

Going French, Going Tahitian: The Tahitianization of French Polynesia

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One of the leading causes of death of a language is the switching of speakers from a subordinate language to a dominant language, whether it is forced or voluntary. In most cases, this dominant language is a language from the Western world, for example English or French. Usually, this dominant language is not even indigenous to the region. While such is the more common case, there are places in the world where a lingua franca of the area dominates and threatens more minor languages of the region. Melanesian Pidgin (spoken in the three Melanesian nations of Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea), Indonesian, and Mandarin Chinese are examples of such languages which pose a threat to the indigenous languages spoken in the country or the region where these languages are predominantly spoken. French Polynesia is another country where a majority of the indigenous languages are threatened to extinction by French. What makes the situation in this country slightly unique and different than other places is that French is the leading factor for the demise of the indigenous languages of the country including Tahitian; ironically, Tahitian itself is also posing a threat to many of the other languages of the country.

According to the *Ethnologue*, there are nine languages listed for French Polynesia. Of the nine, seven are indigenous languages. Of those seven, two, Tuamotu (Pa'umotu) and Austral (Tubuai-Rurutu), are described as either shifting to or bilingual in Tahitian. In addition to the above two languages, speakers of Rapan seem to be fast shifting to Tahitian as well.

This paper will be divided into two parts. The first part will focus on the revitalization and maintenance efforts regarding Tahitian. The second part will be a discussion on how Tahitian, rather than French, is being the major cause of extinction in other parts of French Polynesia. This will be done by presenting the current situation of each individual language spoken in French Polynesia and presenting data to support evidence that Tahitian is in fact causing language endangerment within the country. In addition this paper will show the extent of endangerment the languages are in.