

# Being Rapa Nui, Speaking Spanish: Children's Voices on Easter Island

Miki Makihara

Queens College and the Graduate Center,  
City University of New York, USA

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## Abstract

In recent years, increased attention has been drawn to the situation of endangered minority languages and the complexity of sociolinguistic processes surrounding their evolution and future prospects. The Rapa Nui (Polynesian)-Spanish bilingual community of Easter Island, Chile has been experiencing language shift toward Spanish over the last four decades. At the same time, however, political struggles over land, political decision-making rights, and control over the heritage tourism economy have been converging to lead the Rapa Nui community to publicly and intensively assert and reconstruct their cultural identity. Although the majority of Rapa Nui children today are native and dominant speakers of Spanish, their positive ethnic identification and participation in public cultural activities and in bilingual and syncretic conversational interactions are providing opportunities for community re-valuation and maintenance of their ancestral language. Using ethnographic and linguistic analysis of face-to-face verbal interaction, this paper examines the role of children in the dynamics of sociolinguistic changes and the construction of the ethnolinguistic community.

## Key Words

linguistic anthropology, children, agency, endangered language, language ideology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On September 9th each year the public authorities organize a parade in the village of Hanga Roa on Easter Island to commemorate 'Policarpo Toro Day' named after the Chilean Naval Captain who annexed the Polynesian island to Chile in 1888. On most past occasions, the main feature of the day has been the procession of locally stationed Chilean uniformed service men marching to the tunes of a Western-style military brass band, their numbers augmented by troops from a passing warship visiting for the occasion. In 2003, the parade also featured a number of Rapa Nui song and dance performances by school students accompanied by a Rapa Nui musical group. One notable performance was by a group of three dozen very young children enrolled in the recently established Rapa Nui language immersion and bilingual kindergarten classes. As they moved to the rhythms of a warrior-style dance, the four- to six-year old children sang the following lyrics:

*Ka uŋa te roŋo ki te matu'a*  
*Ka pu'a mai te rima*  
*ki te re'o rapa nui*  
*Hapa'o rō au i to'oku re'o*  
*i avai mai era e te atua*  
*Ka hana, ka here, ka mo'a*  
*i te re'o rapa nui*

Spread this message to the parents  
Help us with  
the Rapa Nui language (voice)  
I take good care of my voice (language)  
that the deity gave me  
Want, love, and respect  
the Rapa Nui language (voice)

As the song finished the gathered audience cheered loudly. The performance, which was also transmitted to the community over the local television channel, stirred the Rapa Nui community unusually, as Rapa Nui adults could be heard for days praising the performance and debating and reflecting upon their responsibility to transmit their ancestral tongue to the younger generations. The children's song evoked very mixed feelings. No doubt it stirred feelings of pride and even amusement to see how the children's spirited performance had somewhat subversively overshadowed the usual military procession at what was after all billed as a celebration of Chilean control over the island, especially as practically none of the assembled Chilean functionaries or visiting dignitaries could have understood what the children's words meant. At the same time, the message of the song touched a raw nerve within the Rapa Nui community. The fact is that despite important recent advances in political and economic rights and a swelling of cultural and ethnic pride, the great majority of Rapa Nui children today are native speakers of Spanish in a bilingual community where the process of language shift toward the national language has advanced steadily over the past four decades.<sup>1</sup> The Rapa Nui therefore saw the children's performance both as an assertion of their newly conquered rights but also as a measure of how much had also been lost.

In this paper, I focus on the role that children have played in the construction of ethnolinguistic community and sociolinguistic changes in the bilingual community of Rapa Nui, where language shift toward Spanish has advanced for more than a generation, but where a new indigenized variety of Spanish and syncretic Rapa Nui speech styles have also developed. How young children (corresponding to kindergarten and elementary school aged children) use language as a resource for identity performance is an important but considerably under-studied element in understanding the simultaneous and complex process of language shift and maintenance, a salient aspect of cultural change occurring in many Pacific and other societies. Children's speech styles and adults' interactional norms that accommodate children have become essential components of the dynamics of language ideology and practice in this community. Rapa Nui children have played an important role in the construction of the community's language ideologies – in particular by shaping adults attitudes and accommodation strategies, leading to more flexible code choices and inclusive notions of language community. Young children have also played a significant role in augmenting the community awareness about language loss and the need for its coordinated effort in language maintenance.

Through a combination of organized protests and land occupations, skillful political bargaining and spirited entrepreneurial energy over the past decade, the Rapa Nui have succeeded at extracting political and economic concessions and resources from the Chilean state, and displacing many mainland Chilean "Continental" in local politics and business. Many aspects of Rapa Nui culture have also been strengthened and reconstructed in the context of the rapidly expanding cultural heritage tourism industry. However, language maintenance has until recently not been the focus of these political and cultural movements. Given so many other political and cultural successes why has language been such a difficult resource to reclaim? This paper addresses one aspect of this large and complex question by drawing attention to the role of children in shaping the dynamics of language shift or maintenance. How are we to understand the agency of these children's voices in language maintenance?

Over the last few decades, anthropologists and other social scientists have reflexively examined the concept of culture as an integrated system of meaning with its own holistic logic and belonging to 'a people.' A number of works, for example, have analyzed the constructed nature of 'national consciousness,' as an elaborate form of culture involved in the making of nation-states and national communities (Anderson, 1983: Text 4; Handler, 1988; Hobsbawm and

Ranger, 1983). At the same time anthropologists have proposed moving away from taking the social cohesion of a culture for granted, to view knowledge as distributed unevenly and controlled, where cultural meanings are locally constructed, and contested and negotiated through the interested activities and practices of agents who shape how they change (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1991; Keesing, 1987; Rosaldo, 1989; Sahlins, 1981). Pacific ethnographies have made important contributions to understanding the processes of local construction, reproduction, and transformation of cultures and traditions (e.g., Borofsky, 1987; Keesing, 1992; Keesing and Tonkinson, 1982; Linnekin and Poyer, 1990).

Studies of youth have contributed to a better understanding of the heterogeneous and shifting natures of the social categories and experiences that make up cultures. Attention to youth has brought to the fore the dynamic and relational nature of culture and the diversity of experience by young people across differing situations in space and time (e.g., Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998a). For example, in an ethnographic study of historical consciousness in postcolonial Madagascar, Sharp (2002) examines the effects of socialist and nationalist policies on the everyday experiences and struggles of school-age youth (mostly high school students). Works on youth such as this have problematized the characterization of youth as a liminal and transitional category. As reviewed by Bucholtz (2002), the recent anthropology of youth draws attention to the agency of young people in understanding new cultural formations in the processes of cultural globalization and localization, focusing on how identities are constructed and performed. Youth, of course, is a flexible social category which may include individuals from a wide range of ages. Younger children are, however, often absent or underrepresented in many discussions of youth, because of their presumed or relative lack of agency or visibility. Children are all too often viewed as the objects and not the agents of the processes of cultural reproduction and transformation, and implicitly treated as pre-social, passive, dependent, and mainly part of the private domestic sphere.

While works in the anthropology of childhood have critiqued the imposition of adult-centered, and universalizing notions of children and their characterization as nonproductive and passive members of society (e.g., Hirschfeld, 2002; James et al., 1998; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998b; Schwartzman, 2001; Stephens, 1995), in linguistics children have very much emerged as universal, biologically-based agents as they acquire language but tend not feature in linguistic change until adolescence. When children's contributions to linguistic changes are examined, their contributions stem from their universal biological language faculty. For example, children's contributions have been considered very important in the formations of creole languages, in particular in the expansion and systematization of the grammatical properties of simplified contact varieties and their nativization in the community (e.g., Bickerton, 1981; 1984; Kegl et al., 1999; c.f., Sankoff, 1980; Jourdan, 1991; Garrett, 2004). In the processes of second language or dialect acquisition researchers also point to children's role in regularizing adult's innovations in grammar, thus having homogenizing effects on linguistic variation in dialect or language contact situations (Slobin, 1977; Kerswill and Williams, 2000). Such conceptualizations are congruent with the focus of the discipline which, after the work of Noam Chomsky (e.g., Chomsky, 1965, 1986), attempts to discover a 'Universal Grammar' as part of a human language faculty via comparative analyses of the structural features of particular languages and the stages of acquisition of these features.

Thus linguists have focused on language as structure in order to understand the human biological faculty for language. Linguistic anthropologists, on the other hand, have insisted on locating language in relation to social life and foreground language use as a social practice that not only reflects but also constitutes social processes (Hymes, 1996). For example, they have examined the heteroglossic nature of language attitudes and uses and how they relate to identity

formation and cultural change (e.g., Hill, 1992; Hill and Hill, 1986; Jaffe, 1999; Kulick, 1992b, a; Woolard, 1989, 1997; Zentella, 1997). In building the ethnography of speaking approach, Dell Hymes critiqued the Chomskian notion of grammatical ‘competence,’ as neglecting the more encompassing tacit sociocultural knowledge that language users develop in order to use language in socially appropriate manners –which he called ‘communicative competence’ (Hymes, 1972). Extending the ethnography of speaking approach to the study of children, works in ‘language socialization’ (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984) – socialization through language and socialization to use language – emphasize the importance of the sociocultural context in the development of children’s communicative competence and its central role in the construction of selfhood and social relations. Here again, works on Pacific societies have made important contributions to the body of literature in this field (e.g., Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990; Kulick, 1992b; Brison, 1999; Watson-Gegeo, 1992; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1999). What children are learning and developing is not only the grammatical structure and vocabulary of a particular language (or languages), but also sociocultural and metapragmatic knowledge of expectations and evaluations about linguistic forms and contexts of use. Here we might evoke Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus,’ definable as ‘a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways’ (Thompson, 1991:12). This includes, for example, development of and preference for particular communicative styles in participating in social interactions.

An important idea emerging from this work is that language socialization is a life-long process, and one in which children socialize other children as well as the adults around them (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). On Easter Island, Rapa Nui children have been active participants in the construction of syncretic interactional norms and the transformation of Rapa Nui Spanish speech styles. In the context of post-colonial cultural and linguistic contact, many social differentiations and power relations between and within ethnolinguistic groups are established and negotiated through linguistic practice. The cultural identifications that Rapa Nui children are forming through their linguistic practices are an important part of the ongoing process of redefinition of ethnic and linguistic boundaries but not one that adults can always control.

While a process of language shift to Spanish is advanced and undeniable on Rapa Nui, it has also been accompanied by an important and simultaneous diversification of the local communicative style repertoire. Significant amongst these are the development of Rapa Nui ways of speaking Spanish (or Rapa Nui Spanish speech styles) and, more recently, syncretic ways of speaking Rapa Nui (or syncretic Rapa Nui speech styles). These new syncretic ways of speaking, in which two languages are mixed within conversational interactions, have emerged in the last few decades and today characterize much of daily linguistic practice among the Rapa Nui. Thus instead of retaining Spanish as a medium of communication solely with outsiders and within institutional domains which had been dominated by Continentals (which for a while appeared to be becoming the case by the 1980s), the Rapa Nui redefined the social value of Spanish by incorporating its use into interactions among themselves. Rather than abandoning their original language or restricting it to ever smaller private spheres of interaction, bilingual Rapa Nui developed new syncretic ways of speaking. The Rapa Nui have clearly come to value and use these syncretic ways of speaking Rapa Nui to perform their modern Rapa Nui identity and solidarity.

Syncretism involves bilingual ‘simultaneities’ characterized by a range of interlingual phenomena such as codeswitching and interference (Woolard, 1998). Syncretism is observable at all linguistic levels as Spanish and Rapa Nui accents, words, grammatical elements, phrases, and genres are mixed within and across speakers’ utterances, while remaining subject to systemic constraints of the sorts discussed by Myers-Scotton (2002). I have elsewhere examined the expansion of syncretic Rapa Nui use among adult Rapa Nui from in-group and informal

interactions to public and political speech situations in the context of the rising indigenous movement and political negotiations with the national government, and the ways in which syncretic linguistic practice has contributed to the maintenance of the Rapa Nui language (Makihara, 2004). A syncretic interactional norm has emerged in which conversation participants tend to allow and expect bilingual simultaneities and demonstrate accommodation toward speakers of varying bilingual competence and preference. Such a norm forms an important part of the language socialization environment for Rapa Nui children. Although the majority of children today have higher proficiency in Spanish and usually speak Spanish in daily family interactions, they engage in conversations with Rapa Nui adults in which the adults mostly employ syncretic speech styles. Many children participate in such interactions by speaking Spanish while demonstrating varying degrees of Rapa Nui knowledge and comprehension. It is not uncommon, for example, for a child and an adult to both insist on unreciprocated code choice where a child speaks in Spanish understanding virtually everything that is said by the adult, who, even though fluent in Spanish, continues to speak in Rapa Nui (Makihara, forthcoming [2005]: Text 4). Through ‘unreciprocal’ code choice (Gal, 1979) these children are actively contributing to the normalization of the syncretic interactional norm.

While the number of Rapa Nui children who are able to speak, and feel comfortable speaking, Rapa Nui to others, is increasing with the school immersion program that began in 2000, many children still prefer to speak Spanish, their dominant language, to preserve or augment their authority in micro-interactional contexts. These children thus can be described as contributing to the language shift. However, what is also significant is that these predominantly Spanish-speaking Rapa Nui children are speaking Spanish in a way that marks it as Rapa Nui. They are displaying their Rapa Nui identification and solidarity through their use of Rapa Nui Spanish while cultivating their Rapa Nui knowledge. Even though they may shy away from trying to speak Rapa Nui, their passive knowledge of the language, their disposition for participating in syncretic interactions and language crossing, and their positive ethnic identification can be evaluated as important assets for the maintenance of the Rapa Nui language. With the help of a little reinforcement, many of these children will be able to become Rapa Nui speakers. Whether this school program and similar efforts will receive the institutional support required to reach more children and play a role in reversing language shift depends crucially on the community’s ability to mobilize resources and overcome collective action problems.

## **2. RAPA NUI ETHNIC IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE**

Prior to the Chilean annexation of the island, the Rapa Nui community had suffered the terrible effects of the 1862 visits of ‘blackbirders’ who raided the island to recruit slave labor to Peru. The island’s population, which is estimated to have stood between 3,000 and 5,000 collapsed to just 110 survivors by the 1870s after departure of so many islanders and the spread of diseases introduced by the few who were able to return to the island (Maude, 1981; McCall, 1980; Routledge, 1919). These events led to the rapid disintegration of many of the existing patterns of social organization and to a great loss of cultural knowledge of the island’s traditions and rituals, as elders and cultural specialists perished or dispersed. Further contact with outsiders accelerated cultural changes in the devastated community. For example, European Catholic missionaries who stayed on the island shortly after the slave raid for several years led a community-wide conversion to Christianity.

Shortly after annexing the island in 1888, the Chilean government decided to lease the island to a French-Chilean businessman who formed a Scottish-Chilean owned company, that unabashedly called itself the ‘Easter Island Exploitation Company’ (Compañía Explotadora de la Isla de Pascua), to run the island as a sheep ranch employing English- and Spanish-speaking

administrators. With the backing of the Chilean state, the company monopolized employment, and all communication and transportation with the outside world, turning the island into a 'company state' (Porteous, 1981). The islanders were stripped of rights, and forcibly relocated and confined to live in Hanga Roa, an area of about one thousand hectares, or about only 7% of the island. Travel outside the island was strictly prohibited. Although the Rapa Nui led several revolts and strikes to try to improve life under company rule, these proved short-lived and the company continued to exert its authority until in mid-1950s when the Chilean government decided to not renew its lease and instead took direct control by placing its island colony under Navy martial rule. In 1933, the Chilean government registered the island as state property under Chilean law completely disregarding all property claims held by Rapa Nui descent groups.

While Spanish became the official language for legal and economic transactions in 1888 and most company overseers spoke Spanish, its official status had little immediate effect on patterns of daily language use on the island. Despite the cultural and political discontinuities caused by the population crash and increasing contact with outsiders, the Rapa Nui continued to speak Rapa Nui so long as the physical and social isolation of the island and continued Rapa Nui demographic dominance allowed it. The Chilean government, however, gradually increased its presence and control over the island colony and promoted policies of cultural and linguistic assimilation, leading the community on a path of language shift. In 1915, the government established a civil registry and with the Church encouraged the Rapa Nui to take Spanish names. Regular public school instruction in Spanish began in 1934, and the use of Rapa Nui in the classroom was discouraged and in some cases even prohibited until 1976 when Rapa Nui language instruction was allowed into the curriculum as one subject area. The initial political arrangements thus clearly argued against future Rapa Nui maintenance. Observing the situation for six months in 1934, Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux darkly prognosticated that in only a matter of years it was 'almost inevitable that the Easter Island language will disappear entirely' (1940:33).

The opportunity for some Rapa Nui to travel outside the island – either through clandestine voyages in the 1940s or through Chilean private or government support for schooling in the continent in the late 1950s and early 1960s – increased islanders' awareness of their subjugation and deprivation of rights. During the 1960s, a political movement for change gathered steam, and on December 8, 1964 the Rapa Nui defiantly organized their own municipal elections without Chilean government authority and elected twenty-two year old Alfonso Rapu as their mayor. Rapu had studied on the Continent and returned to the island at the end of 1963 to teach third graders at the local elementary school. The government gave into some of the Rapa Nui's demands and in 1966 replaced Navy rule by establishing a new civil administration to decolonize the island. The Rapa Nui formally became Chilean citizens and were, for the first time, granted rights to travel freely within and outside of the island.

The rapid integration of the community into the national and global economy and the large increase in the number of Continental residents on the island in the years that followed has led to accelerated acculturation toward the national culture. The Rapa Nui's positive evaluation of Spanish as a tool of trade and administration was an important motivation in the rapid development of bilingualism. Spanish rapidly became the language of the public domain and the main instrument of access to material and political resources. It also quickly entered into family domains, especially via greatly increased intermarriages with Continentals among both Rapa Nui men and women. In addition, aided by the relative devaluation of the Rapa Nui language, the habitual monolingual use of Rapa Nui came to be replaced by the increasing use of Spanish, and more and more Rapa Nui children started to grow up as native Spanish speakers.

Since the opening of regular air travel to and from the continent in the late 1960s, heritage tourism has developed rapidly into by far the most important industry on the island. Over twenty-thousand visitors reach the island each year, more than five times the island's population. Currently most families derive direct or indirect income from this sector. Since the main attraction for tourists are Rapa Nui's archaeological sites, ethnic distinctiveness has come to serve Rapa Nui economic interests. As the local tourism industry developed relatively independently of the state, the Rapa Nui have gained considerable control over the sector. Although the primary medium of tourism is Spanish, Rapa Nui speech has come to serve as a token of authenticity in a commodified culture.

Over the past few decades, negotiations with the Chilean state over the use and control of political and material resources has led the Rapa Nui to newly define themselves as an autonomous group with a distinctive set of cultural practices – including language – and with primordial rights to their native land. Rapa Nui's efforts to increase local political and economic control became greatly enhanced by national democratization and decentralization initiatives leading to and following the 1989 end of Chile's military dictatorship. When the national government introduced its 1994 Indigenous Law, which entitles indigenous persons and groups to new land rights, the island's residents began an intense debate over how to define who is Rapa Nui (or 'indigenous') and who should represent them. Large numbers of Rapa Nui, including young people, are participating in local politics. Some Rapa Nui have argued that the right to own a piece of land on the island should be restricted to those who belong to the indigenous Rapa Nui ethnic group. Given the growing numbers of Continental residents on the island, the intermarriages between Rapa Nui and Continentals, Rapa Nui children who have grown up speaking Spanish, and Rapa Nui living abroad, language, surname, or residence do not serve as clear criteria for such categorization. Rapa Nui political activists argue that the definition of who counts as Rapa Nui should be based on blood ties, and not on the more inclusive notion of kinship, birth place or residence, which would include non-Rapa Nui spouses. By selecting the criterion of blood ties many Rapa Nui are defining themselves in opposition to Continentals and more explicitly and narrowly than their ancestors did.

The political struggle for land and decision-making rights and economic incentives in the heritage tourism sector are converging to lead the Rapa Nui community to intensively and publicly construct their cultural identity. There are now numerous public ceremonies and events and community activities, and many involve children as young as kindergarten age. One of the most important public events for social reproduction and cultural transmission and innovation is the annual *Tapati Rapa Nui* 'Rapa Nui Week' cultural festival, which is also the major tourist event of the year. Since the introduction of a Chilean style town festival in the late 1960s, it has become distinctively Rapa Nui in its character, involving hundreds of competitions in Rapa Nui musical and other performance arts, sports, and crafts such as *riu* ('song'), *kaikai* ('string figure poems'), *'upa'upa* ('accordion'), *takona* ('boy painting and tattoo'), *haka pei* ('banana bark sled competition'), *pe'ue* ('totoro mat'). The Rapa Nui queen of the year is elected by whichever group scores best in these competitions. The two or three candidates for queen are usually teenagers. Planning and preparation takes place months if not a year ahead of time and requires a great deal of human and material resources which can only be gathered by mobilizing entire extended family networks. Hundreds of participants are recruited for each candidate for the preparations for events (for example, making traditional clothing) and for the competitions, where kinship ties are renewed and obligations are renegotiated. Competitions in verbal arts in Rapa Nui are included and the events encourage children and young people to learn Rapa Nui language and traditions. Thus *Tapati* is of modern origin but has been tied intimately to extended families on Rapa Nui and has had positive influences on the maintenance of Rapa Nui

language and culture. Community events and public ceremonies as well as tourist oriented presentations by musical troops are also part of increasingly numerous ‘public rituals’ where Rapa Nui identity is celebrated and displayed. In addition, the effervescent politics of the 1990s meant that political events such as community meetings, protests, strikes, demonstrations, boycotts, and the takeover of public buildings and land parcels also occupied public spaces where Rapa Nui claims and voices could be expressed. These public events have an enormous influence on the ethnic and cultural identity formation among Rapa Nui children.

Adults and older teenagers engaged in such Rapa Nui public cultural and political activities serve as role models for young children who see the value of Rapa Nui cultural skills. These include musicians, dancers, and other performance artists, tour guides, park rangers, and archaeologists. In addition, an increasing number of teenagers and young adults – both men and women – have become engaged in a combination of activities such as farming, fishing, animal husbandry, and craft making that take them to various parts of the island outside of the village, the areas from which the Rapa Nui were prohibited to freely travel as late as the 1960s and which were only opened to restricted legal property rights ownership by the Rapa Nui in the later 1990s. These activities constitute domains where Rapa Nui language has established a stronger grip compared to other domains where Spanish has been privileged. In several cases, these young adults are squatting on public lands that they consider belonged to their ancestors.

Another salient group to which some children are often drawn to is a group of Rapa Nui, locally referred to as *yorgos*. They are mostly male Rapa Nui youth who tend to reject engagement with the wage-labor and cash economy and also avoid many elements of Western modernity. They tend to wear long-hair, ride horses bareback, and spend much of their time in the *campo* away from the village. They usually prefer to speak in Rapa Nui and stress their Rapa Nui identity. Their rebellious, free-spirited, back-to-nature life style and resourcefulness are attracting children’s attentions even if their parents do not always approve of the yorgo’s lifestyles. In sum, the flourishing of new areas and activities where Rapa Nui culture and identity are celebrated and performed, in sometimes defiant and rebellious tones, has made it ‘cool’ to be Rapa Nui.

### 3. CHILDREN AND SYNCRETIC INTERACTIONAL NORMS

The following transcript (Text 1) illustrates a typical three-generation interaction characterized by linguistic syncretism (Makihara, forthcoming). The transcript is taken from a conversation among members of a large extended family gathered in preparation for the *Tapati Rapa Nui* festival. Three children Felipe, Mariana, and Mario –each six years old – helped as adults prepared the bark of a type of banana tree called *maika ri’o* to make cloth (*kahu*) for festival costumes. Just prior to the transcribed segment, their aunts, Elena and Laura, and I had been talking in Rapa Nui about the breakdown of the truck that had transported the bark. Grandfather is sitting nearby. The transcript begins as Felipe asks his aunt Laura in Spanish to explain what had happened. The middle column identifies the speech styles used in each speech turn or segment.

|   |      |  |
|---|------|--|
| 1 Felipe: <i>Tia, ¿qué se hizo su auto?</i>                                 | ChSp | Ch: Chilean, Sp: Spanish, RN: Rapa Nui<br>Felipe: <i>Auntie, what became of your (formal) car?</i> |
| 2 Laura: <i>Ko more ’ā te ηao. He aha rō! Ko more ’ā te ηao o te ’auto.</i> | RN   | Laura: <i>The neck (tube) ripped apart. I wonder why! The neck (tube) of the car ripped apart.</i> |



- |   |   |               |  |
|---|---|---------------|--|
| 3 | Elena: <u>Así que</u> a raro 'ā ka turu ena, a raro 'ā ka hoki mai ena. | RN            | Elena: <u>So really</u> , it was (dragging) down as (we) went down (and) down as (we) came back.                 |
| 4 | Mariana: <u>Sí, po. Tu auto está malo, po. Hizo hore el ηao.</u>        | ChSp;<br>RNSp | Mariana: <u>Yeah. Your (informal) car is bad. The neck (tube) was cut.</u>                                       |
| 5 | E: <u>Hizo more el ηao.</u><br>[laughter]<br><u>Hizo hore el ηao.</u>   | RNSp          | E: (One would say) " <u>The neck (tube) was ripped</u> " [laughter]<br>(Not) " <u>The neck (tube) was cut.</u> " |
| 6 | Mario: <u>Koro! Vamo (vamos) al uta ('uta) mañana?</u>                  | RNSp          | Mario (to his Grandfather): <u>Koro! Let's go inland tomorrow?</u>   |
| 7 | Mariana: ¡ <u>A pie!</u>  | ChSp          | Mariana: <u>By foot!</u>   |
| 8 | Aunts: [laughter]   |               | Aunts: [laughter]  |
| 9 | E: <u>He kī ki ta'a korohu'a he iri a pie!</u>                          | RN            | E: Tell your Grandfather to climb <u>by foot!</u>  |

**Text 1. Children in syncretic interaction (conversation recorded on January 6, 1995)**

Text 1 illustrates the stylistic multiplicity which makes interaction syncretic and how children use their own version of Rapa Nui Spanish (see also Makihara, forthcoming [2005]). Syncretic interactions mix not only the two languages but also their subvarieties such as Rapa Nui Spanish and Chilean Spanish speech styles. A *Rapa Nui Spanish* variety originated with second language acquisition strategies of native Rapa Nui speakers in the development of bilingualism during the first two-thirds of the 20th century on the island. It is characterized by linguistic simplification and Rapa Nui interferences at prosodic, phonological, morphosyntactic and other linguistic levels, and codeswitches (inter- and intra-sentential and -participant turns) to and from Rapa Nui, which makes it divergent from Chilean Spanish. *Chilean Spanish* refers to a set of Spanish varieties originally spoken on Continental Chile, particularly in the Santiago–Valparaíso–Viña del Mar area. Model users of Chilean Spanish on the island are Continental residents, who make up about a half of the current island population, and visitors. Formal and colloquial styles of Chilean Spanish are also propagated in classrooms and by radio and television programs. I estimate that more than three-quarters of the Rapa Nui are quite fluent in at least informal Chilean Spanish, and the great majority of the approximately seven hundred elementary school children (one quarter of whom are from the Continent) are dominant Chilean Spanish speakers. Today, the in-group use of Rapa Nui Spanish, often embedded within syncretic interactions, generally highlights ethnic solidarity, whereas its out-group use may serve to authenticate Rapa Nui identity or to polarize ethnic differences. The features of Rapa Nui Spanish thus largely function as interactional diacritics of the speaker's Rapa Nui identity. The persistence of Rapa Nui Spanish points to the Rapa Nui's positive self-identification and estimation of this previously stigmatized Spanish speech style.

While acquiring Chilean Spanish, the Rapa Nui children are also developing their version of Rapa Nui Spanish. In another paper, I analyzed the transformation of Rapa Nui Spanish speech styles and how children are developing a new Rapa Nui Spanish speech style to perform their Rapa Nui identity (Makihara, forthcoming). Today, most Rapa Nui children receive relatively greater exposure to Spanish than to Rapa Nui in their daily life, especially through school, and TV and radio programs, as well as from their peers and siblings, with whom they interact predominantly in Spanish. While the language socialization context for Rapa Nui children has generally fostered their growing language dominance in, and preference for, Spanish, it has also allowed these children to develop passive knowledge of Rapa Nui. As the Text illustrates, female family members play a particularly significant role in exposing children to a

variety of speech styles, especially syncretic Rapa Nui and Rapa Nui Spanish speech styles. By participating in such interactional environments, the children are cultivating their own way of speaking Rapa Nui Spanish. Although they are constrained by their restricted productive knowledge of Rapa Nui, these children are approximating the symbolic function of Rapa Nui as an ethnic language (or its use in syncretic speech styles) by using their version of Rapa Nui Spanish in identity performance and ethnic solidarity based participation.

As illustrated in utterances by Mariana and Mario (lines 4 and 6) the children's Rapa Nui Spanish speech is characterized primarily by the use of Rapa Nui words inserted in otherwise Spanish utterances in their interactions with Rapa Nui adults, whose Rapa Nui Spanish speech is usually characterized by wider range of interlingual phenomena which include grammatical interference (or transfer) and codeswitching to and from other speech varieties such as Rapa Nui. The Rapa Nui words in children's Rapa Nui Spanish speech serve as metacommunicative devices to establish or create social identity and relationships between participants. Silverstein (1981) distinguishes between referential and nonreferential indexes, and their relative "creative" (or "performative") and "presuppositional" qualities. The referential dimension allows us to analytically distinguish the pragmatic from the semantic meaning, and the presuppositional dimension the degree to which our knowledge of the contextual features depend on the occurrence of the very index itself. Referential indexes contribute to prepositional description. Some referential indexes, such as locatives and deictics, do so by presupposing features of the speech event they index, while others, such as Spanish second person pronouns *tú* and *usted*, make explicit or establish features of the speech event, and thus can be indexically creative. On the other hand, some nonreferential indexes such as the vocabulary of Australian "mother-in-law languages" (Dixon, 1990) presuppose contextual features, i.e. the presence of a mother-in-law, but do not contribute to prepositional description. Politeness markers and elements of speech signaling social identity, in contrast, are nonreferential but indexically creative, serving as contextualization cues or metacommunicative devices to establish or create social hierarchy and solidarity between participants. Similarly, the Rapa Nui words that children use in their interactions with Rapa Nui adults in syncretic conversations serve as 'nonreferential, indexically creative indexes.' Words (as opposed to grammatical elements such as word order) are acquired early, more readily transferred between languages, and constitute a pragmatically salient class of variables whose indexical meanings are relatively easily noticeable by the hearers. These children are aware of their lack of productive knowledge in Rapa Nui, but take full advantage of what they do know in Rapa Nui to create and symbolically use their version of syncretic speech style, while avoiding the insecurities that might be felt in trying to speak Rapa Nui. The way in which the older community accepts and accommodates participation by these 'semi-speakers' (Dorian, 1981) constitutes an important language ideology which allows the maintenance and evolution of the Rapa Nui language.

Mariana's speech acts in this short excerpt reflect her highly developed passive knowledge of Rapa Nui. She is able to use Rapa Nui words to create Rapa Nui Spanish utterances through language crossing and to use style-shifting much in the same way as how adults switch between Rapa Nui, Rapa Nui Spanish and Chilean Spanish. This illustrates how both bilingual Rapa Nui adults and predominantly Spanish-speaking children participate in the construction of the syncretic norm of interaction. Through such syncretic interactions, they are transforming the ways in which language differences are mapped onto social and ethnic identity differences. Rapa Nui children are assessing and evaluating their own communicative resources in formulating their interpersonal communicative strategies within the context of particular speech situations. Furthermore, bilingual adults are beginning to adopt the children's Rapa Nui Spanish as an additional speech style in their own communicative style repertoire. For example,

amused by Mariana's use of the term *hore* 'to cut' (line 4), her other aunt, Elena, didactically rephrases, 'the neck was ripped' in Rapa Nui Spanish, correcting only the choice of verb while following the Rapa Nui Spanish construction as formulated by Mariana. On many occasions, I have observed the use of what I am calling the children's version of Rapa Nui Spanish by adults, not only in paraphrasing what children said, but in other addresses directed at the children. This underlines adults' positive evaluation of children's interactional contributions and their acknowledgement of the unique linguistic characteristics of children's speech.

#### 4. CHILDREN AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

Linguistic anthropological studies have underlined how language ideologies, and in particular the devaluation of identity and language by ethnolinguistic minorities, may act as a major catalyst of language shift (e.g., Gal, 1979; Kulick, 1992b; Hill and Hill, 1986). The initial effects of such a process of 'symbolic domination' (Bourdieu, 1991) were evident in the early history of absorption into the Chilean nation-state. In the decades after the mid 1960s Rapa Nui adults used Spanish in an increasing number of domains and children started to grow up as native speakers of Spanish. The adoption and use of Spanish in many contexts was a necessary and instrumental strategy for Rapa Nui adults given the political and economic dominance of Spanish speakers. The more recent successes of indigenous political and cultural revival movements, however, have led the Rapa Nui to re-organize the communicative economy and the symbolic value of the Rapa Nui language is on the rise. Many Rapa Nui adults are using Rapa Nui, albeit in syncretic forms, in public domains such as political meetings, and interactions at local state institutional offices. Some now argue publicly that its use is a right and they lament that the Rapa Nui language is disappearing. The question is how this re-evaluation of the Rapa Nui language and the expansion of syncretic speech styles will contribute to future Rapa Nui language maintenance and whether the community may still be able to make collective action choices to change the course of the language shift already in motion.

Those involved in revitalization efforts of minority languages in communities around the world have rightly argued the importance of creating an environment where children can learn and use their ancestors' language. For example, in New Zealand Maori language pre-school and primary school programs (*kōhanga* and *kura*) have had significant effect on increasing the number of Maori speakers in the last two decades (Benton and Benton, 2001). The Rapa Nui school teachers took the Maori's achievement as a model in the development of their immersion program. They started the program in 2000 with a kindergarten class and have recruited more children and teachers to expand it each year up to the fourth grade class. Many of the 15 Rapa Nui teachers currently involved are young themselves in their 20s and 30s, and are recruiting other young and older fellow Rapa Nui speakers – including parents and grandparents to participate in the development of their curriculum and in teaching children.

Many of the generation of those who have children in school are Rapa Nui speakers who routinely use Rapa Nui in syncretic speech styles. Thus the relatively less advanced situation of language shift found on Rapa Nui could still provide conditions favorable for slowing down or reversing language shift. A raised consciousness regarding the disappearance of language and the growing symbolic value given to Rapa Nui are however necessary but not sufficient conditions for language maintenance in this context. The recent expansion of the domains in which Rapa Nui is considered a legitimate language choice is an important part of the re-organization of the communicative economy, but still not enough to delay or reverse language shift and loss if the children are not interested in speaking the language. Because language is a public good, its maintenance requires a coordinated effort on the part of the wider community to break out of what was settling into becoming a language-loss equilibrium.

The Rapa Nui political movement focused strategically on land rights and demands for political decision-making autonomy, especially regarding resource allocation and control over the local heritage tourism industry. Despite some important internal conflicts among the Rapa Nui in their local political activities, they have been quite successful at engaging the state into negotiations and in achieving increased decision-making autonomy, land rights, and state investments in employment-generating modernization projects. On the other hand, the Rapa Nui community has only recently begun to aim its attention at the issue of language loss and to feel the need for actions such as language programs in the local school.

Many Rapa Nui parents have been skeptical about their children being taught their language in school. They justifiably consider that it is important for the children to learn Spanish well for their own social and economic advancement. Despite the fact that Chile's Indigenous Law of 1994 recognizes the need for respect and protection of indigenous cultures and languages and advocates the development of a system of intercultural bilingual education in areas with a high indigenous density, institutional support for language immersion and bilingual educational programs and Rapa Nui teacher training has been difficult to achieve and remains inadequate. The Rapa Nui school teachers have put enormous amounts of uncompensated work into establishing the Rapa Nui program not only to teach the classes but also to confront and overcome significant initial community skepticism.

I have argued above that young children have played a role in the maintenance of the Rapa Nui language. While their everyday display of their knowledge of Rapa Nui to mark their Spanish is important, the real power of their contribution also lies in the ways in which they are able to focus and mobilize the adult community's attention through their participation in community activities such as the public event described at the beginning of this paper.

Children are not just passive learners who are only at the receiving end of language socialization, but can be competent interpreters of the social world around them and their own place within it, and they play a role in socializing the adults in their lives and raising their consciousness. I have argued that Rapa Nui children are actively contributing to the construction of the linguistically syncretic interactional norm and that this norm has worked to support the maintenance of the Rapa Nui language. Children's desire to be Rapa Nui and to belong to the Rapa Nui language community is constrained by their lack of Rapa Nui productive knowledge. While being aware of this, they use their available resources—their passive knowledge of the Rapa Nui language and access to lexical inventory—to participate in linguistically syncretic interactions with bilingual Rapa Nui adults in extended family interactional contexts and cultivate their ways of speaking Rapa Nui Spanish.

The Rapa Nui children's contribution to sociolinguistic change not only concerns domestic family interactional domains but also extends to public arena through their participations in school programs and Rapa Nui cultural and community activities, such as presentations in Tapati Rapa Nui festival, the local school's 'Rapa Nui Language Day,' and musical troops' performances for tourists, to name just a few examples, in which their Rapa Nui language and other cultural skills are proudly displayed. Events such as the one described at the beginning of this paper have the potential to serve as catalyzing events focusing the community's attention and raising the desire to maintain the Rapa Nui language. This may lead a greater number of community members to value language enforcement efforts, and to overcome the important coordination problems involved in minority language maintenance efforts.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Today, about half of the island's 3700 residents are *Rapa Nui*, while most others are Chilean *Continental*s. Virtually all residents speak Spanish. By my estimate roughly two-thirds of the Rapa Nui can speak Rapa Nui but most of these Rapa Nui speakers are adults. According to studies by two resident American SIL linguists (Thiesen de Weber and Weber, 1998), the fraction of local elementary school children who speak Rapa Nui as a maternal or predominant language has decreased sharply from 77% in 1977, to 25% in 1989. Among children enrolled in Kindergarten through the 7th grade in 1997, none were considered Rapa Nui dominant, only 7.5% (49 students) were considered balanced bilingual, and only an additional 12.3% (80 students) spoke Rapa Nui well or regularly.

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