

Taking issues with the Samoan Pi Faitau: A relook at Samoa's Alphabet Chart in the 21st century

Levi Tavita & Saili Aukuso

Correspondence: L Tavita
Samoan Research International Repository
Website: www.ola888.com
Email address: ltavita8@gmail.com
2023

Abstract:

Samoa's Alphabet Chart, known by the name Pi Faitau, has been the bedrock of the Samoan language literacy development for a span of a century and a half since its inception. It was the most popular tool that spearheaded the literacy campaign of the church and which transformed Samoa's linguistic landscape overnight. No other tool has done so in terms of impact, as George Pratt testified, in less than two decades since its use, almost every Samoan adult can read the Samoan Bible fluently. Hence the question, if the ends have proved the means all these years, then why take issues with, now?

This short review seeks to argue that there was a linguistic discrepancy involved in the formation of the chart. At the core is a phonemic dilemma arising out of letter sound relationship, which caused for a misrepresentation of the Samoan vowel sound by default. Part of the argument is to do with the tenacity by which the vowel sound withstood the effect of such incongruity all these years; compounded also by the ongoing challenge of an alternative sound (k register). How this could be explained; and why this prolonging compromise may no longer be sustained, are central to this assessment. Most importantly, the implication of all these on the pure Samoan sound and its retention at this day and age, and the urgent need for clarity for the sake of the Samoan language.

Alefapeta – Alphabet, Faitau – Reading, gagana – language,

Introduction:

The Samoan Alphabet chart, widely known by the name *Pi Faitau* since its early days, still resonates in today's discourses, though reference to *Alefapeta/Alefapeta Samoa* has become more popular as a contemporary substitute in the task of resource making (Aukuso, 2021). *Pi* is Samoan for Alphabet. Contemporary Samoan lexicographers assumed its place and role, although its etymology is unclear. Not much can be made from the corpus of early record, even from the missionaries themselves. For example, Pratt (1893) has no reference to *Pi* the alphabet in his dictionary, with two entries on homonyms only. Milner (1996) on the other hand did acknowledge *Pi* as identical with the Samoan alphabet, he also noted four other homonyms, three derived from English: letter p (language symbol), bee (insect), pea (plant).

Both lexicographers have been discreet in terms of making any remarks concerning its etymological origins. Based on this lack of evidence, particularly from Pratt, the most likely hypothesis to draw is, that *Pi* was introduced basically for the purpose of adding a new meaning to a familiar old sound. Phonemically, *Pi* is a Samoan consonant /p/, which stands to represent both sounds [b] and [p] of the English, or Latin for that matter, in its alphabet.

Also known by two other aliases – first, *Pi Tautau* (hanging Pi), second, *Pi Nofoa* (chair Pi). Both words *Tautau* and *Nofoa* refer to the spatial position of the chart as 1. hanging in front of a classroom for all children to see 2. Placed on a small chair for a small group of learners only (see Le Tagaloa, 1996).

From this understanding, a strong hint is drawn, that is, *Pi* is more likely a conversion from the word 'bee' in the context of Spelling Bee, which term has been introduced as far back as the late eighteenth century. Spelling Bee generally refers to a linguistic activity in which English speaking children come together to demonstrate their skills in spelling (Encyclopaedia Britannica). The word 'bee' is said to have been derived from the old English 'bene,' which meanings are prayer, favour, help from the neighbours. No reference whatsoever is made that connects the word 'bene' with the English alphabet as identical (ibid.). Hence this

argument of a sound transfer seems logical for the Samoan language, strictly speaking.

Samoan renowned linguist, Aiono Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, rightly argued that the Samoan language never had an alphabetic chart, which implies that the concept of ‘alphabet’ or formulating a written code was introduced from outside through the missionaries (1996).

So the story of the *Pi Faitau* goes back to the renowned London Missionary Society (hereafter LMS), and their investments in the Pacific languages. With a strong sense of pragmatism, the Pacific languages became the focus of interest, knowing very well the impact they had in approaching their mission fields successfully (Lovett, 1899). Indeed, the main objective of the LMS mission was religious, but language was the medium first and foremost; the Samoans were more impressed with the missionaries’s talking in their language than any display of their spiritual zeal (Ibid.). In order to effectively facilitate this conversation, the Samoans need to be introduced to a full literacy in their own language.

The Samoan Alphabet Chart was created quickly, using Latin phonemes that best match the Samoan sounds, laying the foundation for the development of modern Samoan literacy (Le Tagaloa, 1996). *The Pi Faitau* became the most useful tool in spearheading the Samoan literacy development from the outset, which effectiveness was proved by the speed that the Samoan population became literate overnight (Tanielu, 2004, Pratt, 1911). As Pratt testified, in less than two decades since the missionaries arrived, almost every Samoan adult can read the Samoan Bible fluently (Ibid.).

Since its induction, not an issue was raised with regard to the validity of its original design. For many years the *Pi Faitau* has been one of those few documents, which privileged status was almost guaranteed, thanks to the pedigree of its sponsor, the Samoan church, through its various denominations, who’ve been proactive in the promotion of Samoan literacy among the people. The *A’oga Faife’au*, for instance, has been synonymous with the *Pi Faitau*, which has become a symbolic representation of this pastoral activity. Until some 160 years later, when a Samoan scholar revisited the alphabet and commented on some

of the discrepancies she found in its design. We will come back to this later.

The success by which the LMS mission to the Samoa Islands, after a visit by John Williams in 1830, would soon become the hallmarks of a literate Pacific in generations to follow. For Samoa, the success was to do mainly with the willingness of both sides to facilitate contact, more so the keenness in the missionaries to delve into the Samoan language in order to appropriate as much as they could (Lovett, 1899). The missionary corpus testified to this achievement, attained over a very short period of time in a quite a remarkable way (Williams, 1987). Under the auspices of the LMS mission, the Malua Theological College was established in 1844, Leulumoega High School in 1890. Papauta, a school for girls was founded in 1892. Other schools followed to cater for the eastern islands. By 1905 such investments in the language have become well organised, solidified from the grassroots through the *A’oga Faife’au*.

Though the main LMS mission stations were on the islands of Upolu and Savaii in the former Western Samoa and Tutuila in American Samoa, their outreach to other islands had been significant. The Gilbert Islands [Kiribati] became part of the Samoan mission in 1870, and together with the Ellice Islands [Tuvalu] were known as the North-West Outstations of the Samoan mission (Lovett, 1899). The LMS had varying degrees of success in other islands, including Niue (formerly Savage Island), Tuvalu (formerly Ellice) and Tokelau (Lovett, 1899). Mutual contacts with all these islands, of which the Samoan mission played a crucial role, were sustained, although as Lovett noted, missionary residence on some of them was sporadic and relied heavily on the native South Seas ministry (Lovett, 1899). The Loyalty Islands [Iles Loyauté, Nouvelle-Calédonie] were first visited in 1841 but due to French influence from New Caledonia, the mission was abandoned in 1887 (Lovett, 1899).

Other missions also played their part, the Wesleyans, once re-established in 1857, became active in Savaii, the largest island, and like the LMS invested strongly in the language. The Roman Catholic mission also, and the church of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) as well. All of them upheld the Alphabet Chart which was introduced by the LMS mission from the start.

The South Seas islands, and the missions, were certainly deeply affected by the events of the Second World War, which obliged the LMS and its administrators in London and Sydney to reassess its policies, budgets and programmes in the post-war years (Lovett, 1899). Such events surely impacted the course of history that followed, particularly the change in the vanguard when indigenous leadership took over the helm finally. In sum, the transition of leadership from the old guard to the new marked the end of an era, when the indigenous Samoan church became the first guardian of Samoa's literacy landscape, and onus of own future development.

Le Tagaloa Observations:

The Samoan scholar, in the person of the late Aiono Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, has been a product of the *Pi Faitau* and the pastor's school (A'oga Faife'au). Her achievements as an educator have been exemplary, more so in her role as an advocate of the Samoan language as a priority. Hence, its promotion as a primary medium of instructions in government schools, when she became the first Samoan to hold directorship of the Ministry of Education. The first Samoan to hold a doctorate degree in Education - majoring in bilingual education, nurtured in an intellectual home environment (her father a renowned language translator), an intellectual pursuit that she too followed, hence her interests in the Samoan language and grammar was evident from the start.

Her publication on the Samoan language and grammar, *O la ta gagana*, was part of her repertoire as a professor of the Samoan language. So in reference to the Samoan alphabetic chart, *Pi Faitau*, Le Tagaloa noted that there is an obvious mismatch between the Samoan sounds and their representations in terms of associated images (1996: 34). For example, the vowels: /a/ does not match the image of the basket ('ato) which onset sound is a glottal. The same goes with the /e/ and the /o/, which associated images do not match the Samoan vowel sounds. In addition, Le Tagaloa also noted another lack in symbol representation of Samoan sounds. For example, while the [a] symbol stands to represent one sound, there are other sounds according to Le Tagaloa that need own representations. We can only infer from Le Tagaloa's assertion to suggest one such sound; the exclamatory response 'A!' (yeah!) which closely

mimics the /a/ as in the words hat, that. This particular sound is not represented in the Samoan alphabet or its orthographic system.

For the consonants, Le Tagaloa pointed out a similar dilemma as noted with vowels already. There is an obvious mismatch in letter names and their sounds, she contended. For example, the letter p, which Samoan name is /pi/, is viewed as poorly represented by the image of a cat, or its corresponding sound /pu/-/si/; the same with *solofanua* (horse) for /sa/, and *taavale* (car) for /ti/. We can infer from her assertion that the sound of the letter name must take first precedence, as in this case of matching letter sounds and symbols or selecting image representations for that matter. Thus, looking at the picture from Le Tagaloa's lens, the image of a 'pili' (lizard) would have been a better match for the 'p' consonant than its allophone 'pu-si', for example.

In sum, Le Tagaloa's observations would become the first critical commentary by a local on the *Pi Faitau* after 160 years since its inception. Her stance would further affirm past observations, such as those of Pratt (1859), Brown (1916) and Churchill (1908) for example, on the nature of the Samoan sounds. So, for an able and local scholar to verify some of the past claims, as well as critique its shortcomings are considered very important for the Samoan language development at this stage.

Latest Observations:

A paper by Tavita & Aukuso (1999, 2022) entitled, *The Samoan vowel shift: A phenomenon in phonetics and phonological awareness*, mentioned *Pi Faitau*, as part of an entangled dilemma. Such dilemma refers to the question of how adequate the written transcriptions are in representing Samoan sounds. The writers came to the same conclusion that Le Tagaloa had posited two decades earlier, that is, Samoan sounds are misrepresented due to such constraints posed in its orthographic system.

The phenomenon which the writers referred to pertains to a shift in the vowel pronunciation. The writers have noted through observations a new trend in the overseas-born Samoan speakers glottalizing the Samoan vowel sounds. This is clearly evident in the onset sound of a word that begins with a vowel. A number of factors were discussed, including the likely impact of resources and their designs on the new habit. Thus the *Pi Faitau* sprang to mind, very much informed by

Le Tagaloa's primary observations. As the premium resource in Samoa's literacy development kit, it is perhaps the most important to look at. This paper addressed the concern, voiced by the writers then, with more clarity and detail.

A study by Aukuso (2021) on Samoan sounds was conducted in Samoa in 2019. A total of 100 participants from four schools were tested. The findings attested to the Samoan born-children's overall competency in their articulation of the vowel sounds. Thus, compared with their New Zealand born peers, the problem seems to be identified strongly with the latter. In saying that, more research needs to be done for Samoa alone, especially in the Apia area, so that any claims to the contrary are well substantiated.

A pressing concern:

Given the clarity of Le Tagaloa's observations and subsequent implications on the *Pi Faitau* and its future, there hasn't been any action on the part of the education regime or the authority for that matter, to review the alphabetic chart. Assumedly two basic reasons for the dispassionate response, first, such task seemed fraught with difficulties. The standard chart as gifted by the LMS mission those many years past, is still the benchmark for resource producers and designers to emulate. Second, there might have been the thought at the time that the matter lacked urgency for the authority to act.

Now with the challenges posed by modern shifts such as mentioned, within a bilingual/multilingual landscape, a growing transnational community, and the colossal impact of the Internet and social media, there is urgency in the call for a review. First, because the concern involves the global Samoan community, from children who are nurtured in the Samoan sounds in classrooms, to adults who are able role models for their children and community. A standard is needed so that a language can be sustained collectively and effectively. Secondly, because it is opportune time, given the shifts and turns referred to, hence a strong call for clarity on a number of issues pertaining to. The writers believe that a review of the alphabetic chart is a great start in this reprogramming activity.

Indeed, while our sounds have been sustained for generations within a closed-knit community, today our modern global *aiga* has broadened its horizons rapidly, and that comes

with challenges as well. The most effective defence is to set good standards, first, in the basic components of the language. For example, the writers in their 2022 paper pointed out the intricacies of the dilemma at hand. First, the phonological issue in terms of language transfer errors, from English to Samoan for example. Second, the orthographic issues such as letter sound-symbol relationships, such as the one Le Tagaloa pointed out, where one symbol could not suffice for two or more sounds (Le Tagaloa, 1996). Thirdly, the emerging threatening stance of the Samoan vowel sounds due to the predominant influence of English (Tavita & Aukuso, 1999, 2022). The *Palagi* missionaries, as much as they were proficient in the language, still found it difficult to articulate the onset vowel sounds, thus the phrase, '*tautala faa-Misi; speak like Mister.*' Le Tagaloa referred to this elemental proficiency as a distinct mark that sets apart a native speaker from a foreign student (Le Tagaloa, 1996: 35).

Fourthly, the question about the role of the diacritical marks in the Samoan orthography (Hunkin, 2016; Tualualelei et al. 2015). Proponents of the diacritical marks argued in favour of their maintenance. We agreed to a point, though we clarified our stance by saying that unless the glottal stop sign is used, then it would be difficult for the reader to distinguish between a Samoan vowel sound and a glottal or an English vowel sound for that matter (1999, 2022). In phonetics, English vowels are categorised as hard or simply glottal. Samoan on the other hand belongs in the aspirated vocal (Tavita & Aukuso, 2022). Confusion arises when the Samoan /a/ is mistaken for the English /a/ which children do when they transfer sounds/symbols between languages (Ibid.). Thus the key question, how can this 'entangled dilemma' be resolved? A 2016 paper contends that this can be settled by appointing a new symbol for the Samoan vowel - the circumflex mark. The logic is that this will normalize the glottal sound for Samoan to align with English, without recourse to the glottal stop symbol to differentiate sounds entirely (Tavita, Fetui & Aukuso, 2016). Also, an idea about assigning the glottal sound own letter symbol has been entertained publicly, though it hasn't been seriously pursued.

Otherwise, there are local scholars who tend to argue that the sole purpose of diacritical marks is to assist students with their pronunciation. Le Tagaloa (1996), with Taumoevalu (1998) tend to

argue that the diacritical marks were meant to serve the literacy interests of the missionaries or foreign students of Samoan at the time. It is not surprising therefore that Le Tagaloa was not a proponent of diacritical marks. Her observations of discrepancies noted would have been part of her non-stance. In sum, the polarized nature of the discussion on the role of the diacritical marks in the Samoan orthography, highlights the lingering issues arisen from. These writers referred to the problem as an entangled dilemma from a linguistic viewpoint (Tavita & Aukuso, 1999, 2022).

To this end, the need for a transnational template is becoming ever more relevant. This will serve the urgent need for quality resources, particularly at this stage in time when online resource producers seem to take advantage of the Internet and social media to sell their wares and promote the language. Notwithstanding the industrious spirit involved, some of these resources/promotions would not be the best to recommend, when critically evaluated in the context of the concerns voiced above.

Conclusion:

This short review of the Samoan Alphabet Chart, popularly known by the name *Pi Faitau*, sought to argue that there was a linguistic inconsistency noted in the formation of the chart. At the core is a phonemic dilemma in letter sound relationship, which caused for a misrepresentation of the Samoan vowel sounds by default. Part of the argument is to do with the tenacity by which the vowel sound withstood the effect of such incongruity all these years; compounded also by the ongoing challenge of an alternative sound (k register), which is another discussion. How this could be explained; and why this prolonged stance may no longer be sustained, were central to this review. Most importantly, the implication of all these on the pure Samoan sound and its retention, hence the need for clarity at this time and space. All of the above underscore the urgency of a review of the Alphabet Chart, given its primacy as a resource of first contact in literacy development. To this end, the writers would strongly recommend a new chart. Such chart will provide clarity first and foremost.

Finally, we hope that we have presented the argument well and strongly, based on the strength of observations offered, first, by our own local and experienced observer, Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa. This

will serve the higher purposes of our language, by having a more robust and all-sufficient *Pi Faitau* that takes us into the 21st century and the next.

Reference:

- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "spelling bee". Encyclopedia Britannica, 2 Jun. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/spelling-bee>. Accessed 28 August 2023.
- Churchill, W. (1908). Samoan phonetics in the broader relation. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* Volume 17 No 2. pp 79-92.
- Hough, A. (1923) *O le Faamatalaga o le Gagana Samoa*, 6th Edition Reprinted 1988, Malua Printing Press
- Hunkin, G. A. (2016). *O le taua o faailoga i la tatou Gagana Tusitusi*, in *Tautua faamaoni e taofi mau measina* (Ed.) Sauvao & Tavita, Niupac
- Le Tagaloa, Aiono, F. (1996) *O la ta gagana*, Le Lamepa Press. Apia.
- Lovett, R. (1899). *The History of the London Missionary Society, 1795-1895*, Volume 1. Indiana: Repressed Publishing LLC, Reprint 2012.
- Mayer, J. F. (2016). An historical look at modern Samoan. In L. Sauvao & L. Tavita (eds.) *Tautua Faamaoni e taofi mau Measina*. FAGASA-NIUPAC, New Zealand
- Milner, G. (1966). *Samoan dictionary*. Samoan English English-Samoan. Polynesian Press.
- Pratt, G. (1893). *Samoan dictionary: English and Samoan, and Samoan and English*. LMS's Press Reprint 1911.
- Tanielu, L.S. (2004). *O le A'oa'oina o le gagana, faitautusi ma le tusitusi i le a'oga a le faifeau: Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano Samoa (EFKS) = Literacy education, language, reading and writing in the pastor's school (CCCS)*.
- Taumoeolau, M. (1998). *Problems in Tongan Lexicography*. A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics, University of Auckland, 1998
- Tavita, L. & Aukuso, S. (2019, 2022). The Samoan vowel shift: A phenomenon in phonetics and phonological awareness. *Pacific Dynamics, Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, University of Canterbury, NZ,
- Tavita, L. & Fetui, V. & Aukuso, S. (2020) The children need clarification on own sounds: In search of a new paradigm that suffices for Samoan children's literacy needs, *Samoan Research International Repository*, Website: www.ola888.com.
- Tualualelei, E. M. & Mayer, F. L. J. & Hunkin, G. A. (2015). Diacritical marks and the Samoan

language. *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 27.
No. 1 Special Issue: Decolonization. Language
and Identity: The Francophone Islands of the
Pacific (2015), pp.184-207