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Cheryl Nunes  
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# **Samoanizing my *Fa'apalagi* : The Indigenization of Language in Samoa**



Cheryl Nunes

Dr. Emma Kruse-Va'ai, Advisor  
Jackie Fa'asisila, A.D.  
S.I.T Samoa  
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## **Abstract**

Since its arrival in the 1830s, the English language has been an increasing presence in the minds and mouths of native Samoans. It winds its way within the schools, onto the streets, and into the offices of modern Samoa. This constant exposure to English, however, does not necessarily entail a loss of the Samoan language or culture. Quite the contrary, as Samoans have not only embraced the English language, but have furthermore indigenized it to their own advantage. Using education and exposure as tools, Samoans readily weave innovative mixtures of English and Samoan into various aspects of their lives, including conversation, radio, television, and modern literature. Such mediums expose a unique linguistic hybridity that is employed by many Samoans, who despite their English use, never fail to reflect a core ‘Samoan-ness’.

<b>Contacts</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>	<b>Phone</b>
Emma Kruse-Va'ai	<a href="mailto:e.krusevaai@nus.edu.ws">e.krusevaai@nus.edu.ws</a>	
Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa	<a href="mailto:aionofanaafi@leiunivesiteosavavau.ws">aionofanaafi@leiunivesiteosavavau.ws</a>	21667
John Mayer	<a href="mailto:jmayer@hawaii.edu">jmayer@hawaii.edu</a>	
Ainslie So'o	<a href="mailto:ainsliesoo@lesamoa.net">ainsliesoo@lesamoa.net</a>	21911 ext. 760
Asofou So'o	<a href="mailto:a.soo@nus.edu.ws">a.soo@nus.edu.ws</a>	
NUS		20072

for the fun of it,  
*gagana*

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**Introduction**    *"Linguistically, the Pacific is the most complex region of the world"*  
– Robert Kiste (2001:3)

The Independent Nation of Samoa is located in the South Pacific Ocean, about two thirds of the way from Hawai'i to New Zealand. The country consists of two large islands of Upolu and Savai'i, as well as seven smaller islands, all of which are rugged, mountainous, and covered in tropical vegetation (28). As a people, Samoans are Polynesian, which is a subgroup of the Austronesian family. Austronesians made their homeland in Taiwan three to five thousand years ago, and the geographical regions of Southeast Asia and Oceania are both derived from this original land mass (Va'a 2006:3).

Linguistically, the Samoan language is on the *Samoic* branch of Polynesian languages, once again stemming from the Austronesian family. Samoan is a VSO (Verb-Subject-Object) language, with approximately 199,377 speakers living in Samoa as of 1999. Across the globe, an estimated 370,337 people speak the Samoan language (16).

Historically, the Samoan language has maintained relative homogeneity, with the first European contact arriving in the 1700s, but not intensifying until the arrival of English missionaries in the 1830s (28). With the arrival of missionaries in the 1830s, however, came an onslaught of new ideas manifested through the practice of a new language: English. English slowly but surely wove its way into Samoan life, extending into both education and social domains. While some may view the presence of English as a threat to the survival of the Samoan language and culture, Samoa has actually proved to be quite resilient in maintaining its traditional 'Samoan-ness'. In addition to maintaining a thriving native language, Samoans have also employed a creative integration of English into various realms such as media, music, casual conversation, and written literature. Using education and exposure as tools, Samoans have effectively taken the English language, and indigenized it in such a unique manner that the nation is living in a virtually linguistically hybrid society that never fails to reflect its roots (Kruse-Va'ai 1998).

**Methodology** “Go west, young [wo]man.” – John B.L. Soule (1851:Editorial Title)

The initial objective of this research was to evaluate the recent changes brought upon the Samoan language as a direct or indirect result of the English language, and the introduction of a new culture into Samoan life. After preliminary data collection, however, it soon became evident that the scope of such a study is much larger than expected, as changes are occurring within a tremendous variety of linguistic realms. Furthermore, it became obvious that the true linguistic phenomenon lies not within the Samoan language, but within the people of Samoa, and their ability to *indigenize* language.

The indigenization of English therefore became the focus of this study, and supporting evidence for such a claim was initially derived from a range of secondary sources. Most notable among these sources is the doctoral dissertation of Dr. Emma Kruse-Va'ai, whose extensive research on the appropriation of English in Samoa served to facilitate many facets of this project. Also noteworthy among the secondary sources are the works of author Sia Figiel, whose words from beginning to end propelled much of this research into action. Furthermore, observations amid the experience of language learning throughout the semester also contributed greatly to the evolution of this study.

From an assortment of secondary sources and observations arose a wide range of language experts, with whom many interviews were conducted. Interviewees were primarily employed by the National University of Samoa, where several revisions to the Samoan Language Program are currently underway. The Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture was also consulted throughout the research process, and a final interview was conducted with Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa of the Indigenous Samoan University.

Research was limited to the span of three weeks, which resulted in an otherwise burgeoning bush of a project to redefine itself into an upward-sprouting tree. That is to say, many potential research outlets were discarded in favor of more concise, and available, evidence. Nonetheless, through extensive interviews, inspiring secondary sources, and



inescapable observations, this study has indeed become a tree that will perhaps one day grow into a rainforest.

**Language in Education**

*“From the onset, Samoans were eager to accept the offerings of the missionaries and to adopt them their own needs within the context of Samoan culture and society.”*

*– John Mayer (2001:85)*

When the missionaries arrived in the 1830s, they brought with them a foreign language and a new concept of formal education. Their ideas were received with enthusiasm by the native Samoans, who always showed a great eagerness to learn. By 1855, the missionaries had successfully transcribed the Bible into the Samoan language (16), so the first instances of education were actually conducted in Samoan. By 1900, nearly one hundred percent of Samoans were literate in their own language (Keesing 1934, as in Kruse-Va'ai 1998:71).

When New Zealand gained control of Western Samoa in 1914 (28), the emphasis on English within the schools began to grow rapidly. Although the Samoan language could still be heard at school, it never played an explicit role in the curriculum. Eventually, students even began to get into trouble for speaking Samoan within the classroom, and as time passed Samoans gained increased exposure to an almost entirely foreign educational domain. Among Samoan parents, an awareness soon arose, as Ministry of Education Language Specialist Ainslie So'o points out, "Samoan was never considered to be that important in the curriculum, but then we noticed that the children were losing competency in their own language and heritage" (11-20-06). This loss was in fact very significant, as a study conducted by the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture indicated that, in July of 2000, only 89 percent of Samoan grandparents could communicate with their grandchildren in the native tongue, and only 70 percent of Samoan parents could perform the same task. Furthermore, only 90 percent of Samoan grandparents and 65 percent of Samoan

grandchildren could speak the language at all. This is a competency drop of 25 percent over three generations, and the Ministry predicted that within another three generations, only about 50 percent of the nation would be fluent in their own language (Va'a 2006:15-16).

Stemming from a new awareness about potential linguistic loss, Samoa initiated several educational changes towards the maintenance of the native tongue. First of all, the Samoan language was finally introduced as a subject into the general school system in the late 1960s (Mayer 2001:81). Furthermore, the virtual ban on conversational Samoan within the schools was lifted over the past ten years, and now students are free to speak "whatever they want" (So'o, Ai. 11-20-06). The past ten years have also seen an increase in the standard for Samoan language emphasis within higher learning, both through amendments made to the already established National University of Samoa, as well as the introduction of an Indigenous Samoan University, operating entirely in the Samoan language.

Founded in 1984 by an act of Parliament, the National University of Samoa seeks to create an "establishment of a centre of excellence in the study of Samoa, the Samoan language, and culture" (HDR 2006:90). In light of this claim, the Samoan Studies Department at NUS has recently undergone several revisions. Most notably, Samoan Language is now offered as a major, which effectively recognizes language as a separate entity from the previous option of only Language *and* Culture. Within this new major, students are required to take eight Samoan Language classes, ranging from focus in Syntax, Semantics, and Translation, to Samoan Oratory and Language Change. A course on Oral and Written Literature also encourages students to analyze the role of language within Samoan literary arts, as well as examine their own creative use of language (So'o, As. 11-20-06).

In addition to a revised Samoan language major, the National University of Samoa also offers classes that teach Samoan as a second language. While this is primarily an effort to reach non-native speakers of the Samoan language, such classes are also a tool to improve competency among students who are native Samoan speakers, but may possess sub-standard

language skills. These students, more often than not, are children of mixed-blood parents, or simply come from Samoan families that for whatever reason, choose to speak English rather than Samoan within their homes (Temese 11-20-06)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, as a bilingual institution that pays special regard to language skills upon entrance, NUS is ultimately geared towards equipping young Samoans to “ideally be competent in both [languages], but still maintain ‘Samoan-ness’” (So’o, As. 11-20-06).

Further emphasizing the presence of the Samoan language within schools is *Le Iunivesite o le Amosa o Savavau*, or the Indigenous Samoan University. Founded in 1997, *Le Iunivesite o Savavau* enrolls nearly 300 native students. The institution was established by Samoa’s first local Director of Education Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, and attempts to resurrect the vitality of the Samoan language within education. When asked about admission into the institution, Aiono explains only a couple of easy criteria: an applicant must be at least 18 years of age, and must have a strong desire to be educated, speak, read, and write in the Samoan language. Though the courses vary only slightly from traditional university courses, they are all conducted exclusively in Samoan. *Le Iunivesite o Savavau* offers two degrees: a “journeyman” Bachelor of Arts degree, or *Tagata Malaga*, and an “expert” Master of Arts degree, or *Le Matua o Faiva*. Dissertations for each degree must be written in Samoan, and graduate diplomas are officially recognized by the Samoan Public Service Commission (Le Tagaloa 11-27-06).

In establishing an Indigenous Samoan University, Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa has seen her share of raised eyebrows. The school has been declined overseas funding, and has also met skepticism from those who view the quality of English as directly proportional to the quality of education. When faced with such an assessment, however, Aiono responds that

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<sup>1</sup> The desire to use English in the homes may stem from the perception that the level of English is directly proportional to intelligence or success (Le Tagaloa 11-27-06), and parents should therefore encourage its use at home. This notion is oversimplified, however, as many Samoans continue to live happy and healthy lives without speaking a word of English (Kruse-Va’ai 11-22-06).

“[one] must start with the Samoan language, and get people to think first in *their* language...but they don’t want that, because the whole mark of schooling, being educated now, is knowing how to make noises in English” (Le Tagaloa 11-27-06). Aiono stresses, however, that the schooling at *Savavau* can be used as a foundation, intended to encourage creative thinking and active learning in the native language, with the intention of then serving as a bridge to new languages. After all, the Samoan word ‘*savavau*’ does translate into ‘imagination’, or *fantasia*, as Aiono earnestly asserts (Le Tagaloa 11-27-06).

The notion of first establishing a foundation in one’s native language is not a foreign concept, and is certainly not a sentiment felt only by Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa. Speaking with educators about the use of language within Samoan schools has several times elicited a passion for ‘Samoan first’. At the Ministry of Education, Ainslie So’o expresses: “Don’t worry about children learning to speak English. Make sure they know everything first about Samoan, then they pick it [English] up” (11-20-06). The Samoan Studies department at NUS expresses a similar sentiment, as longtime educator Seuli Vaifou Temese claims, “If you know your mother tongue, it’s easier to learn a [new] language. A first language is very helpful to articulate a second language.” Thus, the educational consensus is that English is indeed there for the taking, but the native language must first be ingrained into the minds of Samoan youth. With a strong Samoan foundation, students can better use what they have learned to improve their native land. Ultimately, this is the ideal goal for western education in Samoa: to take it, to realize its use, and then to *come back and contribute to the development of Samoa*. (Kruse-Va’ai 11-22-06).

**Socio-Linguistic Switching**    “*Our language is our heritage, our origin, our reason for being and belonging.*” – Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa (1997:3)

After receiving a ‘Samoanized’ version of western education, young Samoans are equipped to step foot into a world of colliding cultures. With nearly all Samoan youth today

growing up with at least some exposure to both English and Samoan, linguistic mixing is bound to occur. This code-switching can depend on place and social context of the speaker, or may be a function of one language's inability to adequately translate into another. Language is in fact a social activity, and the presence of both English and Samoan provides for unique cases of mixture, often reflecting a Samoan 'appropriation' of the English language (Kruse-Va'ai 1998). Many factors must be considered, however, as this linguistic hybridization infiltrates such spheres as everyday conversation, music, television, and workplaces within Samoa.

Often before any other domain, the English language is first experienced casually within Samoa. It weaves its way through the circles of playing children, onto the streets of the capital city of Apia, and into the minds of Samoan natives. Although English words and phrases are frequently employed, the manner in which they are uttered often reflects a distinct Samoan flavor.

Growing up, Samoan children may hear English playground rhymes, and promptly repeat them in a style reflective of the Samoan language. This often entails dropping word-final consonants, or changing specific letters to reflect the Samoan alphabet. For example, an English /d/ may become a /t/, or may be dropped altogether if at the end of a word. Such adaptation occurs in the following English rhyme:

Pinky pinky ponky Daddy bought a donkey  
 Donkey died Daddy cried  
 Pinky Pinky Ponky  
 Will you please walk out.

Versus a possible Samoan version that reads:

*Inky inky onky tatty porta-tonkey  
 Tonkey krai tatty krai  
 Inky inky onky  
 Will you please walk outie* (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:79).

The above changes are a product of Samoan appropriation, as no Samoan word ends in a consonant, and unlike English, the Samoan alphabet does not include voiced consonantal stops such as /d/, /b/, or /g/ (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:80).

The same adaptations that occur among singing children also translate to everyday 'street-talk' within Samoa. The appropriation has a lasting effect, and a Samoan using even the odd English word can be heard when listening in on almost any conversation in the Apia area. More often than not, the use of English arises within a spoken mixture of both Samoan and English, which has been dubbed 'Samlish' by language expert John Mayer. Frequently within a Samlish utterance, the nouns are spoken in English, though the sentence often remains Samoan both in intonation and pronunciation.<sup>2</sup> These hybrid conversations are once again examples of Samoa's ability to indigenize language, as in such instances, "The English language has (thus) assumed a non-English character" (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:79).

When listening to the radio in Samoa, it is difficult not to hear remnants of both English and Samoan, sometimes within a single song. Regardless of the amount of English residue, however, an even stronger element of Samoan culture manifests itself either through the tune or the lyrics. Many Samoan artists adapt Samoan lyrics to a foreign tune, or put already existing English songs to a reggae background. (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:169) A prime example of this musical appropriation can be heard in December in Samoa, as familiar Christmas Carols ring out of radios, with the English lyrics jingle-belling along to a reggae beat.

In addition to Samoan and English remixes, new waves of hip-hop and rap music are also emerging onto the Samoan music scene. Similar to the original style of remixing, Samoan rap songs may include a bit of English lyric with an otherwise Samoan tune and

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<sup>2</sup> These inferences were drawn from several observations in which English words such as "tape", "stretch", and "grandma" were heard within a Samoan sentence, without changing the flow or intonation of the native speaker. Furthermore, these flows and intonations often translated to entire English sentences, as in the question "Are you going to Apia today?", typically asked with a Samoan-esque rising-to-falling tone.

tone, or they may be entirely Samoan to a hip-hop background beat. This new brand of music has an enormous influence on the young people of Samoa, and serves as an outlet for creative expression. Samoan rap and hip-hop are yet again products of Samoans using language as they want it, this time by cleverly mixing the domains of music and language, and effectively bringing a foreign genre “into their own variety.” Therefore, regardless of *which* language artists choose to employ, a link to Samoa can always be felt through the *way* in which such language is used (Kruse-Va’ai 11-22-06).

After examining linguistic hybridization on the radio, one can not help but naturally progress to television in Samoa. Television has perhaps an even greater influence on the Samoan public than radio does, and the role of language must therefore be carefully evaluated. As TV3 reporter Hesed Ieremia points out, “language is very vital, very influential” within his work, as he is in the business of reporting the news to the entire nation of Samoa. Hesed stresses the immense competency that he must have in both English and Samoan, as he highlights a typical day complete with interviews, write-ups, and voice-overs, all done in both languages for each story. Although Hesed did not mention many occurrences of language mixing on the news, he did point out the difficulties in translating stories from one language to another. As a native Samoan speaker, Hesed must adhere to the rules of respect within the Samoan language as he compiles his news presentations. He notes that while English allows for many more linguistic liberties when trying to directly report a story, he must on the flipside convey respect during his Samoan portion by using euphemisms, recognizing any and all chiefly titles, and utilizing other linguistic nuances to guarantee that viewers are not offended by a broadcast. Hesed sighs at the complexities of his linguistically separated job, and shakes his head as he claims that “No reporter could survive without being a native [Samoan] speaker” (Ieremia 11-15-06).

Hesed Ieremia stresses the difficulties of translating news reports between Samoan and English, as he cannot simply concede to English language norms within a Samoan

broadcast. This challenge of appropriate separation, however, is not unique to television, and occurs within workplaces throughout Samoa. Beginning again within the schools and branching out to offices and public outlets, attempts at accurate translations between English and Samoan often surrender to a mixture of the two, regardless of the desired medium of the speaker. This may be a result of insufficient vocabulary to express ideas of one culture in another language, or may simply be a product of overexposure to two languages. Regardless, there is an abundance of mixture that inevitably creeps into the minds and out of the mouths of Samoa's modern professionals, who for one reason or another rarely remain linguistically homogenous.

While observing colleague interaction at the National University of Samoa, one is likely to hear many Samlish conversations, some of which include alternations between entire sentences. When asked about his personal opinion on the matter, Director of the Centre for Samoan Studies Lau Asofou So'o claimed that he is in fact very conscious of the switching, but at the same time said that even he himself "can not help but mix languages" (11-20-06). When asked about the role of Samlish within the classroom, Education Lecturer Fa'atafao To'ia expressed that it would of course be ideal to operate exclusively in one language, but quickly noted that "In reality, there is always going to be a mixture of the two." Fa'atafao also commented on the linguistic mixture expressed by her students, as she was at the time correcting exams in which many of the answers were given in a combination of both English and Samoan.

When asked to ponder the reasons for such a strong sense of linguistic mixing, some NUS professionals cite the switching as a product of a native inclination to speak in Samoan, colliding with educational materials that are primarily in English. Therefore, when students are asked to recall ideas that were first presented to them in English, it is not surprising that their first instinct is to respond back in English (To'ia 11-16-06). This educational ingraining then carries over into the workplace as well, as public servants especially find that "the words



that express their thoughts and actions (in their work place) come more readily in English rather than Samoan” (Kruse-Va’ai 1998:94). This fact may stem from the sentiment that English is better used for “important or abstruse subjects”, as its Samoan counterpart may have a “limited vocabulary” (Va’a 2006:16). Consequently, the causes for code-switching between Samoan and English appear to be both academic exposure and vocabulary inefficiencies, which combine to render translational difficulties.

Given that the Samoan language does not offer a one-to-one translation for many English words (So’o, A. 11-20-06), recent efforts have been made towards the expansion of the Samoan vocabulary. Perhaps most notable among these efforts is the foundation of a Samoan Language Commission, entitled *Faleula Fautua i Upu*. Established in 1999, this language commission is set to address issues facing the Samoan language (Le Tagaloa 11-27-06), which include examining English words that lack a direct Samoan translation. Once such words are identified, the commission looks to create a Samoan equivalent, which they then proceed to filter through such mediums as school and the media. An example of one of these recent additions to the Samoan vocabulary is the expression *fa’asinomaga*, which translates into ‘identity’, and literally means ‘to point’ or ‘to show’ (Lesā. 10-15-06). The goal for this new term is to follow in the footsteps of words like *siosiomaga*, which is a manufactured word for ‘environment’ that originated in the 1980s and is now very much in common use (Fa’aSisila 12-1-06). In light of such efforts to ensure permanence, these Samoan counterparts must additionally be compiled in one place, distributed effectively, and subsequently used in everyday Samoan speech. For these reasons, the call for the creation of a National Dictionary is in order (So’o, Ai. 11-20-06).

Throughout the workplace, within education, and through forums such as radio and media, Samoans are using both the English and Samoan languages as well as creative mixtures of the two. Whether speaking Samoan or English or both, however, Samoans still manage to exhibit a strong sense of linguistic tradition. For instance, many Samoans regard it

as inconsiderate to speak formal English to a fellow Samoan, as it reflects an attitude of elitism, or *fiapalagi*, literally meaning ‘wannabe (white)’ (Kruse-Va’ai 11-22-06). Additionally, in cases where English is used among Samoans, there is an even greater effort to maintain a native touch by Samoanizing such things as pronunciation, mannerism, and tone (Kruse-Va’ai 1998). Native Samoan scholar Dr. Emma Kruse-Va’ai comments that when she speaks English to her Samoan colleagues, she does not use English intonations. This aforementioned indigenization of the English language by Samoans is evidenced within various domains, all of which are mentioned above and can be observed on a daily basis. It does not matter, therefore, what language Samoans choose to communicate with and where, because there is a strong sense that “when Samoans speak to each other, they still have to BE Samoan” (Kruse-Va’ai 11-22-06).

### **Modern Literature: Indigenization through Sia Figiel**

*“The language belongs to the user.” – Emma Kruse-Va’ai (1998: 215)*

Before literacy reached the South Pacific, the recording of ideas, laws, genealogies, and histories was all very flexible, and every group of islanders had “expert orators, spokesmen, and other liars to tell” (Hau’ofa 1985:104). Nearly all initial written literature produced about the region was actually authored by *papalagi*, or white foreigners, outsiders (Wendt 1983:82). It was not until the 1960s that native Pacific Islanders began penning their own written works (Subramani 1992:ix), beginning first with the recording of oral histories, and eventually evolving to a new forum of creative expression that manifests itself in multi-lingual literature set to reflect the magic of oral societies.

As literacy arrived and gained force in the South Pacific, the command of the oral traditions began to slowly diminish. This process of fading continued even as oral traditions were written down, as written text can not naturally grasp the magnitude of a storyteller’s performance. Though they are important for preservation, such written works tend to carry a

sense of incompleteness and inaccuracy, stemming primarily from the lack of orality portrayed by the words. As Pacific literature began to evolve, the need to preserve a native orality became even greater, and an awareness soon arose regarding this developmental challenge. Fijian scholar Pio Manoa specifically called on Pacific authors to “bear the burden of orality”, asserting that “literacy must be configured by a creative orality” (Manoa 1995:19). In Samoa in particular, this orality has in fact gained recent resurrection, beginning with the voice of Albert Wendt and extending to Sia Figiel, both of whom use written language as a means of linking past heritage with present innovations.

To a writer, language is infinitely important. To a Pacific islander, “Our languages give rise to our thoughts and our philosophies, and also give expression to our *mauli*, our unique souls” (Afamasaga 2002:98). Thus, it is important within the Pacific that the recent outpouring of creative writers have emerged among a variety of languages to choose from. As Samoan author Albert Wendt points out,

There are more than 1,200 indigenous languages, plus English, French, Hindi, Spanish, and various forms of pidgin to catch and interpret the void with, reinterpret our past with, create new historical and sociological visions of Oceania with, compose songs and poems and plays and other oral and written literature with. (Wendt 1983:81)

Specifically in Samoa, these options of more than 1,200 are pared down to two, and literary artists like Wendt and Sia Figiel are called upon to weave a rich Samoan tradition into creative works, using both the English and Samoan languages. In fact, of the world’s 6,000 odd languages, only 106 had been sufficient enough to produce literature by 1982 (Ong 1982:7), and although the course of twenty four years has certainly seen an increase in global literacy, only about one third of the world’s languages have ever yet been committed to writing (31). Furthermore, even after literacy is achieved there is no guarantee of proliferate literature, as obstacles like printing costs (Kruse-Va’ai 11-22-06) and slender vocabularies often impede the progress of freshly literate societies. In fact, while Standard English does contain a vocabulary of at least 1.5 million words, oral dialects typically consist of only a few

thousand words. (Ong 1982:8) Thus, as artists operating in a language that falls somewhere in between primary orality and ancient literacy, Samoan writers have taken it upon themselves to serve as a bridge between two colliding cultures, by employing an “innovative use of the English language” (Hereniko 1993:49) that answers the call for a resurrection of native orality.

A restored sense of orality within Samoan literature first came about through the works of Albert Wendt, who ultimately served as a great source of inspiration for younger artists like Sia Figiel. Growing up, Wendt remembers his constant exposure to Samoan oral tradition, as his grandmother never ceased to amaze him with countless fables, myths, and legends. As a writer, Wendt led the Pacific charge in incorporating elements of oral tradition into his formal writings, as others had not yet flirted with such a self-conscious stage of literature (Subramani 1992:33). Though he writes in English, Wendt still manages to display an overwhelming sense of Samoan-ness, as “his use of this language [English] conveys a knowledge and competence in his own mother tongue” (Va’ai 1998:23). Through his style, structure, and word choice, Wendt achieves a linguistic hybridization of English text that simultaneously rings true of a Samoan cultural identity.

By writing English in a style that suggests an ‘other’ native language, Wendt effectively employs the literary tool of *relexification* (Va’ai 1998:8). To ‘relexify’ literally means “to replace the vocabulary of a language with words drawn from another language, without changing the grammatical structure” (32). This literary device serves as an effective reflection of the way Samoans actually speak, and proves to be a great source of inspiration for Sia Figiel, who takes the concept of relexification to an entirely new level.

Known as the “first female novelist” from Samoa (24), Sia Figiel is famous for her provocative poetry and prose that not only tighten the gap between orality and literature, but also touches upon sensitive cultural issues in a way that no other Samoan writer has ever done before. As author of four innovative works to date, Sia Figiel grew up like Wendt under

the heavy exposure of Samoan *fagogo* and *faleaitu*, or ‘storytelling’ and ‘house of spirits/theatre’, respectively. These mediums of oral tradition served important roles of inspiration throughout Sia’s childhood, and certainly reflect in the way she writes today (Figiel 1996:133). Sia also cites Wendt’s ability to weave legends into his work as the biggest influence on her own structural intentions (Figiel 1996:129), and goes on to claim that “The imagery and music of the *fagogo* [legends] and the *solo* [poetry] continue(s) to shape and form the way I write in English” (Figiel 1996:122). Sia’s works, therefore, go far beyond word-switching within the realm of relexification, and extend the idea into the structural body of written literature, with an aim to energize Samoan oral traditions through her English words.

Sia Figiel’s conscious effort to maintain Samoan orality throughout her literature is certainly evident within her works. In her novella The Girl in the Moon Circle, for instance, Sia utilizes a double narrator as well as various cases of personified natural elements. Both of these literary devices are indeed products of Sia’s *fagogo* influence, and she maintains that such tools are employed to give meaning and value to indigenous expression and composition (Figiel 1996:129). Furthermore, Sia’s use of language exhibits a unique blend of English and Samoan, which serves to capture the essence of native Samoan conversation. Additionally, through her ‘vulgar’ use of the Samoan vernacular ‘k’ language, Sia rejects the norm of formal writing and instead remains true to her spoken language. The alternative to using this spoken ‘k’ language is the more formal ‘t’ language of Samoa, which is typically used within “domains of language usage which were not traditionally found in Samoa” (Mayer 2001:114). So although literature was indeed introduced as a foreign domain, Sia Figiel appropriates that domain by breaking through the ‘utterly dull and completely uninteresting’ confined conventionalities of formal language (Figiel 1996:125).

In addition to her linguistic style, Sia Figiel also pays extreme attention to the words that she chooses, the structure of her sentences, and the actual physical appearance of the text.

Sia may spend hours writing and rewriting a paragraph until it looks absolutely perfect, and only then can she begin to hear the work as a piece of complete literature (Figiel 1996:121-122). In her efforts to perfectly portray Samoan speakers, Sia purposefully misspells English words and emphasizes ‘incorrect’ syllables, all with the intention of accurately representing the phonetics of Samoan language. Sia also utilizes such techniques as enacting syntactic fusions of Samoan and English styles, sharpening the tone of her sentences, and inserting appropriate Samoan words into the text, all with the goal of exposing Samoan orality through her literary voice.

Sia Figiel is a strong believer that oral and written traditions exist on pluralistic planes. While the written word is not necessarily a natural progression of the oral, Sia does make a concerted effort to bridge the two forms of expression together (Figiel 1996:123). She is firmly entrenched within the overlap of the oral and written realms, and expresses the importance of a reader’s perception when she claims that “Oral and written aesthetics are highly important. I want the reader to be able to experience the music of the oral tradition in the way I write in English” (Figiel 1996:122). Sia is constantly conscious not only of her language and how it reflects Samoan past traditions, but also on the present, and the deeper themes that resonate throughout the nation.

In addition to her strong visual language, Sia Figiel also deals with serious human issues. She broaches such topics as incest, child abuse, suicide, rape, and alcoholism within Samoa. These topics had never before been exposed to such an extent by a Samoan artist, and Sia is aware that her unearthing of such issues is perceived as a reflection on Samoa as a whole. Sia is not concerned with judgment, however, as her objective is to write, and to write well (Figiel 1996:131-132). Her efforts to link Samoan tradition with written text do not go unnoticed, as her exposure of taboo subjects makes her words all the more powerful. In effect, Sia Figiel’s works of literature are written with the intention of performance, complete

with provocative themes that, through the author's language, are meant to be experienced not only with the eyes and mind, but with the ears and soul as well.

As important as language is to Sia Figiel's works of literature, it is even more important to her as a performer. She pays careful attention to the audience, and her language use depends on the respective receptions and reactions to English versus Samoan. Although a mixture is often employed by Sia, her careful attention to switching demonstrates a mastery and understanding of both languages and their appropriate contexts (Figiel 1996:123-124). Though she may deliver one line in Samoan and the next in English, an undoubtedly Samoan sphere encircles Sia's words, which explode out of her mouth, through the audience, and eventually onto paper.

Sia Figiel has perfected the art of performance prose, crafting her English works in such a way that a reader can not help but be overcome by a sense of Samoa. Reaching this level of self-consciousness, however, was no simple task for Sia. In order to truly know one's homeland, she stresses, a writer must first travel the world and gain exposure to *other* people, experience *other* cultures. Such foreign exposure inevitably includes observations on global uses of language, and specifically, Sia cites African and Caribbean artists' use of the English language as great sources of inspiration for her own works (Figiel 1996:132). Their style, their voice, their *indigenization* are all things that Sia Figiel mimics, but in her own, Samoan, way.

Though she may write primarily in English, little doubt exists about the authenticity of Sia Figiel's work. She herself recalls several instances of young Samoans approaching her, exclaiming how real her characters are, how much they are like *them* (Figiel 1996:124). Emma Kruse-Va'ai also asserts that Sia Figiel's language "hit it dead on" in terms of her variety of English and Samoan use. Kruse-Va'ai believes that the use of language is extremely important in literature, and remembers the vital role that English literature played in her own research study on the appropriation of English in Samoa (Kruse-Va'ai 11-22-06).

As an example of language use in literature, Kruse-Va'ai also examined the works of Sia Figiel, including the novella The Girl in the Moon Circle. Commenting on the work, she claims that "Figiel's language use becomes the expression of not just the author, but of a society which is defiantly self-defining with a modern context of technological innovations and Eurocentric notions of being" (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:206). And it is this act of defiant self-definition that makes Samoa so unique, and an enduring quality that Sia Figiel takes meticulous care to portray through her language. It is surprising, therefore, that Sia Figiel had such a hard time publishing her second piece of fiction, The Girl in the Moon Circle. Many establishments actually deemed the work *too* Samoan in style, structure, themes, narration, and essentially everything (Figiel 1996:iv), which is ironic, since the book is written almost entirely in English.

Beginning with orality, Sia Figiel manages to weave innumerable elements of Samoan language into her work, despite its acquired-language reality. Through her language, she also finds an ability to effectively express her own perceptions and impressions from a native Samoan viewpoint. Therefore, although her works are written in English, Sia Figiel has unmistakably stemmed from another language, another place. It is evident that she has accepted the impending changes facing her country, and has in effect used them to her advantage in portraying a Samoa that is genuine, tangible, and compelling.

By not being afraid to articulate a voice that is purely her own, Sia Figiel was able to creatively express herself as a Samoan, and in doing so gained rapid success on the literary circuit. As an icon of influence, Sia turns right back around and encourages young artists everywhere to follow their imaginative instinct and take that leap into creative expression. Samoa in particular is encouraged to heed such advice, as the call for Samoan literature is far from satisfied. Emma Kruse-Va'ai recognizes the scarcity of Samoan books, and acknowledges the need to push Samoan literary emphasis in schools. She sees literature as an opportunity for Samoa to "write back", using English and education as indigenized tools of



the colonizers (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:184). She appeals for teachers who "love reading, love language, speaking, and expressing oneself" (Kruse-Va'ai 11-22-06), and knows that the root of possibility invariably begins with education, where Samoa is currently experiencing a shift in power from the oral to the literate. Despite this shift, however, literature is and will forever remain a creative outlet for the resurrection of Samoan orality, as well as a forum for artists to exhibit an everlasting sense of Samoan self. Such cultural preservation can be seen within the examples of native artists thus far, who through their literature have mastered the art of "conveying cultural messages and contributing to the maintenance of a Samoan cultural identity" (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:181). Beginning with Albert Wendt's mythical synthesis and resonating in Sia Figiel's ethno-rhythmic performance prose, a reader of modern Samoan literature is essentially propelled from an English text into Samoan (oral) tradition.

**Conclusion**     *"The present is all that we have and we should live it out as creatively as possible."* – Albert Wendt (1983:76)

No one can deny that Samoa needs to speak English if it wants to be a part of global development (Kruse-Va'ai 11-22-06).<sup>3</sup> The presence of English, however, is not necessarily a bad thing, as Samoans have demonstrated time and again their ability to indigenize aspects of globalization. Language is no different, and beginning with education as a foundation, Samoans are achieving an increasingly appropriate blend of English and Samoan that they then introduce into a vast multitude of daily outlets. This linguistic hybridization is a creative act by Samoans, and an effort not to retain their language to be stale (Kruse-Va'ai 11-22-06), but rather to maintain a Samoan-ness within their speech that can proliferate, endure, and energize the Samoan culture through the twenty-first century.

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<sup>3</sup> Although it is crucial on the national level, the English language is certainly not essential to ensure individual happiness. Plenty of Samoans even today are living, breathing, surviving and thriving without ever speaking a word of English. (Kruse-Va'ai 11-22-06) English must only be recognized by the country, not necessarily the person.

Education in Samoa began entirely in Samoan, evolved ever so slightly towards an English supremacy, and is now coming full circle with an increased awareness about the importance of the Samoan language within schools. Through current innovations within the Ministry of Education, the National University of Samoa, as well as the establishment of an indigenous Samoan University, the Samoan language is continually gaining strength within curriculums. While expecting to entirely expunge English from schools is unrealistic, efforts are certainly being made to redefine the importance of mother tongue mastery, and the Samoan language has been deemed by natives as entirely necessary for acquisition and survival within Samoan English. Because only after Samoans have conquered their native language are they equipped with the proper tools necessary to speak a second language, yet still exude such a strong Samoan quality.

Beginning in the classroom, Samoans are constantly emerging into a linguistically hybrid society. New generations continue to contribute to the phenomenon of creative mixture, utilizing the likes of conversation, media, and literature as outlets for expression. While many contexts of communication employ the simultaneous use of both English and Samoan, certain situations still call for the adherence to the understood laws of the native Samoan language. Such cases rarely reflect forfeiture to English or its norms, and even English in casual contexts tends to carry a Samoan coating.

An overpowering example of Samoan appropriation of the English language resides within Samoan modern literature. Not only do many of the works accurately reflect a native Samoan society, but they also serve to resurrect a shifting oral tradition. Beginning with author Albert Wendt and booming onwards through the voice of Sia Figiel, the Samoan language and culture never fail to overshadow the use of English within literature. Wendt weaves his words from the wonders of Samoan oral tradition, while Sia achieves authenticity by stampeding her way through language norms. In addition, Sia Figiel exposes provocative issues that serve to enhance her linguistic innovations, and thus elicit an air of performance

within her works. This effort to bridge the gap between Samoan orality and foreign-introduced literacy is a source of inspiration for young artists, as they too try their hand at procuring an everlasting Samoan center beneath a craftily composed English disguise.

In actuality, English is a bonus for Samoans, adding to their repertoire of language skills and effectively serving to enhance, not undermine, the native language. It is a means of accessing Samoan culture through a non-Samoan language, and reflects a society that was and is geared for change (Kruse-Va'ai 1998:219). Though it may not be what it was 200 years ago, Samoan language is still very much a blossoming, evolving, and dynamic language that continues to thrive despite the undeniable presence of English. In actuality, English has not led to a weakening of the Samoan language or identity, but rather Samoans have indigenized English to the point no return. In never failing to reflect their own realities, Samoans have personified the notion that it is not what you say, but how you say it, and though their words may be in English, their voice is forever Samoan.

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Glossary of Samoan Terms

*fa'apalagi* -- casual term referring to the English language

*fa'asinomaga* -- identity; literally 'to point, show'

*fagogo* -- storytelling (of myths, legends)

*faleaitu* -- theatre; literally 'house of spirits'

*Faleula Fautua i Upu* -- title of Samoan Language Commission

*fiapalagi* -- wannabe; literally 'wannabe white, foreign'

*(e) ke alu i fea?* -- where are you going?

*Le Iunivesite o le Amosa o Savavau* -- Name of Samoan Indigenous University

*Le Matua o Faiva* -- *Le Iunivesite o Savavau* Master's Degree; literally 'expert'

*mauli* -- soul

*papalagi* -- white foreigners, outsiders

*savavau* -- imagination, fantasia

*siosiomaga* -- environment

*solo* -- poetry

*Tagata Malaga* -- *Le Iunivesite o Savavau* Bachelor's Degree; literally 'journeymen'

UMA .

