When c, q, r, x, and z are vowels

An informal report on Natqgu orthography

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1. Background

In the Solomons, English is the national language and Solomon Islands Pijin is the commonly used language of wider communication. Most of the variously estimated 50 to 90 vernaculars in the country are part of the Austronesian language family, having only five vowels, no tone, and relatively simple syntax. Natqgu is spoken by about 5,000 people on Santa Cruz island in the far eastern Solomons. It is an agglutinating Papuan language with 18 phonemic vowels and having a basic syllable structure inventory of V, CV, and CCV syllables. It is accurately reputed to be the most complex language in the Solomons, phonologically, morphologically, and syntactically. Many Austronesian language speakers who marry into the Natqgu language group eventually learn to understand it, but few ever manage to produce it, despite the fact that most Solomon Islanders are multilingual.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old orthography</th>
<th>Phonetic representation</th>
<th>New orthography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Chart 1 Changed Natqgu vowels

Natqgu has the five vowels \( a, e, i, o, \) and \( u \) in common with Pijin and the Austronesian languages of the Solomons, plus five other oral vowels. In addition, eight of the 10 oral vowels occur with phonemic nasalization. But only four of the phonemically nasal vowels occur with any frequency, and overall their functional load is quite low. In fact, the translation advisors who preceded us had decided not to mark nasalization at all, since the speakers themselves would never fail to pronounce the correct vowel, whether it was marked or not. We decided to mark it for political reasons. (An influential local church and government leader wanted it marked.) It was previously indicated with a tilde (~) over the vowel. But imagine for a minute the confusion of an underlined \( o \) on one line, with a nasalized umlauted \( e \) lined up just under it on the next line. It was visual confusion. In handwritten, and even typed material, it was often difficult to differentiate an umlaut from a tilde. So, now we indicate nasalization with a straight apostrophe following the vowel \( (a') \).

For years, Santa Cruz people have told other Solomon Islanders “Our language cannot be written.” And when literate “five-vowel people” tried to do it, they said, “You’re right. It can’t.” (That is, it cannot be written with the traditional five vowels of the English alphabet.) But, even among people who knew the additional vowel symbols enabled by diacritics, it seems that there was confusion about the vowels. For some, the fact that a diacritic changed a vowel into a completely different vowel, not even similar in sound to the one without the diacritic, was incomprehensible. And, since vowels with diacritics occur more frequently than those without, a page of text was covered with dots and was too busy visually, if not confusing. We also found that mimeographing or photocopying texts with less-than-perfect reproduction (the norm) resulted in hard-to-read text, because some of the critically important diacritics were faint or missing in places. It would be like trying to read a tone language without tone marks on random words.
Another drawback to the old orthography was that it could not be easily typed on commonly available English typewriters, nor could it be typeset in the country. When typewriter quote marks were used to produce the umlauts on four of the vowels, it necessitated typing the vowel, backspacing, shifting, and typing a quote mark. That meant a lot of work to produce a majority of the vowels. Besides, the result was unappealing, because the quote marks penetrated into the vowels. Since it was difficult for Natqgu speakers to publish anything without a computer and printer to produce camera-ready copy, there was little incentive to produce written materials locally. And as far as we know, no materials have been produced by anyone outside the translation project since the orthography was first introduced more than 20 years ago.

For the above reasons, we had thought for some time that it would be in the best interest of the people to get rid of diacritics in the orthography. Our primary motivation was to make local publication easier, using locally available typewriters and printing businesses. But due to a number of factors, a proposal to this effect was voted down by the Natqgu Translation Committee in 1989, with a bare majority voting to keep the old one.

2. The new letters

During a visit in 1994, after hearing the history of the project and our concerns about the orthography, our SIL director encouraged us to investigate at least one more time the possibility of changing the orthography. It turned out the climate was right, and a survey of the local church and government leaders revealed their openness to a change. On that basis, we made a presentation to a small committee of Santa Cruz leaders (the only ones who had enough interest in the issue to show up) of various options to do away with the diacritics. Due to the frequency of vowels with diacritics, they were unwilling to use a vowel plus consonant digraph option, (for example, \( uh \) instead of \( ë \) for schwa), since it would make the words significantly longer and harder to read. (They are long enough as it is!) After discussion, and looking at texts printed using the various digraph and nondigraph options, the current orthography was adopted by the committee in May 1994.

A couple of sociolinguistic factors played a crucial part in the acceptance of the new orthography. First, the old orthography had been in existence for nearly 20 years, but it was of little indigenous use for any purpose outside the translation project. Most of those who had once learned the old orthography were men now over 45 years old, and only one or two of them ever used it. Clearly, there was little local identification with the old orthography. Secondly, there is a willingness, that borders on apathy, to let others make decisions for them in such esoteric an area as a written vernacular. No one here had strong feelings about the orthography, even though elsewhere in the country orthographies have been hotly disputed, with splits generally occurring along denominational lines.

The response to the new orthography has been uniformly positive. Two workshops were held, within a month of each other, to teach people who had already learned to read English to make the transition to Natqgu. Due to precipitous timing of the decision to change the orthography, the first workshop was taught with the old orthography, and the second was just after the change. Otherwise, the materials and content were identical. It was our impression that the people in the second one were able to learn the new orthography more quickly and were more fluent at the end of the one-week course than those in the first


Page 3.
course. We considered that significant since the demographics of the two groups were essentially the same. Since then, three additional workshops have been held for the same purpose. The result has been a bigger core group of readers and a growing group of younger readers that includes women and teenagers.

The feedback we have gotten from people in the courses has been that the new orthography makes sense to them, and it is easy to use. There is apparently no confusion between what are consonants in English and are vowels in Natqgu. Though, occasionally new readers have a problem with the letter $r$, which is used both as an indigenous vowel and as a consonant in some English borrowings (that is, Robert and Jerusalem). Even those who had learned the old orthography years ago were quick to learn and to promote the new one after attending a workshop. So now with the new orthography, the group of people reading and writing the language is slowly growing, whereas, before it had been minimal and static.

On several occasions, older men literate in the old orthography, but who live some distance away, came to us concerned when they heard about the new letters. But in every instance, after just five to 10 minutes of teaching, they were able to read the new orthography, and left feeling good about it. Others have made the transition independently with just a one-page handout delineating the correspondences.

Vowels: $a$ $c$ $e$ $i$ $o$ $q$ $r$ $u$ $x$ $z$

Consonants: $b$ $d$ $g$ $(j)$ $k$ $l$ $m$ $n$ $p$ $s$ $t$ $v$ $w$ $y$

The $(j)$ sound occurs in one of the 12 Natqgu dialects and is easy for all speakers to pronounce in English borrowings.

Consonants used in English borrowings: $h$ $j$ $r$

Chart 2 Natqgu phonological orthographic inventory

We have also found that people can identify $h$-initial English borrowings better if the $h$ is written, even though there is no phonemic distinction between $[h]$ and glottal stop in Natqgu. For example, both hammer and honey are English borrowings which had been written $ama$ and $ane$. Since these could also be Natqgu words, it made comprehension difficult. But once the change was made to $hama$ and $hane$, comprehension and fluency improved.

3. The growing response

In the two-and-a-half years since its introduction, the new orthography continues to be well received. In May 1996, a group of 82 local leaders met to discuss and to agree on ways they could advance literacy and Scripture-in-use on the island. As a result, weekly reading groups started meeting at three of the four Anglican churches in the population center. A handful of people are helping with song writing and reviewing Scripture. A priority was given to the production of easy reading books, and the translation team agreed to produce a Natqgu worship songbook. Two local sixth grade teachers have very recently started teaching students to read Natqgu in their classes. And finally, about 20 leaders participated in a Natqgu teacher’s course to equip them to teach a few people at a time in their homes.


Page 4.
It would be difficult to conclusively prove that the recent spark of community interest is due in large part to the new orthography. But I am convinced that this is so. The current interest and support, small as it is, is the greatest it has been in the history of the project. I trust it will continue.