

# What you see is not always what you get

or, a brief lesson in how to pronounce some toponyms from the Pacific<sup>1</sup>

*When we see foreign words and toponyms rendered in Roman script, we tend to forget that their pronunciation will not always conform to our expectations. Paul Geraghty's articles on Fijian placenames reminded me of this, says Jan Tent.*

Oceanic languages (of which Fijian is one) tend not to have as many vowels and consonants as English. But some of the consonant sounds they have can be quite different to English ones. And unlike English, they tend to have a relatively simple and regular syllable structure, e.g. (Vowel) + Consonant + Vowel.<sup>2</sup> (I am talking here about pronunciation, not spelling!). This means a word may consist of a vowel by itself, two vowels or three (e.g. *Hiva Oa* and *Uea*)<sup>3</sup>, or start with a vowel followed by a consonant and another vowel (*Ofu*), or start with a consonant followed by a vowel. The latter two sequences may extend over a number of syllables (*Ovalau*, *Moturiki*). There tend to be no clusters of consonants (i.e. sequences of consonants without an intervening vowel) as we have in English.

Fijian, like many Melanesian and African languages, also has what are called 'prenasalised stops'. This means that the stop sounds /b/, /d/, and /g/ generally have a nasal sound preceding them, giving /<sup>m</sup>b/, /<sup>n</sup>d/ and /<sup>ŋ</sup>g/ (the /ŋ/ being the nasal sound we hear in the English word *sing*). These sounds are not considered to be, for example, /m/ + /b/ consonant clusters, but single sounds. You hear the nasal, but it is perceived to be part of the stop sound, so they are rendered in the spelling simply as *b*, *d* and *q*.

'Why the *q* spelling?' I hear you ask. Although English allows single sounds to be represented in its spelling by digraphs (i.e. two letters) (e.g. the /ŋ/ in *sing*, the /ð/ in *there*, the /f/ in *cough*, etc.), Fijian spelling doesn't because it's reflecting the fact that it does not have consonant clusters in its pronunciation. The Fijian orthography (i.e. spelling system) was cleverly devised by the Methodist missionaries David Cargill and William Cross in 1835 so that it represented as closely as possible the way the language was pronounced. The Fijian orthography remains one of the best phonic spelling systems in the world.

So, if the stop sound /g/ needs to be prenasalised and then represented by a single letter, what do we do given that the /ŋ/ sound also occurs in Fijian?

Cargill and Cross had a useful solution to hand. Since English had more letters in its alphabet (or orthography)

than Fijian had distinct sounds, they had some letters (moveable type) in their type case to spare. Since the letter *q* was spare, the solution was to use the letter *q* to represent the /<sup>ŋ</sup>g/ sound, and the letter *g* to represent the /ŋ/ sound. Hence we get Fijian toponyms and words spelled with a *q* (*Beqa* /be<sup>ŋ</sup>ga/, *Qata* /<sup>ŋ</sup>gata/) and with a *g* (*Sigatoka* /sɪŋatoka/, *Galoa* /ŋaloa/) which do not have the same pronunciation as the same letters in English. Quite a few Polynesian languages, in fact, use *g* to represent /ŋ/.



This explains why names like *Nadi* are pronounced as /næ<sup>n</sup>dɪ/ and not /nædɪ/. The Sydney suburb of *Lakemba* is named after the Fijian island *Lakeba*, pronounced /lake<sup>m</sup>ba/. Since English doesn't have prenasalised stops and allows consonant clusters, we render the name with an *m* in our spelling.

But wait—we're not done yet with Fijian. Numerous toponyms and words are spelled with the letter *c*. This was another spare letter in the movable type case, so Cargill and Cross used it to represent the sound /ð/ (as in *there* and *heather*); so we have *Moce* /moðe/, *Cakau Vatulaca* /ðakau βatulaða/ etc.

Many Pacific languages have a closing quotation mark or apostrophe ( ' ) in their spelling systems, and you will see names such as *'Uvea*, *Vava'u*, *O'ahu*, and even *Hawai'i*. This symbol represents a glottal stop /ʔ/, which is a consonant. The glottal stop is the sound you hear (or rather don't hear!) in the Cockney rendering of *butter* as /bʌʔə/.<sup>6</sup>

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Many words and toponyms in Māori contain a *wh* in their spelling. We might think that this is pronounced as /w/. But no—in Māori it is pronounced as a /ϕ/ (i.e. a voiceless bilabial fricative).<sup>4</sup> Hence, we have names such as *Whangarei* /ϕaŋareɪ/, *Whangarā* /ϕaŋara:/.<sup>5</sup> (Notice also that Māori spelling has not adopted the single symbol for the /ŋ/ sound, but uses *ng* instead.)

Unfamiliar spellings (at least to an English reader) are found also in Micronesia. For instance, the nation name *Kiribati* is pronounced /kɪrɪbas/ not /kɪrɪbati/. The country (which has a total land area of 800 square kilometres dispersed over 3.5 million square kilometres) derives its name from its old colonial name *Gilbert Islands*. *Kiribati* is the local way of writing *Gilberts*. Since the Kiribati language (also known as ‘Gilbertese’) does not have a /g/ sound, but does have a /k/ (very closely related to /g/), the *G* of *Gilberts* is rendered as a *K*. Likewise, the language lacks the /l/ sound, but does have a close equivalent, /r/, so the *l* in *Gilberts* is rendered as *r*. An intervening vowel is inserted between the *r* and *b*, because the language follows the Oceanic principle of generally not allowing consonant clusters.



Now, because the Kiribati language does not possess the phoneme /s/,<sup>7</sup> it had to resort to another method of representing this sound without having to introduce a new letter in their orthography. Luckily it does have a /t/ phoneme and when it occurs before the vowel /i/ they are together pronounced as /s/.<sup>8</sup> And that's how *Gilberts* becomes *Ki-ri-bati* /kɪrɪbas/. The nation also has an island as part of its dominion named *Kiritimati* which is derived, via the same process, from *Christmas (Island)* (not the one in the Indian Ocean that's sadly been in the news these last few years).



I hope I haven't perplexed you too much with the phonetics and phonology of Pacific island toponyms, and that you now have a better idea of how these and other words are pronounced.<sup>9</sup>

Jan Tent

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Sincere thanks to my good friend and colleague, Paul Geraghty, for ironing out a few errors and inconsistencies in an earlier version of this article.
- <sup>2</sup> When referring to vowels, I also include diphthongs (i.e. vowels formed whilst the tongue glides from one vowel position to another. They could well be called 'gliding vowels').
- <sup>3</sup> All examples are of toponyms.
- <sup>4</sup> A type of *f* sound produced between spread lips, not between the bottom lip and the top teeth as in English. New Zealand English speakers, however, pronounce the *wh* as /f/ as in *off*. Fijian also has a bilabial fricative, but it is voiced /β/. It is very similar to /v/, hence Cargill and Cross used the letter *v* to represent it. Most English speakers pronounce Fijian words containing *v* with a /v/.
- <sup>5</sup> *ā* represents a long "ah" sound.
- <sup>6</sup> The glottal stop is a type of consonantal sound produced by obstructing airflow in the vocal tract or, more precisely, the glottis (the space between the vocal folds). Although no actual sound is produced, nevertheless, it functions as a consonant in the sound system.
- <sup>7</sup> A 'phoneme' is a *minimal distinct* unit of sound within a language's sound system.
- <sup>8</sup> This specific process is called 'assibilation'. It refers to a sound change resulting in a sibilant consonant (e.g. an /s/ or /ʃ/). The word *assibilation* itself contains an example of the phenomenon, being pronounced /əsɪbɪleɪʃən/. The classical Latin *-tio* was pronounced /tiɔ/ (e.g. *assibilatō* was pronounced /asɪbɪlatiɔ/ and *attentiō* /atentiɔ/). However, in Vulgar Latin it assibilated to /tʃiɔ/, and this can still be seen in Italian: *attenzione*. In French, it resulted in /ʃjɔ/, which in English then became /ʃə/. The word *assibilation* is known as an 'autological' word (also called 'homological' word or 'autonym') because it expresses a property that it also possesses.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Phonetics' is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of the production (i.e. articulation) and the acoustic nature of human speech sounds. 'Phonology' on the other hand, deals with the relationships of individual sounds and clusters of sounds at the level of syllables and words.