

THE LANGUAGE OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE: EARLY EUROPEAN PERCEPTIONS OF TAHITIAN

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1. THE CONCEPT OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE

In 1749 the Academy of Dijon awarded the prize for the best essay on the effect of civilisation upon man to a philosopher by the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who had expressed in a passionate and defiant diatribe what quite a few intellectuals at the time felt, but were reluctant to proclaim publicly as a social doctrine, that the development of civilisation, and the advances in arts and sciences had led to a loss of naturalness in human behaviour and contributed to a decline of moral virtues and ethical standards.

To blame progress and change for the demise of mankind and to indulge in a *laudatio temporis acti* could hardly be called an original idea. The lament about paradise lost where innocent man used to live happily in a state of unspoiled nature is a recurrent theme throughout the history of mankind.

The escapist philosophers of the eighteenth century conceptualised paradise not as a merely metaphysical refuge from the harsh realities of life but as geographical loci which really existed in some distant parts of the world¹. Atlantis, the Hesperides and Avalon, blessed isles of plenty, were believed to lay across the western oceans. As some remote areas of the globe had not yet been explored, there was hope, that an earthly paradise would be discovered one day. Seafarers and explorers were expected to bring back the news and tell the world about their encounter with the inhabitants of paradise, happy people living a simple, natural life, Noble Savages,² who had preserved all the original qualities, physical and moral, that modern man had lost in the process of civilisation. And the voyagers willingly obliged. Romanticising glorifications of indigenous people can be found in most accounts of voyages to faraway lands. Columbus's description of the Indians in the Carribean shows that they were already à la mode during the age of discovery.

¹Lord Monboddo, in a serious scientific work, asserted in so many words, that the Golden Age yet lingered in the islands of the South Seas, "where the inhabitants live without toil or labour upon the bounty of Nature". In Otaheite, he says, "the inhabitants pull bread off trees, which grow with no culture, for about nine months of the year, and when this food fails, it is supplied by nuts and other wild fruits" (Tinker 1964:11). Lord Monboddo (James Burnett) became known as the Scottish Rousseau.

²The word *savage* has to be understood in its etymological sense as *homo silvaticus* = man from the bush. According to Fairchild (1961:29) the term "Noble Savage" was first used by Dryden in his play *Conquest of Granada*, written in 1701. The concept, however, is much older. It can be traced back to speculations by social philosophers like Montaigne (1894:92).

In the eighteenth century the enthusiastic reports on New Cythera (Tahiti) published by members of Bougainville's exploring expedition around the world convinced many contemporaries that paradise had at long last been found. The description of the inhabitants of Tahiti miraculously fitted Rousseau's vision of the Noble Savage as the *alter homo*, the opposite of modern man. 'Otaheitans' were depicted as free from malice and vanity, with no interest in the accumulation of wealth and power. Content on satisfying their physical needs by accepting what nature had to offer, they enjoyed sensual pleasures unconstrained by the kind of repressive social customs that existed in Europe. And as far as their language was concerned, unlike the corrupted tongues of the Occident, it was melodious, expressive and natural.

2. THE LANGUAGE OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE; SOCIOPHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATIONS

To get an idea to what extent the minds of scientists and intellectuals had been influenced by the sociophilosophical discussions in the wake of Rousseau's theories, one only has to look at Commerson's description of the Tahitian language. Philibert de Commerson, physician and botanist, accompanied Bougainville as a naturalist on his expedition. In a letter written in 1769 at Isle de France (Mauritius) and published in the *Mercure de France* in November of the same year, he talks about his encounter with Tahiti, the island he calls 'Utopia' or 'Fortunate' and the idiom of its inhabitants:

A very sonorous, very harmonious language, composed of about four or five hundred words lacking in declension or conjugation, that is completely without syntax, is sufficient for them to render all their ideas and to express their every need. It is characterized by a noble simplicity which, excluding neither tonal modifications nor emotional pantomime, protects it from the arrogant tautology which we call richness of language, which make us lose niceness of perception and speed of judgement in a maze of words. The Tahitian, to the contrary, names his object as soon as he perceives it. The tone in which he has pronounced the name of the object has already indicated how he is affected by it. Paucity of words makes for rapid conversation. The operation of the soul, the movements of the heart, are isochronous with the movements of the lips. The speaker and the listener are always in unison. Our Tahitian prince, who in the seven or eight months that he had been with us, had not yet learned ten of our words, most often stunned by their volubility, had no other expedient than to stop his ears, and laugh in our faces. (Knowlton 1955:8)

Commerson's remarks on the Tahitian language are representative for many of the reports that we have of the early visitors to the Society Islands. They strike us by their charming simpleness in presenting personal interpretations as objective descriptions of facts, which invariably give credence and support to the writer's philosophical stance or view of the world. Reading Commerson's description of Tahitian one has little difficulty in identifying him as a fervent believer in Rousseau's theories on the origin and role of human language as expounded in his essay 'On the inequality of man'.

Language, according to Rousseau, started with the "cri de nature", the urge to express inner feelings of love, hate, compassion and anger by unarticulated cries.³ The close link between vocalisation of feelings and the shape of words is still preserved in the language of those people who

³"Ce n'est ni la faim ni la soif, mais l'amour, la haine, la pitié, la colère, qui leur ont arraché les premières voix" (Rousseau 1974:96).

live in a state of nature. Their language is characterised by the prevalence of vowels over consonants. To make up for the phonotactic drawback, that is, the limited variability of syllables due to the small number of consonants (which are seen as conventional devices, *thesei* rather than *physei*), the languages resort to natural means to make up words without creating homonyms: increasing the number of vowel quality distinctions, using accents, adding quantity and varying the rhythm. As a result, natural languages are melodious and harmonious showing a close affinity with poetics and music.

When Commerson emphasises that the Tahitian language is melodious and harmonious, he does so not only in order to praise its aesthetic quality. He is also anxious to portray Tahitian as a language which is complete in the sense that Rousseau (1974:145) had talked about this aspect with reference to the Greek language:

Une langue qui n'a que des articulations et des voix n'a donc que la moitié de sa richesse: elle rend des idées, il est vrai; mais pour rendre des sentiments, des images, il lui faut encore un rythme et des sons, c'est-à-dire, une mélodie; voilà ce qu'avait la langue grecque, et ce qui manque à la nôtre.

The Tahitian language has more in common with Greek than with French. Its sound inventory may lack the consonants that Greek required for building up its extensive lexicon, but as the communicative needs of people living in a natural environment are less demanding – Commerson estimates the vocabulary to consist of 500 words only – Tahitian cannot be called inferior just on account of its limited lexicon. What is important apart from being capable of adequately rendering the ideas and notions which the language user considers relevant, is the capacity of Tahitian to express feelings and emotions. Commerson has this particular aspect in mind when he twice makes reference to the use of tone in Tahitian: “It is characterized by a noble simplicity which, excluding neither tonal modifications nor pantomime”, and later on “the tone in which he has pronounced the name of the object has already indicated how he is affected by it” (Knowlton 1955:10).

While the naturalness of the Tahitian language manifests itself through sonority and tonality, its simplicity, another fundamental virtue of the Noble Savage's language, is guaranteed by the lack of declensions and conjugations and the complete absence of syntax. The advantages are self-evident. Unlike French, the Tahitian language will not confuse the listener by what Commerson calls an “arrogant tautology” resulting from complicated grammatical structures and a maze of words. Although he doesn't mention the term ‘classical simplicity’, Commerson is obviously guided by this notion which in European literary tradition is closely linked to Greek antiquity. The Greek and the Tahitian language may differ in internal structure and external appearance, but they share the fundamental quality of being classical in their completeness and simplicity. Tahiti is the New Cythera also on account of its language.

Further characteristics of the language of the Noble Savage are its honesty and its potential for spontaneous creativity. Commerson: “the operations of the soul, the movement of the heart are isochronous with the movement of the lips” and “the Tahitian names his object as soon as he perceives it” (Knowlton 1955:10). While ‘naturalness’ and ‘simplicity’ are qualities for which Commerson cited melody/harmony and simple grammar/small lexicon as evidence, these characteristics are of a less tangible nature. They only surface when communication problems have to be dealt with. Then, because there is a direct relationship between feeling and expression, the native speaker will show his ability to spontaneously verbalise new concepts and cope with any lexical

requirement that the new situation brings about. In other words, the Tahitian language has an inbuilt potential for growth and expansion.

3. FIELDWORK IN SITU; TAHITIAN UNDER CLOSE SCRUTINY.

Commerson's remarks on the Tahitian language belong to the realm of philosophy of language. They tell us very little about the linguistic properties of the language itself. His primary concern was to convince his contemporaries that Tahitian had exactly those qualities they had expected of the language of the Noble Savage. While Bougainville and his companions Duclos-Guyot and Fesche compiled word lists of the language of New Cythera (Fesche befittingly using Greek characters), the first attempts to analyse Tahitian, especially its sound system, were made by members of Cook's first voyage to the Pacific. Not concerned about presenting the natives as the incarnation of Rousseau's idea of man's superiority in his natural state, they had no qualms about making negative remarks on aspects of the Tahitian language which they considered inadequate, or quoting examples of the inability of Tahitians to properly pronounce English words. Banks writes in his *Endeavour journal*:

Their Language appear [sic] to me to be very soft and tuneable. It abounds much with vowels and was very easily pronounc'd by us when ours was to them absolutely impracticable. I shall instance particularly my own name which I took much pains to teach them and they to learn: after three days fruitless trials I was forc'd to select from their many attempts the word *Tabáne*, the only one I had been able to get from them that had the least similitude to it. Again Spanish or Italian words they pronounced [sic] with ease provided they ended with a vowel, for few or none of theirs end with a consonant...In one respect however it is beyond measure inferior to all European languages, which is its almost total want of inflexion both of Nouns and verbs, few or none of the former having more than one Case or the latter one tense. (Beaglehole, ed. 1959, I:370)

Parkinson's (1773:65) description of the difficulties that Tahitians had with the pronunciation of English is even more detailed:

The natives could not repeat after us the sound of the letters, Q, X, and Z, without great difficulty; G, K, and S, they could not pronounce at all. Many of the names of the people of our ship having the G, K, or S, in them, they could not approach nearer the sound of them as follows:

Toote	Cook	Mata	Monkhouse
Opone	Banks	Petrodero	Pickersgill
Tolano	Solander	Tate	Clark
Treene	Green	Poline	Spoving
Hite	Hicks	Taibe	Stainsby
Towara	Gore	Patine	Parkinson

Parkinson's reference to the letters *q*, *x* and *z* is somewhat ambiguous as we don't know whether they were presented to the Tahitians as individual letters pronounced [kju], [eks] and [zet] or in the context of words like quick, box or zero. In any case it is nearer to the truth that the difficulties were such that the Tahitians couldn't pronounce them at all as they contain a velar stop and/or a sibilant. As the examples (Solander > *Tolane*, Cook > *Toote*, Hicks [hiks] > *Hite*) show both *s* and *k* were replaced by an alveolar stop. The transliteration *Opone* for Banks is to be read as *o* (personal article

as in *Omai*) + *pane* thus confirming the *-bane* fragment in *Tabane* (*ta* = definite article *te*?) in the version quoted by Banks himself. For *Gore* one would have expected *Tore* instead of *Towara*. The simplification of consonant clusters is quite radical, but the strategies seem to be less rule governed: *nks* > *n* (Banks), *nk* > *t* (Monkhouse) *sg* > *d* (Pickersgill), *kl* > *t* (Clark), *nsb* > *b* Stainsby, *ns* > *n* (Parkinson), *ks* > *t* (Hicks), *sp* > *p* (Spoving), *st* > *t* (Stainsby). In *Treene* and in *Petrodero* *tr* was probably pronounced with a transitional unstressed schwa which in rapid speech is hardly audible especially when the preceding or following syllable is stressed.

Parkinson does not provide an explanation for the inability of the Tahitians to produce certain consonants and consonant clusters. He contents himself with observing the facts without inferring lack of intelligence or cognitive ability. After all, the English have similar problems with some of the Tahitian sounds:

They have various sounds peculiar to themselves, which none of us could imitate; some of them they pronounced like B and L mingled together; other between B and P, and T and D. Some like Bh, Lh, and Dh. (1773:66)

Parkinson's remark on *b/p* and *t/d* is reflected in the transliteration of Banks as *Opane/Tabane*, of Pickersgill as *Petrodero* and in the inconsistent use of these letters in Tahitian word lists compiled by various members of the expedition. The English had difficulties in deciding on the nature of the bilabial and alveolar stops in Tahitian. In Polynesian languages, there is no phonological distinction between voiced and unvoiced stops. Furthermore, vowels following a stop are never realised with delayed voice onset, in other words, stops are not aspirated. In English *b* and *p* and *d* and *t* are phonemically distinct, but in prevoalcalic position, the voiceless stop is also aspirated if it is not part of a cluster. For phonetically untrained native speakers of English, it is the presence of aspiration and not so much the absence of voice that provides the main clue for the identification of *p* and *t* (and *k*). Unaspirated *p* and *t* sound to an English ear very much like *b* and *d*, but in the case of Tahitian the confusion was further aggravated on the production side by the absence of a voiced-unvoiced contrast which allowed the speaker to vary the realisation of bilabial and alveolar stops without transgressing into the allophonic domain of another phoneme sharing the same point of articulation.

4. IS THE NOBLE SAVAGE LINGUISTICALLY DEFICIENT? TAHITIANS PUT TO THE SHIBBOLETH TEST

Banks's and Parkinson's observations of Tahitian pronunciation, while unbiased and rather specific as compared to Commerson's general and uncritical remarks, were not based on a systematic study and testing of informants. They were meant to be examples of the distinct nature of the Tahitian and English sound inventory and the articulatory constraints which this difference imposed on those who try to speak the other's language. Completeness was never intended and the authors never claimed to be experts in foreign languages, let alone phonetics. The first 'scientific' study of Tahitian by a linguist of sorts using a native speaker as an informant was not carried out in the field, but in a studio in Paris on 25 April 1769. On this day Jacob Pereire, a Spaniard who had invented a method of teaching the deaf and dumb, met Ahutoru⁴ from Tahiti who had been brought to France by Bougainville.

The arrival of the first Polynesian in Europe in March 1769 had caused a sensation. Here at last was living proof of the existence of the Noble Savage. Before him, exotic visitors from faraway

⁴His name is traditionally, although incorrectly spelled Aoutourou or Aotourou.

lands had been transported to the old continent to be scrutinised by erudite armchair philosophers and self-appointed anthropologists: Eskimos from Labrador, a Brazilian 'king', Indians from Guiana, a 'genuine' princess from Virginia. None of them had lived up to the expectation of academia and the salons. They became objects of curiosity for the general public at fairs and circus performances like Epenow, the giant redskin who was "shown up and down London for a wonder" (Alexander 1977:69).

Ahutoru and the other two visitors from the Pacific, Ma'i from Huahine and Lee Boo from Belau who arrived later escaped the fate that their predecessors experienced in Europe. They turned up when the stage was set. They were going to fill a role at an historical moment when actors were needed to play it.⁵ And they played that role admirably well. There was general agreement in Paris and London that the social behaviour of the visitors was characterised by naturalness, sincerity and gracefulness which put the artificiality of western etiquette to shame. Befriended and protected by influential men, they had access to the highest circles of society. The disillusionment that had set in with other visitors as soon as they started interacting in their new environment never happened. As far as their private and public conduct was concerned they were almost beyond criticism as their idiosyncracies were interpreted as a reaction against the unnaturalness of rules and regulations dominating civilised man's life. There was, however, one issue which was disturbing and puzzling. It was very obvious to everyone who met Ahutoru, Ma'i or Lee Boo that they performed miserably when it came to speaking the language of their hosts. Was the Noble Savage intellectually inferior after all?

Commerson, as one would expect, rejects any explanation that would tarnish the image of the Noble Savage. For him the fault doesn't lie with the language learner, but with the language he is trying to learn. It is the 'volubility' of French that leaves Ahutoru stunned and demotivates him to such a degree that in a gesture of helpless frustration he stops his ears and laughs into the faces of his interlocutors. Bougainville, who had already become aware of his guest's difficulties with French on the return journey, offers a similar explanation. An entry in his diary made on 11 May, only a few weeks after leaving Tahiti, reads: "Our language is almost impossible to pronounce for somebody whose language consists only of vowels. The very same reasons which are cited to describe French as a language that is not very musical, make it inaccessible to his speech organs." But he adds that this may not be the only explanation. Ahutoru's laziness could be another factor preventing him from making satisfactory progress in French.

The examination of Ahutoru by the linguistic expert Monsieur Pereire was supposed to clarify what caused his problems with the French language. Two possibilities had to be considered: (a) Ahutoru might be of very limited intelligence (a finding that could challenge Rousseau's doctrine of the superior qualities of the Noble Savage), or (b) Ahutoru might be suffering from a physical impediment of his speech organs which prevented him from performing certain articulatory tasks (the Noble Savage was excused). The meeting was arranged by the famous mathematician and astronomer Charles de la Condamine. M. Pereire kept notes of this and all subsequent sessions and sent a transcript of his findings to Bougainville.

De la Condamine first administered a kind of IQ test.⁶ Not unexpectedly Ahutoru scored to the tester's satisfaction. Possibility (a) being eliminated, Pereire took over. The linguistic expert started

⁵This is a modification of Alexander's statement which *only* refers to Ma'i: "The stage was set: Omai was to fill a role at a historical moment when an actor was needed to play it..." (Alexander 1977:70).

⁶"La Condamine décide d'examiner son intelligence par des méthodes qui ne sont pas d'une rigueur scientifique absolue: il lui fait manier un cornet acoustique" (Mazellier, ed. 1978:191).

off by asking Ahutoru to repeat after him the sounds of the French language, one by one. Ahutoru tried very hard, but to the amazement of the interviewer, was absolutely incapable of pronouncing the consonants in the syllables *ca, da, fa, ga, sa, za*, the palatal *l* or any of the nasalised vowels. But that was not all. Ahutoru could not make a distinction between *cha* and *ja*, pronounced *b* and *l* *imparfaitement* and even more so the initial *r*. Parisian *r* is a uvular fricative and the closest that Ahutoru would have ever gotten to it was probably an apical trill which exists in Tahitian. Pereire deserves credit for the accuracy of his auditory discrimination. When he asked Ahutoru to pronounce initial *r* in the Tahitian words *rai* 'big' and *roa* 'long' he noticed that it was preceded by a vowel "...car j'ay essayé de luy faire prononcer l' r à plusieurs reprises et il ne la prononçoit que très imparfaitement en traisnant plustot la voyelle qui précédoit l' r" (Taillemite 1977, I:488).

Ahutoru had said *e rai* and *e roa* using the verbal particle *e* in order to produce a grammatically correct utterance, as *rai* and *roa* never occur by themselves. Pereire was wrong to conclude that *r*-initial words do not exist in Tahitian and that the words *rai* and *roa* recorded in Bougainville's word list contain spelling errors, but the logic of his argument is flawless. If Tahitians only have an intervocalic *r*, then they would find it difficult to pronounce a French word that has initial *r*, just like French people, whose language has a palatal *l* intervocalically, find it hard to pronounce this sound in word-initial position in Spanish.

After establishing which sounds Ahutoru could not produce, Pereire examined the word list that Bougainville had compiled, pointing out some dubious transcriptions like *abobo* 'demain', *allelo* 'langue', *maglli* 'froid' and the phonotactically impossible *taomta* 'couverture de tête' (an obvious printing error for *taumata*).

He criticised the use of the letter *b* as one might be led to believe that it represents "...l'articulation franche du *b*, lettre que pourtant il ne prononce qu' à l'espagnole ou sans presque joindre les lèvres" (Taillemite 1977, I:488). Spanish /b/ has two allophones: one is realised as a bilabial voiced fricative [β] occurring between vowels, and the other is realised as a bilabial stop [b]. Pereire, describing Ahutoru's pronunciation, was referring to the former when he said that the lips hardly come together in the production of this sound. It is difficult to believe that the Tahitian *p* was realised as a fricative; what he had observed was probably a *b* pronounced with reduced articulatory force, in other words, a lenis. The results of Pereire's investigations are mentioned in Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde*. Johann Reinhold Forster, who translated the book into English, added a footnote to the passage where Bougainville (1772:272) says:

The language of Taiti is soft, harmonious and easy to be pronounced; its words are composed of almost mere vowels, without aspirates.

Forster's footnote reads:

The contrary, of the last mentioned circumstance, has been observed by our English navigators; and it is therefore highly probable Mr. de B. picked up his vocabulary of words from Aotourou, who had an impediment in his speech.

Forster had obviously misunderstood and misinterpreted what Pereire had said about Ahutoru's capacity to learn French, or rather he was led astray by the manner in which Bougainville (p.272) had presented the findings: "M. Pereire, celebrated for his art of teaching people, who are born deaf and dumb, to speak and articulate words, has examined Aotourou several times, and has found that he could not naturally pronounce most of our consonants, nor any of our nasal vowels".

Not only did Forster wrongly conclude that Ahutoru had a speech impediment, he also expressed grave doubts about his intelligence. The following statement (p.265), entirely based on hearsay, makes the Noble Savage appear in a very unfavourable light:

Though our author has strongly pleaded in this paragraph in behalf of Aotourou, it cannot, however, be denied that he was one of the most stupid fellows; which not only has been found by Englishmen who saw him at Paris, during his stay there, and whose testimony would be decisive with the public, were I at liberty to name them; but the very countrymen of Aotourou were, without exception, all of the same opinion, that he had very moderate parts, if any at all.

When Forster translated Bougainville into English, he had not yet been to Tahiti and he had never met a native speaker of the Tahitian language. His remarks are as biased as Commerson's uncritical laudation, leaving the reader in no doubt about his stance in the Noble Savage controversy. Bougainville's final assessment (p.264) which took into account Pereire's findings is far more balanced and would satisfy most psycholinguists and experts in foreign language learning of today:

Some other sharp critics conceived and propagated a very mean idea of the poor islander, because after a stay of two years amongst Frenchmen, he could hardly speak a few words of the language. Do not we see every day, said they, that the Italians, English, and Germans learn the French in so short a time as one year in Paris? I could have answered them perhaps with some reason, that, besides the physical obstacle in the organs of speech of this islander, (which shall be mentioned in the sequel) which prevented his becoming conversant in our language, he was at least thirty years old; that memory had never been exercised by any kind of study, nor had his mind ever been at work; that indeed an Italian, an Englishman, a German could in a year's time speak a French jargon tolerably well, but that was not strange at all, as these strangers had a grammar like ours, as their moral physical, political, and social ideas were the same with ours, and all expressed by certain words in their language as they are in French; that they had accordingly no more than a translation to fix in their memory, which had been exerted from their very infancy. The Taiti-man, on the contrary, only having a small number of ideas, relative on the one hand to a most simple and most limited society, and on the other, to wants which are reduced to the smallest number possible; he would have been obliged, first of all, as I may say so, to create a world of previous ideas, in a mind which is indolent as his body, before he could come so far as to adapt to them the words in our language, by which they are expressed.

If we were to rephrase this statement using the terminology of modern theories of foreign language acquisition, we could say that Bougainville had correctly identified some fundamental factors influencing the learner's proficiency, for example maturational constraints, phonological and lexical interference from the first language and sociopragmatic incongruence of Tahitian and French. And of course he was absolutely right in his reply to those who were criticising Ahutoru, that his poor performance in French was no reflection on his intelligence and could not be used as an argument in the discussion whether man in his natural state was inferior or superior to man civilised.

5. MA'I'S LOW ENGLISH PROFICIENCY DOES NOT DEMYSTIFY THE NOBLE SAVAGE

Ma'i (elsewhere Omai, Omy, Omiah) was an immediate success in English high society when he arrived in England on the *Adventure* in 1773. Fanny Burney commented: "He appears in a new world like a man who had all his life studied the Graces, and attended with unremitting application and diligence to form his manners, and to render his appearance and behaviour politely easy, and thoroughly well bred!" Comparing him with Mr. Stanhope, Lord Chesterton's son, who, despite his father's educational efforts, had turned out "a meer *pedantic booby*", she concludes "this shows how much more *nature* can do without *art*, than art with all her refinement unassisted by *nature*" (Alexander 1977:91). Ma'i also gave a splendid demonstration of his "unspoiled intellectual powers" by beating Signor Baretti at chess. Even Dr Johnson, one of the most outspoken critics of Rousseau, grudgingly acknowledged his potential. But as with Ahutoru in Paris, Ma'i's poor English proficiency nonplussed his admirers. How could it be that the Noble Savage performed so miserably in the language learning task?

Numerous anecdotes were in circulation, which described the humorous aspect of his attempts to master the phonetics of English and to come to grips with its syntax. But whether it was Anglo-Saxon respect for a person's dignity or a lack of Cartesian rigour, Ma'i was never subjected to the kind of linguistic test that Ahutoru had to endure. We are therefore left with rather anecdotal and sometimes even contradictory evidence such as the following where according to one source, he could not produce *g* [dʒ], having greeted His Majesty King George III with "How do, King Tosh." Fanny Burney, however, claimed that "he can pronounce the *th* as in *thank you*, and the *w* as in *well*, and yet cannot say *g* which he uses a *d* for. But I now recollect, that in the beginning of a word, as *George*, he *can* pronounce it" (Alexander 1977:89).

George Colman, who was a little boy when he became friends with Ma'i, reports in *Random Collections* that they had made up a lingo for themselves, half Otaheitan, half English, in which they contrived to jabber to their mutual enlightenment (Tinker 1964:79). Fanny Burney, whose brother Lieutenant Jem Burney had been to Tahiti with Furneaux, even supplies us with bits and pieces of discourse in pidgin à la Omai.

He began immediately to talk to me of my brother.

"Lord Sandwich write one, two, three" (counting on his fingers) "*monts* ago,— Mr Burney — come home."

"He will be very happy," cried I, "to see *you*."

He bowed and said, "Mr Burney very *dood* man!"

We asked if he had seen the King lately?

"Yes; King George *bid me*, — 'Omy, you go home.' Oh, very *dood* man, King George!"

(Alexander 1977:135)

Although Ma'i had great difficulties with English, he was an excellent communicator who got the message across using gestures and body language when his linguistic resources were exhausted. As far as the Rousseauists were concerned, his communicative skills compensated for his low proficiency in speaking English correctly as it manifested the natural intelligence, ingenuity, inventiveness and resourcefulness expected of a Noble Savage. The man from Raiatea very cleverly transferred the conceptual categories that he was familiar with to the new sociocultural context by producing interlanguage words and phrasal expressions which impressed and amused the English public. These creations, known as Omaisms, made the round of the salons.

Ma'i, who had never seen ice, called it "stone-water", and for snow which was equally unknown to him, he came up with the term "white rain". At a reception given by Lord and Lady Sandwich at Hinchinbrook, he was asked what he liked best about London:

"The great hog that carries people" he replied instantly. "English hogs ver'fine", he continued. "Only this morning Lord an Lady Sandwich show me the great hog that gives coconut milk. Ver' good. No climb tree - only put hand under hog and squeeze." (Clark 1969:26)

When offered a pinch of snuff, Ma'i gracefully declined, saying:

"No tank you, Sir. Me nose be no hungry!" He called Captain Furneaux "King of the Ship", Lord Admiral Sandwich "King of all the Ships" and the butler "King of the Bottles". (Clark 1969:27)

Cradock recalled another incident at Hinchinbrook which had people admire his linguistic ingenuity:

He came in whilst we were at breakfast at Hinchinbrook, his hand was violently swelled, and he appeared to be in great agony, but could not explain the cause. At last, not being in possession of the word wasp, he made us understand that he had been wounded by a soldier bird. We were all astonished: and Dr. Solander very well remarked, that considering the allusion to the wings and the weapon, he did not know that any of the naturalists could have given a more excellent definition. (Alexander 1977:83)

According to Fanny Burney Ma'i's English became better as time went by. Twelve months after she had first met him she wrote:

Since his first visit, twelve months before he had learned a great deal of English and, with the aid of signs and actions, could make himself tolerably well understood. He pronounced the language differently from other foreigners, sometimes unintelligibly, but he had really made great proficiency, considering the disadvantages he laboured under; for he knew nothing of letters, while so very few persons were acquainted with his tongue that it must have been extremely difficult to instruct him at all...our conversation was necessarily very much confined; indeed it wholly consisted in questions of what he had seen here, which he answered, when he understood, very *entertainingly*. (McCormick 1977:157)

Ma'i had started to learn English aboard the *Adventure* on the voyage to England from Jem Burney, who himself had a keen interest in the Tahitian language. Ma'i was highly motivated and worked very hard. He used a rather unusual mnemonic method to memorise English words. Unable to read and write, he tied a knot into a cord for each new lexical item that he had learned⁷. The knot-association device helped him to visualise and recall them, he had in a manner of speaking the newly learned words at his fingers' end.

Tane, man; wahine, woman; upoo, the head; niho, the teeth; iore, rat; wai, water; vaa, canoe; tira, mast; inu, sleep(sic!). These words and many others, he repeated to himself as he told off his rosary of knowledge. On it went knots representing parts of the body, table utensils, ship's articles, colors, numerals, and the name of every ship they met at sea

⁷According to a missionary source a 'writing system' using knots was used by the inhabitants of Mangareva in pre-contact times.

and its country. The knotted cord also served Omai as a calendar, twenty-eight to thirty knots for each moon – four moons since they left Huaheine. (Clark 1969:20)

Ma'i received English lessons of a more formal nature during his stay in England, when his illiteracy and poor command of the language became of concern to a group of London philanthropists who felt that it would be irresponsible to let him return home without having taught him how to read and write (McCormick 1977:167). Their ulterior motive was evangelical. Through reading and writing, Ma'i could be introduced to the Christian faith and thus be entrusted with the spreading of the Gospel among his fellow countrymen on his return to Tahiti.

Granville Sharp obtained permission from the Admiralty to start the instruction. Ma'i attended a few classes and Sharp claimed that he had taught him the use of English letters and had made him sound every combination of vowels and consonants that letters are capable of. If we were to believe him, Ma'i was even able to write a letter to Dr Solander.

After 15 lessons Ma'i must have been bored to death. He pretended to have too many social engagements to attend further classes. It was probably the set textbook and Sharp's approach to 'English as a second language' that had turned him off. The phonetic section, written by Sharp himself and adapted to the needs of Ma'i, is entitled 'An English Alphabet, for the use of Foreigners: wherein the Pronunciation of the Vowels, or Voice-Letters, is explained in Twelve short general Rules, With their several Exceptions, As Abridged (For the Instruction of Omai) From a larger Work'. It contains rules of didactic transparency like the following: "The vowels are pronounced short in all syllables ending with a consonant, (except in the particular cases hereafter noted,) and the three first vowels have the foreign articulation, without any other material difference except that of being pronounced short" (McCormick 1977:167).

6. IS 'OTAHEITAN' AN EASY LANGUAGE?

While philosophers and literati looked at the Tahitian language and the linguistic ability of its speakers from a sociophilosophical point of view in an attempt to find an answer to the rather elusive question whether man in a state of nature was superior to his civilised cousin, there were other people who had a very pragmatic interest in Tahitian. These were the missionaries of the London Missionary Society who were planning to save the Noble Savages from eternal damnation by converting them to the Christian faith. From what they could read in the published works and from what they concluded observing the limited linguistic skills of the South Sea Islanders, it would be very easy to learn Tahitian for somebody who spoke such a sophisticated tongue as English. Had not a simple corporal of the marines on Cook's first voyage been able to speak the language fluently after only a three months' stay in Tahiti? And had not a trustworthy person with first hand experience like Captain Bligh assured Reverend Haweis, who was organising the missionary enterprise in the South Seas that the learning of a Polynesian language would present no difficulty? (Newbury, ed. 1961:XXIX).

It seems almost an act of higher justice that the roles were reversed in 1798 when the first English missionaries arrived in Tahiti and tried to learn the language. Their difficulties were such that for years the whole project looked like it would end in a disastrous failure. On 10 April 1799, Jefferson wrote in his journal:

Our growth in knowledge of the language is still slow and in many cases uncertain; which is in great measure owing to our not being able to catch the sound of the words, with that exactness that is necessary; there is as great a labour to arrive at the true sense and

meaning of a word, or its various meaning; for one word is used to express very opposite things in different sentences. (Newbury, ed. 1961:XLIV)

And years later, in 1806, the missionaries recognised that they had been gulled into believing that Tahitian was an easy language to learn.

It has been represented as uncommonly easy of attainment; but we know the contrary by long experience. The Tahitian language, as may justly be expected, is destitute of all such words, common among civilized nations as relate to the arts and sciences, law proceedings, trade and commerce, and most of those made use of in Theology &c. But when viewed as having relation to objects known, and in use among the natives it is full and copious. (Newbury, ed. 1961:85)

By then they also knew that they had made fools of themselves in the early days when they used to say to the Tahitian king, "*Mity po, tuaana*". By putting together *mity* [maita'i] 'good', *po* [po:] 'night' and *tuaana* [tua'ana] 'elder brother' they had produced an interlanguage construct which easily matched in its naiveté any Omaism⁸. When the Tahitians finally found out what the missionaries wanted to express, they just laughed without making any assumptions about speech defects or inferior mental capacity of the religious envoys. After all, nobody in paradise had ever heard of Rousseau.

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⁸If they understood *mity* as their word *maitai*, the phrase would be an assertion to this effect, 'Good (is the) night, brother'. The simple declaration, 'Good-night, brother', would be unintelligible to the Tahitians, though the language were correct; a corresponding wish among them would be, *la ora na oe i teie nei po* (Ellis 1969:14).