

Rotuman Vowel Project

This spring, Konousi Aisake, a Rotuman artist living in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada, worked on a project concerning the Rotuman language with Amber Blenkiron, a graduate student in at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby BC. Their weekly meetings were spent for the most part looking at the long and short forms (what linguists call the *complete and incomplete phases*) of lexical words. For example, they looked at *tiko* in both “Hoam tiko se te’i” and “hoam tiok heta”. The project centered on the vowels that appear in the short forms with a focus on the specific vowels that appear in words like *fu’i*, *mori*, and *mose*. The vowel *ü* and *ö* only seem to appear in the short forms of certain words in Rotuman, as in “füt” (from *futi*), and as in “mör” (*mori*) and “mös” (*mose*). The project looked at the acoustic characteristics of these vowels (*ü*, *ö*) (i.e. the physical qualities of the sound waves uttered by a speaker) to see how they differ from the main vowels (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*) and from vowel pairs (*diphthongs*) like *io* that appears in words like “tiok” (*tiko*). This preliminary study suggested that *ü* and *ö* appear to be more acoustically similar to the main vowels (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*) than the diphthong ‘*io*’ since the frequencies of the acoustic resonances (or overtones of physical energy of the vowels) did not significantly change across the duration of the vowel. Interestingly, even though Rotumans use *ö* in the writing system for the short forms of words that originally ended in *oCe* (C stands for any consonant) as well as for words that ended in *oCi* in the long form, they appear to be two distinct sounds when in the short form. For example the *ö* in “mör” from “mori” is acoustically different than the *ö* in “mös” which comes from “mose”. Sincere thanks goes to Dr. Marit Vamarasi for her help during initial stages of the data collection. Thanks also to Dr. John Alderete for guidance throughout the project and Dr. Alan Howard for connecting Mr. Aisake and Ms. Blenkiron who hope to continue working together on the Rotuman language.