

COPYRIGHT NOTICE
Palmer/Kokota Grammar

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Sociolinguistic context

Ooe Kokota ('Kokota talk') is spoken on Santa Isabel, the middle island in the northern chain of the Solomon Islands' double chain of six large islands and several smaller islands. At over 200 kilometers in length, it is the longest of these islands, but has the lowest population density in the Solomon Islands, with some 25,000 inhabitants. *Ooe Kokota* is the language of three villages: Goveo and Sisiġa, half way along Santa Isabel's north coast, and Hurepelo at a corresponding location on the south coast. A small number of Kokota speakers are resident in the capital Honiara and the provincial capital Buala.

Speakers refer to themselves as Kokota people, and their language as *Ooe Kokota*. The name Kokota itself refers to a currently uninhabited area of coastal Santa Isabel between Goveo and Buala, and also to a river that enters the sea at that point. The word *kota* in present day *Ooe Kokota* means 'to go ashore' or 'to land', and *Kokota* is a historically reduplicated form of that root.

Until the 19th century the mountainous interior of Santa Isabel was populated. These groups later dispersed to the coast on either side of the island, leaving most of the interior uninhabited, including the region between the Kokota villages. The relative proximity of Goveo and Sisiġa allows regular boat contact. Travel to and from Hurepelo is a far more considerable matter, and less contact is maintained. In Kokota areas paths extend beyond the village as far as local coconut and betelnut plantations, and gardens in the hills behind the villages. People do not cross the island on foot, and travel to Hurepelo involves a boat trip of several days. Speakers from Goveo and Sisiġa report no significant linguistic differences between those two villages, and no sound differences between these communalects and Hurepelo. Nothing else is known about Kokota dialectology.

Today the number of Kokota speakers is probably approaching 1200 individuals. Ethnologue (2005) gives a figure of 530 speakers in 1999, but Ethnologue (2000) gave a figure of 1,020 for the previous year, 1998. Palmer (1999a:1) gives a 1999 figure of "in excess of 900," based on extrapolations from 1976 and 1986 censuses. Given that the population of Santa Isabel increased by 25% between 1999 and 2007, a 2007 figure of between 1100 and 1200 is likely.

Kokota is the normal language of communication in all three Kokota villages. In the 1990s, when the present field research was carried out, it was used for all purposes except in the primary school, where English was the official medium and Solomons Pijin often used, and in church, where sermons by non-Kokota priests were given in Pijin. Outside school, children used Kokota almost exclusively. This, coupled with the rapidly increasing population, suggests that the language is not in immediate danger of disappearing, despite its low speaker

CHAPTER 1

numbers. Several Pijin words have been borrowed into the language, as have a number of words from the two dominant Santa Isabel languages Zabana and Cheke Holo, but this is not a new phenomenon. It is clear that borrowing between the island's languages was the norm before the arrival of Europeans.

However, Kokota is at risk from Zabana and Cheke Holo, which are spreading as their much larger populations expand and move into new areas of the island. Neighboring Hoatana, known in the literature as Laghu (Tryon and Hackman 1983), spoken between Kokota and Zabana, lost its last speaker in 1984, through intermarriage and population expansion of Zabana speakers. Kokota is similarly at risk, mainly from Cheke Holo. The inhabitants of Bolotei and Toelegu, west of Sisiġa, and Dedeu, west of Hurepelo, are Cheke Holo speakers (Whiteman and Simons 1978:6). More recently a settlement of Cheke Holo speakers was established on the coast between Goveo and Sisiġa. This encroachment of Cheke Holo speakers may be expected to continue. Several Kokota speakers expressed the opinion that one day everyone on Santa Isabel will speak Cheke Holo, an opinion also reported elsewhere on the island (Whiteman and Simons 1978:6).

1.2 Kokota in Oceanic

The large Oceanic branch of Austronesian has several major subgroups. With the exception of Bugotu, all Santa Isabel languages belong to Western Oceanic, a first-order subgroup displaying shared innovations. (Ross 1988:386–392; 1995:92) While some innovations are shared by more than one subgroup, none are shared by all. Western Oceanic, therefore, represents several groupings descended from a dialect network that spread slowly through the Bismarck Archipelago, coastal New Guinea, and the northwestern Solomon Islands including Bougainville, following the more rapid eastern expansion of several other first-order Oceanic subgroups.

Western Oceanic itself comprises three groups: Papuan Tip, North New Guinea (Ross 1995:89, 92–93) and Meso-Melanesian, consisting of languages of the Bismarcks and the western Solomon Islands. The Meso-Melanesian network divides into two small groups and the large New Ireland network, which in turn divides into four small groups the South New Ireland/Northwest Solomonic network. South New Ireland/Northwest Solomonic divides into seven small groups and Northwest Solomonic (NWS). (Ross 1988:257–314)

NWS comprises the Oceanic languages of Bougainville and its offshore islands (excluding Polynesian Outliers), of Choiseul, of the New Georgia group, and, excepting Bugotu, of Santa Isabel¹ (Ross 1988:213–256). The boundary with NWS Cheke Holo and Gao on one side and Bugotu on the other represents the easternmost extension of Western Oceanic.

¹ Although spoken on Santa Isabel, Bugotu is a South-East Solomonic language.

The roughly 37 NWS languages fall into six subgroups: Piva/Bannoni, Nehan/North Bougainville, Mono-Uruavan, Choiseul, New Georgia, and Santa Isabel.² Ross (1988:224–225, 240–247) finds one shared lexical innovation and some syntactic evidence that weakly appears to link New Georgia and Isabel into a single larger subgroup. Whether or not this is ultimately demonstrated, each clearly represents a distinct subgroup at some level. Shared phonological and lexical innovations justify grouping the Isabel languages and positing a common ancestor, Proto Santa Isabel (Ross 1988:225). Members of the Isabel chain are Zabana (aka Kia), Hoatana (aka Laghu, extinct), Kokota, Blablanga (probably including Zazao [aka Kilokaka]), Cheke Holo (aka Maringe), and Gao.

1.3 Previous work on Kokota

Before the present research, Kokota was known to outsiders only from Tryon and Hackman's (1983) 320 item wordlist. A section of the Church of Melanesia Prayer Book (Church of Melanesia 1965) had also been translated into Kokota by a Zabana speaker (Church of Melanesia n.d.) and used locally, despite grammatical and lexical inaccuracies and numerous Zabana words.

In the 1990s the author began fieldwork in Goveo village. This led to a PhD thesis (Palmer 1999a); a discussion of the phonemic status of Kokota's voiceless sonorants (Palmer 1999b); a grammatical sketch (Palmer 2002a); a discussion of the syntactic status of Oceanic indirect possessor-indexing hosts with particular reference to Kokota (Palmer and Brown 2007); and an online dictionary (Palmer 2007). In addition, at the community's request as a condition of field work, a further section of the Prayer Book, the Evening Prayer, was translated in collaboration with a local Committee and desktop published (Palmer 1998).

1.4 The present study

The present work describes the grammar of Kokota, including its phonology, and its phrase, clause, and sentence level syntax. Particular attention is paid to the system of possession; to argument structure; and to the stress regime, which is complex and in a process of change. Like many Oceanic languages Kokota has limited morphological complexity, so there is no separate chapter on morphology. Aspects of the morphology and morphosyntax are discussed in conjunction with other areas of the grammar that they relate to syntactically or functionally. The structure of the language is described up to the level of the sentence. Apart from information structure issues with syntactic implications (such as topicalization and focushood), discourse level phenomena are not discussed. Sociolinguistic phenomena and issues such as multilingualism, language mixing and code switching are beyond the scope of the work. As research was carried out in one village, Kokota dialectology is not discussed.

² This subgroup is traditionally known as the Ysabel chain, reflecting the pre-independence spelling of the island's name. Here the modern name Isabel is used.