

# An introduction to Kanakanavu grammar



Figures 1 and 2. A fieldtrip to Dakanua village, Namasia District, Kaohsiung (photo courtesy of Dr. Yi-Yang Cheng)

The Kanakanavu people, primarily located in Dakanua and Maya villages, Namasia district, northeastern Kaohsiung, are one of the Austronesian groups indigenous to Taiwan. Referred to simply as the “Alisihan aborigines” in Qing dynasty records, the Kanakanavu people were formally recognized by the Taiwanese government and the Council of Indigenous Peoples in June of 2014, becoming the 16th recognized aboriginal group in Taiwan.

Kanakanavu is a critically endangered language, and its survival is of crucial importance not only in maintaining linguistic diversity in Taiwan but also in preserving Kanakanavu cultural identity. Of the already small tribal population of 321, only approximately 10 to 20 tribal members or so can still speak the language well, the youngest

of whom is over 60 years old. The current situation is dire, but this has not stopped linguists from trying to save the language from extinction. Of utmost importance to the preservation effort is thorough and accurate documentation. However, the amount of linguistic research undertaken on Kanakanavu over the past fifty years remains comparatively minimal, with the bulk of extant research having been published after the year 2000. The earliest studies focused on phonology, pronouns, and verb inflections, while later works investigated individual structural phenomena (the voice system, verb serialization, interrogative constructions, etc.) in greater depth. It goes without saying that these studies have all proven indispensable in bolstering our understanding of the Kanakanavu language and provide an important foundation for the current publication. That

said, this body of work remains largely inaccessible to the casual reader.

The current publication, born from extensive fieldwork conducted by Professor Li-May Sung of National Taiwan University's Graduate Institute of Linguistics, succeeds in consolidating and bolstering the extant linguistic knowledge of Kanakanavu, providing a comprehensive description of Kanakanavu phonology, morphology, and syntax. While written with the linguist in mind, it is nevertheless accessible to those without any linguistic background. Its primary goal is to serve as a reliable reference work for those working with Kanakanavu in any capacity. Whether for a linguist conducting research or a member of the Kanakanavu tribe reclaiming his or her mother tongue, it is without doubt an excellent resource

for anyone wishing to acquaint themselves with or deepen their knowledge of this endangered Formosan language.

As this book is an introduction to Kanakanavu grammar, its content is organized such that the fundamentals are laid out first, and discussion of the more complex structures is built up and expanded from there. The first chapter is dedicated to providing a brief survey of the history and geographic distribution of the Kanakanavu people. Chapters 2 through 6 cover the fundamental structural characteristics of language. As the basics of any language are its sounds, the writing system, basic phonetic inventory, and phonological rules are addressed first. Following this is a discussion of morphology, which primarily investigates the characteristics of words as structural units in Kanakanavu, their component morphemes, and the rules and strategies governing their formation. Next comes a description of word order with a focus on declarative sentence structure. The typological status of Kanakanavu as a verb-initial language, how subjects and predicates are defined, and what their respective constituents are comprise the core analysis of this chapter. Finally, an investigation of Kanakanavu case markings, pronouns, the voice system, and strategies for marking tense and aspect is presented.

Chapters 7 through 11 cover the remaining simple sentence structures in greater detail –

existential and possessive sentences, imperatives, causatives, negatives, and interrogatives. Chapters 12 through 15 build on this discussion and proceed to cover complex structures – serial verb constructions, complement constructions, subordinate and dependent clause structures, and compound sentences.

In addition to the above chapters, this introduction to Kanakanavu grammar is further supplemented with three appendices. There are aspects of Formosan language writing systems that have yet to be fully agreed upon and codified. Punctuation is one of them. The punctuation guide published by the Council of Indigenous Peoples in 2014 contains only general rules for cross-linguistic use of punctuation marks and lacks language-specific models. The first appendix is a guide for the recommended use of punctuation specifically in Kanakanavu. The second appendix is a simple reference dictionary containing 500-600 common words that are mostly cognate among Formosan languages with an additional 50-100 Kanakanavu-specific words. No discussion of grammar would be complete without some discussion of how the structures in question are actually used by speakers, i.e., it is extremely important to contextualize grammar in a naturalistic setting. To this end, the third appendix consists of three annotated and glossed stories that give the reader a sense for the naturalistic use of the language and provide an op-

portunity to verify the structures described in preceding chapters and see them used in a narrative context.

This book is part of a series of reference grammars published by the Council of Indigenous Peoples, one for each of the sixteen Austronesian languages in Taiwan. All of these languages are under threat, but Kanakanavu is on the brink of extinction. It thus goes without saying that this book is an extremely valuable resource in the fight to preserve and revitalize this critically endangered Formosan language.

#### References

Sung, L.-M. (2018). *An introduction to Kanakanavu grammar* (Series on Formosan Languages, Vol. 16). Taipei, Taiwan: Council of Indigenous Peoples.

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