

Tobian Language 1968-2012: background information on this project

In 1968, E.M. Quackenbush reported his database of almost 600 words* from each of 17 dialects (including Tobian) that form the chain of related languages described in his dissertation, [From Sonsorol to Truk: A dialect chain](#) (University of Michigan, 1968).

Our project is designed to map and try to understand the changes that have taken place in Tobian over the last 40 years. To begin, we are collecting the same Tobian words in 2009-2012—from a speaker of “Old Tobian” and from a speaker of modern Tobian.

We commend to you Quackenbush’s entire dissertation. Chapter Two contains many charts and tables outlining specific details about his work. Here, we reproduce some information about the symbols Quackenbush used in his representation of Tobian.

Alphabet symbols used by Quackenbush to write Tobian words include these vowels:

Symbol	Sound Position	Rounded Lips?	Example (from Quackenbush list)	2009 Spelling	Meaning
i	high, front	No	# 3: goroccegir	horouchehir	left side
y	high, back	No	# 40: faat –yr	faatur	eyebrow
u	high, back	Yes	# 9: guubw –er	huuber	leg
e	mid front	No	# 9: guubw –er	huuber	leg
ø	mid front	Yes	No example found		
é	mid back	No	# 37: móóng mèngor	mong	forehead
o	mid back	Yes	# 68: gongo	hongohong	to hear
à	low front	No	# 70: mámári	memer	to laugh
a	low back	No	# 63: cantyyt	chentut	milk
ó	low back	Yes	# 37: móóng mèngor	mong	forehead

Taken from Tables 5 (Voiced vowel phones) and 6 (Inventories of voiced vowel phonemes) (Quackenbush: 52-53)

Other alphabet symbols used by Quackenbush to write Tobian words include: pw, p, t, f, s, mw, m, ng, r, w, j, c, l, n, bw, and g. He does not use th, h, sh, b, or d. Several of the sounds which Quackenbush identified with a separate symbol are quite rare in Tobian; these are the L sound and also the K and the N. Two of the symbols he uses might be a bit confusing to speakers of Tobian. J is used to represent a sound like the beginning of the English word yellow. (He can’t use Y for that because he is using it for one of the vowel sounds.) G is used for one of the sounds that these days is usually represented with an H. This is a very throaty sound, and it is one of the sounds that most distinguishes Tobian from Sonsorolese and the other languages in this dialect chain. Finally, any reader of Quackenbush will soon see that to indicate a long sound he doubles the symbol.

Some interesting facts about Tobian (according to Quackenbush)

1. Speaking of the similarities and differences in the sounds used in Sonsorolese and Tobian, Quackenbush made three points:

- a. "Sonsorol and Tobi are partly alike in that each has a voiced bilabial nasal continuant sound that functions as a phoneme m." (**Quackenbush: 57**)
- b. "Sonsorol and Tobi are partly dissimilar in that Sonsorol has an interdental fricative sound that functions as a phoneme th, but Tobi has no such sound." (**Quackenbush: 57**)

For example, the Sonsorolese **thewa** and the Tobian **sewa** both mean "very."

- c. "Sonsorol and Tobi are partly dissimilar in that whereas both languages have [ã] and [a], these two sounds are allophones of the same phoneme in Sonsorol but different phonemes in Tobi." (**Quackenbush: 57**)

Here he is saying that in Tobi the difference in these sounds is important because it affects the meaning of the word; that is, they are phonemes. In Sonsorol, the two sounds (allophones) are just different forms of the same sound (phoneme) and don't affect the meaning of the word.

2. Speaking of how easily Sonsorolese and Tobian speakers could understand one another, Quackenbush wrote in 1968:

"Sonsorol is mutually intelligible with Tobi, which is spoken only by the natives of Tobi Island, many of whom live on Palau. These two languages exclusively share several important phonological features and many lexical ones, so they obviously constitute a subgroup within the chain. Yet there are three crucial phonological isoglosses between the two languages, and many lexical ones. The differences which these isoglosses represent are quite obvious in the surface forms of sentences, so much so that the ease with which speakers of Sonsorol and Tobi understand each other seems attributable in part to semi-bilingualism; recent levelling must also be a factor." (**Quackenbush: 100**)

Perhaps Quackenbush already was seeing signs of the emergence of Echangese in the 1960s.

3. Quackenbush found that Sonsorol and Tobi have some things in common that are not shared with the other 15 members of the dialect chain. They are the only ones to use the term **fitegi** to mean "to work." In the other languages that term means "to fight." Those other languages, he says, use the word **jengaang** for "to work." Sonsorol and Tobi use that word (which today would be spelled something like **engang**) to mean "to measure." (**Quackenbush: 81**)

4. In 1968 the sound represented by the letter “L” in English and other languages usually became an “R” in Tobian. There was one exception to this that Quackenbush found. He said:

“Tobi has a very rare marginal **L** which, in our data, occurs only in the loan word **leprosii** with the **L** being pronounced exactly as in the English **leprosy**. (Loan words in Tobi usually have **R** for an **L** in the source language).” (Quackenbush: 47)

He gives two examples of “L” becoming “R”—**soor** which means “salt,” and **jikeressija** for “church.” Today the word for church would be spelled **keresia** and, in case you don’t know, it comes from the Spanish word for church, “iglesia.” “Leprosy” on the other hand comes from English and the fact that Quackenbush heard the “L” may be due to the fact that his informant was Felix Andrew, who was an American-trained nurse who spoke pretty good English.

5. Generally speaking, the greater the distance between the islands where the languages in the dialect chain are spoken, the less those languages have in common. So Quackenbush found:

“. . .Sonsorol and Tobi are not mutually intelligible with Truk and the other languages at the eastern end of the chain. . .” (Quackenbush: 102)

6. Quackenbush examined how much overlap there is in the basic vocabulary of the 17 languages. He compared the word roots because the actual words were pronounced differently on different islands. It is interesting to note that the two languages in the chain that have least in common in their basic vocabulary are Tobi and Ulithi (which share 78 percent of the words he collected). This is a surprise since some Tobi people have said that Ramoparuhe, the woman who founded their island, came from Mogmog, in Ulithi. Other Tobians say Ramoparuhe was from Fais. Unfortunately, Quackenbush did not collect any material from Fais.

* Quackenbush’s word list consisted of the 200 word Swadesh list for lexicostatistics and another almost 400 words from general and cultural vocabulary.