

### Rennellese

The Rennellese Sign Language was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century on Rennell Island, a raised atoll in the Solomon Islands. Though situated in Melanesia, the Rennellese are Polynesians who arrived on the island 24 generations ago. Because of the island's small size (250 square miles or 640 square kilometers), its isolated geographical position, and its bad anchorage, the islanders lived almost entirely without outside contact until 1938.

According to oral traditions, there was never a deaf person on the island before the birth of the boy Kagobai about 1915. For that reason no sign language existed on the island. The vocal language, one of the most copious Polynesian languages, thus had no terms for "deaf" or "mute." There existed only a term for being "hard of hearing," referring to the impaired hearing of old people. In order to transcend the world of communicative isolation, Kagobai developed a communicative device. It consisted of a number of signs which can be combined into sentences by way of a very simple grammar. A systematic analysis of the syntactical rules has not yet been conducted.

Structurally one can distinguish between three sign categories: indicative signs, imitative signs, and symbolical signs. The indicative signs vary with their degree of proximity to the signer's own body. The signer can touch a body part, point to phenomena within sight, or point with sweeping movements to far-away objects of mainly geographical or astronomical art. The imitative signs are concerned with all parts of everyday life and constitute the largest part of the sign vocabulary. A coconut crab, for example, is signed by its characteristic movements. It is within the group of symbolic signs that one finds the greatest creativity. In most of these signs basic cultural values are encoded, for example, the sign for "brother-sister." This sign consists of two extended index fingers facing each other with their dorsal sides, thus signifying the socially determined brother-sister avoidance tabu.

Several signs consist of two or more constituents, such as the sign for "past," which is based on an arm movement toward the horizon, indicating

The sign for "brother-sister."



something far away, and a hand movement to the neck, indicating "killing." The past thus means that something is as far away (in time) as when the Rennellese still killed each other. For many of the signs there is a close relationship to the cultural values of the society.

On the decoding side one finds that some of the signs are interculturally understandable, such as the sign "to drink" or "to copulate." Some signs are not interculturally understandable, as the sign for "brother-sister." Other signs are not immediately decipherable. These are idiosyncratic signs, the meaning of which is not accessible without further explanation. Such a sign is used for "father," in which the signer points to the position of the tattoo on the buttock. The sign creator's own father had such a tattoo.

Whether or not the Rennellese signs constitute a language (which only a syntactical analysis can determine), the creation of this communicative vehicle required intellectual effort and a deep-rooted desire to penetrate the barrier of silence.

### Bibliography

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