

## Chapter 6

# Acquisition and Maintenance of the Indigenous Chamorro Language in the Youngest Generation in Guam

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter first provides an overview as to the history and factors that have contributed to a marked decrease in the number of Chamorro language speakers in Guam. Although recent efforts by the Government of Guam as well as community groups have sought to reverse this decrease, there continues to be a decline in the number of Chamorro speakers, especially amongst the youngest generations. In a contemporary context, the chapter will focus on the acquisition, maintenance, and the attitudes toward the Chamorro language among the young generation in Guam. Data collected from 582 participants was statistically analyzed. The results show that 80.4% of participants claimed that they understand the Chamorro language, more or less. However, only 4.5% of them evaluated their speaking ability as very good. Among the participants in our study, only 2.6% acquired Chamorro as their mother language, and 9.8% regularly use the Chamorro language. These results show that the extent of the shift on Guam among the youngest generation to the use of English is statistically large.*

### INTRODUCTION

Guam is a U.S. territory in Micronesia, in the western Pacific. It has an area of 210 square miles (544 square km). Historically and culturally, it was part of a Chamorro archipelago, of which the other islands are now the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The current population is about 167,000. It

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is thought that the indigenous Chamorro (CHamoru<sup>1</sup>) people originally came from Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines around 3000-2000 BC on sailing canoes. The official languages in Guam are English and Chamorro. The Chamorro language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian subgroup of the Austronesian language family. The word order is SVO and VSO.

Guam is a multi-ethnic region. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (2019) calculates the proportion of Chamorros at 37.3% of the population as of 2010, and Chamorro-language speakers at 17.8% of the population<sup>2</sup>. Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (2016) estimates that there are 58,000 speakers of Chamorro worldwide, with 26,000 of them living in Guam, and the rest residing in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and elsewhere. 26,000 people account for approximately 15.5% of Guam's population. Many researchers have pointed out that the number of speakers of the Chamorro language decreased rapidly after World War II for numerous reasons, chiefly Americanization due to the impact of the U.S. military occupation (e.g., Odo, 1972; Riley, 1974; Underwood, 1984).

The local Government of Guam as well as community groups have been trying to promote the Chamorro language and culture and generally see the younger generations as key to its continuance. Yet, to our knowledge, there are no up-to-date studies investigating what percentage of young people today have acquired Chamorro as their mother language or can speak it frequently.

This chapter will analyze data collected from 582 students, ranging from 5 to 32 years old, and discuss indigenous Chamorro language acquisition, maintenance of Chamorro linguistic ability, and attitudes towards the Chamorro language among members of the youngest generation living in Guam.

## **HISTORY OF GUAM**

### **Spanish Colonial Period**

Although Guam was first founded by Europeans in 1521 with the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan, European colonization began in earnest in 1668, with the establishment of a Catholic mission from Spain. This mission was led by Father Diego Luis San Vitores, who had learned to speak Chamorro from a Filipino who had previously been shipwrecked on Guam (Rogers, 1995). One reason Chamorro people initially welcomed the Spanish was because of their ability to use the Chamorro language. As former Archbishop of Guam, Anthony Apuron (1996) wrote:

*The fathers, who brought the faith to the Marianas, had to grapple with the natives and had to find ways in which to enter their mindset and culture. That they did by learning and speaking the native language in order to win the people over and in order that they may impart the faith that is Catholic (p.2).*

San Vitores conducted his first masses entirely in Chamorro and went on to translate Spanish religious songs into Chamorro and publish the first documented grammar book in Latin in 1668 (Chung 1998). Although initially fascinated by Spanish offerings, Chamorro nonetheless soon began to resist their presence, leading to three decades of sporadic warfare. The resistant Chamorros eventually lost and were forced to give up aspects of their culture that conflicted with Catholicism, or, in the case of their seafaring skills, knowledge that allowed them to elude Spanish control. As a result of warfare, disease, and forced relocation, the Chamorro population was reduced by an estimated 90% by the start of the eighteenth century (Russell, 1998).

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