Lea Faka-Tonga

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Orthography Guidelines

Ministry for
Pacific Peoples

Acknowledgements

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We apologise for any errors or omissions that may remain despite our best efforts and urge readers to bring any issues to our attention by contacting us at languages@mpp.govt.nz.

Suggested Citation

When citing the lea faka-Tonga orthography guidelines, you may wish to use the following convention:

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Contents

Introduction

Due to a range of historical and contemporary factors including migration, population growth, and climate change, there is a growing number of kakai Tonga in the diaspora.

The future of lea faka-Tonga in New Zealand, and indeed other languages of the Pacific, is uncertain, and it is for this reason that the Ministry for Pacific Peoples, in collaboration with Pacific communities across the motu and abroad, published the Pacific Languages Strategy 2022-2032. The Strategy, in line with current research on language policy and planning, highlighted *corpus*[1] as a key element of successful language revitalisation, and it is in this context that these orthography guidelines have been developed.

These guidelines outline what the Ministry for Pacific Peoples, in consultation with language experts, consider to be best practice for writing lea faka-Tonga *in New Zealand*. They are intended as an accessible and easy-to-reference guide that we hope will be useful to beginners and experts alike. They are part of a series, which also includes guidelines on Niuean, Tokelauan, Cook Islands Māori, and Samoan.

These guidelines were developed using widely accepted conventions and literature on the orthography of lea faka-Tonga to promote accessibility, consistency, and clarity of meaning and pronunciation, especially for language learners in New Zealand. Given this, there may be instances where the advice in this publication contradicts that of other authoritative texts. For example, there are mixed opinions around marking vowel length in lea faka-Tonga – while some authorities support macrons under certain circumstances only, this document recommends they always be used where long vowels are present. In cases such as this, it is recommended that these guidelines supersede those in other (especially older) literature.

The Ministry for Pacific Peoples recommends Reverend C. M. Churchward's *Tongan Dictionary*[2] – also the basis for the 2023 *Tongan-English Dictionary* iOS and Android application – as a primary reference for checking how words should be spelled. Likewise, the Ministry recommends Churchward's *Tongan Grammar* for grammatical rules.[3]

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1   *Corpus* refers to the creation and maintenance of a language's oral and written resources e.g., dictionaries, grammars, orthography guidelines, and pronunciation guides.
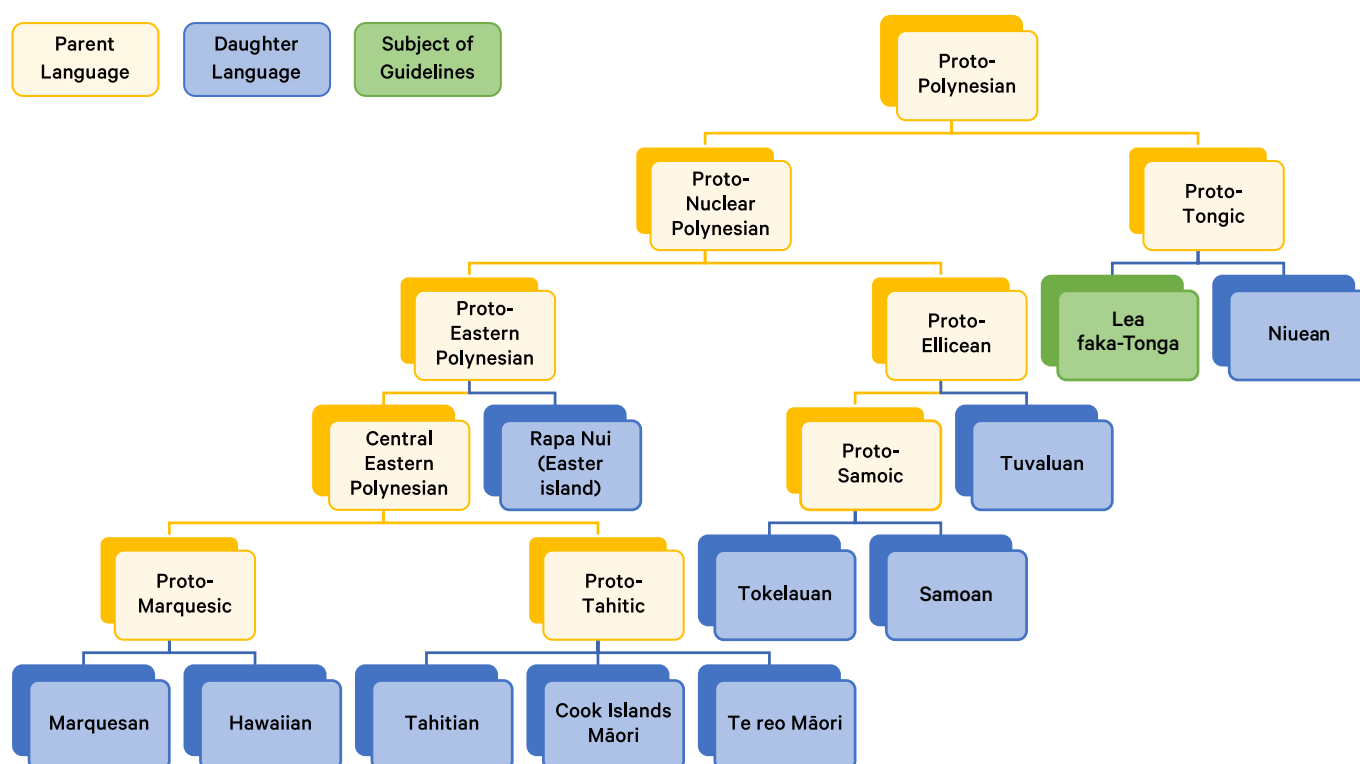2   Churchward, C. (1959) Tongan Dictionary. Tongan Government Printing Press.
3   Churchward, C. (1953) (1985 Edition) Tongan Grammar. Oxford University Press

Linguistic classification of lea faka-Tonga

Lea faka-Tonga is a Polynesian language that belongs to the eponymous Tongic subgroup alongside Niuean. As one of the earliest offshoots of the Proto-Polynesian language estimated to have been spoken ≈3000 years ago, lea faka-Tonga is not generally viewed to have been influenced significantly by other Pacific languages. It has a distinct linguistic character, with many unique features – including the so-called *definitive accent* – not found elsewhere in the Polynesian language family.

A visual representation of the Polynesian language family tree is included for reference with an accompanying legend below. Note the diagram is not exhaustive, and that many other languages not included are also part of the Polynesian language family.

Figure 1 – Polynesian Language Family Tree

Timeline of key texts on lea faka-Tonga

There are several texts of historical and linguistic significance written on and in lea faka-Tonga that these guidelines draw on directly – descriptions and examples from Churchward's 1953 *Tongan Dictionary* and 1959 *Tongan Grammar,* for example, are referenced throughout. Conversely, other texts merely contextualise the journey of the written language from Willem Schouten and Lacob Le Maire

earliest transcriptions in 1616, to the publication of William Mariner's more substantive *A Grammar of the Tongan Language* in 1817, and the work of many other authors since. All mark important inflection points in the history and study of written lea faka-Tonga. These key texts are detailed in Appendix 1, noting the timeline is not exhaustive.

Section 1 – Dialects and Registers

Dialects

Lea faka-Tonga is a largely standardised language, owing partly to the codified hierarchical structure of Tongan society and its speakers where convention, linguistic and otherwise, traditionally emanates from the royalty outward. However, despite this, it is widely reported that a distinct dialect is spoken on the two northern islands of Niuafo'ou and Niuatoputapu.

The exact qualities of this dialect are under-researched, though anecdotal evidence suggests a high level of mutual intelligibility with standard lea faka-Tonga, with some differences in vocabulary and pronunciation. These differences are variably reflected in spelling.

Respectful language

Lea faka-Tonga can have as many as five distinct words to express the same idea, with each variant signalling a different degree of respect or deference to the addressee. This is similar to how, in English, someone might say *bathroom* or *lavatory* instead of *toilet* depending on who they are talking to. In his Tongan Grammar, Churchward describes these word classes as follows:

(1) Different classes of respectful language in lea faka-Tonga[4]

WORD CLASS	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE	MEANING
Derogatory	Used to refer to oneself or one's own belongings or affairs when speaking to a person(s) of higher social rank (i.e., a noble or member of the royal family)	*mama*	'to eat'
Ordinary	Used by default when no other class of word is required.	*kai*	'to eat'
Polite	Used for the sake of courtesy even when a person(s) of higher rank is not present.	*tokoni*	'to eat'
Honorific	Used when addressing or referring to chiefs or other individuals who hold high office.	*'ilo*	'to eat'
Regal	Used when addressing or referring to the sovereign or God.	*taumafa*	'to eat'

Note that respectful language in lea faka-Tonga has not been heavily researched, and so it is entirely possible that, in some cases, fewer or more than five classes may exist – it is not the intent or prerogative of these guidelines to dictate or otherwise impose Churchward's analysis as absolute. Further, though certainly a unique and important feature of the language, it is noteworthy that not all speakers "are masters of the language of respect" and that those "desiring to speak to a high chief, will often ask [...] a person who is thoroughly conversant with the language of respect to act as intermediary".[5]

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4   Churchward 1953 [1985]: 304

5   Churchward 1953 [1985]: 305

Section 2 – Vowels and Consonants

Alphabet

Historically there have been two alphabets of note in lea faka-Tonga – each comprised of the same letters, but ordered in a different way.

The Privy Council approved the first official alphabet in 1943. This configuration grouped all the vowels together at the beginning of the alphabet, followed by the consonants and, finally, the glottal stop:

(2) Early Lea-faka Tonga alphabet[6]

a, e, i, o, u, f, ng, h, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, v, '

However, in 1954, the Privy Council changed that order to alternate vowels and consonants in line with the English alphabet. It is likely this change was in response to Churchward's Tongan Grammar calling for an order that "avoid[s] confusion […] both to Tongans when using an English dictionary, and to English people when using a Tongan dictionary"[7]. Note all future references to 'the alphabet' relate to (3).

(3) Modern lea faka-Tonga alphabet[8]

a, e, f, h, i, k, l, m, n, ng, o, p, s, t, u, v, '

Vowels

Like most Polynesian languages, lea faka-Tonga has five basic vowels.

(4) Vowels in lea faka-Tonga[9]

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

There are three distinct types of vowels – **short**, **long**, and **double** – and these can be combined to create diphthongs.

- **Short** vowels are unmarked – a, e, i, o, u
- **Long** vowels are marked with a macron – ā, ē, ī, ō, ū
- **Double** vowels, which are pronounced distinctly as two syllables, are:
    - unmarked sequences where the same vowel is repeated – aa, ee, ii, oo, uu
    - unmarked sequences where the vowels are different – ae, ai, ao, au, etc.,
- Diphthongs, which combine two vowels and are pronounced as one syllable, are:
    - unmarked sequences – ae, ai, ao, au, etc.,

The distinction between vowel type is *contrastive* in lea faka-Tonga. That is, the meaning of a word changes depending on which is used. For example:

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6   Churchward 1953 [1985]: 13
7   Churchward 1953 [1985]: 13
8   Churchward 1959: viii
9   Churchward 1953 [1985]: 3

(5) Contrastive word set[10]

VOWEL TYPE	WORD/SPELLING	MEANING
Short	*ata*	'twilight'
Long	*'atā*	'roomy, spacious'
Double	*aata*	'to see dimly (as through frosted glass)'

Determining whether a pair of different vowels should be pronounced *separately* (i.e., as double vowels), or *together* (i.e., as a diphthong) in lea faka-Tonga can be difficult, as both are written as unmarked sequences. This is further complicated by the fact that certain pairs are more likely to be, but not always, pronounced separately or together based on physiological factors such as the shape of the mouth and how much the tongue has to move to form different vowels. For example, /ue/ is more likely to be a diphthong, while /e/ followed by /u/ are more likely to be pronounced separately, because it is easier for the tongue to glide from /u/ to /e/ than the other way around. Developing fluency is the only way to accurately determine how to correctly pronounce such sequences.

 Further to the above, while the macron is theoretically the exclusive marker of vowel length in lea faka-Tonga, in practice many speakers do not distinguish between long vowels (marked with a macron) and vowels subject to the definitive accent (marked with an acute) when speaking. Thus, in fluent, casual speech, /ā/, /á/, /áa/, and /aá/ can sound the same. The *definitive accent* is explained further in a dedicated section below.

In sum, while the orthography of lea faka-Tonga generally reflects how words and phrases should be articulated, it is not wholly reliable, and correct pronunciation can be unclear in some circumstances. This being the case, access to a native speaker and/or recording (as available on some dictionary apps) is the only way to discern the right way to say certain words and phrases.

Consonants

There are twelve consonant sounds in lea faka-Tonga.

(6) Consonants in lea faka-Tonga[11]

	BILABIAL	LABIO-DENTAL	ALVEOLAR/DENTAL	VELAR	GLOTTAL
STOP/PLOSIVE	p		t	k	ʔ
FRICATIVE		f v	s		h
NASAL	m		n	ŋ	
LATERAL			l		

All consonant sounds in lea faka-Tonga are represented in spelling as they are in the above table, with the following exceptions:

• /ʔ/ is represented as a single inverted comma (')
• /ŋ/ is represented as /ng/

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10 Churchward 1959: 14, 552, 1
11 Garellek and Tabain 2019: 407

The Definitive Accent

A characteristic unique to lea faka-Tonga is the *definitive accent.* This term, which refers to both the diacritic mentioned earlier (i.e., á, é, í, ó, ú) as well as the pronunciation it indicates, is a key grammatical feature in the language, as it distinguishes between the definite and indefinite article.

To explain, while English has different definite ('the') and indefinite articles ('a/an'), lea faka-Tonga distinguishes between these categories by placing the definitive accent on the final vowel of the relevant noun. In speech, a vowel subject to the definitive accent is slightly elongated.

(7) Example of the definitive accent in lea faka-Tonga

EXAMPLE	MEANING
'Oku ou nofo 'i he fale	'I live in **a** house'
*'Oku ou nofo 'i he fal**é***	'I live in **the** house'

Consistently using the definitive accent where appropriate is essential to achieving clarity of meaning in lea faka-Tonga. If omitted, a reader will (unless context strongly suggests otherwise) consider the relevant noun(s) indefinite, potentially leading to comprehension errors.

In sum, mastering the definitive accent in writing is as challenging as it is important, especially as speakers are often "no more aware they are using the definitive accent [...] in accordance with certain rules, than [English speakers] are constantly observing certain variations of stress and tone which are essential to correctly spoken English [...] it is mostly a matter of subconscious habit subconsciously acquired".[12]

Section 3 – Word Division

Affixes

Lea faka-Tonga has three types of affixes: prefixes, suffixes, and circumfixes. Reduplication is not considered a type of affix by these guidelines. Affixes *are directly attached to the root words they modify.* An exception to this is when an affix would be attached to a proper noun, in which case a hyphen is used e.g., *faka-Tonga,* 'Tongan, of Tonga, in the manner of Tonga'.

Prefixes

Lea faka-Tonga utilises a range of prefixes. Some examples are described below:

(8) Prefixes[13]

PREFIX	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
faka-	Many functions, including denoting 'to cause' or 'in the manner of'.	*faka + tonutonu* 'straight' = *fakatonutonu* 'to straighten' *faka + tu'i* 'king' = *fakatu'i* 'regal, kingly'
ma/mā/mo-	Many functions, including denoting actions that occur spontaneously or by accident.	*ma + fusi* 'to pull' = *mafusi* 'to be pulled out of position' *ma + hae* to 'tear' = *mahae* 'to be torn'
kaungā-	Combines with verbs and nouns to denote 'together' or 'fellow'.	*kaungā + lotu* 'to worship' = *kaungālotu* 'to worship together' or 'to be of the same religion'

12 Churchward 1953 [1985]: 10
13 Churchward 1953 [1985]: 253, 259, 261

Suffixes

Lea faka-Tonga has many suffixes also, some of which are listed below:

(9) Suffixes[14]

SUFFIX	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
-'anga	Combines with verbs to form related nouns.	*nofo* 'to dwell' + *'anga* = *nofo'anga* 'dwelling place'
-'ia	Combines with nouns to denote 'having', 'possessing', or 'characterised by'.	*koloa* 'wealth' + *'ia* = *koloa'ia* 'rich, wealthy'
-'aki	Combines with nouns to denote 'to treat as' or 'to use as'.	*'otua* 'god, deity' + *'aki* = *'otua'aki* 'to deify'

Circumfixes

Lea faka-Tonga has two circumfixes: *fe-   -aki* and *mo'u-   -a*.

The first of these, *fe-   -aki* (which can be realised in a number of ways including *fe-   -'aki, -faki, -laki, -ngaki, -taki, -ki, -fi, -hi, -ni, -i*), is used to form reciprocative, reciprocal, and communal verbs. Note that these different verb types are not always distinct – they are nuanced and can bleed into one another depending on context.

- Reciprocative verbs indicate movement backwards and forwards, to and fro, or to a certain place/in a certain direction and back. In English, this quality is achieved by including one of those terms after the relevant verb – e.g., 'the child swung on the swing set' vs. 'the child swung backwards and forwards on the swing set'.

- Reciprocal verbs indicate actions performed by and on multiple parties. In English, this quality is achieved by including 'each other' or 'one another' after the relevant verb – e.g., 'they played in the sandpit' vs. 'they played with one another in the sandpit'.

- Communal verbs indicate actions performed simultaneously or in unison, but not necessarily reciprocally. In English, this quality is achieved by including 'together' in relation to the relevant verb e.g., 'they went to the park to run' vs. 'they went to the park to run together'.

Examples are included in the table below, noting the list is not exhaustive.

(10) Examples of *fe-   -aki* and some of its variations[15]

CIRCUMFIX	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
fe- -aki		*fe* + *lele* 'to run' + *aki* = *felēleaki* 'to run there and back'
fe- -'aki		*fe* + *'ofa* 'to love' + *'aki* = *fe'ofa'aki* 'to love one another'
fe- -laki	Forms reciprocative, reciprocal, and communal verbs.	*fe* + *lau* 'to arrive' + *laki* = *fetaulaki* 'to arrive from different directions'
fe- -ngaki		*fe* + *puli* 'to disappear' + *ngaki* = *fepulingaki* 'to lose sight of one another'
fe- -taki		*fe* + *hiki* 'to move' + *taki* = *fehikitaki* 'to change places with one another'
fe- -ki		*fe* + *hola* 'to flee' + *ki* = *feholaki* 'to flee together'
fe- -ni		*fe* + *'ofo'ofa* 'to be kind' + *ni* = *fe'ofo'ofani* 'to be kind to one another'

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14 Churchward 1953 [1985]: 239, 246, 247

15 Churchward 1953 [1985]: 256, 257

The second circumfix, *mo'u- -a*, indicates the continuation or prolonging of the action, or state, of the verb to which it is attached. Examples are provided in the table below:

(11) Examples of *mo'u- -a*[16]

CIRCUMFIX	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
mo'u- -a	Denotes continuation or prolonging of an action or state.	*mo'u + tu'u* 'to stand' + *a* = *mo'utu'ua* 'to remain standing for a considerable time'
		mo'u + mohe 'to sleep' + *a* = *mo'umohea* 'to remain asleep for an unusually long time'
		mo'u + ilifia 'to be afraid' + *a* = *mo'uilifiā* 'to continue in a state of fear for a prolonged period of time'

Compound words

Orthographic convention around compound words in lea faka-Tonga is inconsistent – they can be written as single words, as two or more words separated by space(s), or as two or more words separated by hyphen(s). Examples of all three strategies are included in the table below.

(12) Compound words[17]

WORD COMPONENTS	COMPOUND WORD
tu'u 'to stand' + *mālie* 'well'	= *tu'umālie* 'wealthy', literally 'to stand well'
toka 'to lie' + *ma'u* 'firmly'	= *toka ma'u* 'to set firm (of cement etc.)'
sino 'body' + *mālohi* 'strong'	= *sino-mālohi* 'strong-bodied'

Linguists theorise that certain combinations of words and/or types of words are more likely to compound in certain ways. However, in the absence of any consistent rules, the best approach is to consult a dictionary or native speaker. In short, while most compounds in lea faka-Tonga are written as one word, there is no way to accurately determine where there is an exception, and whether that exception is separated by space or hyphen, without consulting a dictionary or native speaker.

Loanwords

Lea faka-Tonga has many loanwords, most of which are nouns or verbs that originate from English. These are formed almost exclusively through the process of *transliteration,* whereby foreign words are spoken and written in a manner than conforms to the pronunciation and spelling conventions of lea faka-Tonga. Examples are provided below:

(13) English loanwords in lea faka-Tonga[18]

ENGLISH		LEA FAKA-TONGA
'rice'	▶▶▶	*laise*
'lemon'	▶▶▶	*lemani*
'sugar'	▶▶▶	*suka*

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16 Churchward 1953 [1985]: 261
17 Churchward 1959: 520, 488, 430
18 Churchward 1959: 278, 292, 436

Section 4 – Capitalisation

Proper nouns

Proper nouns – including personal names, religious titles (i.e., Father, God etc.), days of the week, months of the year, place names, country names, demonyms, and language names – are subject to variable capitalisation in lea faka-Tonga. Guidance around what should be capitalised specifically is provided in the sections below.

Personal names

All components of personal names – i.e., first names, any middle names, and surnames – are capitalised in lea faka-Tonga.

(14) Personal names

LEA FAKA-TONGA	ENGLISH
Malakai Fekitoa	Famous Rugby Player
Tu'imala Kaho	Famous Singer

Religious titles

Religious titles are always capitalised in lea faka-Tonga, whether they are referring to a specific person or being used generally. For example, *Pātele Ioane* 'Father John' versus *na'e 'a'ahi mai 'a e Patele ki 'api* 'the priests visited the house'.

The above rule also applies to all references to god(s) – e.g., *'Ofa ke fai tapuekina koe he 'Otua* 'may God bless you' versus *'Oku 'ikai ke tau toe tauhi 'Otua mate 'o hangē koe kuohili* 'we no longer worship the pagan gods of the past'.

Days of the week

The days of the week are always capitalised.

(15) Days of the week

LEA FAKA-TONGA	ENGLISH
Mōnite	'Monday'
Tūsite	'Tuesday'
Pulelulu	'Wednesday'
Tu'apulelulu	'Thursday'
Falaite	'Friday'
Tokanaki	'Saturday'
Sāpate	'Sunday'

Months of the year

Tonga follows the Gregorian calendar, with each month's name transliterated into lea faka-Tonga. All months are capitalised.

(16) Months of the year

LEA FAKA-TONGA	ENGLISH
Sānuali	'January'
Fēpuli	'February'
Ma'asi	'March'
'Epeleli	'April'
Mē	'May'
Sune	'June'
Siulai	'July'
'Aokosi	'August'
Sēpitema	'September'
'Okatopa	'October'
Nōvema	'November'
Tīsema	'December'

Place names

Place names, including geographic features, are generally separated by spaces with all words capitalised except prepositions. There are exceptions to this, however, and digital maps do not always align with traditional maps. This being the case, traditional maps should be considered authoritative in the first instance. However, if you do not have access to traditional maps, or someone with knowledge of the place names contained therein, a digital resource such as Google Maps is acceptable – just be consistent, and reference sources where appropriate.

(17) Place names

LEA FAKA-TONGA
Tatakamotonga
Ha'amonga 'a Maui
Paaka mo e Feitu'u

Demonyms

Demonyms are the words used to denote the inhabitants of a particular country, state, city, region etc. In English, demonyms are formed with a number of suffixes, most notably /-n/ or /-an/ e.g., Samoa**n**, Niue**an**. In lea faka-Tonga, lowercase *tangata* 'man', *fefine* 'woman', or *kakai* 'people' is combined with the relevant capitalised country name:

Language names

Language names are always formed with *lea faka* ('language [of]') and the name of the country where the language originates (generally speaking). The *faka* component and the name of the country are separated by a hyphen. *Lea* is only capitalised if it is at the beginning of a sentence, while *faka* is always lowercase, and the country name is always capitalised.

Country names

Country names are separated by spaces with all words capitalised.

(19) Country and continent names

LEA FAKA-TONGA	ENGLISH
Nu'u Sila	'New Zealand'
'Ingilani	'England'
Ha'amoa	'Samoa'

(19) Demonyms

LEA FAKA-TONGA	ENGLISH
tangata / fefine / kakai Nu'u Sila	'New Zealand man / woman / people'
tangata / fefine / kakai 'Ingilani	'English man / woman / people'
tangata / fefine / kakai Ha'amoa	'Samoan man / woman / people'

(20) Language names

LEA FAKA-TONGA	ENGLISH
lea faka-Tonga	Tongan language
lea faka-'Ingilani	English language
lea faka-Ha'amoa	Samoan language

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Churchward, C. (1985) Tongan Grammar. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press

Garellek, M. Tabain, M. (2019) Illustrations of the IPA Tongan. Published Online by Cambridge University Press.

Appendices

Appendix 1 — Timeline of key texts on and in lea faka-Tonga

YEAR	TEXT	SIGNIFICANCE
1817	A Grammar of the Tonga Language	One of the first texts on the Tongan language was William Mariner's *A Grammar of the Tongan Language*, edited and published in 1817 as part of Volume 2 of his *Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands in the South Pacific Ocean*. While somewhat informative in its day, the orthography detailed by Mariner is no longer in use, having been superseded by newer, modern conventions.
1845	A Vocabulary of the Tonga Language	Reverend Stephen Rabone expanded on William Mariner's early work with *A Vocabulary of the Tonga Language*. This text consisted of a Tongan to English wordlist, annexed by some grammatical notes and a list of idioms.
1849	*Tohitapu Katoa* (Tongan Bible)	Although parts of the Bible were translated into Tongan in as early as 1844, the first complete edition of the New Testament wasn't published until 1849. This was further revised and edited by Thomas West for republication in 1860, with the translation of the Old Testament was completed shortly after in 1862. These texts remained the most substantive texts in lea faka-Tonga for some time.
1897	An English and Tongan Vocabulary, also a Tongan and English Vocabulary, with a List of Idiomatic Phrases; and Tongan Grammar	Building on earlier works by Reverends Stephen Rabone and Francis West (though largely ignoring the contributions of William Mariner) Reverend Shirley Baker's *An English and Tongan Vocabulary* included English to Tongan and Tongan to English wordlists, in addition to a substantial section on grammar, over 386 pages. The volume remained a key reference text until the publication of Churchward's *Tongan Grammar* and *Tongan Dictionary* some sixty years later.
1953	Tongan Grammar	Reverend C. M. Churchward's seminal *Tongan Grammar* remains the most comprehensive and authoritative linguistic text on lea faka-Tonga published to date. At 305 pages, it provides a comprehensive account of the structure of the language, complete with illustrative examples and etymological notes.
1959	Tongan Dictionary	Six years after publishing *Tongan Grammar*, Churchward completed the *Tongan Dictionary*, the most comprehensive written account of the language to date. Building on earlier work such as Collocot's *Supplementary Tongan Vocabulary* and Baker's *An English and Tongan Vocabulary*, Churchward's dictionary includes both Tongan to English and English to Tongan sections, as well as some grammatical notes, spanning a formidable 836 pages.