

# Let's 'kakokako' about Motu

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## Introduction

Motu is an Oceanic language spoken along the coast of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea [1]. The last comprehensive survey of Motu was completed in 1896 [2] which was followed by a revised grammar of Hiri Motu in 1974 [3]. Hiri Motu is a major dialect of Motu and was historically utilised as a language of trade amongst the many tribes located in Papua [1]. The data was elicited from a language consultant, and assistance was sought from the language consultant's parents to gloss unfamiliar vocabulary and clarify ambiguous grammatical constructions.

## Phonetic Processes

There are fifteen consonantal and five vowel phonemes in Motu. The consonantal phonemes in Motu are /p, t, k, k<sup>w</sup>, b, d, g, g<sup>w</sup>, h, β, γ, m, n, l, r/ and the vowel phonemes are /a, e, i, o, u, ə/. Motu (and Police Motu) has a CV syllable structure.

- the glottal stop [ʔ] only occurs in the initial position of a word preceding a vowel (e.g. ʔuna 'that'); the glottal stop is not phonemic
- the labialised palatal approximant [ɥ] in free variation with /i/ and only occurs in the final position of a word (e.g. sinavau 'river, lake')
- the palatal approximant [j] is an allophone of /i/ when it is realised intervocalically (e.g. ʔidija 'they' and ʔoj-emu 'your')
- the labio-velar approximant [w] is an allophone of /u/ when it is realised intervocalically (e.g. law-egu 'my')
- the bilabial nasal /m/ and alveolar nasal /n/ can occur word-finally following variable word final /u/-deletion (e.g. gadara-mu → gadara-m 'compare')
- variable intervocalic-/h/ deletion (e.g. dahaka → da:ka 'what')
- the alveolar approximant [ɹ] is in free variation with the alveolar tap [r]

## Adjectives

The typology of the adjective class in Motu is consistent with other Oceanic languages.

- (1) Clifford be [sisija kakakaka-na bona moale-na]  
Clifford is dog red-3SG.POSS and happy-3SG.POSS  
'Clifford is [a happy red dog].'

As sentence (1) illustrates,

- Adjective words such as kakakaka 'red' and moale 'happy' are more noun-like
- Adjectives can appear with the nominal case third person possessive case markers -na (SG) and -dija (PL)
- Multiple adjectives can be coordinated with the conjunction bona 'and'

The above features can be observed in attributive and predicative position.

Furthermore, adjectives are not inflected for degree (i.e. they do not have comparative or superlative forms), but degree can be expressed with the adverb herija 'very'. Comparison can also be expressed as shown in sentence (2). Sentence (2) is a good example where the word moale 'happy' is nominalised.

- (2) oj-emu moale be bada law-egu be maragi  
You-2SG.POSS happy is big my-1SG.POSS is small  
'You are happier than me.' (lit. 'your happiness is big, mine is small')

## Adpositions

Compound postpositions are typically formed using a (locative) noun, a personal suffix and the basic postposition ai:

noun + personal suffix (-gu, -mu, -na, -da, etc.) + ai

henunai 'under' = henu + -na + ai

Sometimes no personal suffix is used:

murimuriai 'outside' = murimuri + ai (no personal suffix)

There are also some postpositions such as kahikahi 'near' that contain neither a personal suffix nor ai. Postpositions in a sentence come after the noun, usually at the end of the sentence (1)

- (1) kito be [maua kahikahi]  
cat is box near  
'The cat is near the box.'

Sentence (1) can be said in another way as well. Rather than the position of a noun in relation to another noun, there can be a description of whether the two objects are close/far from each other, as seen in (2):

- (2) kito bona maua be kahikahi  
cat and box is near  
'The cat and the box are near each other'

Motu, being an SOV language, nearly always uses postpositions rather than prepositions. However, there were a few instances where the adposition seems to come before rather than after the noun, making it a preposition e.g. kito be atai gadara gauna 'the cat is above the toy (= play thing)' was elicited instead of the expected kito be gadara gauna atai. This is not a very common phenomenon.

## References

- [1] Chatterton, P. (n. d.). *Say it in Motu: an instant introduction to the common language of Papua*. Buranda, QLD: Robert Brown & Associates.  
[2] Lawes, W. G. (1896). *Grammar and Vocabulary of Language Spoken by Motu Tribe (New Guinea)* (3rd ed.). Sydney, NSW: Charles Potter.  
[3] Dutton, T. E., and Voorhoeve, C. L. (1974). *Beginning Hiri Motu*. Canberra, ACT: Linguistic Circle of Canberra.  
[4] Lister-Turner, R., & Clark, J. B. (1931). In P. Chatterton (Ed.), *A grammar of the Motu language of Papua* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sydney: NSW: A.H. Pettifer.

## Verbs

The verbs in Motu are structured as:

subject particle + [verb stem (+ object suffix) (+\*)]

\*= additional suffixes are added for certain tense/aspect combinations

subject	SG				PL			
	Present/Past		Future		Present/Past		Future	
Person	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C
1	na	na	baina	baina / ba	ta (inc) a (exc)	ta	baita (inc) baia (exc)	baita / ba
2	o	o	ba	ba	o	o	ba	ba
3	e	e	baine	be / bae	e	e	bae	be / bae

Subject particles mostly occur as described in the previous literature [4], but the inclusive-exclusive distinction in the 1pl seems to have been lost (P = previous literature; C = current study).

The object suffix was also found to follow the previous literature [4]:

Examples:

1,2,3=person ; SG/PL=number ; O= object

na uraheni-mu

1.SG like-O:2.PL

"I like you"

- For the future, b- is often prefixed to the subject particle vowels from the present/past tense, as in:

ba taho-a-m

FUT.1.SG throw-O:3.SG-FUT

"I will have thrown (it)"

- The suffix -mu was reported to mark the immediate/present future in the existing literature (cf. Lister-Turner & Clark 1931). However it appears it is now more widely used as a general marker of the future tense, and is often reduced to -m:

be kiri-mu  
FUT.3.PL laugh-FUT  
'They will laugh'

baita gadara-m  
FUT.1.PL play-FUT  
'We will play'

- va was found in the previous literature as a marker for the continuous aspect, and evidence was found for this:

e kiri-va  
3.PL laugh-CONT  
'They were laughing'

e gadara-va  
3.PL play-CONT  
'They were playing'

## Questions

The position of the interrogative phrase is determined by its function. The word for 'who' appears in initial position in subject questions (1), but in final position in identificational questions (2).

- (1) dajdija be unukaj? (2) Una mero ladana be dejka?  
who.PL is there That boy name is who.SG  
'Who will be there?' 'What is that boy's name?'

The word order in content questions generally matches the word order in corresponding declaratives (3)-(4), but there are instances where this pattern can be obscured because independent subject pronouns are not always necessary (5)-(6).

- (3) mero -na da:ka e-ita (4) mero -na gwarume e-ita  
boy -3SG.POSS what 3SG-see boy -3SG.POSS fish 3SG-see  
'What did the boy see?' 'The boy saw the fish'

- (5) oj be da:ka o-ita (6) gwarume na-ita-ja  
you-2SG is what 2SG-see fish 1SG-see-O:3SG  
'What did you see?' 'I saw the fish.'

'Why'-questions are an important exception to the word order generalisation. While dahaka dajinaj 'why' consistently appears in initial position (7), the corresponding answer in the declarative appears as an embedded clause in final position (8).

- (7) dahaka dajinaj boroma ojem ruma lalonaj?  
What reason pig your house inside?  
'Why is there a pig in your house?'

- (8) boroma lau-egu ruma lalonaj badina lau-ese na-davari-a  
pig mine house inside reason I-ERG 1SG-find-O:3SG  
'There is a pig in my house because I found it.'