Literacy and feelings: The encoding of affect in Nukulaelae letters

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Abstract

The primary purpose of literacy production on Nukulaelae Atoll (Central Pacific) is to write letters. Nukulaelae letters are sent to relatives on neighboring atolls, and serve a variety of functions: monitoring economic reciprocity; informing kin of family events; and admonishing younger people. Permeating every aspect of letters is a heavy emphasis on the overt expression of affect, of a nature not found in any other arena of Nukulaelae social life. This paper describes the way in which affect is encoded in the text of these letters, and shows how the topics addressed in letters are emically defined as affectively charged. A content and historical-ethnographic analysis of letter-writing on the atoll indicates that letters have been defined as cathartic events from the very introduction of literacy. It is suggested that the metaphorical affiliation of letter-writing with parting is in large part responsible for letters having become affect-display context. This case study challenged traditional views that written communication is universally less affective than spoken communication.

‘Papauta, Sept. 13, 1897

To Mrs. David, the lady,—

My love to you! alas my mother! The thought weeps when I think of you, together with the others, because of your kindness to me. Alas for my love! Dear, oh dear, my heart is full of love, but it is difficult because I cannot speak; but I thought I would try and send this small piece of paper to make known to you my love. Alas my mother! my love is very great, and it is difficult and hard because we shall be so soon parted. Grief continues to grow in my heart when I think of the days we were together in Funafuti. Alas! I do not forget them and you all. I feel I want to be still with you. It is hard that we have been so soon parted on shore. May you return with blessing to your home. This love of mine has nothing with which to make itself known, but I have striven to make appear before you that which was hidden, namely, my love to you. Alas, my parents, love is difficult.
This letter is hurriedly written. May Jehovah remain with us both when we are separated. Good bye.

May you live!

(David, 1899: 88–89)

At the end of last century, Lady Caroline Davie accompanied a geological research team led by her husband to the atoll of Funafuti, then a remote colonial outpost in the Central Pacific. After her return to Australia, she received this letter from a young Funafuti woman who had been studying at the mission school for girls in Samoa, and subsequently quoted it in the narrative of her three-month sojourn on the atoll, a treasure of information about Victorian perceptions of Funafuti society at the end of the nineteenth century. By the time this ‘wailing letter’ (David, 1899: 89) was written, thirty years had elapsed since the introduction of literacy to Funafuti. This letter, the original of which was presumably written in Samoan, thus represents one of the earliest recorded samples of writing by a Funafuti islander.

The historical records are too scanty to enable us to judge the extent to which Vitolia’s letter represents the written output of nineteenth century Funafuti islanders; yet her letter bears a striking resemblance to the written texts that members of the same society produce today. Why does she store up in such fashion a letter at such an early date after the introduction of literacy to a culture? Under what circumstances does a society exploit the written medium for such purposes?

This paper is a study of the linguistic encoding of affect in letters written by Nukuleauei islanders, who inhabit a small isolated atoll of the Tuvalu group (formerly the Ellice Islands), 65 nautical miles to the south of Funafuti. Taking as a point of departure a quantitative study of the distribution of affect markers across Nukuleauei spoken and written registers (Besnier, 1986a), this study is a qualitative analysis of how affect is encoded in letters, a register which the quantitative analysis singled out for the high incidence of grammatical affect markers. This paper addresses two questions: what type of affect do Nukuleauei islanders express in their letters? What linguistic strategies do Nukuleauei islanders exploit to express this affect? In this study, a broad definition of ‘affect’ is adopted, encompassing not only the linguistic encoding of emotions, but also the expression of attitudes and points of view, stance and moods, both toward the propositional content of the discourse and toward the communicative context (Ochs and Schieffelin, this issue).

While considerable progress has been made in the past few years toward an understanding of the role and nature of affective meaning in oral discourse (Haviland, 1987; Irvine, 1982; Labov, 1984; Lutz and White, 1986; Ochs and Schieffelin, this issue), little attention has been paid to the communication of affect in writing in any speech community. The little research that has addressed the question of writing and affect has mostly focused on Western literary genres (e.g., Haviland, 1984), and not on the day-to-day written output of members of speech communities. Thus we do not have a basis on which to compare the role of affect in spoken and written communication. This paper attempts to fill this lacuna; it puts forward a number of proposals to explain the form of affective displays in writing on Nukuleauei. The extent to which these explanations hold cross-culturally remains to be tested.

1. Written communication and affect

Underlying the questions addressed in this paper is the need to examine more closely the role of affect in writing. Many researchers have maintained that written communication is typically less affective than oral communication (Chafe, 1982; Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987; DeVito, 1966, 1967; Redeker, 1984). These scholars maintain that, while the immediacy of an audience allows speakers to invoke more personal elements in spoken discourse, writers can afford to do so considerably less, because of the lack of a visible audience. The symptoms of this difference are the greater incidence, in spoken language, of linguistic features like personal pronouns, references to the speaker’s mental processes (‘I think that’, etc.), expressions like ‘you know’, emphatic particles, hedges, and direct quotes. These features have all been characterized in research on affect as strategies with which high affect is encoded in many languages (Irvine, 1982; Ochs and Schieffelin, this issue).

Tannen (1982a, 1982b), Biber (1986), and Besnier (1986a) all challenge the characterization of speaking as an affectively charged communicative activity and of writing as a medium in which little affect surfaces. Tannen and Biber show that, in English, some types of writing are more affect-laden than some types of speaking, and vice-versa. While the salience of affect is an important factor in distinguishing some spoken genres from some written genres, it is not useful in explaining the differences between all spoken and written genres.

It is clear that what has led earlier researchers to conclude that written language is more ‘objective’ and less affective than speaking is the fact that the data that they have typically based their research on is academic writing, in which writers are expected to pose as objective and unemotional. It is surprising that little research has focused on the structure of
more run-of-the-mill written registers like personal letters as communicative events and linguistic genres (Gilgoly, 1984; Mikulecky, 1985; Mulkay, 1985; Rubenstein and Gajdusek, 1970; Scribner and Cole, 1981). Yet letters represent a major portion of the written output of members of numerous societies, including mainstream Western middle-class society. This paper is thus a contribution to the cross-cultural study of a little-studied written register.

To test the cross-linguistic validity of Tannen’s and Eibner’s conclusions about spoken- and written-language relationships, I conducted a statistical analysis of the distribution of selected linguistic features across 152 texts from seven Nukulaelae spoken and written registers, including 40 of the letters analyzed for this paper (Besnier, 1986a). The linguistic features used in that study include, among others, morphological and syntactic markers of affect like intensifiers, pronouns, hedges, and ergative case-marking (shown in Besnier 1986b to have important affect-encoding functions). The patterns of co-occurrence of these features across texts of the corpus define a number of dimensions, along with structural similarities and differences between text types can be measured. One of the most striking results of this analysis is the fact that letters rank higher than any other Nukulaelae spoken or written register in terms of affective-involvement markers. Letters also rank higher than four of the other six registers along the dimension labelled ‘affective intensity’. The general conclusion I drew from this study is that the extent to which the members of a speech community allow affect to surface in a particular register, whether spoken or written, is a function of the communicative norms at play in the society, and not an inherent consequence of orality and literacy. I suggested that, on Nukulaelae, letters are used to channel certain types of affective displays which are not judged as appropriate in face-to-face interactions. What these affective displays are and what form they take is what this paper addresses.

2. The speech community

Nukulaelae’s population of 350 is predominantly Polynesian in origin, culture, and social organization. Despite recent changes, the economy is essentially a subsistence economy based on fishing, the cultivation of swamp taro, and the gathering of coconuts.

Nukulaelae islanders first came into contact with Westerners in 1821, but had few opportunities to interact with the rest of the world until the end of the century. During the 1860s, within a very short period of time, Nukulaelae islanders converted to Christianity, and, at the same time, learned how to read and write; both Christianity and literacy were introduced by missionary-pastors from neighboring Samoa. At the same time, the Samoan pastors reorganized virtually every aspect of the social and political life of the atoll by deposing the island chiefs and establishing a near-theocracy based on their interpretation of the Scriptures. The context in which literacy was introduced was thus one of great social change (Brady, 1975; Munro, 1982).

Literacy activities on Nukulaelae were not conducted in Tuvalu until recently. For many decades after the introduction of Christianity and of literacy, Samoan remained the language in which religious activities, interactions with the outside world, and reading and writing were conducted. Samoan ceased to be the official language of local government in the Ellice Islands in 1931 and that of the church in 1958. Even though most adults understand Samoan, the use of Samoan for writing has virtually disappeared. The Tuvaluan dialect used in writing today is the Funafuti dialect, which differs very slightly from the Nukulaelae dialect.

Until recently, the extreme isolation of the atoll and the resulting exclusion of its population from the economic life of other Pacific islands meant that there were very few opportunities and very little motivation to learn English (Munro, 1986). Today, the situation is rapidly changing, and the pressure to learn English for academic and economic success is increasing rapidly. But few individuals on Nukulaelae are proficient enough in English to write it (with a few notable exceptions, which include a published writer), and English literacy conventions have had only a minor influence on the written texts produced on Nukulaelae.

3. Nukulaelae letters

 Barely twenty years after the introduction of literacy, a visitor to the atoll commented: ‘The Nukulaailai [sic] people ... are well educated, can all read, and are most persistent letter writers. No present is more acceptable to them than a few sheets of paper and some pens. ... We nearly ran out of ink before we got clear of the group’ (Bridge, 1886: 554). Even today, writing letters is the most salient activity in which writing skills are put into practice.

Personal letters (tusi alofa, literally: ‘letters of empathy’) are the primary link between Nukulaelae and the rest of the world. Nukulaelae residents do not usually use letters to communicate with each other within the confines of the atoll itself. Letters are received about once a month when the government vessel calls at Nukulaelae, and are typically hand-carried by travellers. Some letters, particularly to and from relatives.
abroad, are sent through the mail, although this often poses problems because many people on Nukulaelae cannot afford stamps on a regular basis. A person planning to leave the atoll is usually the major motivation for writing letters, and the regularity of communication through letters with the outside world depends on people's movements to and from the atoll.

Every Nukulaelae adult and teenager writes letters; some much more frequently than others. But there does not appear to be a correlation between the frequency of letter-writing and age or gender. The corpus on which this study is based includes a broad range of letters; Table 1 summarizes the composition of this corpus according to authors' gender and affiliation to emically recognized age categories. The corpus comprises 145 letters, totalling 65,446 words of text (mean, 454 words per letter; standard deviation, 285). Letters are usually saved by their recipients and become part of the few personal possessions that every individual keeps in his or her trunk (pausi) stored in one corner of the house. This facilitated collecting these letters from their recipients.

The letters in the corpus are all addressed to close acquaintances and relatives of the writers, since Nukulaelae islanders rarely write to strangers. Some of the letters were written by Nukulaelae residents to relatives and friends on other islands, while others are letters home from Nukulaelae islanders temporarily away from the atoll: on Funafuti, Tuvalu's capital; on Nauru, where Tuvaluans work as contract laborers for periods of two to three years; or on another island or abroad, studying or working. The text of Nukulaelae letters is sometimes paragraphed, particularly if the writer has had formal schooling. Older individuals tend to write their letters as continuous strings, with no paragraphing and little punctuation. As in all written texts, there are many idiosyncratic variations in the orthography used in letters, because Tuvaluan orthography is not standardized. Letters are emically recognized as a distinct communicative genre, but Nukulaelae islanders do not distinguish between subcategories of letters.

4. Affect in Nukulaelae letters

Nukulaelae letters may have a variety of social functions. Letters may also be simply motivated by the writer's need to reaffirm social bonds with particular people, and, thus, many have a phatic function. They may be tools through which economic transactions are monitored. News reporting is another possible reason for writing a letter. And a fourth common aspect of letters is admonitions from older people to younger relatives and friends. Many letters in the corpus have a multifarious function: the same letter, for example, may announce the arrival of a package, present information about current domestic events, and include a long eloquent tirade asking the recipient to behave lovingly toward his relatives, not to drink sour toddy, and to go to church regularly.

Whatever their primary motivations may be, letters share one important characteristic: they are a medium in which affect is considerably more salient than in other Nukulaelae communicative contexts. The content of many letters, first of all, is about affect. Letters tell of crying, hoping, and longing; they ask for forgiveness for past and current wrongdoings; they express empathy, happiness, and love:

A maaua i taumia katako e maaua e nee maaua au tasi, e peelaa loa me se aa te mea faa tafasili koo maaua nee maaua i temaa faafii mo temaa loto alofa kiaa koe. Teelaa laa, e faiatu nee maaua au tasi ke ttagi, oka ko te maafaufo au moo koe.

The two of us, every time we get a letter from you, it is like the most joyful thing that happens to the two of us, given our love for you in our hearts. Thus, we read them and cry, because we keep thinking about you. (letter 150)

[from a young woman on Niutao to her parents on Nukulaelae]
Taapa! ... Kaati ko te vaaiaso teenaa ne masaki i et a I, au i te vaaiaso teenaa koo tagitiagi faeloa kae manatu mai i te taaao kee oko ki te afaagi. Taapa! ... Te maasei, au e tagi faeloa maa kilikilo aka au ki te matafagafa. E pelu laa naa ooto mea, ka ko au teenei loa e tagitiagi atu.

Oh! ... It was perhaps the week that I was sick, that week, I kept crying and crying and thinking about you longingly from morning till evening. Oh! ... It is so bad, I always cry when I look at the beach. While you are taking care of your daily business, and I am here crying for you. (letter 45)

[from a young woman on Nanumaga to her bond brother on Nukulaelae]
Ia, ee tuagaane, e peela loa mo tau muna teelaa ne faai mai ia taaao koo ssai loa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age and gender group</th>
<th>Number of writers</th>
<th>Number of letters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent men (taumataene)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent women (taumafigine)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult men (taagata)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult women (taufine)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older men (taealana)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older women (loomaatuu)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified writer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The encoding of affect in Nukulaelae letters

Table 2. Distribution of selected emotion verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion verb</th>
<th>Occurrence per 10,000 words in letters (n=17,200)</th>
<th>Occurrence per 10,000 words in conversations (n=23,809)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Alofa</em> ‘feel empathy, love compassion, pity’</td>
<td>80 (n=138)</td>
<td>15 (n=36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fakamoemoe</em> ‘hope’</td>
<td>10 (n=18)</td>
<td>&lt;1 (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fakatoeoa, fakaamaagalo</em> ‘feel remorse, ask for forgiveness, excuse’</td>
<td>3 (n=5)</td>
<td>&lt;1 (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fiua</em> ‘happy’</td>
<td>15 (n=26)</td>
<td>&lt;1 (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fa’anoomoa, see fiafa</em> ‘sad, unhappy’</td>
<td>6 (n=10)</td>
<td>&lt;1 (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Masau, maiausau, manu</em> ‘think of, long for’</td>
<td>20 (n=34)</td>
<td>7 (n=16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>134 (n=231)</td>
<td>24 (n=57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of six categories of emotion verbs in a sample of 40 letters from the corpus and in a corpus of 12 casual conversations (described in Besnier, 1986a) representing a cross-section of the types of conversational activities that take place in highly informal settings on the atoll. It is evident that emotion verbs are considerably more frequent in letters than in conversations, and hence that talk about affect is more frequent in letters.

Many of the norms that regulate the display of affect in other interpersonal contexts do not apply to letters. Letters exchanged between young male siblings display positive affect, while face-to-face interactions between young men always have a subtle undertone of negative competition that leaves little room for positive affect, particularly if the interactors are related:

[from a male teenager to his teenage brother]

*Mmoli atu alofauga kia T mo te kaiga, S mo te kaiga, peelas foki mo K i konaa, ka e fakasili atu moo ko.*

Send my love to T and his kin group, to S and his kin group, and also to K over at your end, but [my love] for you is strongest of all. (letter 20)

Letters between cousins of different sex also display as much affect as any other letter, even though avoidance taboos prevent cousins of different sex from talking to each other face-to-face, let alone exchanging any remotely affective language:

[from a man in his 50s on Nukufetau to his female cousin in her 50s on Nukulaelae]

*Fakafetai foki moo taimi ne fakatai eia taatu i konei, fakafetai.* Koo malie katoa te loto i fiafaiga ggali. Te fakamoemoe kee tuama e te loto feaalofani.

Thanks for the moments that we spent together here, thank you. The heart is completely satisfied with the beautiful actions [that took place then]. It is hoped that the spirit of mutual love will remain. (letter 82)

The affective component of letters is thus ritualized enough to over-ride the norms of inter-personal conduct at play in other interactional contexts.

Why are letters such affect-laden events? Why is their affective content so salient? What is the nature of this affect? How is it encoded in the discourse? To answer these questions, I turn to various aspects of the form and function of letters. Taking as evidence the text of letters from the corpus, I shall demonstrate in this section that Nukulaelae writers consistently frame their letters as affect displays, and that the overt and salience of the affective component of letters is a part of their social definition as a Nukulaelae communicative event. I shall first show that the ritualized framing devices that writers use in their letters are purely...
affective in nature. I shall then focus on the content of letters and argue that Nukulaelae letter writers have a strong tendency to highlight the affective component of whatever topic they address. This tendency is facilitated by the fact that affect is a pivotal element in the areas of social life that letters generally touch.

4.1 Discourse frame

The text of Nukulaelae letters is overtly framed with the help of a number of specific framing markers, which are always present at the beginning and the end of the text. Letters usually open with a greeting identical to the greeting used in face-to-face interactions (taalofo ‘hello’). Then follow references to the health of everyone at the writer’s and the recipient’s ends, and a sometimes very long series of references to God’s grace and kindness. While variations in the form and order of some of these introductory elements are found, most introductions follow a fairly set pattern:

[from a woman on Funafuti to her father on Nukulaelae]
Taalofo koutou katoa! Fakafetai, e maalosi katoa loa matou i konei, koe koe ne maus foki nee maatou outou tsi, ne logo foki maatou ia S mo A, me e maalosi fua koutou. Ko te vilika mo te tavaega o tsoi Tamani ki te see gata mai.

Greetings to all of you! Thanks, we are all in good health at this end, and we also have learnt from your letters, and have also heard from S and A, that you are in good health. We praise and glorify our Father for ever and ever. (letter 52)

[from a 75-year-old woman on Nukulaelae to her grand-daughter in Australia]
Fakafetai koo maus nee au se avanoa gai peenei o tsi atu eee au te tsi teenei moo feiloi ake e tanaa. Ia, a kaafai e oko atu te tasi teenei ka te tusa taaia i te alofa o te Atua. E avatu e nee tanaa te fakafetai ki te teiva, auaa tena tauiga alofa kia taaia te faanau see ilei anu ma. Ia, aavaka nee tanaa tavaega ki te see gata mai, e see gata mai eiloa. Aomeni.
Ia, a maatou nei e maalosi fua. Ia, kaafai laa koutou foki i konaa, kaafai e maalosi katoa.

Thanks are due to the fact that I have this beautiful opportunity to write you this letter so that we can both meet through it. And if this letter reaches you, we are both equally under the protection of God’s love. We both send our thanks to God because he is taking care of us, his sinful children before him. And we praise him for ever and ever, for ever and ever. Amen.
So we are all in good health here. And perhaps the same applies to all of you over there, perhaps you are all in good health. (letter 21)

Self-deprecatory expressions are common in opening sequences. For example, some writers express that it is their ‘weak conjecture’ (fakattau vaavai) or their ‘silly opinion’ (manatu valea) that the recipients are in good health:

E taamu faaeloa te ola mo te maalosi i luga i au i konei, mo te fakattau vaavai me e peenau foki koula i konaa.
I am well and alive here [lit.: life and good health are constant upon me here], and my weak conjecture is that you two are the same at your end. (letter 60)

Au nei e maalosi fua, kea kaati e see taumate ko taaia fakatsi i te taina e tasi. Kaafai laa e tonu te manatu valea teenei mai konei, ...
I am just in good health, and perhaps it is possible that both you and me are along the same line in this respect. If this silly opinion from this end is correct, [let us thank the Lord]. (letter 61)

These self-deprecatory statements commonly have ritualized religious connotations. Letter writers often refer to the fact that God’s children are sinners by nature in opening sequences:
Fakafetai moo te alofa o tsoi Tamana ki Tena tautiga ki luga ia taatou, te faanau see mo te nofo sala i Ona mua.

Thanks [are due] to our Father for protecting us, His wrong-doing children who stay in sin before Him. (letter 15)

Following these introductory remarks, a motivation for the letter is usually presented. Here, writers often refer to their letters as conversations (sautala), in which the writer and the addressee ‘meet’ (fetaui):
Ia, a ko te ala o te tasi ko te fia sautala atu mo koe.
So, the reason for the letter is that I want to chat with you. (letter 136)

Fakafetai mo koo fetau i taatou te lau pepa teenei. Ia, see ko mata, ka ko lau pepa.
Thanks for the fact that we can meet through this piece of paper. It is not a face-to-face [encounter], but [one that takes place] through a piece of paper. (letter 42)

The same theme is sometimes referred to in the closing frame:
Ia, tussi kaa fai o gata atu moo koula, maatua pele i te loto, a ko te fia sautala atu mo koula seki taatua o gata.
So, the letter to you is about to end, beloved parents of my heart, but the desire to chat with you is not about to end. (letter 10)

It is also in the opening sequence that writers may acknowledge having received earlier letters, which they invariably have read with great happiness (mo te fiafia last), or express their unhappiness (faanoanoa) about not having heard from the addressee:
la, P, fakafetai, me koo oti ne maua nee maatou au tusi kolaa ne aumai, mo tau uaelesi foki koo oti ne maua nee au; ne faiatu nee au mo te fiafaa lai.

So, P, thank you, because we have received the letters that you sent, along with your telegram, which we have also received; I read them with great happiness. (letter 138)

Kae ko au e tai faanoanoa malosi ciloa auaa маafai seki oko atu aku tusi i te oloatawa a see L. ... Kae kaafai laa ne maua nee koutou, kae e aa, ko te mea loa ko au koo puli mo galo ia koutou?

As for me, I would be very sad indeed if the letters I sent along with L did not reach you. ... But if you got them, so what is this. you have completely forgotten me? (letter 27)

The closing sequence of letters always takes the form of long lists of people sending their *aloifa* 'love, empathy, compassion', or to whom *aloifa* is to be conveyed. Such lists commonly include the names of all members of the immediate kin group, including young children:

*Koo gata i konei tivou sautalaaga, kae fakamoeoe taatou ko te alofa o te Atua e maua ei te mauia mo te fiafaa kae toe tetau fakamulii.* Alofa atu Oolepa, Vave, mo Tauseiga, Saavali, Aifou, Luisa, Uiki, Vaeou, Fagaua, Aileta, kae sili ei maua ou maatua see aogaa moo koe. *Toofaa laa.*

Our conversation will stop here, but let us *kope* that we shall obtain *luck and happiness* from God's love for us to meet again in the future. Oolepa, Vave, and Tauseiga, Saavali, Aifou, Luisa, Uiki, Vaeou, Fagaua, Aileta all send their love, but, above all, we two, your parents who are useless to you. Good bye. (letter 150)

It is evident from the above illustrations that the discourse frame of letters is heavily affective. The formulas used as opening and closing sequences require the use of emotion verbs like *aloifa* 'empathy, love'. Opening sequences express the writer's happiness (*jieafia*) about meeting the addressee and about having received his or her previous letter. They also express the writer's regret that the meeting takes place through the medium of a sheet of paper, and cannot take place in person. At the end of a letter, the writer must leave, but does so regretfully, because 'the desire to chat with you is not about to end' (letter 20). And letters close with a list of people to whom *aloifa* is to be conveyed. Affect is thus a very salient component of the framing conventions of letters. It is of course possible, from an etic perspective, to view this affect as ritualized affect, which would not be 'meant genuinely', much like the affective connotation of the 'Dear Sir' that frames English letters addressed to complete strangers. However, it is significant that such ritualization should have targeted this communicative event as opposed to others. In what follows, I shall show that affect does permeate other aspects of the text of letters, in ways that cannot be interpreted as ritual displays.

### 4.2 Economic function of letters

There is a clear economic orientation in many Nukulaelae letters. Letters are used as a tool to monitor, record, and control reciprocal exchanges and gifts; as such, they have become thoroughly incorporated into the socio-economic dynamics of the community. Hand-delivered letters often accompany food baskets, packages, and money. A substantial number of letters, particularly shorter letters written in a hurry on the dock, list the content of packages:

_E fia fakailoa atu kia koulua me koo oti ne avatu nee au te afiifii fooliki mo te toeina ko S. Mea i loto, e tasi te t-shirt lanu moana, tasi te sulu solosolo, tasi te suipi, mo fusi ei e lua._

I want to let you know that I have sent along a small package with the old man S. Its contents are one blue tee-shirt, one striped loin-cloth, one deck of cards, and two belts. (letter 42)

Many letters are written to request (*aakai*) such items as food, money, and trade goods. Nukulaelae islanders living on Funafuti often ask for staples like caramelized coconut toddy, salt fish, coconuts, and swamp taro, because these items are in short supply on Funafuti. More luxurious items like coconut crabs and birds are also requested. In return, Nukulaelae islanders write to their relatives on Funafuti and abroad for money, clothes, imported food like rice and sugar, fishing gear, and, more recently, construction materials:

[from a 40-year-old woman on Nukulaelae to her 40-year-old cousin abroad] _Muna a P ... kee tiogi mai se vee moo vee aka tena talafa. Kiloke, a te tuataina o S teenei e fai foki kee tiogi mai ana teuga ki te kuata, kae kiloke, kaafai koutou e mmai, kee tiogi mai nee koe ne papa moo S. Kaati tusasa fouk koo fakaoaga nee ia a papa. Kaati laa koo too uke a mea a maatou e fai atu kita koe._

6P asks ... that you buy him a razor so he can shave his beard. Look, S's mother's brother also asks that you buy him clothes for the [forthcoming] celebrations, and look, when you come here, buy some wooden planks for S. [Because] maybe next year he will need to have wooden planks. Perhaps we keep asking for too many things from you. (letter 49)

Gifts also need to be acknowledged, in part because baskets of food sometimes get lost, stolen, or misplaced during transportation; this is motivation for further correspondence:
[from a 60-year-old woman on Funaaafuti to a 35-year-old nephew on Nukulaelae]

_‘La, a ko au e fakafetai lasi atu moo pulaka a maatou ne aumai. Ne maallie maatou i te egali o pulaka. ..._ Ia, kae saa toe taa mai nee koe ne mea llasi iaa koe e fittuaa.

So, as for me, I want to thank you very much for the swamp taro you sent us. We were very pleased because the swamp taro was very nice. ... But don’t dig up any more big [swamp taro] for us, because it tires you out. (letter 90)

As in many other Polynesian cultures, on Nukulaelae the intra- and inter-domestic economic issues are closely linked to certain key emotions. As Chambers (1975, 1983) has shown for Nanumea, another island of Tuvalu, and Brady (1970, 1974, 1976) for Tuvalu in general, _alofo_ ‘empathy, love, pity, generosity’ and _maa_ ‘shame, shyness’ are the primary means through which economic reciprocity and gift-giving are socially controlled. An important component of the emic definition for _alofo_, for example, is the social action that it produces; when an individual feels _alofo_ for another, the actions that the emotion triggers are giving, nurturing, and feeding. Similarly, _maa_ ‘shame, shyness’ is what controls excessive _aakai_ ‘requesting’, particularly among non-kin. In letters, it is these affective components of economic transactions that are the focus:

[from an adult man on Funaaafuti to an older male relative on Nukulaelae]

_Peeela mo mea koo oti ne oka mai ko omotou lima, e te ttao atu loa te faa fakafetai, ona eiloa ko tootou aalofo mai ki mea kolaa ne manako e i maatou._

As for the things that have reached our hands, I want to express again my thanks for your _alofo_ towards us [expressed in the form of] the things that we had requested. (letter 34)

[from a young woman on Nanumaga to her bond brother on Nukulaelae]

_Tuagaane, kaafoi e isi se mea (e) fia fai mai, fai mai. Io me ko ou kaiga i konaa, fai mai, kee saa magaiga laa, ia au foki maa maa iaa kee. ..._ Kae alofo mai kia au.

Brother, if there is something you want, tell me. Or if one of your relatives over there [wants something], tell me, _don’t be ashamed, otherwise I am also going to be too ashamed to ask you_. ... _And feel alofo towards me and send me thing_. (letter 17)

In letters that are motivated by the writer’s inability to fulfill his or her economic obligations to a relative, the affective component of economic transactions is even more salient. Such letters are written with ‘a great deal of _alofo_’, and the addressees are asked to ‘appease their heart’ and to forgive the writer for being unable to meet the addressee’s requests:

[from a teenage daughter on Funaaafuti to her parents on Nukulaelae]

_‘La, ... koo tusi mo te alofo lasi kia koula maatua, auaa e seeal se mea e maau atu. Kae kiloke, maatua, onosai maalde kee foki mai au i Saamoa, koo maau atu laula sene i au io me se a._

So, ... I am writing the letter with a great deal of _alofo_ toward you, my parents, because nothing is being sent to you. But look, my parents, be patient, when I return from Samoa, I shall send you some money or whatever. (letter 87)

(from a young man on Nauru to his parents on Nukulaelae]

_N, kae peelaa mo te mea teela e manako koe moo fai tou tautino ki te aso o faafine. Kiloke, malie tou loto, te tasi ne maau nee au i te pou 17. Ko tona uiga, kaafai e fia atu nee au i tuku tasi, e taumuli atu. Koo oti te aso o faafine. Teela e, laa, malie tou loto ki ci._

N, regarding what you wanted for your contribution to the woman’s day festivities. Look, _appease your heart_, but I received your letter on the 17th. This means that, had I enclosed it in my letter, it would have reached you too late. _So do appease your heart_. (letter 36)

(from a woman in her 60s on Nukulaelae to her 40-year-old daughter on Nukulaelae]

_S, te afigi o A teena a e fanato mo K. Kae faanaanoa me seeal se sulu o F e maau atu. A G nei e tasi loa tena sulu mai ia T. Fakamoeo moe ki se taimi mai mua, maafai e maau soko sulu._

S, K is bringing you a package for A. _But I feel sadness_ about the fact that there is no loin-cloth for F. G here got only one loin-cloth from T. _Let us hope for another time, when I get another loin-cloth_. (letter 84)

The affective component of the economic system of reciprocity is thus highly salient in letters. It surfaces in overt ways in the frequent references to emotion terms and affect-denoting expressions.

4.3 Informational function of letters

Letters are used to transmit news. It can be news about weddings, births, illnesses and deaths, or about feasts and other celebrations, games, arrivals and departures, the visit of a ship other than the usual inter-island vessel, and about atoll politics. In general, the emphasis is on news about the community or the kin group rather than the individual:

[from a 50-year-old woman on Nukulaelae to her daughter abroad]

_T, kae ilea nee koe, a te paalota teenei ne fai, koe oloa te gali a te kaiga o taatou. Ko M mo T koo see elo i loto i mea a te feunu. ... konaa fale koo see elo i mea a te fenua. E iita loa ia T seki maaloo i te paalota, kae iita. Koe see leie te kaiga o taatou._
And, you know, in the elections that took place, our kin group behaved beautifully [facetious]. M and T don’t want to take place in island affairs any more. [list of names], these are the households that don’t take part in island affairs any more. They are angry because T did not win the elections, and they are angry. Our kin group is in disarray. (letter 48)

Kae kee fai atu taka kia F, teelaa ki te fekau a L. A F nei koo iata i pati a K ne fai kia F. Ana pati i te laveaga nee ia F. ‘Taapa e! au see taaitai loa o loto ki F’. Teelaa laa, F koo oko loa i ana kaitaua. Fai loa kia T kee naa fakafoki te fekau a L.

And let me tell you my story about F, the one about L’s marriage proposal. F is angry at K for what she told F. When she saw F, she said: ‘Hey! I have absolutely no intention to accept F’ [as a father-in-law]. So F is absolutely furious. He told T to withdraw L’s marriage proposal (letter 65)

As with the economic component of letters, emotions and affect play an important role in the news-reporting function of letters. Nukuelaele letter writers make many overt references to the feelings of the participants in the events that they are reporting. In the above two examples, the anger and displeasure (ita, kaitaua) of third parties is carefully commented on as an essential element in the narrative. In the following illustration, it is alofa and saalamo ‘remorse’ that are in focus:

[from a woman in her 20s on Funaaftuli to a male relative in his 40s on Nukuelaele, relating her recent boat journey from Nukuelaele to Funaaftuli] Ia, tala o te malaga a maatou koo loa i loa i te maatou. Kaitaua e lavea loa nei koutou te maatou o te tai. Maatou e tolu a gula nei fai ki loto i temotou pooti. Teelaa laa, temotou pooti kaitaua e llave loa ia T; moe seeli a T, kaitaua taka fakatua e maafu; taka fakatua tolu a aku. Teelaa laa, toku ate palelo loa nei kai i tolu alofa ia T. Teelaa laa, tolu saalamo, ia koutou nei fai mai kee nofo maatou, a ko maatou e aumalai loa.

Now, as for the story of our journey, it was very bad. You probably saw how bad the ocean was. We had three waves crash inside our launch. And our launch was stable thanks to T, it had not been for T, in my opinion, it would probably have capsized, this is just what I think. So my liver is eaten up by my pity for T. And I am full of remorse, because you advised us to stay, but we left anyway. (letter 47)

The description of affect thus plays a major role in the informational component of letters.

4.4 Admonitory function of letters

Letters from older people to younger relatives often include advice and admonitions (polopolooki), similar to admonitions delivered orally to young people who are about to leave the atoll or who have breached social mores. Letter writers admonish their correspondents (usually younger relatives) not to drink sour toddy, not to gossip in public, to refrain from fighting, to attend church regularly, and to be generous toward their kin:

Ia, N, masaua nee koe aku pati, e tapu koe i te kava. Kaafai koe e see fakalogo ki aku pati, ko au koo see alofa kiaa koe. Ia e e logo ia L te i tu i o tamatae o taatou koo oka loa, a ko tamakili fookiliiki eloaa. Teelaa loa, au e fai atu kiaa koe nee mmao koe mo te koga teenaaa. Ma kua fai nee koe, see teo avatatu nee au naa mea.

So, N, remember my words, you are forbidden from drinking. If you do not obey my words, I will not feel empathy toward you any more. Because I heard from L that our young men have been drinking a lot, even little children. Thus, I am telling you that you should stay away from this behavior. If you engage [in this behavior], I will not send you any more things. (letter 64)

Kae nofo fakalole ki e, tialoo ki te Atua kee manuina koe (kee) toel feleloai taatou i se aso i tena alofa lasi, oti te iun, kae fai fakalole tou 21 i konaa, alofa mai laa kia A maa uke au mea e manu i konaa.

And live properly, pray to God so that you may be lucky enough for us to meet again one day, stop drinking, celebrate your 21st birthday properly over there, feel empathy toward A [the recipient’s brother] here in case you get a lot of things over there. (letter 50)

As will be evident from the above examples, the primary focus of the language of admonishments is the affective component of the recipient. In the following two examples, emotion verbs such as alofa ‘love, compassion, pity’ and fakamoemo ‘hope’ play a central role in the discourse organization of admonitory acts:

[from a 75-year-old woman on Nukuelaele to her grand-daughter in Australia] Ia, kae fai atu au kiaa koe, nofo fakalole, alofa ki tou maatua, mo koo seeai sou tamana, kae toe fua nan ou tou maatua. Ia, kae saga fakalole ki tau gaulueko, ko te mea kee oola llei ei koulua mo tou maatua, ia koulua koe gai se isi tina e fakamoemo koe ki e.

So, I am telling you, live properly, be kind and generous to your mother, because you do not have a father any more, only your mother is left. So pay attention to your work, so that you and your mother can live well, because you do not have any other person to hope for. (letter 21)

[from a 50-year-old woman on Nukuelaele to her daughter abroad] Kae nofo fakalole, alofa kia S mo tena aavaga, ka masaua aku pati, tausi tou fofiiro, kae tialoo ki te Atua kee manuina mea e fakamoemo taatou ki e.

And live properly, be kind and generous to S and her husband, and remember my words, take care of your body, and pray to God so that our hopes may be fulfilled. (letter 48)
Even sentences that do not refer overtly to the emotional comportment of the recipient have a salient affective component. For example, the phrase nofo fakallei used in the imperative, which literally mean: ‘stay in a good fashion’ (translated here as ‘live properly’), is an extremely common opening to admonitory sequences. As a qualitative statement about the social acceptability of the recipient’s behavior, it expresses an objective evaluation of another person’s conduct, and is thus heavily affective.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that affect permeates Nukulaelae letters at several levels. First of all, letters are framed by contextualization cues that consist of affective expressions. The opening and closing sequences of letters are indeed statements about the affective state of the writer. Secondly, the four topic areas that Nukulaelae writers address in their letters all have clear affective connotations. Discuss about economic issues, whether produced in the oral mode or the written mode, always touches on affect, because economic transactions are regulated by emotions like alofa and maa. Since letters have a clear economic function, affect surfaces frequently and saliently. Similarly, admonitions, whether oral or written, frequently focus on the affective behavior of the person, who are told to be kind and loving, generous and peaceful. Admonishing being one of the most important functions of the genre, it is not surprising that affect should play such an important role in the text of letters.

But even when addressing topics that are not primarily affect-oriented, like news, letter writers bring out the emotional aspects of what they describe. In this respect, letters contrast even with the most emotionally charged oral gossip, in which affect is kept as covert as possible, as I have shown elsewhere (Besnier, 1989a, b). The salience of affect in Nukulaelae letters is thus not entirely attributable to the topics they address. In letters, there seems to be a license to display affect that is not found in most face-to-face interactions.

Another important characteristic of affect displays in letters is that letter writers do not shy away from employing the most overt affect-communicating strategies like emotion terms and expressions, as this discussion has illustrated, in addition to more covert grammatical strategies (Besnier, 1986a). The result is that letters become emotional outpourings in which affect surfaces at all levels of the discourse.

Levy (1984) proposes that a culture may ‘hyperrecognize’ or ‘hypocognize’ particular emotions. A hyperrecognized emotion, for example, is a frequent topic of conversation as either socially sanctioned or socially disapproved behavior. Furthermore, fine semantic distinctions are commonly made in the emotion lexicon to refer to hypercognized emotions, whereas no word may exist in a language to refer to hypocognized emotions. I propose that the notions of hypercognition and hypocognition can also be used to describe variations in the importance of affect across social contexts in a society. In some social events, members of a culture may deem it appropriate to express their emotions directly and overtly; affect in general, in these events, can be said to be hypercognized. In other contexts, it is appropriate to display only certain types of affect; this affect will thus be selectively hypercognized. Finally, emotional displays, of an overt kind at least, may be disapproved in a third type of context. Affect in these contexts can be said to be hypocognized. An event like Nukulaelae letters thus hypercognizes affect: emotions are referred to more overtly and frequently than in other communicative events. Certain types of affect, however, appear to have a privileged position in the texts of letters: alofa ‘empathy, love, pity’ appears to be considerably more hypercognized than, say, anger. As in Tahitian (Levy, 1984), many fine distinctions are made in the Nukulaelae Tuvaluan lexicon for different types of anger, an indication of the hypercognized status of anger in this society. In letters, however, few references are made to anger. Anger, thus, is a hypocognized emotion in this Nukulaelae register, in contrast to alofa. Further research is needed to identify which affect types are hypercognized or hypocognized in particular communicative contexts.

Clearly, Nukulaelae letters are defined as affectively cathartic contexts in Nukulaelae society, in which certain types of emotions may be (and perhaps should be) hypercognized. Why should letters have come to be defined as cathartic contexts? On Nukulaelae, letters are highly concentrated communicative events: opportunities to receive and write letters are remarkably few and far between (once a month at most), which contrasts sharply with the constant face-to-face socialization that life on a tiny crowded atoll affords on a daily basis. Furthermore, Nukulaelae islanders are highly sensitive to physical distance from loved ones, as witnessed by the extreme emotional displays that typically characterize farewells.³ Longing and alofa, the emotions that are hypercognized when parting or reminiscing, are also hypercognized in letters:

Niko, talu mai te aso no maavae ei taatou, i te afaia teena, a maatou mo S, O, T, S, mo tamaliki kataa, koi ttagi i te mamasua au kiaa koe. I te paleleega o temotou lotu, a ko O koo fakamasua aka nee ia ou tau mamasani i taimo o ttou lotu afaia, a koe e see mafai loa o fano ki se koga fakaatu, ... A S i te taimo teena koi tagi, a ko au foki koi tagi, a maatou koi ttagi kataa loa i te maafafau atu ki ou uiga ggali mo ou faiga lile nei fai i loto i te kaiga, peela foki ki te fenua. Koo leva kkii eiloa temotou sagasaga, takotokkato foki, ke faatoo fa temotou
That letters should have come to be defined as cathartic contexts may be a result of their association with parting and longing, which are contexts in which such emotions are traditionally hypercognized, as witnessed again by Lady Caroline on nineteenth-century Funafuti, who narrates as follows the departure from the atoll of the author of the letter quoted at the beginning of this paper:

*But the full meaning of *paleni too massy cry* [i.e., *plenty too much cry*] did not dawn on me until I saw [Funafuti islanders] say good-bye to one of their own girls, Vitolia, who was going on the John Williams to Apia, to the High School there. All the village assembled on the beach. Vitolia came out with swollen eyes and damp countenance, in a frock just presented to her by another girl. When she was close up to the boat her mother clung round her neck, rubbed noses, and set up the most dismal howl that ever anyone’s eaves were thrilled with. Then the mother stood aside, emitting fearful howls at in. eervals, and raining down a perfect tropical shower of tears; and one after another the girls went up to Vitolia, hung on her neck and wailed, until I feared the girl would be reduced to pulp with the squeezing and the tears. By this time the wailing had become general, and was so dismal and bitter I felt it was approaching the unendurable. Just then Vitolia was hustled into the boat and taken away. The people dried their eyes and left off howling to watch the boat, and in about half an hour were capering about all smiles and high spirits. (David 1899: 277–278)*

**Notes**

1. This paper is based on research conducted on Nukulaelae in 1980–1983 and in 1985, with funding from the Fondation de la Vocation (Paris) and the National Science Foundation (Grant No. 8903061). Additional funding for the preparation of this paper was provided by the Hewlett Foundation for International Research and the University of Illinois Research Board. I thank the Government of Tuvalu and the Nukulaelae authorities for granting permission to conduct research on the atoll, and all my friends on Nukulaelae for generously providing the data for this paper. A shorter version of the paper was presented at the 12th Boston University Conference on Language Development. Earlier drafts benefitted from comments from Mary Hessey, Jacob Love, Naomi McPherson, Phil Morrow, and Rex Wockner. The usual disclaimers apply.

2. The islet on which the bulk of Nukulaelae’s population resides is very small (0.5 mile long), and messages (fekau) from one household to the other can easily be conveyed verbally, a task which usually falls on children and adolescents. Recently, however, Nukulaelae people have made it a habit of using written invitations to intra-island feasts on slips of paper (for further discussion, see Benner, 1986a: 58–61).

3. As in many other Polynesian societies (Shore, 1982), age-group affiliation in Nukulaelae is not absolute, but, rather, situation-dependent. The categorization used here is based on the age group in which each individual would fall in most contexts. Very roughly, men and women are *tanuea* and *tanuse* from adolescence till marriage, at about 20–25; from marriage till their mid-fifties or early sixties, they are *taqata* and *fase*, after which they are *toeina* and *loomata* respectively.

4. In the illustrations quoted in this paper, the orthography and punctuation have been standardized to facilitate reading and comparison. Personal names have been changed to initials wherever it was deemed necessary to protect the identity of individuals. Efforts were made to keep the general “flavor” of the original in the translations, sometimes at the expense of idiomaticity in the English translations.

5. A discussion of the referent and use of these terms is beyond the scope of this paper. For a discussion of cognate terms in two Polynesian societies, Samoa and Tahiti, see Gerber (1975) and Levy (1973). As in Ifaluk (Lutz, 1982) and probably many other Oceanic languages, basic emotion terms are verbs in Nukulaelae Tuvaluan, rather than nouns.

6. Affection-noun expressions of the type “the heart is satisfied” (in the following example, ‘my liver is eaten up by pity’ (Section 4.3), and ‘the desire to chat is not about to end’ (Section 4.1) could be seen as attempts on the part of Nukulaelae letter writers to create more “detached” texts, thus confirming Chafe’s (1982) claim that written language is more detached than spoken language. However, this construction type is commonly used to express emotions (as well as many experiences and cognitive processes) in both spoken and written Nukulaelae Tuvaluan, so much so that they can be considered the unmarked lexicalization pattern. This pattern appears to be true of other Oceanic languages as well, and is probably cross-linguistically common (Talmy, 1985: 101 provides comparable evidence from Samoan, Yiddish, and Kaluli).

7. The notion of “frame” is used here as in Goffman (1974). It refers to interactional cues that mark the boundary of a social event and that provide guidelines for the interpretation of the event.

8. Recently, much work has been devoted in anthropological circles to the cross-cultural study of emotions and affect. Central to much of this work is the warning that Western views about the relative “genuineness” of affect displays in non-Western societies are at best suspect (Irvine, 1982; Levy, 1984; Rosaldo, 1980, 1983, 1984). This warning is particularly relevant to Western Polynesian societies, where the boundary between emotion, affect, and social action is extremely tenuous (cf. Ochs, 1986; Shore, 1982 for discussions of Samoan society). In these societies, emotions are defined in behavioral terms.

9. The same remark applies to other Polynesian societies, as witnessed by Love’s (1985) description of Samoan farewells. We may note here that, traditionally, when Polynesians set out on long-distance canoe journeys, the likelihood of their ever being seen again was very slim. Even today, Nukulaelae islanders always express doubts as to whether visitors will ever return to the atoll in the future.

**References**


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