ROTUMAN LANGUAGE LESSONS
PREPARED BY
MARIT VAMARASI
AND
JOTAMA VAMARASI

Introduction. These lessons are being prepared in order to help overseas Rotumans who either do not know the language or feel they do not know it well enough. It is hoped that these lessons will be a first step toward the maintenance of the Rotuman language and culture into the next century and beyond. Please consider this Lesson 1 to be a draft only. Feel free to give a copy to anyone who might be interested. Feedback is welcome. Please send your comments to: Marit Vamarasi, 3538 Grove Street, Evanston, IL 60203, U.S.A. Or e-mail to: m-vamarasi@neiu.edu.

Instructions. These lessons are meant to be used with a native speaker, who can read the Rotuman and provide a pronunciation model to the learner. For that reason, there is not much information about pronunciation here. (Eventually, we would like to put these on CD-ROM, but this more traditional style of lesson is an important first step.)

The boldface items in the dialogue indicate that those words and structures will be explained in the Grammar section which follows. The lines in the Dialogue are numbered so they can easily be referred to in the Grammar Section.

I have tried to follow the Rotuman writing system where the symbols are available on my computer keyboard. Instead of the macron (the line that goes over vowels to indicate length) I have reduplicated the letter.

--Marit Vamarasi
--Jotama Muahea’he’a Vamarasi
1. Person A: Noa'ia ko hántei. ka 'äe taptapen? 
   *Hi, dear, how are you?*

2. Person B: F'ai'ákse'ea ka gou ne'ne' lelei, ka tapen ‘äe? 
   *Thanks, I'm fine, and how are you?*

   *I'm fine too. I haven't seen you for a long time.*

4. B: Kota ho'í-m, ko hántei. 
   *I just got back.*

5. A: ‘E tei? Ka ‘äe la’ se hanua? 
   *From where? Did you go abroad?*

6. B: Gou la’ ma às se ‘oto räi’ ta ‘e Setnē. 
   *I went to visit my children in Sydney.*

7. A: ‘Uh tauag, ka tapen iris? 
   *No wonder. And how are they?*

8. B: F’ai’ákse’ea ka iris ne’ne’ lelei tape’ma. ‘Oto hän folu ‘inos ‘atakoa, ka ‘oto fä haharāg ta rak la’ mo. ò-fâ ta ne’ne’ tape’ma. 
   *Thank you, they are well too. My three daughters are all married, but my youngest son is still in school. Dad is well too.*

   *Thank God. My husband is in Lebanon.*

10. B: Ka la’ ma roa? 
    *Did he go long ago?*

11. A: Fau-t ‘el la pō. 
    *Close to a year.*

    *It’s been good to talk to you, but I'm going to take my bag from the Air Pacific office.*

13. A: Lelei, ‘itar la ör hoï’åk. ‘äe tåla la’-au? 
    *Good. We'll chat again. Good-bye.*

    *Good-bye.*
Grammar Notes

• The word hántei, glossed in 1 as ‘dear’, is related to the word hani; both mean ‘woman’ or ‘wife’. Hence, this expression could only be directed to a female.

• The conjunction ka is sometimes translated as ‘and’ (2, 7), sometimes as ‘but’ (12), but usually it is best left untranslated into English (1, 5, 8). In 5 and 10 ka functions as a sort of question marker.

• Rotuman has a 2-part negative; kat (or kal in the future) goes before the verb or adjective; ra follows the verb or adjective (3). The ra part sometimes follows a postverbal adverb. For example, hoi’āk ‘again’ and ma roa ‘for a long time’ both occur before the ra part of the negative.

• Rotuman has a set of 3 verbal suffixes that are called ‘directionals’ which indicate the direction of the action expressed by the verb in relation to the speaker. The suffix –m (seen in 4) shows that the action is toward the speaker. The suffix –of(o) is used for actions away from the speaker.

• Prepositions often differ greatly between languages. In this conversation, you see examples of three Rotuman prepositions: se (3, 5, 6), in each case translated as ‘to’ or, with some verbs, it requires no English translation; e (5, 6, 9, 12), translated as either ‘at’, ‘in’, or ‘from’; and ne ‘of’ (12). In most cases, the context will determine which meaning a certain preposition has.

• One cannot speak a language without using pronouns. In this conversation you see several pronouns being used: äe, meaning ‘you’ (singular only) (1, 2, 4, 14); gou ‘I, me’ (2, 5, 12). iris ‘they, them’ (7, 8), ia ‘he, she’ (10); and itar ‘we two’ (13, 14). The possessive pronoun for ‘my’ is oto (6, 8, 9, 12).

• The article ta occurs at the end of a singular noun phrase and means something like ‘the’. See examples in 6, 8, 9, and 12. The other article, meaning ‘a’, is the suffix –t or the particle het, both of which follow the last word of a noun phrase (11).

• Intransitive verbs (that is, those that do not take a direct object) often have suffixes which indicate who is the subject. In 13 you see an example of the ‘you’ suffix (-au) and in 14 an example of the ‘I’ suffix (-ou). The verb la’ ‘go’ is one that often takes these subject suffixes.

• Past, present, and future tenses are not indicated by affixes on Rotuman verbs. Rather, when tense is expressed at all, it is expressed by a preverbal particle. In this dialogue you see future indicated by la (13) and tāla (13, 14).
Useful Vocabulary Words and Expressions. Try to memorize these.

Noa’ia
Hello. Hi.

Fāi’ākse’ea.
Thank you.

’āe taptapen/tapen ‘āe?
How are you?

Gou ne’ne’( lelei).
I’m fine.

Av roa het gou kat rāerē ra se ‘āe.
Av roa het
gou kat rāerē ra se ‘āe
It’s been a long time since I last saw you.
a long time
I haven’t seen you

Gagaja noa’ia.
Thank God.

Noa’ia ma ‘itar ôr se’.
It’s been good to chat (with you).

‘Itar la ôr hoi’āk.
Let’s chat again.

’āe tāla la’-au?
Good-bye. (Literally, will you go?). This
is said only to the one who is leaving.

’āe tāla fu’u-ou.
Good-bye. (Literally, you will stay). This
is said only to the one who is staying.

Exercises on Grammar and Vocabulary. Answers follow in the next section.

1. Practice Rotuman negatives by negating the following sentences. Give the
meanings of the new sentences.

   a. Ia la’ ma roa.
   b. ‘Oto fā ta ne’ne’.
   c. ‘Itar la ôr hoi’āk.
   d. ‘Oto hån ta ‘inos.
   e. Gou la’ se hanua.

2. Fill in the correct prepositions. Choose from se, ‘e and ne.

   a. ‘āe leum____ tei?
   b.‘āe la’____ tei?
   c. Gou la la’____ ‘ofes ta.
   d. Ia hoa’kia ‘on ‘af ta____ ‘ofes ta.
   e. famōr____ ‘oto hanue ta
   f. Gou kat rāe ra____ ‘āe.
   ‘Where are you from?’
   ‘Where are you going?’
   ‘I am going to the office.’
   ‘He took his bag from the office.’
   ‘people of my land’
   ‘I didn’t see you.’

4
3. Give the correct Rotuman for the following noun phrases, paying special attention to the articles. (Remember that there is no article with plural nouns.)
   a. a year
   b. the year
   c. the father
   d. an office
   e. my husband
   f. my youngest daughter
   g. my three daughters
   h. a bag

4. Match the terms for family members.
   a. mother
   b. son
   c. father
   d. daughter
   e. children

Answers to Exercises

1. a. Ia kat la’ ma roa ra. ‘He/she did not go long ago.’
   b. ‘Oto fā ta kat ne’ne’ ra. ‘My husband is not well.’
   c. ‘Itar kal ōr hoï’āk ra. ‘We won’t chat again.’
   d. ‘Oto hån ta kat ‘inos ra. ‘My daughter is not married.’
   e. Gou kat la’ ra se hanua. ‘I didn’t go abroad.’

2. a. ‘e
   b. se
   c. se
   d. ‘e
   e. ne
   f. se

3. a. faut
   b. fau ta
   c. ō’fā ta
   d. ofes het
   e. ‘oto fā ta
   f. ‘oto hån haharåg ta
   g. ‘oto hån folu
   h. ‘af het

4. a. o’honi
   b. le’ fā
   c. ō’fā
   d. le’ hån
   e. rāi’