

Tongan and Samoan 'Fai' Contrasted With English 'Do' and 'Make'

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In the first issue of the TESL Reporter the problem of literal translation from some language to another was discussed. The different meanings of "yes" and "no" in some English structures were contrasted with the "io" and "ikai" of Tongan and the "ioe" and "leai" of Samoan. In this issue the differences in the common verbs "do" and "make" in English and their Tongan and Samoan counterpart "fai" will be discussed.

In these Polynesian languages "fai" is usually translated "do" or "make". Both English questions "What are you doing?" and "What are you making?" are translated exactly alike,* using the verb "fai", "Ko e ha ho'o me'a 'okufai? (Tongan) and "Po'o 'a au me'a o lo'o fai?" (Samoan). There is no distinction in meaning here as there is in the English language.

In teaching English to Samoan and Tongan speakers it will be necessary for the teacher to explain that asking the question 'what is being done' or 'what is taking place' requires two different verbs to cover what is a single construction in the Tongan and Samoan languages. The first one "make", is used when the response will be a noun or a specific object. The other "do" is used when the answer is another verb--with or without a noun object.

Examples:

"What are you making?"

"A tiki." or "I'm making a tiki."

"A canoe." or "I'm making a canoe."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm eating." or "I'm eating my dinner."

"I'm reading." or "I'm reading a book."

"I'm making a canoe."

"What are you doing?" could never be answered in English by "A book," "A canoe," "A tiki," etc. Note that the "I'm making a canoe" might be the response to either question because the answer is another verb with a noun object. However with the question "What are you making?" the only verb that could be used in the response is "making."

In English "do" can stand for any other verb (including make) and in the construction "What are you doing?" the "do" usually stands for other non-identified verbs. There are, however, a few nouns and verbals which can be the object of the verb "do" itself, such as "homework," "exercises," "the washing," etc. These answers usually denote a fulfillment of responsibility or completion of a task rather than the specific created objects which are necessary with the verb "make."

Examples:

What are you doing?"

"My homework." or "I'm doing my homework."

"My exercises." or "I'm doing my exercises."

"The washing." or "I'm doing the washing."

This distinction should not be too confusing when teaching these English constructions if one remembers that all verbs are repeated or implied in answer to a direct question. "What are you reading?" "A book." or "I'm reading a book." "What are you making?" "A canoe." or "I'm making a canoe." "What are you doing?" "My homework." or "I'm doing my homework." It is only the verb "do" which can be used as a substitute for unknown verbs in the question construction.

It would probably be wise to teach

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the use of the English verbs "do" and "make" with their correct responses during the early stages of English learning so that students do not literally translate "fai" as "make" and develop a false facilitation in English language learning as so many students have previously done in both the use of "yes and no" and "do and make."