The factory building of the company Pfaff is the size of a handball field. The site contains some 60 machines grouped according to type – external, surface and internal grinding machines. It’s very noisy, and the sound of grinding fills the room. The workers are used to operating the machines and don’t speak to each other much. Some skip around their workstations to break the monotony and ease the discomfort of standing. When Gunter Senft took a vacation job in the fall of 1977, his colleagues were not aware that he was observing them – for the sake of science. He was interested in communication structures – what were people talking about, and when, how, and how often? “I listened to what people were really saying,” wrote Senft in an account of his time spent at Pfaff.

Five years later: Gunter Senft steps out of a Dash 7. The small airplane brought him for the first time to the Trobriand Islands, which are part of Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific. “I had this romantic, clichéd notion of stepping right into the picture so vividly presented in Bronislaw Malinowski’s ethnographic masterpiece Argonauts of the Western Pacific, which he wrote in the first part of the last century,” he recalled. Initially, it lived up to his preconceptions – palm trees, beaches, huts and friendly yet mistrustful barefooted natives in traditional costume. There could not have been a starker contrast to the factory in Kaiserslautern.

But what Senft aimed to achieve in the South Seas was something similar to what he had done in the Rhineland-Palatinate: he wanted to understand how, and about what, people speak. At this point, however, the German scientist could say next to nothing in Kilivila. At Pfaff in Kaiserslautern, he could easily join in in the local dialect because he himself is from the city. In Kilivila, he knew only one sentence: “I want to learn Kilivila – Magigu banakwali Kilivila.” In addition, he could ask, “who, what and where,” and could indicate this, that, here and there.

He brought a pictorial dictionary along. His aim was an ambitious one; Gunter Senft wanted to write a grammar of the Kilivila language. Looking back, he says: “I could not have foreseen how much work was actually involved.”

LIKE A BULL IN A CHINA SHOP

His first impressions were formed by the village of Tauwema on the island of Kaile’una, and Kilagola – the chief – and his family. Senft was allowed to store his belongings in the church building, where he also slept until a house was built for him. It was the beginning of a fascinating
period in which the villagers and Gunter Senft scrutinized one another. He was fully aware that he would make lots of mistakes. “To realize later that one has behaved like a bull in a china shop is certainly embarrassing,” said Senft.

Are you interested in taking part in an interdisciplinary project on ritual communication on the Trobriand Islands?” Wolfgang Klein, Senft’s doctoral adviser and Director at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, had asked him one day in May 1980, before serving in a ping pong match. Irenäus Eibl Eibesfeldt, head of what was then the research department for Human Ethology at the Max Planck Institute for Behavioral Physiology in Seewiesen, was looking for a linguist for the project. “I have already recommended you,” said Klein. “You’ve already successfully carried out field research in Kaiserslautern, it won’t be that much different on a Pacific island.” Then came the serve, and Senft lost the match – but received a postdoctoral position on the project.

A COUNTRY with 900 LANGUAGES

The Trobriand Islands are off the beaten tourist track. The archipelago, like the entire country of Papua New Guinea with its 5.8 million inhabitants, is a mecca for linguists. The official language of Papua New Guinea is English. Tok Pisin, known as pidgin English, and Hiri Motu are also widely used. But besides these, approximately 900 different languages are spoken – more than in any other country in the world. The Kilivila of the Trobriand Islanders is spoken by around 28,000 people. It is one of 40 Austronesian languages of the Milne Bay province to which the group of islands belongs.

Gunter Senft slowly felt his way through the thicket of the Kilivila language in those first days and weeks. He recorded every expression and attempted to transcribe them. This anecdote about a spider’s web underscores just how arduous the task was. “What is that? Avuku beya?” asked the researcher, pointing to a spider’s web. “Kapali labwala,” came the reply. As Senft already knew that kapali meant spider, he inferred that labwala must have meant web. He was mistaken: labwala denotes house and the expression kapali la bwala can be literally translated as “spider its house.” In a similar way, Gunter Senft earned himself a nickname that would stay with him for quite some time. As a translation for a small carving of a crocodile, he entered uligova in his dictionary, and continued to use the word for every carving he saw. He never understood why people always grinned at this – or at least not until Senft saw a carving of a crocodile on a walk across the island with one of the villagers, and again asked what it was. His companion started to giggle and said, uligova – the word for carving is tokwalu.

When Gunter Senft talks about his field research in Tauwema, it is obvious that his experiences there have greatly influenced his research and his private life. The Trobriand Islands have become a second home for him. No one should ask him, confesses the soft-spoken linguist, what life is like on the Trobriand Islands. It evokes his most intense experiences, and he can involuntarily dominate conversations with his recollections.

The subject shifts from the 55-year-old’s findings in the field of linguistics to the behavior of the Trobriand Islanders and their culture – assuming these two topics can actually be separated from one another. Malinowski referred to “ethnolinguistics” – other terms include “anthropological linguistics” and “linguistic anthropology.” This discipline attempts to describe “the impact of culture on language, which aspects of this culture are linguistically coded, how such aspects are passed on and how language as a constituent factor affects the culture of its speakers,” explains Senft.

Senft has spent around 40 months in Tauwema to date. His wife ac...
accompanied him for a year during his first 17-month stay. In 1989, they even brought their two- and four-year-old children for more than four months. “As blond German children, they really stood out,” said Senft, smiling. He still feeds off these experiences today. “My wife and I sometimes speak in Kilivila for fun.” The visit with the family meant that the researcher was seen in a different light by the Trobriand Islanders. When the couple brought four-year-old children for more than their own consumption.” He adapted as best he could to temperatures of over 30 degrees Celsius with humidity of over 90 percent. He allowed people to cook for him, and put up with eating yams with sardines or with lobster for four weeks. He overcame his fears of all kinds of animals that shared his hut with your wife in public is perfectly normal for Europeans. He became a consultant on medical aid,bound wounds and was adopted by Kilagoala, the village chief. He and his wife Barbara, who mostly had contact with the women of the village, noticed how cooperative and sociable the people were once they had accepted strangers. They also saw just how proud they could be: “The Trobriand Islanders even get officials from the far-away provincial capital to learn Kilivila, because they reject Tok Pisin as a language. This, in turn, affects not only the grammar, but also the cultural heritage that is passed on orally, and therefore the cultural identity of the Trobriand Islanders.

In May 1989, Gunter Senft returned to Tauwema. He quickly noticed that life had changed dramatically, “These changes hit me more than some forms of culture shock I had previously experienced in moving between two worlds and cultures.” Senft admitted. He made the changes a key part of his research, as cultural changes also produce a shift in language. This, in turn, affects not only the grammar, but also the cultural heritage that is passed on orally, and therefore the cultural identity of the Trobriand Islanders.

In 1982/83, the vast majority of Trobriand Islanders still wore traditional dress, explained Senft: “The women wore colorful grass skirts made out of banana and pandanus leaves, and the men wore either a loincloth made out of the leaf sheath of a betel palm or knee-length waistcloths, the so-called lap-lap or sulu made out of bright cotton, an item of clothing typical of the whole of the South Pacific region.”

Now the villagers proudly wear Western garments made out of plastic fibers – even if it causes them to sweat. These are more respectable in the eyes of the missionaries and Christian village priests. “Grass skirts and loin-cloths are now part of Trobriand folklore,” said Senft abjectly, “comparable with the costumes worn at festival processions in Upper Ba-

Not everyone likes having their picture taken: The wary Isaya in her Sunday best, and three girls on the way to school.

Flying Witches Lurk in the Air

Gunter Senft knows that the conditions on Kula’una are anything but paradise. “The Trobriand Islanders were about.” In the end, Gunter Senft kept his word, returning to Tauwema with a grammar and a dictionary of Kilivila.

Since nakedness has been deemed improper, loin-cloths and grass skirts have become part of folklore. Moti gala (left) and Boreyada in traditional costume made out of natural materials.
varia.” Nakedness has been deemed indecent, although strict rules governing moral and sexual behavior have always applied.

The Trobriand Islanders no longer make everyday items themselves from natural materials, but instead buy industrially produced goods. They hardly ever wear traditional body adornments made out of shells. And since hardly any women wear modern skirts, the dyeing methods are no longer needed. Instead of the Kilivila lexicon proper, such as sasieni for saucepan, mina for chair or tata’utasi for trousers. And there are now a number of loan words that have one or even more equivalent(s) in Kilivila. However, the new words generally have a slightly different connotation. Examples of these loan words are bolo for ball (vs. moi, a ball made out of pandanus fibers) or beleta for belt (vs. duliduli, pepela, sepig, sukala – different types of self-made belts).

In these changes, Senft sees the consequences of literacy campaigns and the increasing establishment of schools. Senft believes schools provide education and development opportunities for the inhabitants, but also cause the language to change by fostering contact with English. In 1983, only a few of the Tauwema villagers used loan words, but they are now on the increase as they “indicate the speaker’s degree of modern orientation and education.” Some of these loan words have completely replaced Kilivila expressions, including, of all things, kinship terms. The terms imag and nimagu for “my mother” and ramagu for “my father” have been substituted by the words mama and papa.

The changes have also affected Kilivila pragmatics, the way in which verbal expressions are dealt with. As carvers, wicker-workers and other craftsmen are having problems finding apprentices, politeness forms are disappearing. The younger generation not only acquired expert skills and knowledge, they also received highly elaborate training in the culturally appropriate use of these forms. Apart from aesthetic loss, this also represents a change in social relationships.

In addition to the expert knowledge that is lost, what Senft noted above all during his stay is how the role of magic and magical rituals has declined, leading to a depletion of linguistic formulae. The belief in the power of magic words is dwindling, while at the same time the influence of Christian missionaries and village priests is increasing. The strategy pursued to combat the use of what they consider to be pagan rituals is quite subtle. They stress that there are two ways to live one’s life – the traditional way and the Christian way.

Senft also observes how a series of loan words that had no equivalent at all in the large Manusuan-type canoes, which are ritually produced by the community, the Trobriand Islanders now use smaller, less extravagantly manufactured canoes or boats made out of aluminum and fiberglass. This not only affects the status of the skilled craftsmen, but the vocabulary associated with the process is also falling into oblivion.

The changes in the language have also affected the Trobriand Islanders’ approach to marriage. As the traditional method of birth control is now frowned upon, more and more children are being born. In view of the limited space available on the group of islands, that is fatal, as there is insufficient land for cultivation, and the period of time between the two usage cycles in which the land lies fallow is becoming increasingly shorter. Nutrients in the soil of the barren coral islands are in scarce supply. Gunter Senft notices the extent to which the status of magic formula has declined by how much more often they are offered to him in return. In 1983, Kilagola, the chief of Tauwema, gave the German linguist his canoe magic as an adoption present. Kilagola’s brother gave him his weather magic as a sign of his friendship, and one of the oldest men in the village presented him with his garden magic. Like a clearance sale for personal and secret information, just six years later, 12 villagers approached Senft, offering to sell magical formulae for money and tobacco. “This is clear evidence of the fact that the magi-
the holders of traditional power. The Trobriand Islanders are a matrilineal society, in which fathers have no kin relationship with their children. Children take on their mother's proper name, which is the property of the clan, and are provided for by their uncles.

Now, a patrilineal kinship system is emerging. As fathers now have to pay school fees for the children in high school, they no longer invest in the children of their sisters. Children now give their father's given name as their surname, in addition to their mother's proper name, for the settlement of school fees. This blurs clan membership.

Senft’s conclusion is sobering: "The Christian missionaries have been extremely successful in changing the island society in line with their values, because they have changed the everyday world, as well as the traditional convictions of the Trobriand Islanders." The world of the spirits of the dead, who, according to the traditional beliefs, inhabit an underground paradise on Tuma Island, is still sung about at harvest festivals and periods of mourning. Yet, the majority of people no longer understand the songs that are sung in a special, ancient language variety as the Trobriand perception of death and life to come is increasingly overshadowed by Christian beliefs.

However, to bemoan the approach of the missionaries and the growing influence of the western world is not a fair reflection. Senft believes we benefit from these changes. "We are all ultimately dependent on markets, which the missionaries opened up initially for the former colonists, and then for our export economies." And linguists and ethnologists are also generally reliant on cooperation with the mission in foreign cultures. It is often the case that societies become accessible only through their cooperation. "Field studies not only involve a methodological approach, but also, and most importantly, social interaction," Senft explains. "I can therefore confidently say that the Trobriand situation is universal!"

This is also true in another respect: languages are dying out everywhere, also in Europe. Scottish Gaelic and Low German are just two examples. "While we lament the loss of cultures and their languages, which are foreign to us, it is difficult for us to avoid traces of ethnocentrism and ideological romanticism left over from the "noble savage" myths," says Senft.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY REQUIRES OPTIMISM

Only on a secondary level may scientists more or less subjectively evaluate the changes of cultures and languages. Their primary task is to describe and document them. "To influence the direction of these dynamics would be a political task," says Senft. The linguist nevertheless hopes that sympathetic tourists, politicians, missionaries and scientists will accept that every society requires cultural diversity, and will help preserve it. Yet, Gunter Senft also knows: "This is perhaps being a bit too optimistic."