Vernacular language, biocultural diversity, intangible cultural heritage and social order: Case-studies of applied language maintenance and revitalization from Vanuatu

Mark Love, Samuel Kenneth and Gorden Edward
Reference map of 138 languages in Vanuatu

The languages of Vanuatu, ranked by speakers
(each dot is a language)

Source: François, et al. (2015: 7)
Main language used at home, by regional province (percentages comparing 1999 and 2009 Vanuatu census data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province (N to S)</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local language</td>
<td>Bislama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TORBA</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANMA</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ incl. Luganville</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PENAMA</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MALAMPA</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHEFA</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ incl. Port Vila</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFEa</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National, rural</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National, urban</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: François, et al. (2015: 13)
Why does linguistic diversity matter?

• Reaffirms cultural identity
• Maintains indigenous ways of knowing and doing (cultural practice)
• Facilitated better childhood learning outcomes (e.g. foster cognitive & intellectual development)
• Linguistic diversity is linked to biodiversity (and thus a component of human-environment well-being and resilience)
• United Nations: “Languages are the most powerful instruments of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage.”
Combating language shifts

Reversing language shift (RLS) (Fishman 1991, 2001)

• ‘Top-down’ approaches don’t work

• Intergenerational transmission at home (most important before ‘higher level’ actions....)
Cultural renewal and language maintenance in Vanuatu

Community-level approaches to language maintenance and cultural renewal

- *Kastom skul* movement (started with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, Port Vila, c. early-mid 2000s)

- **Outreach** village *storians* (presentation & discussions)

- **Curricula** (Sunday School & Adult Literacy Education)
Sot Wes Bei
kastom skul
Sot Wes Bei
Kastom skul
Vanuatu Kastom Governance Partnership

- 2006-2012
- Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs (MNCC)
- The University of Queensland
- Australian government - AusAID [now DFAT]
- 5 days workshop/discussion (storian) around Vanuatu
- 10 ni-Vanuatu facilitators
Namakura week

PROGRAM BLONG NAMAKURA WEEK
1st to 5th March 2011
"UNITED LONG KASTOM, BLONG WAN PEACEFUL MO HARMONIOUS KOMUNITI LONG FIJIAN"
"NATOK VILITEKEAN ANOQ NATOTOW ANIGIT, NI NA AMEDEEAN NE NALAELEAEAN NATOKKEAN ANIGIT"

NAMAKURA WEEK 2011
NAWOTALAM NAMARAKEAN TIAMU
National Chiefs Day
Celebration

R23: The Lord is my shepherd
Lanwis, famili mo Relensip
Language, Family and relationships
2015-2018
Lanwis, famili mo Relensip

- Promote, protect and use vernacular language
- Education outreach (community storian)

**Content:**
- Types and importance of language
- Preamble to the Constitution
- Constitution - Chapter 1, Art 3 (2)
- Vanuatu National Flag
- Kastom kalenda (local ecological knowledge)
- Centrepiece of storian - Family matrix (kinship terms)
- Sunday School & Adult Literacy Curricula
Lanwis, famili mo Relensip
Forum – Lugenville, 15 Sept. 2018

Key resolutions include: *National Indigenous Language Day*
Summary

• Language is not just a vehicle but an example intangible cultural heritage
• No vernacular language = no cultural heritage
• Land is the mother of Vanuatu; language is the father
• Language is power (important to holding respect and ensuring social order)
• It is only through use in the home that some languages in Vanuatu can be sustained into the future
• Linking family and relationships to language seemed effective and more powerful than linking language to ecological knowledge alone
• Approach has challenges and issues
• Is locally grown, locally-led, context specific, but may be a useful approach for elsewhere in Melanesia