

## THE STATUS PLANNER'S DREAM COME TRUE, OR NIGHTMARE IN PARADISE?

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### 1. Introduction

This paper is firstly descriptive, detailing the language planning provisions of the 1980 Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu. It also briefly analyses the complexities that have arisen in the interpretation and implementation of these, and outlines the language conundrum facing the country today<sup>2</sup>.

Vanuatu is an independent micro republic in the south west Pacific. It began to be settled around 3500 years ago by populations moving south east through coastal Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and is probably the staging point from which the rest of the Pacific to the east (Fiji and Polynesia) was settled. The archipelago (74 inhabited islands) nearly became a Spanish colony after the brief visit of Pedro Fernandez de Quiros in 1606. After further visits by other European explorers, such as Louis Antoine de Bougainville in 1768 and James Cook in 1774, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an influx of whalers, traders in various commodities (especially sandalwood and the trepang sea-slug), planters (cotton and copra), missionaries, and others. The history of the pandemic disease and depopulation that occurred over this period, of atrocities committed by land-hungry settlers, and of the darker side of the traffic in Melanesian labour to the sugarcane fields of Queensland is a very sorry record. It is out of this milieu that the Melanesian-base English-lexifier contact language now known as Bislama developed. This language has gone on to become the major lingua franca in Vanuatu, as have its close relatives Tok Pisin and Pijin in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands respectively<sup>3</sup>.

After decades of informal and more official rivalry between British and French interests during the late 1800s, a stalemate compromise reflecting the entrenched geo-political rivalries of the time was reached, whereby from 1906 until independence in 1980 the country

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<sup>2</sup> The original paper prepared for the Symposium on Bilingualism was entitled "Double trouble and three is a crowd: languages in education and official languages in Vanuatu". That paper contained an in-depth review of the role of the Ombudsman in language planning issues in Vanuatu, but was both too detailed for oral presentation at the conference, and too lengthy for inclusion in this volume of proceedings, and will be published elsewhere. Also, most symposium participant had very little exposure to language situations in the south Pacific, and so this general descriptive presentation was more appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about Bislama, see (Tryon, 1987).

existed as the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides. This agreement left the indigenous inhabitants stateless, but gave equal authority to the two colonial powers, and so each proceeded to establish their own systems of administration, law enforcement, education, health and so on throughout the country<sup>4</sup>.

Eighteen years after independence, the life of the nation continues to be marked by the effects of this deep bifurcation. On the one hand is a constellation of francophone, Catholic, pro-French and (prior to 1980) anti-independence sentiment and interest, focused in the Union of Moderate Parties political party, and on the other is the anglophone, protestant, pro-independence grouping, many of whose leaders were allied with the former British administration, and are primarily associated with the Vanuaaku Party which struggled for independence and the more recent derivatives that have resulted from factional splits within it. Van Trease considers this polarisation, and in particular its focus around the francophone / anglophone distinction, to be “the main political issue which had divided Vanuatu since the Colonial period of the New Hebrides Condominium”, and in his analysis of the 1991 elections, states that this factor “continued to dominate” (Van Trease, 1995: xvii).

For much of the 1990s Vanuatu has been going through considerable political turmoil and uncertainty, and it continues to be heavily dependent on overseas foreign aid and development assistance. However, there are good reasons for the country being advertised to the tourism market as “The untouched paradise”, and it is a popular holiday destination, especially for Australians and New Zealanders. The tourism sector is probably the only bright spot for the immediate economic future<sup>5</sup>.

The current population is 98% indigenous Melanesian (around 160,000), who speak over 105 distinct but related languages. Along with three Polynesian languages which result from comparatively recent westward back-migrations from Polynesia, all the languages belong to the Oceanic subgroup of the Austronesian family.

## **2. Language and the Constitution**

The presence in Vanuatu of the two colonial metropolitan languages (English and French), a pidgin lingua franca (Bislama), and a multiplicity of small vernaculars means that language issues are a significant factor in every sphere of life. The population is highly

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent description of the transition to independence during the later colonial period, see Van Trease (1995b).

<sup>5</sup> Further information about the country can be found in the Lonely Planet Guide (Harcombe, 1991), or in the Vanuatu home page on the web: [www.vanuatu.net.vu](http://www.vanuatu.net.vu).

sensitized to language concerns, and matters of special interest, especially from the time of independence, are the status of Bislama, and the relative roles of English and French.

The importance given to these and other language-related matters is reflected in the provisions relating to them that were encoded into the Constitution. Vanuatu is one of the few nations in the Pacific that has any provision in its founding document concerning language matters, and perhaps there are few countries in the world that have such an explicit and inclusive set of formulations. They appear to provide a clearly delineated perception of the status, function and role of the various languages that once and for all establishes the rules according to which each of the players in the language game can participate and coexist.

Countries without such clear national language policy guidelines could easily consider that developing such measures might be the answer to whatever language problems they are facing, and on the surface, the provisions of the Vanuatu Constitution relating to language might appear to be the language status planner's "dream come true". We will now look at what these provisions actually state, and evaluate how they have worked out in practice.

### **3. Preservation of linguistic diversity**

The first of the statements concerning language occurs in the preamble to the Constitution:

PREAMBLE: We the people of Vanuatu, proud of our struggle for freedom, determined to safeguard the achievements of this struggle, cherishing our ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity...

The extensive degree of linguistic speciation and cultural diversity in Vanuatu is obviously seldom paralleled elsewhere, and is of considerable interest and wonderment to outsiders. However, it never seems quite so problematic to the people of Vanuatu themselves. The diversity has probably arisen as a consequence of social structures which valued localism and tightly-integrated communalism at the level of small clan groups, and where language was, and still is, a key marker of group identity. The use of language as an important determiner of social relationship is featured as a key component of national identity, and is being recognized and celebrated in the preamble to the Constitution as something to be cherished. Of course, the effects of this do not always contribute to national unity, but can instead intensify the long-standing "tradition of cultural fragmentation and political division" that seems to exist in Vanuatu (Van Trease, 1995: 58). However, there is a climate of cultural renaissance in Vanuatu at present, and at least in relationship to this, the various vernacular languages of the nation and the diversity they signal are proudly valued. Other significant

forces that militate against the viability of the vernaculars are also at work, as will be mentioned later, but at least it is clear that the preferred blueprint for the kind of society citizens want for the future is one in which the current diversity of vernacular languages should be able to flourish. Some linguists who know the situation intimately (e.g. Crowley, 1995) do make quite optimistic assessments of the viability and future prospects of these languages.

#### **4. National language, official languages and languages of education**

Secondly, the Constitution clearly specifies official languages, a national language, and languages of education.

ARTICLE 3(1): The national language of the Republic is Bislama. The official languages are Bislama, English and French. The principal languages of education are English and French.

As with most contact pidgins, Bislama has always had its detractors, but it has established itself as the major lingua franca of the nation (even when it lacked significant literature of any kind). Imbuing it with nationalist aspiration gave it immense symbolic value, and in that neither English nor French would be acceptable on their own, Bislama was really the only viable and clear-cut candidate, even if not many people could envisage it developing as it has.

However, Bislama has truly expanded to adequately meet all the requirements of a national language. Except for occasional cases of political grandstanding, when francophone politicians speak French to protest at the lack of translation facilities or at the fact that parliamentary proceedings are produced in English only, it is the primary language of debate in Parliament, and it is almost always the lingua franca for all interlocutions involving Melanesians who do not share a common vernacular. With urbanization and intermarriage it has creolized, both in terms of becoming, for the first time, the first language of some of its speakers, and also for the associated expansion of its lexical and expressive resources.

The identification of English and French as the principal languages of education is the only provision of this Article that was really controversial at Independence. The first drafts of the Constitution, sponsored by the Vanuaaku Party, only had English as the language of primary education, but this provoked public demonstrations and threatened to stall the peaceful transition to Independence so a compromise was reached (Thomas, 1990: 242; Van Trease, 1995: 54).

At present, nearly all children have access to six years of primary education. Only 25% of those who finish from primary school can proceed further, the rest are pushed out of the system at that point. It is widely felt that the education system has significantly failed the nation, because despite the few that succeed, the main product is a large number of disaffected unemployed semiliterates. The government finds it difficult to build enough new primary schools to keep up with population growth, but there are ambitious plans to increase the number of secondary places available. Around 65% of primary places are in English medium of instruction schools, and 35% in French medium schools. Vanuatu has only a handful of masters degree level graduates, and has yet to produce its first earned Ph.D.

As different overseas experts and volunteer teachers come and go, the Ministry of Education, and individual schools, go backwards and forwards in their attitude to the use of Bislama and the vernaculars at school (Lynch, 1996; Thomas, 1990: 244ff.). On the basis that the Constitution specifies that English and French are the principal languages of education, it is sometimes conceded that Bislama especially may be helpful as an auxiliary language of instruction. Other times, the use of Bislama is banned from the classrooms and the playground. As Lynch (1996) points out, there can't be many situations in the world where students can be punished for speaking in the school playground the language that is both the national language and one of the official languages of their country.

Bislama is still widely regarded however as a stigmatized variety, both by some Vanuatu Melanesians who speak it, and also by many outsiders who do not, and to some extent, the urban educated elite will prefer to speak English or French, particularly to their children to give them a head-start in these crucial languages of success.

### **5. Protection of the vernaculars**

The next provision provides for official protection to be given to the vernacular languages.

ARTICLE 3(2): The Republic shall protect the different local languages which are part of the national heritage, and may declare one of them as a national language.

The second part of this article is very strange, as all of the 105 vernacular languages are in fact minority languages, none with more than around 4000 speakers. There never was, and neither is there today, any prospect for any one of them to be accepted as the national language, even in conjunction with Bislama.

However, the first part of the article about regarding the vernacular languages as part of the national heritage, and according them the protection they therefore deserve, is an extremely ecolinguistically-friendly statement. It was formulated significantly before its time, many years before the endangered languages movement began.

Most of these vernaculars, while rich in oral tradition, have little or no written literature. Some have religious materials from the work of earlier missionaries, but there is little active production and use of any other kind of vernacular literature. Few languages have had anything produced in them in recent decades, and unfortunately, it is difficult to point to any specific measure or step that has been taken by the government that actually fulfils its constitutional mandate to protect them.

The Constitution also gives a role in protecting the vernaculars to the National Council of Chiefs:

ARTICLE 28(1): The National Council of Chiefs has a general competence to discuss all matters relating to custom and tradition and may make recommendations for the preservation and promotion of Ni-Vanuatu culture and languages.

The Council of Chiefs has from time to time made strong statements and appeals for action to ensure the vitality of the vernaculars, but they have not met with any substantive response from the administration. One of the chiefs' main concerns is language shift from the vernaculars to Bislama.

Such shift is indeed evident, primarily in urban areas, but there is enough mobility that what happens in the town can effect language use patterns in rural areas as well. As Bislama expands into a fully-fledged creole, it is shaping up to be a killer language (Mühlhäusler, 1996) of significant proportions.

There is another recognition in the Constitution of the important role of language as a marker of social signification in the Melanesian cultures of Vanuatu. The Constitution places all the land of the country in the hands of the indigenous custom owners, but makes some allowance for the government to redistribute land in certain circumstances. However:

ARTICLE 79(2): When redistributing land ... the Government shall give priority to ethnic, linguistic, customary and geographical ties.

This provision appears transparently reasonable, but one wonders how it could ever be given effect. Land law is an ongoing difficulty anyway, and custom law in all its variant forms has barely begun to be codified. As well, the demarcation of ethnic and linguistic identities and boundaries is frequently problematic, particularly if they have to be correlated with land

ownership and tenure. It is probably just as well that so far, this provision of the Constitution has been barely tested or implemented, if at all.

## **6. Language rights and the law**

A further aspect of the Constitution's concern with language can be seen in the section on fundamental human rights. All the rights that are preserved, including freedom of expression, are to be freely available without discrimination on the grounds of "race, place of origin, religious or traditional beliefs, political opinions, language or sex":

ARTICLE 5(1): The Republic recognises, that ... all persons are entitled to the following fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual without discrimination on the grounds of ... language ....

As well, the Constitution ensures that persons undergoing legal proceedings should be able to understand what is going on:

ARTICLE 5(2c): ...everyone charged shall be informed promptly in a language he understands of the offence with which he is being charged.

ARTICLE 5(2d): ...if an accused does not understand the language to be used in the proceedings he shall be provided with an interpreter throughout the proceedings.

The expectations of these provisions have been largely accomplished through the widespread currency of Bislama. Where presiding officials in courts are not Bislama speakers, interpreters are provided, although it is unlikely that the interpreters have had specific training for this work.

## **7. Language rights and the role of the Ombudsman**

The next set of statements relating to the language rights of individuals and minority languages is also very progressive, evidencing a concern and sensitivity for such matters long before this became politically correct.

ARTICLE 62(1): A citizen of Vanuatu may obtain, in the official language that he uses, the services which he may rightfully expect from the Republic's administration.

ARTICLE 62(2): Where a citizen considers that there has been a breach of paragraph (1) he may make a complaint to the Ombudsman who shall conduct an enquiry...

ARTICLE 62(3): The Ombudsman shall, each year, make a special report to Parliament concerning the observance of multilingualism and the measures likely to ensure its respect.

The Ombudsman's office was established in the Constitution with two main functions: investigation of maladministration, and application of the Leadership Code. The Ombudsman has been very active in carrying out these duties, exposing numerous situations involving illegal, corrupt and abuse of power circumstances, with high level public servants and

politicians implicated. The constitutional provisions listed above give the Ombudsman a third area of responsibility. The first part of this is to enquire into complaints relating to breaches of the language rights provided for in the first paragraph, and the second part is to produce annual reports to parliament relating to the observance of multilingualism in the country.

Only two such reports have been published so far, and in order to deal with the complexities of the language situation in Vanuatu, the Ombudsman, who is a naturalized Vanuatu citizen originally from France, recruited a “language expert” from Canada. Between the two of them, they have engaged in some rather startling exegesis of the Constitution, and produced some equally startling and problematic recommendations.

The reports take a reductionist view, that the only language issue of any significance in Vanuatu is the equality, or rather the supposed inequality, and therefore the need to preserve the equality, of English and French. This sounds very much like the Canadian solution! The vernaculars are dismissed as an interesting exotic and colourful oddity, and in another public presentation the Ombudsman has claimed that there is no link between the vitality and function of these languages, and the stability or integrity or even the reality of whatever it is that one would call “Melanesian culture”. Bislama is regarded as something of an annoyance, and is blamed for what are seen to be declining levels of competence by public servants in English and French.

The Ombudsman recommends, among other things, that the government should ensure that the anglophone and francophone school populations should be enforced at 50%-50% levels, and that what are comparatively large sums of aid donor money should be spent to recruit expatriate translators to ensure that all official documents and government services are provided in the two main “languages of education” –not in the “three official languages” as one might expect, presumably because this might give Bislama a legitimacy it is not felt to deserve. The kind of language equality overkill that the Ombudsman is pushing for gives rise to the kind of situation recently reported whereby expatriate anglophone advisers in government departments are not now to work alone, but are supposed to have expatriate francophone counterparts in all instances.

Perhaps like many reports presented to parliaments, these ones relating to language in Vanuatu may be destined to simply “lie upon the table”, i.e. to be received with no action taken. However, I regard the reports as quite flawed, and somewhat dangerous. Among the reasons that they are flawed is that they completely overlook the various realities of the current situation in Vanuatu. Among the factors that are not given sufficient weight are: the

increased and increasing role and status of Bislama, the inherent difficulties and costs of “official trilingualism”, and the diminishing necessity and role of French.

There is a constellation of factors that points to the declining utility of French as opposed to English, and the reasons for it have been discussed, for example, by Van Trease (1995b), Miles (1994) and also in Early (1997). The Ombudsman’s reports react strongly to this, but the fact is that the only people who are genuinely disadvantaged by not being able to access government services in French (rather than in Bislama or English) are a handful of native-speakers of French who refuse to learn the national language of their country of residence.

The reports are somewhat dangerous because they create a climate of fear, in bringing to the surface all over again the old francophone-anglophone rivalries of what is supposed to be a bygone era, where the international and regional fortunes of “la francophonie” were regarded as more important than concern for what might be the best options for the people of Vanuatu. By appealing to Melanesian sensitivities about fairness, equality and so on, the reports make it very difficult for politicians and the community to openly evaluate other options for the kind of society, especially in regard to language, that the citizens of Vanuatu might want to create for their future.

### **8. Language domains: too many players on the field**

It will have become clear from various comments so far that Vanuatu is not immune to the same powerful social forces and pressures that are affecting communities everywhere in the world. The forces of globalism, internationalism, and modernity, along with the rise of nationalism, and also the powerful influence of localism or tribalism can all be identified. In its local manifestation, the latter is often referred to as Melanesian socialism, and there is also a strong ethos of cultural revivalism associated with it.

If we relate these forces to domains of language use, we can see that the pressure of internationalism and the need to participate in the Pacific community of nations greatly reinforces the role and status of English, but only very marginally so for French. Bislama appears to be the ideal candidate for filling the national language slot. The vernaculars allow for clear identification and demarcation of each ethnolinguistic community.

The fortunes of the languages functioning in each domain do seem to rise and fall with the ebb and flow of the forces mentioned. For example, the move towards independence lifted enormously the status of Bislama. But in the intervening years, there has been a growing sense of disappointment and disenchantment with the lack of flow-down effect of economic

development, and there seems to be renewed interest and commitment to local identity as expressed through vernaculars. On the other hand, everyone wants their children to have access to the best education, especially in English, that will secure their economic future, and this may be the most powerful factor in the equation.

Speaking of power, it seems that the three domains relate hierarchically to each other, from the international to the national to the local level, in that they seem to provide a chain or path of spread along which language shift proceeds. It appears that typically, language shift is unidirectional along this path. There is also pressure toward optimality within the system, i.e. one language maximum per domain. By this I mean that the existence of more than one language at one level is an inherently unstable situation, and creates pressure for resolution.

It is my contention that in Vanuatu there is not enough room in the system for three official languages, nor for two primary languages of education. This situation results in there being simply too many players on the field. This belief may have something to do with the nature and typology of language systems, or it may be responding to more pragmatic considerations, such as the capability of the government of a developing micro state to provide the kinds of institutional, logistical, and pedagogical support framework that languages need in order to function in their assigned roles. Either way, the framework of language roles outlined in the Constitution is unworkable in the present context, and some kind of simplification is required. But which language is going to be culled from which domain?

Can there be change in the languages of education? Seventeen years after independence, the education sector is still trying to merge the inherited dual education system into a single (but still dual-language) system. That is seen as a priority task, and there is simply no energy left for evaluating other systems which would give Bislama and the vernaculars a place in education, despite numerous pleas and proposals that have been made (e.g. Taylor, 1990; Bracken, 1997; Thieberger, 1997). There is a lot of resistance to Bislama being given a place in education, although that may be changing slowly. With regard to vernacular education, most people in the education fraternity cannot believe that anyone would seriously suggest adopting vernacular primary education for a hundred small “local dialects”. The implementation considerations of vernacular education in such a context are somewhat mind-boggling when stacked up alongside the minimal resources that are available, but not enough serious consideration is given to the evidence of the educational benefits of vernacular education, as presented for example by Williams (1996) for other parts of the world, or for teaching using a pidgin language by Siegel (1997).

However, Vanuatu is keeping an eye on developments in Papua New Guinea, which several years ago adopted a vernacular education policy for its 815 living languages (Waters, 1997)<sup>6</sup>. The use of low-cost on-site print technologies like silkscreens, and the development of computer based shell books or graphic templates into which vernacular text can be readily inserted are crucial components of that program.

The various proposals that would give Bislama and the vernaculars a transitional role in education mostly still include the maintenance of French and English streams in secondary education. McMaster (1990) is one who bravely suggests that this kind of duplication should be avoided, by withdrawing support for French in formal education.

Could the same be done with regard to the official languages? What are the possibilities for reform there? There is good reason to drop French as an official language, but it is not likely to happen under the current coalition government which involves the francophone party. There is also good reason to enhance the role of Bislama as a co-official language with English, along with its existing national language function, and this is more likely to happen by default rather than by design. Linguists and others have been arguing for many years that Bislama should be given full recognition as a language in its own right, and allowed a greater place in education and official domains, but it is also possible that giving support to Bislama may be all that is needed to hasten the decline into oblivion of the 105 unique and valuable Melanesian vernacular languages. So then might it not be better to sacrifice Bislama, which may already be in the process of decreolising to standard English anyway, and simply develop an education system where the vernacular languages transition to English only?

Any realistic assessment of the wider language situation in Vanuatu at the present is that the language planning provisions of the constitution are proving to be unworkable. On the other hand, the pragmatic realities of the current political situation are that any kind of purposeful, directed reform is not likely to take place. Language planners who attempt to come to grips with the conundrums of the Vanuatu language situation can be forgiven for wondering if the status planning dream come true hasn't turned into a nightmare in paradise.

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<sup>6</sup> Waters (1997: 4) reports that by 1994, 33% of these languages (representing 74% of the population) had alphabets and some literacy materials in their languages. She notes that the implementation of vernacular education throughout Papua New Guinea is an extremely ambitious project, but specifies various advantages, such as a culturally relevant education that values the cultural and linguistic heritage that students bring to school, that community ways of knowing and doing can be used as a bridge to further learning, intergenerational ties within the community are strengthened, and there are fewer dropouts. The strength of the reform is based on the fact that for once, "grassroots communities, non-government organizations, politicians, and international funding agencies are pulling in the same direction towards the same goal" (1997: 6).

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