
BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW of MALAU, CATRIONA (WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM PHILEMON ALA, KATHERINE E. HOLMES, ARMSTRONG MALAU AND ELI FIELD MALAU), 2021. *A DICTIONARY OF VURĒS, VANUATU* AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 978-1-760-46460-8

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1 Introduction

This trilingual dictionary, free to download from ANU Press, contains around 3,500 Vurës headwords defined in both Bislama and English, an extended introduction, finder lists for Bislama and English, a thesaurus section organized by semantic fields, and an appendix giving details of texts used in example sentences. The dictionary is the outcome of over twenty years of research with the Vurës community, and is a testimony to Malau's linguistic expertise, close working relationships with community members and experts from other fields, and understanding of community needs built up over this time.

While Malau is the sole author, the contributions of the ni-Vanuatu botanist Philemon Ala, marine biologist Katherine E. Holmes, and two Vurës community field researchers, Armstrong Malau and Eli Field Malau are acknowledged on the title page. The contributions of many other community members, linguists and other researchers are listed in the Acknowledgements section, as well as in the relevant sections of the introduction. Malau's commitment to drawing on expertise from other disciplines by collaborating with a wide range of researchers to serve the community is a key strength of the dictionary. The speakers

who have contributed texts that have informed the analysis are listed in a detailed table in the appendix, so that example sentences can be linked to their authors, and archived texts can be consulted for fuller context.

2 Introduction to Vurès

The introduction begins with the aims of the project, and how the dictionary can support community members with their language goals. While the dictionary undoubtedly also has symbolic value for the language community, there is a strong focus on how it can be practically used, especially to support speakers to write in Vurès, and to maintain traditional technical vocabulary and traditional knowledge encoded in word meanings.

Vurès is one of around 140 Indigenous languages of Vanuatu (François et al. 2015). It is spoken by about 2000 people, the majority living in the southern part of Vanua Lava island where the language originates. Vanua Lava is in the Banks Islands, in the north of Vanuatu. The major Vurès-speaking village is Vētuboso, with other speakers living in nearby villages or in Vanuatu's urban centres – Port Vila on Efate island and Luganville on Espiritu Santo island. Vurès is part of the Northern Vanuatu linkage of the Oceanic subgroup, part of the Austronesian language family.

Like other language groups in Vanuatu (Walworth et al. 2021), the Vurès community is highly multilingual, as a result of both traditional patterns of small-scale multilingualism between Indigenous languages (Pakendorf, Dobrushina & Khanina 2021), and more hierarchical multilingualism as a result of Vanuatu's colonial history. All Vurès speakers are fluent in Bislama (p. 2), the national language of Vanuatu, which is an English-lexifier creole. Vanuatu was jointly colonized by France and Britain, and retains French and English as official languages of education. The local language of education in different regions is usually determined by missionary history, and the majority of Vurès speakers are educated in the English-language system (p. 2).

A major strength of this dictionary is the robust linguistic analysis of the grammar of Vurès that underpins decisions about how to structure and label lexical data. Rather than needing to justify every analytical decision here, Malau is able to refer to her comprehensive grammar of the language (Malau 2016). This helps keep the introduction reasonably brief and focused on

supporting community members to navigate the dictionary, rather than dedicating too much space to questions that are more relevant to academic linguists.

Although it is difficult to counteract the potential standardising influence of a printed dictionary, the section discussing variation, different types of variants and complex forms, is very well communicated, explaining technical concepts clearly with helpful examples, while emphasising that no one way of speaking is more ‘correct’ (pp. 19-21). Malau’s transparency over her own linguistic competences in Vurës and Bislama, the contributions of language assistants, and different kinds of evidence supporting definitions (p. 10), all help to emphasise that the lexicographical project is an ongoing, collaborative process, rather than a final authority.

There is also a very informative discussion of language families, relatedness and linguistic history in the ‘Word origins’ section (pp. 21-22), which is especially helpful in an area of linguistics that is prone to misunderstandings and misappropriations within local language ideologies. This section also addresses the inclusion of Bislama loanwords as headwords in the dictionary, reflecting contemporary usage of Vurës as a living and changing language, while acknowledging the feelings of some community members that these loanwords are “not ‘real’ language” (p. 22). Including the Bislama loanwords with cross-references to indigenous Vurës synonyms strikes a good balance between affirming contemporary language use, supporting speakers who may have dominant Bislama to increase their knowledge of Vurës, and encouraging the maintenance of traditional Vurës vocabulary.

While Bislama loanwords have been included, Malau has followed the preference of more conservative members of the community to exclude swearwords from the dictionary (p. 12). Community members decisions around these issues and the conflicting goals of comprehensiveness and self-presentation in language documentation have been recently theorised as a process of ‘cultural facework’ by Schwartz (2021). In the introduction, Malau is explicit about this decision, while also acknowledging that others in the community did feel they should be included. This transparency ensures that other voices in the community are also heard, and the speaker community is not figured as a monolith.

One area where it would have been helpful to give more detail is in the description of word classes referred to in the lexical entries. While it is very appropriate to guide linguists to the

relevant sections of the reference grammar for language-specific justification of word class definitions, this would have been a useful place to give some explanation and exemplification of word class categories for a speaker community audience in simple English. Community members are less likely to be able to access the grammar, and if they do consult the grammar as directed, its technical language could be an obstacle. This section of the introduction feels a little uneven. There is a lot of technical detail given about certain word classes, where necessary to justify lexicographical decisions. For example, there is a lengthy discussion of the form used for different noun classes, and the classification of verbs where there is a lack of evidence for which subclass they belong to. However, most word classes are only covered in a table giving page numbers to the relevant section in the grammar, and concepts referred to in the lexicographical discussion, such as transitivity, are not explained. An extra column in the table with a couple of typical examples of each word class would have helped make the word class information in the lexical entries more transparent to community members.

Overall, the introduction is very well pitched between the different audiences of the dictionary, prioritising community needs. Technical terms are kept to a minimum and clearly explained where necessary. It would, however, have been good to signpost the fact that the volume is available for free download more clearly in the introduction, as the ability to search for words online could make this even more accessible for community members and researchers looking for specific information.

3 Dictionary entries and finder lists

The dictionary is designed to support and draw on the speaker community's multilingual resources, with definitions, translations of examples, and finder lists in Bislama and English. The Bislama content is very clear and carefully edited, acknowledging regional variation within Bislama where lexical differences could be misleading. While monolingual definitions are sometimes held up as the gold standard for dictionaries for endangered languages (Mosel 2011: 347–348), in highly multilingual contexts like Vanuatu that would not necessarily be as useful as translations and definitions into a lingua franca like Bislama. Rather than treating Vurès as the kind of sealed system prized by monolingual language ideologies, the structure of this dictionary better reflects the multilingual lives of Vurès speakers.

In the lexical entries, the colour coding and font choices for different kinds of lexical information help make the dictionary more readable and accessible. The inclusion of full colour photos on nearly every page makes the dictionary appealing and easy to browse, especially for school children. Speakers' needs and intuitions have also influenced less visible organisational decisions, for example the choice of headwords for complex forms is based on speaker intuitions of word boundaries, rather than a strict linguistic analysis of where the root begins (p. 20). Though not immediately obvious, these kinds of decisions can have a big impact on the usability of a dictionary for community members, and minimise the training required to consult the main body of the dictionary – speakers will usually find the entries where they expect without having to carefully read the introduction.

The organisation of the dictionary and individual entries is clearly explained for community and non-linguist audiences, in enough detail to make the linguistic analysis underpinning these organisational decisions transparent for linguists. The inclusion of referenced reconstructions from Proto Oceanic (Ross, Pawley & Osmond 1998; 2003; 2008; 2011) and Proto North Central Vanuatu (Clark 2009), makes this an especially useful resource to historical linguists, and is carefully explained for community members too. The use of scientific names for species for plants and animals makes this dictionary very helpful to researchers in biology and ethnobotany, as well as community members studying biology or working in conservation. One minor issue is that the abbreviations *sp.* 'species' and *spp.* 'several species', are not included in the list of abbreviations (p. 24), though those who would be interested in that distinction are likely to already be familiar with the discipline-specific abbreviations.

4 Thesaurus

The thesaurus section presents Vurës words organised according to semantic categories rather than alphabetically as in the main dictionary and is well-designed for community members, especially teachers, children and parents, and those aiming to learn more specialist vocabulary about the natural environment and traditional technologies. The framework of semantic categories used here is based on a dictionary for Mali (Baining), spoken in Papua New Guinea (Stebbins 2012). Malau makes a good case for the parallels between the environmental and sociocultural contexts of these two Melanesian languages, while also

applying the framework flexibly to account for important semantic areas in Vurēs, resulting in very detailed subheadings.

For reasons of space, the entries in the thesaurus are limited to the definitions in English and Bislama, with readers instructed to consult the main body of the dictionary for other kinds of information. While this is an understandable decision, it would have been beneficial to also include encyclopaedic information in the entries in the thesaurus, especially where that might help to distinguish words with similar or identical definitions, which is especially often the case for the Bislama definitions. For example, *bōgō dēmēl*, *bōgō mes*, and *bōgō nōrñōr* are all defined as ‘wan kaen sak [a kind of shark]’ in the Bislama definitions in the thesaurus (p. 369), with more detailed information only given in the literal translation field in the main entries (p. 41). Some encyclopaedic information might help make this section more useful to teachers by giving more information about differences between species and varieties. Perhaps this thesaurus section could be a starting point for a further project developing monolingual encyclopaedic resources.

Even more so than the main body of the dictionary, the thesaurus contains many excellent colour photographs illustrating different varieties of plants and wildlife, material artefacts, as well as culturally specific activities like music, and stages in construction, weaving and food preparation. These images are provided by Malau and a range of collaborators, as clearly indicated in the attributions. While it is expensive to print such high-quality colour images, they significantly add to the value of the dictionary and the likelihood of it being well-used. They also make the dictionary a much more informative resource when it comes to identifying varieties of plants and animals, as both community members and other users of the dictionary might not be familiar with scientific names or even the common names in Bislama and English. The detailed subheadings, fine-grained lexical entries, and helpful illustrations in the thesaurus section also mean it is likely to be very useful as a prompt to other language communities in Vanuatu working on dictionary projects. Similarly, the description of the software and processes involved in preparing the dictionary (pp. 11-12) will make this a valuable resource to other language projects.

5 Conclusion

As Malau discusses in her introduction (p. 1), writing a dictionary for an Indigenous language is a balancing act – between the needs of different audiences, between comprehensiveness and timeliness, detail and length, aesthetics and cost, among many other considerations. This dictionary is an excellent example of how to manage these competing demands, while placing community needs at the centre of decision making.

A Dictionary of Vurës, Vanuatu is an excellent example of a collaboratively designed dictionary for an Indigenous language. It prioritises the needs of the language community, and gives clear and explicit guidance to community members on how to access and make the most of this resource. At the same time, it is likely to be useful to researchers in anthropology, biology, ethnobotany, and a wide range linguistic subdisciplines.

6 References

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