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*Introduction to the three Special Issues on Vanuatu languages*

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## *Introduction to the three Special Issues on Vanuatu languages*

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Forty-five years after Independence, Vanuatu's linguistic diversity remains one of the most striking aspects of the country's identity. With estimates ranging from 118 to 138 Indigenous languages (François et al., 2015; Hammarström et al., 2024) and a population of over 300,000 people, Vanuatu remains the country with the most languages per capita in the world (cf. Crowley, 2000a, p. 50). Besides its Indigenous Oceanic languages, Bislama is the country's lingua franca, spoken by nearly all ni-Vanuatu, while the colonial languages, English and French, also have a role in education, the economy, politics, travel and tourism. This rich and layered linguistic landscape is reflected in Vanuatu's Constitution which was adopted following Independence: Bislama is the country's national language, English and French have official status too, while the Indigenous languages are explicitly protected by the Constitution (Republic of Vanuatu, 2006).

The linguistic diversity of Vanuatu has developed over millennia of migration, language contact and accommodation to changing language ecosystems, and it has been preserved through the centuries due to the ingenuity and resilience of ni-Vanuatu people. These three Special Issues on Vanuatu languages are presented in celebration of that heritage. They bring together a wide range of voices—linguists and other academics, grassroots researchers and language activists, teachers and translators—to reflect on languages, linguistic research and other language work in Vanuatu, illustrating and celebrating Vanuatu's linguistic heritage.

Language endangerment and the urgent need for language documentation and description of the world's languages have been increasingly foregrounded in linguistics for more than three decades (cf. Hale et al., 1992; Himmelmann, 1998; Seifart et al., 2018;

McDonnell et al., 2018). While most of Vanuatu's Indigenous languages are considered endangered to various degrees (Hammarström et al. 2018; Eberhard, et al. 2021), many have demonstrated relative resilience in terms of intergenerational transmission, compared to languages with similarly low speaker populations around the world. Nevertheless Vanuatu is increasingly exposed to factors associated with language endangerment internationally, including unsustainable urbanisation, globalisation, and developments in technology and media, as well as regional pressures, like residential schooling and seasonal employment in Australia and New Zealand, that disrupt linguistic and cultural transmission within families. The importance of urgent and sustained action to protect endangered languages has been recognised by UNESCO's declaration of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages from 2022–2032.

The resilience of the Indigenous languages of Vanuatu reflects the hard work and commitment of many stakeholders. Most importantly, Vanuatu language communities understand the importance of language vitality for maintaining cultural identity and sustainable livelihoods. Many community members have dedicated their time and efforts to both grassroots language initiatives and language projects involving foreign linguists, researchers, and translators. Trained linguists from Vanuatu and elsewhere have dedicated years of work to documenting and supporting Vanuatu languages, often working beyond the limits of their academic roles to ensure that communities are supported in their own language goals, and to try to reciprocate the myriad of ways that ni-Vanuatu communities welcome, host and care for visitors. The University of the South Pacific and more recently the National University of Vanuatu have served as hubs for researchers in various disciplines to come together while in Port Vila, and to share their findings with students. The Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (Vanuatu Cultural Centre/Centre culturel de Vanuatu), with its *Filwoka* (Fieldworker) Programme and dedicated workforce have ensured the effective regulation and guidance of research, including supporting foreign researchers (cf. Regenvanu, 1999, 2011). The Vanuatu government's plan for sustainable development (DSPPAC, 2016, 2017) aims to double the number of documented languages by 2030, recognising the important foundation of language documentation for language maintenance and revitalisation.

These Special Issues were conceived as a celebration of Vanuatu's linguistic heritage, but also to provide a venue for those who engage with Vanuatu's languages to publish their work. There have been two well-attended editions of the Vanuatu Languages Conference in recent years, organised by the Department of Linguistic and Cultural Evolution at the Max Planck Institute and held in 2018 at the University of the South Pacific and in 2023 at the National University of Vanuatu. The success of these conferences demonstrated the great interest in language work in Vanuatu from both local and foreign researchers but also from speakers of Vanuatu languages. We received a very positive response to the call for papers for what we thought would be a single Special Issue on Vanuatu languages, and the resulting three issues contain 26 articles by a total of 43 individual authors. Eight of the authors are ni-Vanuatu, which shows increasing representation of Indigenous viewpoints in research on Vanuatu languages compared to the past, while at the same time highlighting the need for sustained efforts to support the work of ni-Vanuatu scholars.

The Special Issue on *Vanuatu languages in context* situates Vanuatu's languages within the social, historical, and ecological contexts in which they are spoken and signed. Among the topics discussed in this Special Issue are language endangerment, multilingualism, linguistic demography and language evolution. Some of the articles focus on the language ecosystems in specific regions of Vanuatu.

The Special Issue on *Vanuatu languages in action* examines Vanuatu's languages' place in society and how they serve their communities. The articles in this Special Issue tackle questions related to language planning and policy, including education policy, orthography design, language work by missionaries, support for the human rights of deaf and disabled people in Vanuatu, and traditional ecological knowledge and cultural practices as they are encoded in Indigenous languages.

The Special Issue on *Vanuatu language structures* includes studies of the lexicon, morphology and syntax of Vanuatu's languages from different theoretical perspectives. Together the articles demonstrate the diversity of Vanuatu's languages and the importance of documentation and description across Vanuatu to ensure that the structural features of Vanuatu's languages are represented in cross-linguistic research in all areas of linguistics.

Specific areas within each Special Issue will be discussed in the introduction to each issue, but we will briefly mention some themes and areas that cut across different issues here.

A very important contribution of these Special Issues is the inclusion of research exploring the language use of deaf people in Vanuatu. Deaf language use and sign languages have been severely under-studied to date in both Vanuatu and the wider Pacific (Ridge et al., 2023), so it is especially significant to have three contributions examining deaf language use in Vanuatu. The three articles represent the different perspectives on language use taken across the three issues, exploring the sociolinguistic context of deaf people in Vanuatu (Iseli & McKee, 2025, this issue), reporting on language planning efforts to support the creation of a national sign language (Eldads Vira et al. 2025, companion issue), and investigating the emergence of linguistic structure in a nascent signing community (Miles & Mayberry, 2025, companion issue).

Another aspect of research that cuts across different issues is Vanuatu-specific implementations of oral practices that have been theorised as research methodologies across the Pacific (Sanga et al., 2025; Sanga & Reynolds, 2024). Sanga et al. (2025) discuss Pacific oralities methodologies for research across different disciplines, and use *tok stori* (a term from Tok Pisin) as an umbrella term for oral methodologies in Melanesia. The Bislama term *storian* has been used across research in various disciplines to refer to a Vanuatu instantiation of this approach that prioritises reciprocity and contextualisation, as well as local linguistic and cultural norms for conversation, narrative and knowledge exchange. Hoback (2025, companion issue) reflects on using *tok stori/storian* methodologies in orthography development for Denggan, while Ridge (2025, this issue) uses a *storian* approach to research interviews to explore young people in Mele Maat's experiences of other language communities. While not explicitly framed as a methodological framework, Naupa and Naupa (2025, companion issue) describe community-run workshops and follow-up conversations with navigational experts in Erromango to explore wind terminology in Erromangan languages, demonstrating many of the communicative practices theorised as *storian*. Tarihehe and Willans (2025, companion issue) describe a more locally specific oral methodology, *hunguhungu*, an approach in Nduindui-speaking communities of Ambae for reaching community consensus through providing a forum for all adults to come together to share their views. Researchers interested in the traditions of story-telling that *storian* and *tok stori* approaches draw on could also engage with Bessis and François's (2025, companion issue) exploration of narrative structure in two regions of Vanuatu.

The final cross-issue theme that we wish to highlight here is the legacy of the work of two linguists who have had a huge influence on the development of linguistic research in Vanuatu, John Lynch and Terry Crowley. Lynch and Crowley dedicated most of their

careers to studying the languages of Vanuatu and developing linguistics at USP's Emalus campus. They created the solid foundations on which many of us today are working. It is not surprising that the vast majority of the articles in these Special Issues cite various works by these two linguists, and many take inspiration from threads of their research or build more directly on their work. Rangelov et al.'s (2025, this issue) study can be seen as an update of Lynch & Crowley's (2001) bibliography and survey, using contemporary tools for mapping and data visualisation. Lavender Forsyth (2025, this issue) follows in the footsteps of Crowley's article on linguistic demography in the 1989 Vanuatu census (Crowley, 1994), again using the availability of modern tools for statistical analysis to further interrogate trends in census data. Ridge (2025, this issue) takes the definition of *lanwis* in Crowley's (2003) *New Bislama Dictionary* as a starting point for investigating how the Bislama word for language differs from its English equivalent, and the implications for language maintenance. Naupa & Naupa (2025, companion issue) build on Lynch's (2017) investigation of wind terms in Erromango languages, which itself is based on the foundation of Crowley's documentation of the island's languages (Crowley, 1997; 1999; 2000b). We are certain that their research, support and intellectual engagement will have shaped many of the contributions in less tangible ways too, and we want to conclude this introduction by acknowledging their legacies and the loss to linguistics in Vanuatu. It is now twenty years since Terry Crowley passed away in 2005, while John Lynch passed away more recently in 2021. These Special Issues are dedicated to their memories.

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