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Do dominant languages affect linguistic diversity in Vanuatu? A call for further research

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Abstract

Language loss in Vanuatu has been attributed to speech communities shifting to Bislama, the lingua franca of the archipelago, due to the increasing urbanisation of islanders. This paper discusses the need to consider the handful of Vanuatu indigenous languages which dominate the current linguistic map of rural Vanuatu by size of their speech community, with a total number of speakers representing about 40% of the population of Vanuatu. The social factors that led to the existence of the largest language communities of Vanuatu, the reasons and makeup of their community of speakers, remain to be investigated. To illustrate this point, this paper describes the composition of Raga, one of these large speech communities. The aim of this article is to stimulate the interest of linguists and anthropologists in identifying the reasons and circumstances that lead speakers to use these languages with, or instead of, their first language.

Summary in French

La perte de diversité linguistique au Vanuatu est le plus souvent imputée au remplacement des diverses langues océaniennes du Vanuatu par le bichelamar, la langue véhiculaire de l'archipel, en raison de l'urbanisation progressive des insulaires. Cet article examine la nécessité de prendre également en compte les quelques langues autochtones du Vanuatu qui dominent par leur nombre de locuteurs la carte actuelle des langues du Vanuatu rural, avec un nombre total de locuteurs représentant environ 40 % de la population du Vanuatu. Les facteurs sociaux qui ont conduit à l'existence des plus grands groupes langagiers du Vanuatu, les raisons et la composition de ces communautés, restent à étudier. Pour illustrer ce point, cet article décrit la composition d'une de ces grandes communautés linguistiques, celle des locuteurs Raga, au nord de l'ile de Pentecôte. L'objectif de cet article est de stimuler l'intérêt des linguistes et des anthropologues dans le but d'identifier les raisons et circonstances qui conduisent les locuteurs à utiliser ces langues avec, ou à la place de, leur langue maternelle.

Summary in Bislama

Long Vanuatu fulap lanwis oli stap lus mo risen from wanem hemia i stap hapen hem i from se ol komuniti oli stap yusum Bislama moa from ol man long aelan oli stap ko liv long taon. Be tu sam man oli aot long Indijenes lanwis blong olgeta i go long wan difren Indijenes lanwis blong Vanuatu bakagen we i gat moa man i stap toktok long hem. Atikol ia hem i diskasem nid blong lukluk ol indijenes lanwis blong Vanuatu we oli ripresentem moa long 40% blong populeisen blong Vanuatu mo we oli kavremap bigfala spes long linkwistik map blong rurol Vanuatu. Ol eria olsem ol sosol fakta we oli mekem se ol lanwis ia oli kam ol bigfala lanwis long Vanuatu, ol risen mo komposisen blong ol spika blong olketa, oli ol eria we oli stap yet

blong ol riseja oli investikeitem. Blong soem poen ia pepa ia hem i tokbaot komposisen blong Raga, one long ol bigfala spij komuniti. Eim blong atikol ia hem blong mekem ol linkwis mo ol antropolojis oli intres blong aedentifaem ol risen mo ol sekomstans we i mekem se ol spika oli yusum ol lanwis ia wetem, o long ples blong, fes lanwis blong olketa.

Keywords

linguistic diversity, language ecology, Vanuatu languages, language endangerment, dominant languages

1 Introduction

Little attention has been paid to the role of the handful of Vanuatu large speech communities of Oceanic languages regarding the threat they may pose to the archipelago's linguistic diversity. Bislama, the national language of Vanuatu, an English-lexifier creole, is considered the main threat to the Oceanic languages of Vanuatu and the language to which most community of speakers shift. It is however possible that some speakers use one of the large Oceanic languages as a code of communication, rather than, or alongside, Bislama. This point was first raised by Crowley, a major contributor to Vanuatu documentary linguistics, who observed that we need to take a step back from the claim that Bislama is the language posing the main threat to Vanuatu's linguistic diversity (Crowley, 1995, 2000). This paper does not intend to minimise the role of Bislama in the erosion of linguistic diversity, but rather to point out that further research is needed to examine the threat that large vernacular languages may pose to diversity, alongside Bislama. Another reason for investigating these communities with a large number of speakers is to clarify the role of linguistic diversity in Vanuatu. Laycock proposed that linguistic diversity in Melanesia could be understood as a means of keeping the size of communication communities manageably small and "not merely the by-product of accidents of history and geography, but (…) a positive Melanesian reaction to their environment – in other words, a Melanesian choice" (Laycock, 1981, p. 120). Laycock worked mainly in New Britain, Papua New Guinea, in a social and cultural environment unlike that of the Vanuatu archipelago, and it is therefore necessary to examine whether linguistic diversity functions differently in the Vanuatu context. Taking a broader perspective than Laycock on the factors underlying linguistic diversity, Mühlhäusler suggests that, in Australia and the Pacific, this situation is woven into the traditional ecology system of the region. Examining this ecology system ('language ownership, cultural practices, speakers' lifestyles, settlement patterns, speakers' physical and spiritual well-being') is therefore essential to understanding the reasons for this linguistic diversity (Mühlhäusler, 1996, p. 322).

The nine communities identified here count over 6,000 speakers each, well above the average 1,760 speakers per community for the 138 Oceanic languages spoken in Vanuatu (numbers reported by François et al., 2015). This average is reduced to 725 speakers for the majority of linguistic communities whose number of speakers varies between 100 and 3,000.

If the role of linguistic diversity in Vanuatu was to ensure linguistic societies remained reasonably small, how can we reconcile this role with the large size of these social and linguistic groups? And must the existence of these large language communities inevitably be understood as a loss of diversity? For each of these societies we would need to reveal whether the speakers grew up speaking the large language or if they speak it in addition to, or rather than, their native language. We would want to know whether the speakers tend to use the large

language as a local lingua franca alongside, or instead of, Bislama, and how the speakers themselves assess their own language use and fluency. Examining the functional relationship between domains of language use would clarify the role and status of these major languages in 21st century Vanuatu. It would also prepare us to deal with the threat these languages may pose to linguistic diversity.

1.1 The role of linguistic diversity

The geographical area of Melanesia encompasses, from West to East, the mainland of New Guinea and adjacent islands, and the archipelagos of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji. This region is well-known for its considerable cultural and linguistic diversity, a characteristic whose origins and mechanisms have long been the object of research and debates. Combinations of factors such as isolation, physical barriers, time depth, intermarriages, migration, lack of linguistic norms, have been proposed as hypotheses for the languages showing extreme diversification from their reconstructed ancestors (cf. Pawley, 2006, for a detailed chronological review of these hypotheses). It was also suggested that linguistic diversity might be playing a social role, and that speakers in these regions were the intentional agents of diversification. In fact, Thurston (1989) explained linguistic diversity in Melanesia as an outcome of the practice of small communities to distinguish themselves from each other by deliberately incorporating changes to their own vernacular. The linguistic barriers between communities thus created ensured that vernaculars held their role as identity markers. Thurston's explanation complements Laycock's earlier proposition that linguistic diversity serves a social role in Melanesia and can be seen as a means of keeping the size of communication communities small.

In the context of Vanuatu, nine large linguistic communities, that is, 6.5% of the reported 138 linguistic communities, represent 40% of the speakers of the archipelago's vernacular languages. The question arises then about the role of linguistic diversity suggested by Laycock. Could it be that, in Vanuatu, linguistic diversity does not - or no longer does - play the social role suggested by Laycock of keeping the size of speech communities small? There is a lot at stake in wanting to answer this question. The main objective of any investigation to be carried out on these large communities would be to understand the mechanism that made them possible in the first place, and in doing so, to assess whether these languages pose a threat to other smaller language communities and, consequently, to Vanuatu linguistic diversity. Another objective of this investigation would be to deepen our understanding of the role of linguistic diversity in Vanuatu.

1.2 The large speech communities of Vanuatu

The nine communities identified in this study (Map 1) have 6,000 or more speakers each. The number of speakers and the names of the languages featuring on Map 1 are based on Lynch & Crowley (2001). These numbers have likely increased over the past two decades, the overall population of Vanuatu having inflated by over 100,000 since the turn of the century.[1]

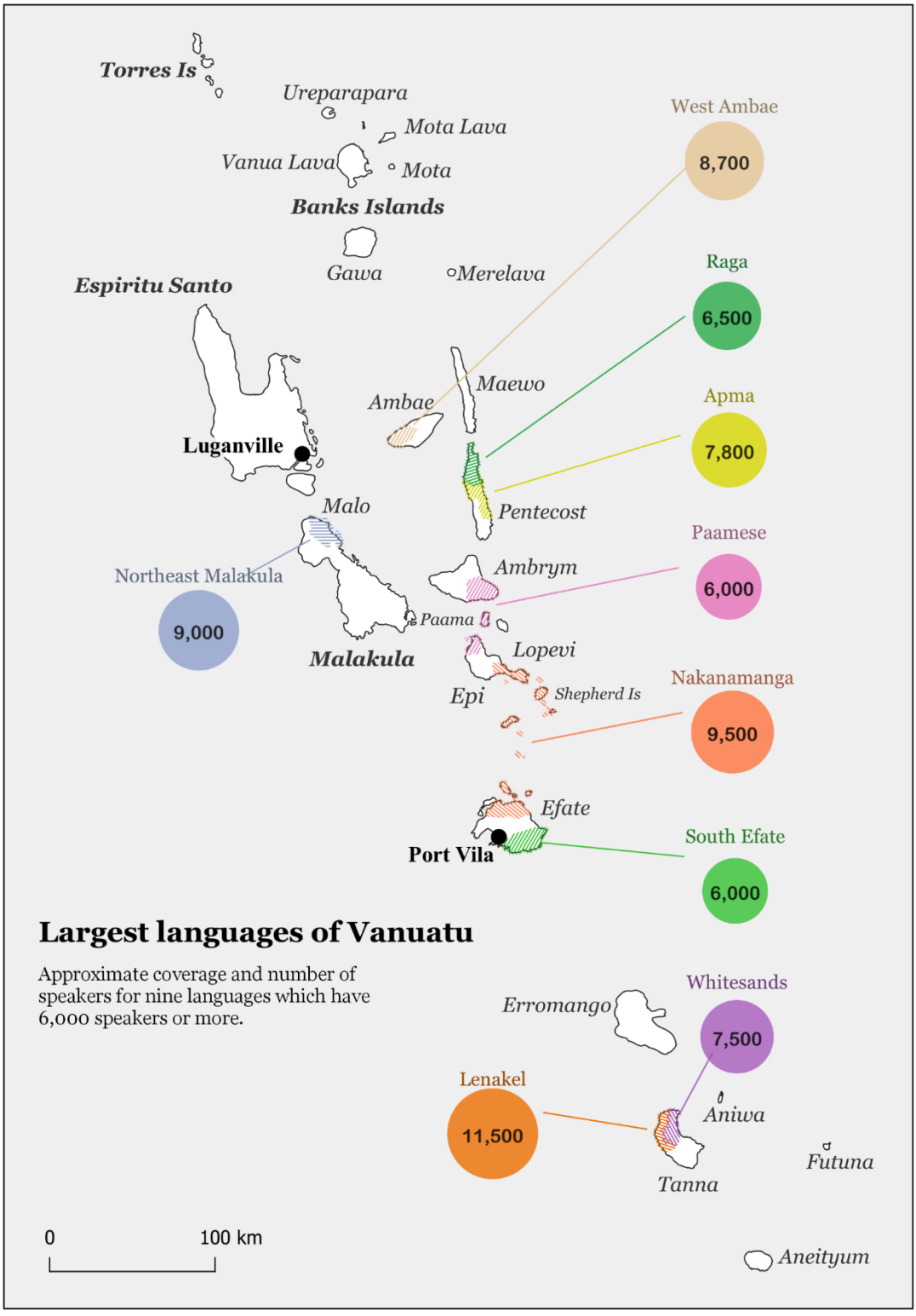
The most recent population census, in 2020, identified the number of vernacular language speakers by region but did not specify which of the many vernacular languages these were.

[1] "The 2009 census determined that the total population was 234,023. This compares with 186,678 people in 1999 and represents an increase of 25.4% or 47,345 people. This population increase represents an average annual growth rate of 2.3%, or an increase of 4,733 people per year" (Vanuatu National Statistics Office [VNSO], 2009, p. X). So, in 2001, the year of Lynch and Crowley's survey, the population would have been about 196,000. It was 300,019 in 2020 (VNSO, 2020).

Interestingly - and we will return to this topic later - the 2020 census population also collected figures for the first language spoken by census responders, whether it was Bislama or a vernacular, but with no precision as to which vernacular language this might be. For some regions where the language boundaries may be more defined than elsewhere - as is the case for Northern Pentecost and the Raga language - the total population by region from the 2020 census can be seen as giving us an indication of the number of speakers of the vernacular language in that region. However, these numbers underestimate the total number of speakers because they exclude members of the language group who may be found in other regions. In the case for Northern Pentecost region - total population of 6,745 (VNSO, 2020) - many Raga speakers live elsewhere in Vanuatu, in neighbouring islands and in the urban areas of Port Vila and Luganville. To estimate the number of speakers of a specific vernacular, we therefore cannot rely on the 2020 region's population figures, and neither can we use the figures collected on first languages. The figures in Lynch and Crowley's 2001 survey were inferred from data, in some cases, 'produced by researchers with close familiarity with particular language areas' (2001, p. 5), while in other cases those were older published census figures. The main problem with using recent census data is that, as mentioned earlier, the speaker figures did not identify which vernacular languages were being spoken. It is hoped that researchers familiar with these language communities and interested in responding to the present call for further research will contribute their own estimates of the number of speakers. In the meantime, the figures provided by Lynch and Crowley's survey give us a good indication of which language communities have the most speakers, bearing in mind that the total number of speakers has most certainly grown in the past 25 years as more speakers may now be found in Vanuatu urban centres than in 2001, due to the ongoing urbanisation of the country.[2]

Map 1 reveals that some areas of Vanuatu include no large speech communities, in particular the northernmost region of the archipelago: the Banks Islands, the Torres Islands and the big island of Espiritu Santo. On the contrary, in other regions and islands, large linguistic communities adjoin each other, as for example Raga and Apma communities on the island of Pentecost, with respectively 6,500 and 7,800 speakers, and Lenakel and Whitesands on the island of Tanna in South Vanuatu, with respectively 11,500 and 7,500 speakers.

[2] The degree of urbanisation (ratio of percent urban by percent rural) increased sharply in the period 1967-1989 but has since slowed down. It was 27% in 1999 and 32% in 2009 (VNSO, 2009, p. 21) and 28% in 2020 (percent urban: 22%; percent rural: 78%), based on the figures of the 2020 National Population and Housing Census (VNSO, 2020, p. 22). Vanuatu society remains predominantly rural.



Map 1. The largest languages of Vanuatu (Duhamel, 2020, p. 9)

The languages themselves may appear under different names in other works. To avoid confusion, their corresponding ISO codes are listed in Table 1. This table lists the number of speakers per language, as they were estimated in Lynch and Crowley's survey. In the rightmost column the table also shows the population number according to the 2020 Census (VNSO, 2020), for the locations where Lynch and Crowley reported the languages were spoken. As

mentioned earlier, the population number reported in the 2020 census is not to be understood as the number of speakers per language. These figures are only given here as an update of the population size in (some of)[3] the regions where these languages are spoken, most often alongside other languages. The region names used in the 2020 census appear in quotation marks.

Table 1. Number and location of speakers of the largest languages, as per Lynch and Crowley (2001), and population number for these regions as per Census 2020.

Language	Number of Speakers (2001)	ISO 639-3	Islands	Population number for approximate locations where the language is spoken (census 2020)	
Lenakel	11 500	tnl	Tanna	13 221	'West Tanna'
Nakanamanga	9 500	llp	Efate, Shepherd Islands, South Epi	11 713	'North Efate', 'South Epi' and Shepherd Islands[4]
Northeast Malekula	9 000	upv	Malekula	6 816	'North East Malekula'
West Ambae	8 700	nnd	Ambae	3 321	'West Ambae'
Apma	7 800	app	Pentecost	8 475	'Central Pentecost 1' and 'Central Pentecost 2'
Whitesands	7 500	tnp	Tanna	7 664	'Whitesands'
Raga	6 500	lml	Pentecost	6 745	'North Pentecost'
Paamese	6 000	pma	Paama, Epi	1 677	'Paama'[5]
South Efate	6 000	erk	Efate	11 721	'Erakor'

2 Vanuatu Speech Communities

François et al. (2015) list 138 Oceanic languages in Vanuatu; however, the authors acknowledge that this figure includes moribund languages, some of which are no longer spoken, or are spoken by only a handful of speakers. The number of moribund languages is difficult to estimate and the authors remark that the 'total number of languages currently spoken in Vanuatu is closer to 135' (Francois et al., 2015, p. 6). One tenth of these languages are spoken by fewer than 100 speakers, while for about half of them (N = 64, based on François et al.'s Figure 3 (2015, p. 8)), the number of speakers fluctuates between 100 and 1,000 speakers. A fifth of the communities (N = 27) count between 1,000 and 5,000 speakers, and ten exceptionally large language communities count 5,000 speakers or more.

[3] Which could explain the difference between the 2020 population number in Northeast Malekula and West Ambae regions, and the 2001 estimated number of speakers for Northeast Malekula and West Ambae languages.

[4] Shepherd Islands population number includes the figures for 'North Tongoa', 'Tongariki', 'Makimae', 'Nguna' and 'Emau'

[5] The population of Paamese speakers is widely scattered beyond Paama, in various locations on Epi, but also Malekula, Efate and Espiritu Santo (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 97), and it is only the population for Paama Island that is shown here.

3 The Non-Vernacular Languages of Vanuatu

Several languages are spoken in Vanuatu, additionally to the Oceanic languages. Among these non-Oceanic languages, Bislama, English and French share the status of official languages. Unlike the two European languages, the creole Bislama is widely spoken and used as language of communication by Vanuatu citizens who do not share a first language. Vestiges of the colonial rulers, English and French are languages of education and, for English, of several institutions, but their use is not widespread in the Vanuatu population. Bislama however is spoken throughout the archipelago. The latest population census (VNSO, 2020, p. 179-180) established that 15% of the total population speaks Bislama as their first language. The distribution of native Bislama speakers is not homogeneous across the archipelago. In the three provinces of Sanma, Malampa, and Shefa, native Bislama speakers represent between 14 and 17 % of the population; in the urban centers of Port Vila and Luganville, these speakers average 34%, while in the provinces of Torba, Penama, and Tafea, less than 5% of the population speaks Bislama as their first language. If we accept that the percentage of L1 native speakers of Bislama roughly represents the proportion of vernacular speakers who migrated to Bislama, the census figures reveal that this phenomenon of linguistic shift to Bislama varies noticeably across the archipelago.

Regarding the situation between Bislama and the large languages identified in Map 1, several questions need to be addressed: in the areas where they are spoken, are the large languages used as lingua franca, instead or alongside Bislama? How can we explain their large number of speakers? Do they play a part in language loss in Vanuatu rural areas, and do they threaten linguistic diversity in the archipelago? Lynch and Crowley's 2001 exhaustive survey of the languages of Vanuatu has answered some of these questions. Their work provides an important reference for any investigation of language contact within the country, but more sociolinguistic work is needed to understand the dynamics of Vanuatu linguistic situation.

4 The Ecology of Language

In its approach to language, the field of language ecology 'considers the complex web of relationships that exist between the environment, languages, and their speakers', as defined by Wendel in 2005 (Skutnabb-Kangas & Harmon, 2017, p. 11). This framework for the study of language is particularly useful to gain knowledge in the functioning of linguistic diversity, its foundation and the means to promote its maintenance (Mühlhäusler, 1996), as well as for focusing on language evolution (Mufwene, 2017), an application that is, however, outside the scope of this article. To answer the questions mentioned above about the large languages identified in Map1 - whether they are used as lingua franca; whence their number of speakers; their impact on linguistic diversity - this article suggests that a survey be carried out in the areas where the identified large languages are spoken, in line with the Voegelins' perspective on language ecology (cited in Haugen, 1972, p. 328). The survey of the area to be explored requires examining which language, among the vernaculars, Bislama and the two European languages, the islanders choose to use in different social domains and with different users. Interpreting the linguistic choice of speakers and the factors at play that motivate their choice allows us to work out whether the local populations tend to add these major languages to their linguistic inventory or whether they tend to use them instead of their native language. In the first scenario, we would conclude that local speakers use the main indigenous language as a local lingua franca and in specific communication situations, thus adding to the number of speakers of this large language but without abandoning their mother tongue. This could be interpreted as a stable situation that does not endanger the linguistic diversity of the region. In the second scenario however, in situations where speakers tend to use the dominant languages

instead of their native language, we would see evidence of individuals turning away from their native language to adopt one of the major languages, thereby contributing to a loss of linguistic diversity in this local area.

Haugen commented that "the choice of region [to be explored] can be fairly arbitrary" (ibid.), and this needs to be addressed. The boundaries of the language areas shown on Map 1 should not be considered as clear-cut as they appear on the map. Firstly, these languages may be spoken in areas other than the ones indicated in the map as the islanders travel within Vanuatu and may settle in other regions of the archipelago. It is for example very likely that many of these large languages are spoken in the two main urban centres of the country, which are regularly visited by speakers of all regions and islands. Then there is the matter of how to circumscribe any language in Vanuatu. The overall linguistic picture of the archipelago that was proposed by researchers who covered large sections of the country is that of a chain of dialects (Bonnemaison, 1996; Tryon, 1998), rather than the juxtaposition of distinct languages. Historical studies have established a shared ancestry for most Vanuatu languages, which points to a settling of the archipelago by the proto-Oceanic speakers of the Lapita culture complex.[6] Previous studies have also established that over the centuries Vanuatu languages have diversified, some more than others, and often to the point that mutual intelligibility was lost between these related varieties. The common ancestry shared by indigenous Vanuatu languages is noticeable, but to establish whether these varieties are distinct languages or dialects of a same language, we rely on the perspective, sense of identity and word-of-mouth of communities of speakers, and on the descriptive studies of linguists, when such studies exist.

It is possible that the large number of speakers of some of the languages identified on Map 1 can be explained by the presence of several mutually intelligible varieties, as in the case of Apma whose 7,800 speakers speak one or several of its three dialects (Schneider, 2010). But we should not limit ourselves to this feature alone, because, as we will see in the case of Raga examined in detail below, some of the major Vanuatu languages do not have regional dialects. Additionally, the criteria of mutual intelligibility on the basis of which we establish the existence of dialects has often not been thoroughly tested (and certainly not to the extent of Gooskens & Schneider, 2016), and the dialects themselves not been described (Schneider & Gray, 2015). We must therefore exercise caution when assigning dialects to a major language.

Factors other than the existence of dialects come into play that must be considered to explain the large number of speakers of these varieties. However, the information that can help us understand the social context of these large languages is sometimes non-existent, sketchy or difficult to access, and yet this information could help us weigh up the linguistic situation in the regions where these languages are spoken. In his review of Pacific Island communities, Besnier concluded that "the same dynamics that help maintain diversity and heterogeneity in one setting can help erase it in another" (Besnier, 2004, p. 114). The investigative approach proposed by this article is in line with Besnier's conclusive observations. Not only can we not rely on a single determining factor to explain the existence of the large languages identified in Map 1, such as the presence of dialects, but a survey of the area where each of the languages are spoken appears to be a necessary condition to explain their existence.

As for the importance of the actual size of a speech community, we must remember that in the region of Melanesia community languages have continued to be spoken through generations by speakers in their low hundreds at any one time. The mere number of speakers of a vernacular language is therefore not a good indicator of its vitality, yet it is a factor

[6] This does not concern the Polynesian outlier languages in Vanuatu, which were introduced later from eastern Polynesia, or any other language introduced more recently.

correlated to its vitality. “The presence of a critical mass of speakers” is one of the Indicators of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (IEV) refined and field tested in Papua New Guinea by Landweer (2012). Of particular interest to this paper, Landweer proposes that the critical number of speakers of a language is determined by the number of immigrants to the speech community who actively speak the community language. The active bilingualism of immigrants is therefore a determining factor in assessing the vitality of a language, which links to our point raised earlier about the need to examine which language islanders choose to use in diverse social domains and with different users.

Additionally, on the topic of multilingualism, the concept of small-scale multilingualism, defined as ‘balanced multilingualism practiced in meaningful geographical spaces sustaining dense interaction and exchange at their interior’ (Lüpke, 2016, p. 41), is of great relevance to the setting of Vanuatu, which commonly attests to such situations. The methodology for investigating this type of multilingualism was rewardingly applied to case studies in Vanuatu (Walworth et al., 2021), discussed later in this article. Expanding on a notion previously proposed by Haudricourt (1961), François (2012) comments that, in the Torres and Banks Islands, language groups recognise the intrinsic value of the languages spoken in nearby communities and learn these languages. This situation of egalitarian multilingualism plays an important role in maintaining language diversity in this northernmost archipelago. However, in situations where a group is comparatively more powerful than its neighbours, due to its large population, its economic, cultural or political influence, speakers of other languages learn the vernacular of the powerful group, while the reverse is not true. This situation of asymmetrical bilingualism encountered in Torba province (Francois, 2012, p. 99-100) is what prevails in the Raga community, discussed below. Raga community members acknowledge the value of the languages spoken in nearby communities with which they are in regular contact, but they tend to not speak these languages.

The case of Raga illustrates my argument that to explain the large languages of Vanuatu we must consider the interactions between the languages and their social and natural environment, and the functional relationship between languages in an area. The section below reports on the specificity of the speech community of Raga and the factors that may explain its large number of speakers. These elements were described in a variationist study of this language carried out in the period 2015-2020, with a team of community members and the participation of around sixty speakers (Duhamel, 2020).

5 The Case of Raga (6,500 Speakers), North Pentecost

Despite being spoken in a large geographical area, this language presents no clear regional variation (Duhamel, 2020). We can therefore discard regional dialects as a reason for Raga’s many speakers and focus on other explicatory factors.

The Raga language (ISO 639: lml) is primarily spoken in the densely populated region of North Pentecost. It is also spoken in the south of Maewo Island and in the southeast of Ambae Island, as well as in Vanuatu’s two major urban centres. As mentioned above, its estimated number of 6,500 speakers dates from Lynch and Crowley’s 2001 survey and this number should be revised upwards at the time of writing this paper.

As was mentioned above (section 4), active bilingualism among immigrants is a determining factor in assessing the vitality of a language. In this aspect, and regarding the seven other indicators proposed by Landweer (2012) – potential for contact; domains in which the target language is used; frequency and type of code switching; social networks; social outlook;

language prestige; access to a stable and acceptable economic base -, Raga meets the criteria of a language with high vitality.

On North Pentecost, Raga is spoken by all members of the community and in most domains. The language displays good intergenerational transmission as young children tend to only speak Raga since it is the language most spoken around them. It is only later in their school years that children are introduced to Bislama, if they are schooled away from North Pentecost. Raga language is well sustained by institutions and has been taught in local primary schools for children's first two years of schooling since 2015 (Duhamel, 2020, p. 144). These factors play a role in the high use of Raga in the community, and so does the limited access from North Pentecost to other language communities. It is, however, the strength of the ethnic identity of Raga speakers, the prestige of their language, and the positive economic prospects in speaking Raga, that seem to be most relevant in attracting new speakers, or in increasing the language use in some domains. We will now focus on these factors for Raga.

A marked feature of the Raga community is the ability of its members to embrace modernity, that is, social, cultural and technological innovations, while retaining their cultural and traditional values and practices. North Raga was cited in an anthropological study for its adaptability to "major innovations such as cash cropping, Christianity, and party politics [that] have successfully incorporated within an expanded and altered framework of graded society political activity" (Allen, 1984, pp. 36–37). From the interviews of Raga speakers and conversations with them (Duhamel, 2020), it emerges that the ethnic identity of Raga community members is grounded equally in their local community, its language and traditions, and in their nation-state, its lingua franca and the Constitution. The inclusive nature of Raga identity and its equilibrium between adapting societal innovation and maintenance of traditions make the community very attractive to outsiders looking for ways of adjusting to Vanuatu's changing lifestyles.

Correlated with the strength of Raga ethnic identity, the perception by outsiders of the status and values of this community also influences whether they want to be seen as connected to the community by speaking its language. Haugen (1972) identified two factors when evaluating the ecology of a language community: status and intimacy. The status of the community refers to the community's "association with power and influence", and intimacy refers to the community's association with "solidarity, shared values, friendship, love, in short contacts established through common family and group life" (Haugen, 1972, p. 329). The prestigious status of Raga society, progressive yet firmly rooted in its traditions, as well as its values promoting unity, are two characteristics particularly influential in attracting new speakers to this speech community.

The high profile of the community rests in part on the decisive role of Raga politicians, such as Walter Lini, in the events leading to the nation independence from the Anglo-French rulers in 1980. Lini's political party, Vanua'aku Pati, promoted national unity among ni-Vanuatu while retaining links with traditional, cultural and religious principles in the diverse communities of the archipelago (Vois Blong Manples TV, 2019). Embracing tradition and innovation (Duhamel, 2020, p. 184) is considered an essential feature of Vanuatu political scene, and while it was not without creating conflicts at times (Lasseur, 1998), this feature is considered a strength in the highly diverse nation-state and a characteristic of the North Pentecost community. This, in turn, may explain the positive attitudes from outsiders to this community, via their use of the community's language. The Raga community, nearly uniformly Anglican, makes up a large part of the Anglican congregation of Port Vila. Religious texts, prayers and hymns were translated into Raga in the late 19th and early 20th century (see the preamble to the Book of Common Prayers in Raga 'leo huri ganisabuga', 1954) and, to this

date, the Anglican religious service in Port Vila's Tagabe Church is delivered in Bislama and Raga. Songs are written and sung in Raga languages by non-Raga artists and Duhamel received testimonies of native Pentecost islanders explaining that when conversing with Raga speakers, it is frequently Raga language that is used by outsiders to the community, rather than the national language Bislama. As further evidence, a recent study identified the high degree of intelligibility of Raga variety in the neighbouring communities of Pentecost Island, on account of a larger exposure to this variety, possibly due to 'the high prestige of Raga community' (Schneider & Gooskens, 2018, p. 170).

Furthermore, a noticeable number of well-educated and relatively well-off individuals constitute the middle-class of Raga community. These influential individuals contribute to ensuring members of Vanuatu society gain access to better living conditions by creating businesses and local employment, promoting the education sector, developing the health system and actively supporting the improvement of their fellow citizens' well-being. It is no wonder that outsiders to Raga community would want to associate with this community, and what better way to connect with its members than by speaking their vernacular?

On another note, both the structure of a language and its degree of variation within the community can influence its appeal to new speakers. It is easier to learn a language that presents no complex phonology or morphology; likewise, it is easier to learn a language that is spoken uniformly by its native speakers and presents little interspeaker and regional variation. Expanding on the concept of linguistic complexity, Thurston (1989) distinguished esoteric and exoteric communications and languages. Esoteric languages function primarily as a way of communication within a society and among members of a community who share a large amount of references and knowledge that do not need to be stated in everyday utterances. Over time, such language becomes less explicit and structurally more condensed, and therefore more difficult to learn by outsiders. Exoteric languages, on the other hand, are those used by speakers not sharing a native language and they tend to be structurally simpler[7]. It should be noted however that it is not an either-or situation, as a language can function as a marker of identity while becoming structurally simpler because it is frequently used by non-native speakers. Modern day Raga corresponds to this situation. Its phonology and morphology are simpler than those of other Pentecost languages, such as Apma and especially Sa, but Raga is undoubtedly a marker of Raga identity.

Little is known about the evolution of Raga language, but this variety appears to have gone through little change over time, let alone complication (Blust, 2013; Clark, 2009; Pawley, 2006). The structural simplicity of the Raga language may have benefited its popularity with outsiders although it may also be seen as the consequence of being spoken by many non-native speakers and a common contact-induced change (Thomason, 2001). It could not be said that Raga's structural simplicity is the main reason for its appeal to non-native speakers, but rather we could argue that the social factors mentioned previously - the strength of the ethnic identity of Raga speakers, the prestige of their language, and the positive economic prospects in speaking Raga – exert a greater influence than the language's uncomplicated phonology and morphology in attracting new speakers.

[7] It is noted however that these associations between language and social structure have been contested (e.g. Shcherbakova et al., 2023)

6 A need for sociological interpretations and analyses

The large number of speakers of Raga language can therefore be explained by several social factors, as explored in the previous section. What about the other eight languages featuring on Map 1?

Spoken just south of Raga, Apma has more than 7,800 speakers and thus constitutes an even larger language community than that of Raga. It is intriguing to observe two large neighbouring speech communities. This is the case for Apma and Raga on Pentecost Island, and for Lenakel and Whitesands, on Tanna Island, in South Vanuatu. In both cases, it appears that one of the two neighbouring languages is more prestigious than the other: Raga in Pentecost and Lenakel in Tanna. In terms of their status and size, the history of these communities would probably help us understand the present situation, but little is known about their history. For some of these communities, however, informative sociolinguistic and anthropological explorations enlighten us on the origins of their status, as in the example of Lindstrom (1983) who discusses linguistic boundaries in Tanna and, for Raga, the anthropological work of Taylor (2008) and Duhamel's sociolinguistic study (2020). Most of the languages identified in Map 1 were the subject of linguistic studies, but, by and large, these studies, as well as most studies on Vanuatu languages, are confined to describing the structure of the languages with little social information and no sociolinguistic analysis provided. These missed opportunities were noted by the late eminent Vanuatu linguist John Lynch, who, in his closing remarks at the Vanuatu Languages Conference given in his honour in 2018 observed that the descriptive work of linguists must place languages in their social context if we are to understand the complex linguistic situation of this region.

To get an overview of what is known and what needs investigating, the article will now briefly review the information that could be collected about the social context of each of the eight remaining major linguistic communities, starting from the northernmost variety.

6.1 West Ambae/ Duidui / Nduindui - ISO code: nnd

The two regional varieties of West Ambae language, Duidui/Nduindui and Walaha, are spoken in the southwestern part of Ambae Island. According to Lynch and Crowley's (2001) survey, the language is poorly known and there does not seem to have been any additional linguistic work on this language since 2001. On the other hand, Allen's work on the social structure of the Nduindui (1964) can offer valuable information on the social making of the community and on contacts between west and east Ambae, although this material probably requires updating. The work of anthropologist Lissant Bolton (1999) may also provide insights in the correlation between sense of place and language in Ambae, although this account refers to east Ambae only.

6.2 Apma / Abma - ISO code: app

The Apma community is the largest speech community of Pentecost and is located directly south of Raga community. Schneider (2010) provided a grammatical description of Apma, based on the Suru Mwerani dialect, spoken in the southernmost area of central Pentecost and the largest of Apma's three dialects. The northernmost dialect of Apma, Suru Kavian, is spoken by a few hundred people on the border with Raga. Due to the location of its speech community, in the contact zone between two major languages, the ecology of Suru Kavian, as well as the attitude and speech habits of the members of this dialect community, deserve to be studied. Of particular note is a study that tested the mutual intelligibility between Apma and Raga speakers,

based on picture pointing and word translation tasks (Schneider & Gooskens, 2018). This study revealed that the Apma speakers of the Suru Kavian dialect had very high intelligibility of Raga language, whereas this was not reciprocated by Raga speakers, who had quite low intelligibility of the Suru Kavian dialect. It is assumed that the degree of structural relatedness between the two varieties would similarly affect the mutual intelligibility of each group of speakers and the authors proposed that there may be social factors involved, which require further investigation.

6.3 Northeast Malekula / Uripiv-Wala-Rano-Atchin - ISO code: upv

An analysis of the dialects of this large language is long overdue and views differ as to the composition of the dialects of Northeast Malekula. The language is spoken on four small islands alongside the northeastern coast of Malekula - Uripiv, Wala, Rano and Atchin, from south to north -, and the mainland opposite the islands. Tryon suggested that the variety spoken in Atchin was a language distinct from the one spoken in Uripiv, Wala and Rano, whereas McKerras, who worked on Uripiv, the southernmost dialect, observed that all four varieties were mutually intelligible (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 80). This language is also reported to have replaced at least three languages in this region, Naman, Tape and Uri (ibid.) We owe McKerras for an unpublished sketch phonology of the language spoken in Uripiv Island and a comprehensive dictionary of this variety (McKerras, 1988, 2001), but this material includes little information on this society and its contact with the neighbouring communities. Similarly, material by Capell and Layard (1980) consists of a sketch grammar, a list of words and the transcription and translation of texts collected on Atchin islet by the ethnologist Layard in 1914, but this work provides no information about the Atchin society. Another source (Layard, 1942) may present scant material on Atchin social fabric while Duhamel (2010) provides a very brief profile of the community and its language use. Overall, we lack a sociolinguistic analysis of the different communities of speakers of Northeast Malekula and its dialects.

6.4 Paamese / Paama - ISO code: pma

The well described Paamese language is primarily spoken on Paama Island although most speakers are now found in Vanuatu urban centres and Paama's neighbouring islands (Lynch & Crowley, 2001). Petrou and Connell's 2017 study on return migration and mobility in the Paamese community touches on some issues of language maintenance but does not provide explicatory information as to the size of Paama speakers community. Crowley (2004) mentions two Paamese dialects, a northern variety, spoken in southeast Ambrym, and a southern variety spoken on Paama island and north Epi, but he remarks that his descriptive work on the language does not feature dialectal considerations. When investigating the very scattered community of Paamese native speakers, it would be worthwhile to include the present-day use of Paamese in the communities of southeast Ambrym and northern Epi which were reported in 2001 to speak Paamese as a second language in (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 97).

6.5 Nakanamanga / North Efate / Nguna - ISO code: llp

Nakanamanga is spoken in a wide area including North Efate, the Shepherd Islands and South Epi. The language presents a complex dialect landscape due to the back-and-forth movements of population in this region, dating as far as the 15th century Kuwae volcanic eruption (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, pp. 107-109). An ethnological study of the Shepherd Islands, Espirat (1973), may yield some interesting material about the ecology of this region and, also worthy of note, Lacrampe (2014) gives a brief review of the language ecology and use of Lelepa, a variety which Clark proposed to be grouped with Nakanamanga (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 108). Of note, two of the small-scale multilingualism cases studied in Walworth et al. (2021) take place

on the island of Emae, in the Shepherds Islands. Fakamae, a Polynesian Outlier traditionally spoken in the eastern part of the island, is being replaced in this area by Nakanamanga, and Namakura, another non-Polynesian language, with an estimated population of 5,000 in 1991 (Sperlich, 1991). Studying the factors that drive small-scale multilingualism in two neighbouring villages, the authors explain how a shift towards Namakura is taking place in one of the villages, where Fakamae and Namakura languages are regularly both spoken, whereas in the other village, interactions within the villages are solely in Fakamae, which prevents, or at least delays, villagers replacing Fakamae with Namakura language.

6.6 South Efate / Erakor / Nafsan - ISO code: erk

Islanders have been migrating throughout the decades to Efate, the most important island of Vanuatu in terms of economy, politics and population. The language of South Efate is spoken in the well-populated coastal region of Efate, from southwest to east. South Efate has been well studied and Thieberger's (2006) description of the language includes a detailed chapter on the composition of its community, its history and language use. Thieberger remarks however that it is not known how many of the many migrants to this region speak South Efate (Thieberger, 2006, p. 43), which is an important note because Bislama is widely spoken and often used as a first language in Efate, alongside a wide variety of Vanuatu languages. It is therefore likely that the size of the South Efate community does not accurately reflect the number of South Efate language speakers and probably exceeds it.

6.7 Lenakel / West Tanna – ISO code: tnl, and Whitesands / East Tanna – ISO code: tnp

Lynch and Crowley's comments about densely populated Tanna and the history of its people offer some clarification on the size of the island's two major communities of speakers (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, pp. 125–128). The authors explain that, unlike what happened on neighbouring islands, Tanna Islanders did not suffer a massive depopulation in the epidemics of the second half of the nineteenth century. This gives reasons, at least in part, for the very large number of speakers of two of Tanna varieties. The authors add that Lenakel is "perhaps the most prestigious of the five Tanna languages" (ibid., p. 128) which probably is a factor attracting speakers to this community. Lenakel and Whitesands, like the other languages of Tanna, have several dialects and the authors remark that the real number of speakers of each of the two languages is difficult to establish due to "the existence of substantial centres with mixed populations" (ibid., p. 5). Furthermore, in an earlier work on the grammar of Lenakel, Lynch (1978) suggested that Lenakel and Whitesands were themselves part of a dialect chain. Lynch noticed that there were strong lexical similarities between the two languages on the basis of lexicostatistical figures (in the range 75 - 81%), although Tryon (1976, p. 160) proposed lesser similarities between the two varieties, in the range 67-72%, depending on the dialects considered. It appears therefore that the boundary between the two languages and their speakers is particularly difficult to establish. Bonnemaison's anthropological material on Tanna (1986) clarifies aspects of the history and social life in Tanna, and particularly the role of missions in the communities. Regarding how Lenakel and Whitesands language communities became so large, he points to the historical role of missions and says: "Waisisi, White Sands on the east coast, and 'Lenakel-Sydney' on the west coast, became the strongholds of the missionary system in the early years of the 20th century. Important villages were formed

there, constantly enlarged by the floods of converts coming from different regions."[8] The significance of Yasur Volcano in the founding myths of Tanna (Bonnemaison, 1994) may also have conferred a special status on the language area of Whitesands.

7 Taking Stock of the Linguistic Situation and Studying Speakers' Interactions

As we saw, the social and historical information that can help us understand the foundation and context of the languages shown on Map 1 is largely missing. Furthermore, in these regions we need a study of interactions between speakers of different linguistic backgrounds, to survey which language is spoken, in which geographical space and situation and by whom. This data is needed to assess whether some languages are being replaced by large vernaculars or Bislama. It can also inform us on whether any language replacement is restricted to some domains or whether it takes place in most daily life interactions, that is, whether communities are moving away from their native language. How can we obtain this information and what approach can we take? We could draw inspiration from the methodology used by Schooling (1990) in his exploration of language maintenance in New Caledonia, whereby the linguist investigated whether communities were shifting from the Kanak vernacular languages to French, the language of education and wider communication in New Caledonia.

In selected rural communities, Schooling surveyed the domains of use of French and Kanak languages. His study was based on communal and individual questionnaires, listening comprehension tests, and an analysis of social networks. Communal questionnaires made it possible to obtain information on the use of languages, vernacular or French, and in various settings: in the village, in homes, during religious, school or traditional events. The purpose of individual questionnaires was to elicit data from community members about their self-assessed linguistic ability, and their attitudes to their community language and French. Listening comprehension tests were used to evaluate individuals' understanding of spoken French, and, in localities where French was too poorly understood to function as a lingua franca, the tests were instead used to measure the understanding of the Kanak languages that could be used as languages of communication. Finally, the data collected over long periods spent in Kanak communities were analysed using the concept of social networks developed by Milroy (1980) and adapted to the context of New Caledonia, which made it possible to explore the linguistic behaviour of individuals.

The methodology applied by Schooling and his team in the Melanesian setting of New Caledonia is highly transferrable to a Vanuatu setting to investigate the distinct languages spoken in a rural Vanuatu context and the possible shifts to the major Vanuatu languages, or to Bislama. The questionnaires, comprehension tests and social network analysis designed for the New Caledonian study can certainly be adapted to Vanuatu's situation. The methodology used by Schooling would be particularly beneficial to survey the languages and dialects used in interactions between individuals of diverse speech communities and could be applied to survey language maintenance in rural Vanuatu and consider additional scenarios to the threat posed by Bislama. On the other hand, the study of the factors that motivate small-scale multilingualism in different contexts can be combined with this approach or replace elements of it. It would allow, for example, a detailed examination of individual interactions in situations such as the large mixed population centres of Tanna.

[8] « Waisisi, White Sands sur la côte est, et 'Lenakel-Sydney' sur la côte ouest, devinrent dans les premières années du XXe siècle les points forts du système missionnaire. D'importants villages s'y formèrent, sans cesse agrandis par les flots de convertis venus de régions différentes. » (Bonnemaison, 1986, p. 236)

Schooling reports that languages spoken by small Kanak communities were replaced by other Kanak languages, and that French replaced some large Kanak languages that were used as lingua franca (Schooling, 1990, pp. 84–85). It would be valuable to know if similar cases occurred or are taking place in Vanuatu. The status and comprehension of the French language in rural New Caledonia is similar to that of English or French in rural Vanuatu, where the two European languages are languages of education, and sometimes also used in religious services. However, in rural Vanuatu, the two European languages are rarely used in other domains, and they are not languages of communication in the archipelago. The same cannot be said of Bislama, which is the language used and understood by most adults who do not share a common native language. It is therefore important to include Bislama, alongside the large Oceanic languages, in a study of language maintenance in rural Vanuatu, in order to examine the domains in which the national language is used rather than the local language or any other vernacular that might be used as a lingua franca.

8 Conclusion

In Vanuatu linguistics, much of our descriptive material contains virtually no social information, yet the characteristics of a language are not detached from the speakers and their society. The social context in which the languages we study are spoken is not only worth reporting on but also essential information for understanding the evolution of the languages and societies studied. If language diversity in Melanesia is to be seen as a response to the environment of the communities of this region, as Laycock has argued for Papua New Guinea, in order to assess the role of linguistic diversity in contemporary Vanuatu it is crucial for us to understand this environment. Furthermore, in Vanuatu, as in many regions of the world, language is an important marker of identity and members of minority groups want to preserve their own language. Members of these communities also tend to be multilingual and use languages other than their vernacular in different situations. It is this language use that we need to examine in more detail, as it will help us identify the language of choice in interactions and contexts in which speakers use a language other than their own. By giving us a snapshot of the present situation, the survey of language usage and frequencies would allow future studies to determine whether communities are shifting towards another language or are in a stable multilingual situation.

In our endeavour to examine the issue of loss of linguistic diversity in Vanuatu, to the role of the national language Bislama we must add that of the large vernacular languages which may also constitute a threat to this diversity. In rural Vanuatu, there is a gap to be filled in the study of language use in diverse situations and in examining potential shifts, between vernacular languages, or from the vernacular to Bislama. In such a study, with a focus on the possible role that major languages play in the loss of linguistic diversity, we would need to investigate:

- The contexts in which one of the major languages is used instead of the local language(s).
- The contexts in which Bislama is used instead of the local language(s), and whether Bislama has replaced another Vanuatu language that used to fill this function.
- The Vanuatu languages reported to have been replaced by a major local language.

The sociolinguistic study on language maintenance that Stephen Schooling carried out in New Caledonia in the 1980s presents a pertinent approach to examining this issue in the Vanuatu archipelago. It would be highly adaptable to the situation of the major Vanuatu languages identified in this article, examining their actual use and their role in language

maintenance and shift, in the regions where they are spoken, and, by extension, in the country as a whole.

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