Te Reo
the Journal of the Linguistic
Society of New Zealand

Volume 68
Issue 2 (*Special Issue*): Vanuatu languages in context
Research Article
2025
Pages 133–161

December, 2025

What does lanwis *mean? Parallels between Indigenous languages of Vanuatu for young people in Mele Maat*

Eleanor Ridge
Massey University, Palmerston North

Ridge, E. (2025). What does *lanwis* mean? Parallels between Indigenous languages of Vanuatu for young people in Mele Maat. *Te Reo 68*(2) Vanuatu languages in context [Special Issue], edited by T. Rangelov, E. Ridge, L. Takau & V. Chen. (pp. 133–161)
This paper is a peer-reviewed contribution from https://www.nzlingsoc.org/journal/

Guest Editors: Tihomir Rangelov, Eleanor Ridge, Lana Takau, Victoria Chen

What does lanwis *mean? Parallels between Indigenous languages of Vanuatu for young people in Mele Maat*

Eleanor Ridge

Massey University, Palmerston North

Abstract

The Bislama word for 'language', *lanwis*, is prototypically used to refer to Vanuatu's Indigenous languages as opposed to the national language Bislama, or the languages of education, English and French. This article first investigates the meaning and usage of *lanwis* in responses to a sociolinguistic survey of young members of Vatlongos-speaking communities, arguing that *lanwis* expresses one aspect of the relationship between people and places that is central to cultural identity in Vanuatu and wider Melanesia. The article then focuses on interviews with young people from Mele Maat, a peri-urban community near Port Vila which relocated from Southeast Ambrym in the 1950s, where intergenerational transmission of Vatlongos is disrupted. Young people in Mele Maat draw on national understandings of the purpose of *lanwis*, and explicit comparisons with other *lanwis* communities, to understand, discuss and challenge experiences of language endangerment in their own community. The article concludes by considering how the metalinguistic concept of *lanwis* in Bislama can support Indigenous language maintenance across Vanuatu.

Summary in Bislama

Mining blo wod ia lanwis lo Bislama i defren smol long mining blo wod ia language long Inglis. Nomali, ol man Vanuatu oli yusum lanwis blong minim wan lanwis blo man ples long Vanuatu, we i no minim Bislama, Inglis o Franis. Fes samting long atikol ia i lukluk long hao ol yangfala we oli aot long ol komuniti we oli yusum Vatlongos (lanwis blo Saot-Is Ambrym) oli stap yusum wod ia lanwis long ol ansa blong olgeta insaed long wan sevei long saed blong ol lanwis. Hem i soemaot se lanwis hemi pat blong relesensep blong man ples mo graon blong olgeta. Ating hemia hem i from wanem nomali lanwis i no minim Bislama, Inglis o Franis, be ol lanwis blo man ples nomo. Mo tu, atikol ia i lukluk lo sam intaviu wetem yangfala long Mele Maat, wan komuniti we i bin aot long Saot-Is Ambrym, mo go stap klosap long Port Vila long Mele eria. Long Mele Maat fulap pikinini mo yangfala oli no lanem lanwis blong olgeta, Vatlongos. Atikol i investikeitem hao nao ol yangfala ia oli andastandem ol defren risen blo yusum lanwis blo olgeta, we ating ol risen ia i kamaot long mining blo wod ia lanwis long Bislama. Mo tu, atikol ia i eksplenem lukluk blong ol yangfala abaot ol kastom blo ol difren lanwis komuniti blong andastandem mo jalensem ekspiriens blong olgeta lo Mele Maat lo saed blo lanwis we i stap lus. En blo atikol i lukluk lo saed blong wod ia lanwis bakagen, blong traem eksplenem haonao mining blo lanwis, we i kaveremap evri lanwis blo man ples lo Vanuatu, i save sapotem wanwan komuniti blo holem taet lo lanwis blo olgeta, espeseli long ol komuniti we lanwis blo olgeta klosap bae i lus.

Keywords

multilingualism, metalinguistic terminology, language endangerment, language shift, *storian*, *tok stori*, Bislama, Vanuatu

1 Introduction

Vanuatu is a highly multilingual country. With recent estimates of between 118 and 138 Indigenous languages belonging to the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian language family, it has the highest density of languages per person in the world (François et al., 2015; Hammarström et al., 2025). Most of these languages have been maintained by relatively small groups of just a few hundred speakers (François, 2009, 2011). This linguistic diversity developed in the context of traditional patterns of egalitarian small-scale multilingualism (Lüpke, 2016; Pakendorf et al., 2021; Vaughan & Singer, 2018), with members of each language community knowing the languages of neighbouring communities, extended family, and trading partners to varying extents, and receptive knowledge of multiple language varieties especially prized (Lindstrom, 1994).

The lives of ni-Vanuatu people remain highly multilingual today, as these traditional patterns of small-scale multilingualism are overlaid with hierarchical multilingualisms introduced through Vanuatu's colonial history. The vast majority of ni-Vanuatu are fluent speakers of the national language Bislama, an English-lexifier pidgin-creole, and will have some knowledge of one or both of the languages of education, English and French. While there is diversity in how these dynamics play out in different communities across Vanuatu (Ridge, 2025a; Walworth et al., 2021), there are also national expectations for multilingual repertoires including Indigenous Vanuatu languages.

Bislama is an English-lexifier pidgin-creole that developed through the colonial practice of 'blackbirding' (Crowley, 1990), where people from across Melanesia were taken to Queensland and elsewhere in the Pacific to work as indentured labourers on plantations in poor conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many people in coastal areas of Vanuatu were kidnapped, tricked or misled into multi-year contracts, and many never returned. Those who did return disseminated the variety of Melanesian Pidgin English that would develop into Bislama, which was designated the national language of Vanuatu in the country's constitution upon Independence in 1980. Today Bislama is used across all areas of daily life, local and national institutions, and increasingly used in printed and digital media (Crowley, 2000; François et al., 2015). Bislama has become a first language for an increasing proportion of children, especially in growing urban communities and in marriages of mixed linguistic backgrounds (Lavender Forsyth, 2025a, 2025b, this issue); Vandeputte, 2018).

Attitudes to Bislama are often mixed and contradictory, reflecting its complicated history and role in contemporary Vanuatu (Vandeputte, 2018, 2020). Bislama's English lexicon and association with a painful colonial history mean it can be dismissed as a 'broken' English, or as a language belonging to white colonisers. On the other hand, its Melanesian structure and its role in uniting Vanuatu's diverse population in pursuit of Independence and national development, make it an emblem of national and regional pride.

Bislama has a similarly complex relationship to efforts to maintain Vanuatu's Indigenous Oceanic languages. Internationally, economic incentives to shift to colonial languages are often drivers of language endangerment. However, in Vanuatu, use of English and French is usually limited to formal education and employment, and, even there, often restricted to written

mediums (Abongdia & Willans, 2014; Crowley, 2000; Willans, 2011). Instead, shift to Bislama is a more significant threat to maintenance of Indigenous languages in Vanuatu (Crowley, 2000, p. 122; François et al., 2015; Lavender Forsyth, 2024; Tryon, 1996, p. 181). Bislama is sometimes perceived as a glottophage language that consumes other languages (Vandeputte, 2018, pp. 32–34), and community members are often concerned by the incursion of Bislama vocabulary into their languages, though there is little linguistic evidence that borrowing from Bislama is increasing over time (Duhamel, 2020; Meyerhoff, 2016; Ridge, forthcoming). The availability of a national lingua franca disrupts the incentives to maintain traditional patterns of reciprocal multilingualism with neighbouring communities which have traditionally sustained Vanuatu's linguistic diversity. On the other hand, Bislama is also a vehicle for sharing national expectations around language use, for example that ni-Vanuatu should speak at least one Indigenous language of Vanuatu in addition to Bislama and English or French.

This article will explore the Bislama concept of *lanwis*, used to refer to Vanuatu's Indigenous Oceanic languages, as opposed to Bislama, English and French (Crowley, 2003, p. 147). As well as assigning a special role to Vanuatu's Indigenous languages, this categorisation draws implicit parallels between these languages and their communities, which can encourage mutual support for language maintenance throughout the national language community. The expectation that ni-Vanuatu people should know their own *lanwis* in addition to Bislama and a language of education can be protective against language loss in communities where transmission of *lanwis* is threatened. Taking inspiration from Kroskrity's (2018, 2021, 2022) concept of Multilingual Language Ideological Assemblages, this article situates the concept of *lanwis* in relation to Melanesian ideologies about identity and place, as well as exploring how this concept mediates the multilingual practices of *lanwis* communities across Vanuatu.

The study is part of a wider project looking at young people's language use in Vatlongos-speaking communities in rural Southeast Ambrym and communities in and around Port Vila (Ridge, 2025b). This article focuses on the peri-urban community of Mele Maat just outside Port Vila, who relocated from Maat village in Southeast Ambrym following a volcanic eruption in the 1950s (Tonkinson, 1968, 1985). Over the last few decades this community has faced serious threats to intergenerational transmission of Vatlongos. As early as 1991 community members were concerned that children had shifted to Bislama and had only receptive knowledge of Vatlongos, and by 2002 it was reported that many children could not understand Vatlongos either (Tonkinson, 1967, Sections RT1-008-A 28:48-29:38, RT1-018-B 18:02-18:45). Today most children learn Bislama as their sole first language, and may or may not acquire receptive and productive knowledge of Vatlongos as older children or young adults (Ridge, 2018, 2019, pp. 64–86, 2025a). Newcomers, such as women marrying into the community, often do not learn to speak Vatlongos.

Many of the Mele Maat community members who took part in this study expressed a lack of confidence in speaking Vatlongos beyond basic greetings, and many were working hard to develop their spoken Vatlongos as adults. During qualitative interviews and group workshops, I was struck by how young people drew on their experiences with other *lanwis* communities to explain, justify, criticise or reimagine language use in their own community. I wanted to understand how the Bislama concept of *lanwis*, and the implicit parallels it draws between all *lanwis* in Vanuatu, can help communities facing language loss to support and maintain their own *lanwis*.

This article will address three main questions: what does *lanwis* mean in Bislama?, what do participants believe *lanwis* is for?, and how and why do participants make comparisons with other *lanwis* groups? After explaining the methodology in section 2, the first research question is addressed in section 3 by exploring typical usage of the word *lanwis* through a concordance

of tokens in responses to short-answer questions in a sociolinguistic survey of young people in both urban and rural communities. Sections 4 and 5 focus on Mele Maat as a community experiencing language endangerment and shift. These sections draw on interviews with young people to explore their perceptions of the purpose of *lanwis*, and explicit comparisons they make between *lanwis* communities. The findings are then discussed in the wider regional context and research on multilingualism in section 6, and the article concludes by considering implications for language maintenance in Vanuatu.

2 Methodology

The interviews that are the main source of evidence in this article covered everyday language use, language acquisition over the lifetime, emotional responses to languages, metalinguistic awareness of variation and change, and language support strategies. The interviews were recorded in 2023 with young people aged 18-35 in Vatlongos speaking communities. In total, 39 young people took part in interviews (18 from Mele Maat and 21 from villages in Southeast Ambrym). An additional 11 young people took part in one or more group workshops on orthography and language support. Though this article focuses on interviews with Mele Maat participants, the analysis is also informed by experiences of interviews and workshops across both communities.

The interviews were planned, conducted and analysed in the spirit of *storian*. This Bislama term for culturally specific practices of conversation, narrative and story-telling has been used to refer to the Vanuatu instantiation of Melanesian *tok stori*, theorised as a research practice belonging to a wider umbrella of local oralities across the Pacific (Hoback, 2024, pp. 35–37; Sanga et al., 2025; Sanga & Reynolds, 2024; Thomas, 2013; Warrick, 2009). While *tok stori* values the nuances of everyday communication in specific communities, Sanga and colleagues highlight relationality and contextualisation as central to oralities across the Pacific. My positionality as a white British woman researcher, as well as my experiences of research and teaching in different Vanuatu communities and internationally, have shaped the interviews and the analysis presented in this article. One way that a *storian* approach to research interviews diverges from traditional Western interview methodologies is in the importance of reciprocity, meaning that as the researcher I also contribute experiences and explanations to the *storian* and leave space for participants to question me in turn (Sanga et al., 2025, p. 12).

Many important aspects of *storian* as a research methodology are also linguistic and cultural norms that I have learned only semi-consciously while living and working with communities in Vanuatu (cf. Hoback, 2024, p. 36). For example, culturally appropriate responses to age, gender and place influence each interview in subtle and interacting ways. The interview questions were posed in Bislama, and the interviews were conducted in Bislama with occasional code switching into Vatlongos, English and French, and brief phrases in other Vanuatu languages (Sanga et al., 2025, pp. 8–9). Bislama is the typical language choice for discussions between people with different language backgrounds in Vanuatu. For both myself and many participants in Mele Maat, using Bislama allowed more flexible expression than if we had used Vatlongos. Similarly, Bislama was chosen over English both because many participants would have struggled to express themselves fully in English, and because English is associated with prescriptive educational contexts in Vanuatu, invoking hierarchical domains that are counter to the goals of *storian* (Sanga et al., 2025, p. 6; Sanga & Reynolds, 2024, p. 176). Instead, *storian* recognises research participants as "experts in their own lives" (Sanga & Reynolds, 2024, p. 176).

The analysis was conducted using procedures for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), going through a recursive process of data familiarisation, coding, and

generating and refining themes. This process was also guided by principles of *tok stori*, in which "a joint understanding of the world is woven through narrative strands" (Sanga & Reynolds, 2024, p. 176). The themes generated in this analysis are shaped by my curiosity about the strands that weave a joint understanding of *lanwis* for participants and the wider ni-Vanuatu community. The primacy of orality in *storian* meant that I tried to stay as close to the physical context of the interviews as possible throughout the analysis process. I familiarised myself with the *storian* by first listening to the audio-recorded interviews to identify particular interviews and episodes for analysis. These sections were transcribed, translated and coded in ELAN (MPI Nijmegen, 2024), to produce time-aligned annotations that allowed me to stay close to the audio recording throughout the process of coding and refining themes, and allowed me to quickly relisten to relevant extracts during analysis and writing. In transcription and translation, I paid attention to the texture of interaction, including hesitations, repetitions, overlaps, interruptions and backchanneling.

Young people's comparisons across *lanwis* groups reveal how parallels between Indigenous Vanuatu language communities create national shared expectations for multilingual repertoires which support language maintenance. The Bislama word *lanwis* is emblematic of this set of beliefs, and has a role in wider assemblages of ideologies about the relationship between groups of people and land or place.

3 What does *Lanwis* Mean?

As in other pidgin and creole languages (Velupillai, 2015), words in Bislama approximately copy the form-meaning correspondences of words in the language that is associated with social power in the context of the language's formation, in this case English. English is therefore described as the lexifier of Bislama. On the other hand, more precise details of pronunciation, grammar and meaning are usually determined by shared features of the less socially powerful languages which are the first languages of most speakers of an emerging pidgin or creole, in this case languages of Melanesia and especially Vanuatu. As in all languages, pronunciation, grammar and meaning change over time as speakers creatively use words in new ways in new contexts.

The approximate meaning of the word *lanwis* would be easily guessed by a monolingual speaker of English. While the official spelling of the word is *lanwis*, it can be variably pronounced as /lanwis/, /laŋwis/, /lanwidʒ/, /laŋwidʒ/, with many of the alternative pronunciations even closer to the pronunciation of *language* in English, /læŋgwɪdʒ/. However, while the English word *language* would refer equally well to any of the named languages of Vanuatu, the Bislama word *lanwis* prototypically refers to the Indigenous languages of Vanuatu, so it comfortably describes Vatlongos, but less easily refers to Bislama, English or French.

Crowley's dictionary of Bislama tries to capture this distinction as a separate sense, (sense 1 being simply "language"), "vernacular (as against lingua franca)" (Crowley, 2003, p. 147). This meaning is so specific to Vanuatu's language context that it is difficult to find a good translation into English. The word *vernacular* in Crowley's definition is potentially misleading as Bislama could also be described as a vernacular, as it is a language spoken by nearly all ni-Vanuatu, usually on a daily basis and increasingly as a first language. Within Vanuatu, *vernacular* is often used to refer to Indigenous languages of Vanuatu in English language versions of official documents (Language Services Department (LSD), 2020). My use of 'Indigenous' is also potentially misleading, as although Bislama has arisen through colonialism, it is also a creation of Indigenous people of Vanuatu and wider Melanesia (Crowley, 1990). By foregrounding relationship to place, *local language* is probably the best

fit as an English translation for this sense of *lanwis*, but in English can have dismissive connotations of dialectal status, rather than of separate, mutually unintelligible languages. In this article I will use the Bislama term *lanwis* in English translations to better illustrate how it is used, with clarification of a referent language in square brackets when relevant.

As a first step to investigating how the word *lanwis* is used in Bislama, I examined how 39 participants from Mele Maat and Southeast Ambrym used the word in short responses to brief open-ended questions asked as part of a sociolinguistic survey.[1] These questions asked participants to rate the importance of Vatlongos, Bislama, English and French on a four-point scale, and give a reason for their answer. I decided to focus on these questions rather than the more in-depth interview recordings because I did not use the word *lanwis* in posing the questions, and did not ask follow-up questions in the survey, so participants were more likely to use the term in a naturalistic way without influence from my own use of the term. The word *lanwis* was used in nearly fifty responses. Because these questions only targeted these four named languages, I have also supplemented the responses with some examples from the interview data to illustrate how *lanwis* is used to refer to other Indigenous Vanuatu languages.

3.1 A set excluding Bislama, English and French

Within the survey responses, *lanwis* is most commonly used to refer to Vatlongos. When *lanwis* is used as a bare noun phrase without any modifiers, it is always interpreted to mean Vatlongos, the most relevant *lanwis* of Vanuatu in the research context.

bae yumi mas toktok lo lanwis fulap plante taem[2]
'we must speak *lanwis* [Vatlongos] a lot all the time'

yumi save se lanwis i stap jenis
'we know that *lanwis* [Vatlongos] is changing'

from bae yumi toktok lanwis oltaem bae yumi holtaet lo hem
'because if we speak *lanwis* [Vatlongos] all the time we'll keep hold of it'

In a different language community, the same statements would instead be interpreted as referring to their own local language, and in fact all these statements could be equally true of Indigenous languages of Vanuatu in general too. Already these examples demonstrate how the parallels implied by grouping these languages together under the umbrella term *lanwis* could support the spread of shared language ideologies within the national context. This example shows how *lanwis* can apply equally well to other Indigenous languages of Vanuatu:

i gat ol frens lo ol difdifren lanwis, sam oli save lanwis blo yumi, sam oli no save
'we have friends from different *lanwis*, some of them know our *lanwis*, some don't.'

[1] See (Ridge, 2019, pp. 64–86) for a description of the survey tool used.

[2] Transcription of Bislama follows spelling in Crowley's (2003) dictionary, occasionally diverging to indicate notable phonological variants. Punctuation follows conventions for English, with commas used to mark pauses and hesitations. Sometimes examples do not start with an uppercase letter or end with a full stop – this is to show that examples are extracted from a longer sentence in their original context.

Bislama is excluded from this sense of *lanwis*, as demonstrated in many examples where speakers draw a contrast between *lanwis* and Bislama. In the context of the second example, *lanwis* could be intended to mean Vatlongos, or to refer to languages of Vanuatu in general.

mama bae i talem lo lanwis, mi bae mi talem lo Bislama
'Mum would say it in *lanwis* [Vatlongos], I'd say it in Bislama'

samtaem sam turis, samtaem sam man i kam we oli no save lanwis, Bislama, bae i yusum English nomo
'sometimes some tourists, sometimes some people come who don't know *lanwis* [Vatlongos? Vanuatu languages?] or Bislama, they'll only use English.'

It is important to acknowledge that *lanwis* is also used as a synonym to English *language* that can refer to Bislama, English and French, such as in these responses to questions about French:

mi luk se hemi impoten, French lanwis
'I think it's important, the French language'

I gat fulap man sam ol frankofon oli kam, yumi yusum lanwis ia wetem olgeta
'there are lots of people who come and some of them are Francophone, and we use this language with them'

blo faenem wan wok naoia oli askem blo tugeta lanwis, English mo French i semak
'these days to find a job they ask for both languages, English and French are the same'

However, in these examples the word *lanwis* needs additional qualification, either by explicitly naming the language or by using determiners like *ia* 'this', referring back to the named language in the question, or *tugeta* 'both, all', grouping the two languages of education together. The word *lanwis* is similarly qualified in responses where it refers to Bislama, which is variously described as a *komon lanwis* 'common language', *kampani lanwis* 'company language', *mama lanwis* 'mother language' or *lanwis blo yumi evriwan* 'a language of all of us'.

These qualifications show that Bislama, English and French are less prototypical referents for the word *lanwis*, so need to be clarified or explained to override the default interpretation of the term. *Lanwis* extends more naturally to the Indigenous languages of Vanuatu. Looking more closely at the linguistic context of the word *lanwis* can give us a better idea of how the intensional meaning of *lanwis* differs from that of its English translation.

3.2 Lanwis *as a relation to place and identity*

Lanwis is a component of a wider ideological assemblage relating people to land (Lindstrom, 1994, pp. 75–76). Similar sets of beliefs about the connections between people and place are found across Vanuatu communities and Melanesia, with subtle but important distinctions (Hoback, 2024, pp. 72–79; Jourdan, 2007; McDonnell, 2023; Meyerhoff, 2003; Roe et al., 1994). The Bislama term *man ples*, literally 'man place', has been discussed as an emblem of these beliefs (Jolly, 1982, 1999, 2014; McDonnell, 2023, Chapter 2), and is used to identify people as belonging to a particular region, often bounded by linguistic groupings more than

physical geography. In the survey responses, the word *man ples* is used to explain who should speak a *lanwis* and when. *Man ples* should use *lanwis* among themselves, and only use Bislama to speak to outsiders, here referred to as *man kam*, literally 'man come'.

bae i gud blo yusum Vatlongos from hemi stret lanwis blo yumi man ples
'it's good to use Vatlongos because it's the proper *lanwis* for us, *man ples*'

Bislama hemi blo toktok lo ol man kam, olsem ol man we oli kam aotsaed, sipos hemi no man ples blo hem hemi kam lo haos ating bae yu toktok Bislama
'Bislama is for speaking to people visiting, like people who come from elsewhere, if they're not *man ples* and they come to the house maybe you'll speak Bislama.'

Lanwis is one axis of the relationship between people and place. This response shows how the need to speak *lanwis* is framed as natural consequence of being situated in a place:

From se hemi lanwis blo aelan, yumi stap lo hem i gud we yumi toktok Vatlongos
'Because it's the *lanwis* of the island, we live on it so it's good for us to speak Vatlongos'

The idea that *lanwis* relates to both place and people is also evident in the frame *lanwis blo(ng)* X 'the language of X, language POSS X'. In both the survey and interview data, *lanwis* are said to belong to people and places. In the survey responses, *lanwis* are most frequently identified as belonging to people and groups of people, with seven tokens of *mi* 'first person singular', four tokens of *yumi* 'first person inclusive', and one each of *mifala* 'first person exclusive', *yu* 'second person singular' (in generic sense), and *hem* 'third person singular' (in a hypothetical situation).

In the context of the survey responses *lanwis* was most often used to refer to Vatlongos and it therefore was not necessary to distinguish it from other *lanwis*, but in the interviews *lanwis* were frequently identified by place names, such as *lanwis blo Ambrim* 'the language of Ambrym', *lanwis blo Saot Is* 'the language of South East [Ambrym]' or *lanwis blo ples ia* 'the language of this place' to identify Vatlongos, and a variety of other place names to identify other *lanwis* such as Epi, Erakor, Lamen, Malekula, Mele, Paama, Pentecost and Tanna. The linguistic complement of the noun *lanwis* appears to be either a group of people, or a place. This example taken from an interview, shows both used in succession to clarify which language the participant is talking about:

mi toktok lo lanwis blo mi, lanwis blo Malekula.
'I spoke my *lanwis*, a *lanwis* of Malekula.'

We have seen the official languages, Bislama, English, and French, can uneasily be identified as atypical and qualified examples of *lanwis*, but they are categorically not *lanwis* that belong to people and places in Vanuatu. This lack of status was often explained as a reason for giving them a low importance rating in the survey.

Bislama, hemi no wan stret lanwis blo yumi
'Bislama, it's not a real *lanwis* of ours'

from hemi no lanwis blo Vanuatu
'because it [English] is not a *lanwis* of Vanuatu'

hemi no lanwis blo mi
'it [French] is not my *lanwis*'

Understanding the meaning of *lanwis* as one axis of the relationship between people and place explains why Indigenous Vanuatu languages are the prototypical referents of the word, and why it extends less easily to Bislama, English and French. It also helps explain exceptions like this example, where *lanwis* is used to refer to English in the context of explaining that for overseas visitors, English is their main language used for everyday conversation, unlike how English is used in Vanuatu.

Samtaem i gat sam visita we oli kam oli ovasi lo haos, we lanwis blo olgeta hemi English, English oltaem we oli iusum.
'Sometimes there are visitors to the house from overseas whose own *lanwis* is English, it's English that they use all the time.'

Another important axis in the relationship between place and people that has been widely discussed in the anthropological literature is *kastom* 'custom, culture', the local cultural practices of groups across Vanuatu (Jolly, 2014; Keesing, 1982; Lindstrom, 2008, among others). *Lanwis* is doubly important to this relationship, because it is a vital medium for sharing and maintaining knowledge about local *kastom* and other forms of knowledge. Hoback (2024, pp. 89–93) discusses the idea of knowledge embedded in language as a recurring theme across Melanesian and Pacific epistemologies.

Several participants drew on this discourse to explain the importance of Vatlongos. The simplest expression of the relationship was to equate *lanwis* with *kastom* 'custom' or *kalja* 'culture', and this formulation was used by several participants:

Lanwis hemi kalja blo yumi
'*Lanwis* [Vatlongos] is our culture'

Other participants went into greater detail about the importance of this relationship in the face of language loss and associated loss of culture, land and history. The second extract also explicitly rejects Bislama as an alternative means of maintaining cultural knowledge.

hemi impoten blo yumi toktok lo hem, from ol jeneresen we bae oli kam bae oli save holem taet Vatlongos, mo oli save holem taet kalja blo Saot Is Ambrim we i stap lo Vatlongos
'It's important for us to speak it, because future generations will be able to maintain Vatlongos and they'll be able to maintain the culture of Southeast Ambrym that is in Vatlongos'

from sipos we yumi lusum Vatlongos bae yumi lusum kalja blo yumi, ol graon blo yumi, ol nasara blo yumi, ivin ol histori tu bae yumi lusum; from histori yumi singaotem lo Vatlongos, bae yumi no singaotem long Bislama
'because if we lose Vatlongos we'll lose our culture, our land, our dancing grounds, we'd even lose our history as well; because we tell our history in Vatlongos, we don't tell it in Bislama'

The Bislama word *lanwis* figures Vanuatu's Indigenous languages as a key dimension of the relationship between culturally-defined places and groups of people. National expectations for how and when *lanwis* should be used stem from this central meaning of the term.

4 What Is *Lanwis* For?

Using the same word to identify the languages Indigenous to places and people across Vanuatu allows ideas about the purpose of *lanwis* to be shared across communities in Vanuatu, including in communities like Mele Maat where transmission and use of *lanwis* is under threat. As well as Vatlongos, many of the young participants in Mele Maat had affiliations to other *lanwis* communities, usually because either they or a parent (typically women in both cases) had married into the community from a different *lanwis* background.

Regardless of whether they were discussing Vatlongos or another *lanwis*, two main purposes for *lanwis* recurred across the interviews: proving belonging to place, and restricting communication to an in-group. Both of these functions are closely tied to the meaning of *lanwis* as a relation between place and group identity. They were both mentioned in interviews with participants in rural Southeast Ambrym as well, and are likely components of a shared understanding of the purpose of *lanwis* across Vanuatu. However, the specific framings and emotional urgency of these themes in the Mele Maat *storian* reflect the particular circumstances and concerns of a relocated, peri-urban community, where transmission of linguistic and cultural heritage has been disrupted.

4.1 Proving belonging to place

If *lanwis* is a component of the relationship between people and places, then *man ples* are expected to speak the *lanwis* of their place. This kind of logical framing was posed in responses to questions about the importance of speaking and maintaining Vatlongos in interviews in both rural Southeast Ambrym and peri-urban Mele Maat. However, the need to prove their belonging to place is more pressing for young people in urban communities (Kraemer, 2020). For young people in Mele Maat their status as *man ples* is thrown into question by their community's relocation away from their ancestral land, and because many have rarely or never returned to Ambrym. This doubtful status is often compounded by lack of ability or confidence to speak Vatlongos, foreclosing another pathway to demonstrating their legitimacy.

In the Mele Maat interviews, the connection between speaking *lanwis* and being *man ples* was repeatedly depicted in a scene of confrontation. Many of the Mele Maat participants imagined or recalled their status as *man ples* being challenged, and needing to prove their competence in speaking or even writing Vatlongos to satisfy the challenger.

Sometimes the scene was staged in a possible future, where the participant's or their community's grasp of *lanwis* had been lost. While this participant uses Vatlongos with her immediate family, she has witnessed language loss among her friends and extended family. Her community's experience of language endangerment informs her fears about a worst-case scenario where they are revealed as placeless by their inability to speak a *lanwis*.

> *Hemi olsem se, mi mi man Ambrym, mi nid blo mi save, lanwis. Olsem sipos wawantaem we mi lusum, afta, eni samting we i kam, afta bae olsem wan man we i kam insaed, be i askem se "Yu blo wea? Yu blo wanem vilij?" Afta, "Wanem lanwis blo yu?" Afta bae yu talem wanem? Hemi, hemi, hemi nid blo bae yu mas save lanwis blo yu.*

> ‘It’s like, if I’m from Ambrym, I need to know *lanwis* [Vatlongos]. Like if it happened that I lost it, then, if something happened, then if like someone came here and asked “Where are you from? What village are you from?” And then, “What’s your *lanwis*?” Then what are you going to say? It’s, it’s, it’s necessary that you must know your *lanwis*.’

In this extract the reference of the word *lanwis* shifts between specifically Vatlongos, and generically a relationship between any place in Vanuatu and its language. This shifting reference is mirrored in the move between first person singular pronoun *mi* ‘I, me’, and both specific and generic uses of the second person singular *yu* ‘you’. The slippage between a highly specific, though hypothetical, scenario, into a broadly applicable maxim – ‘you must know your *lanwis*’ – shows how categorising certain languages as *lanwis* enables the articulation of linguistic ideologies that respect the specificities of local contexts while having resonance for communities across Vanuatu.

For other participants who were less confident in their Vatlongos proficiency, this scene was not so much conjecture as a composite of their experiences of being called out for not speaking Vatlongos.

> *sipos yu talem se yu yu man Ambrym, afta yu no save lanwis blo yu, bae nara man aelan bae i luk se no, yu wan giaman man Ambrym nomo, samting olsem. Laek, blo talem, o wan man Ambrym stret bae i askem se “yu blo wea?” Sipos hemi talem, afta yu talem olsem “no mi blo Ambrym”, afta sipos hemi lanwis lo yu be yu no save rispond bak lo lanwis, bae hemi se “no, yu, yu giaman nomo se yu blo Ambrym! Hemi no,”*
>
> *ER: Mm, sori*
>
> *a-a, o samting olsem, laek mi mi ekspiriens ia fulap taem.*
>
> *ER: E sori.*

> ‘if you say you're a person from Ambrym, and then you don’t know your *lanwis*, then another person from the island will think that no, you’re just a fake Ambrym person, or something like that. Like, say, or if a proper Ambrym person asks “Where are you from?” If they say that, and then you say “No, I'm from Ambrym”, then if they speak *lanwis* [Vatlongos] to you but you can’t reply in *lanwis* [Vatlongos], then they'll say “No, you're just lying that you're from Ambrym! it's not,”
>
> ER: Mm sorry.
>
> a-a, or something like that, like I've experienced that lots of times.
>
> ER: Oh, sorry.’

This extract uses the Bislama frame of *man ples* ‘Indigenous person’, where *ples* can be swapped out for a specific place name to refer to a person Indigenous to that place. Though the use of *man* ‘man’ is undeniably a gendered term in its origins, and women in Vanuatu cultures have a different relationship to land from men (Jolly, 2014; Meyerhoff, 2003), this participant and other women who took part often identified themselves as (potential) *man ples*, so I am translating the term as gender neutral. The extract draws a distinction between *man Ambrym*, ‘person from Ambrym’, an identity that seems to be available to the Mele Maat participant (subject to further proofs), versus *man aelan* ‘person from the island’, referring to Southeast Ambrym people who live in Southeast Ambrym itself. It is the *man aelan* ‘person from the island’ who is then identified as *wan man Ambrym stret* ‘a real/proper person from Ambrym’, and the person who is qualified to test *lanwis* skills to prove *man ples* status.

This seems to be another shared national language ideology, as migrants across Vanuatu are measured against the practices of those who remain in place. McDonnell (2023, p. 38) describes how a woman who has married into another *lanwis* community, when she returns after twenty-three years, finds that despite maintaining her first *lanwis*, her status is still in question: "Words in the Aneityum language had so altered that children laughed when she spoke. She sounded like an elderly person rather than a forty-year-old *woman-ples*". Even speaking a more conservative form of the *lanwis* can index lack of continuity in place, as language change has proceeded in the interim.

Use of the *man ples* frame goes hand in hand with the language of authenticity, or lack of it. In this extract *man Ambrym* is alternately modified by the adjectives *stret* 'real, genuine, proper' or *giaman* 'pretend, fake'. Then there is a short move from being *giaman* 'fake', to the verb sense of *giaman* 'lie', as the imagined or remembered challenger accuses the participant of lying about their identity.

The same sense of precarious authenticity affects women and others who have moved into Mele Maat, often from rural communities elsewhere in Vanuatu. Long-term migrants into Mele Maat lose opportunities to speak their own first *lanwis*, usually without acquiring a new *lanwis* to prove affiliation to their new place. Lack of opportunities to learn Vatlongos were particularly unsettling for women who had migrated from communities where there was a strong expectation for wives to acquire the language of their new home. Hoback (2024, pp. 145–146) describes the strong social incentives for women marrying into a Denggan-speaking community in Southeast Malekula to learn *lanwis*, especially to prove their serious intentions to stay with their new husband and his wider family. Meyerhoff (2003) discusses how women from other islands choose to use Bislama or Tamambo, the *lanwis* of Malo, in the light of their relationship to place, and how this group is an influential cohort in the wider community.

4.2 Restricting communication

Another purpose of *lanwis* that was mentioned in interviews with both urban and rural participants, but was particularly resonant in the Mele Maat interviews, was to restrict communication to an in-group. Compared to people in rural Southeast Ambrym, people living in Mele Maat are more likely to encounter speakers of other *lanwis*, so are more likely to use Vatlongos for this purpose, or to experience other groups using their own *lanwis* to restrict communication. This use of *lanwis* is so common across Vanuatu that when *lanwis* is used as a verb, it generally implies this purpose. This is reflected in the third sense in the entry for *lanwis* in Crowley's (2003, p. 147) dictionary: "speak vernacular (as against a language that is more widely understood)".

Restricting communication to other members of the same *lanwis* community serves multiple purposes to keep knowledge private, avoid embarrassment, and ensure politeness. Young participants in Mele Maat who found it difficult to speak Vatlongos often emphasised the potential embarrassment of not being able to restrict communication in mixed spaces if they could only speak Bislama, or if they used too many Bislama loanwords when speaking Vatlongos, so that their meaning was transparent to bystanders. Unlike *lanwis*'s role in proving belonging to place however, this problem was usually framed in a light-hearted or humorous way.

A typical context for using *lanwis* to restrict communication was when speaking in public places such as buses, shops in central Port Vila, or public institutions like hospitals. One participant imagined a scenario where someone is at the hospital and needs to go to the toilet. The participant assumed a comic faux-conspiratorial tone starting with a dramatic intake of

breath followed by a stage whisper, building up to a punchline imagining the embarrassment of announcing that you want to go to the toilet in Bislama so everyone can understand.

> *taem we yumi wantem talem wan samting, olsem kaen, fo eksampol sipos yu go lo hospitel o wan samting [intake of breath], afta yu wantem talem wan samting, be bae yu mas talem lo Vatlongos, bae yu no save talem lo Bislama from bae evriwan i harem yu! [laugh] Olsem sipos yu, se fo eksampol sipos yu wantem yusum, restrum, bae yu mas talem lo lanwis [both laugh] blo bae, i defren yu nomo yu save, from sipos no bae evriwan i save se yu wantem, yes.*
> 'when we want to say something, like kind of, for example, if you go to the hospital or something [intake of breath] and then you want to say something, you have to say it in Vatlongos, you can't say it in Bislama because everyone will hear you! [laugh] Like if you, for example if you want to use, the restroom, you have to say it in *lanwis* [both laugh] so that, it's different so only you understand it, because if not everyone will know that you want to, yes.'

Another context where restricting communication is important is in competitive sport. One participant identified football as a useful focus for language revitalisation efforts, because there is an inherent motivation for boys and young men to speak *lanwis* in this context to avoid their plans being overheard by rival teams. The participant contrasted the boys' language use during football matches with their preference for speaking Bislama at home.

> *espesili ol boe, yangfala boe taem we oli go stap plei futbol, afta taem we oli go plei olsem wan tim, ale, taem we oli wantem toktok lo olgeta nomo, afta bae, hem nao bae yu harem hemia nid brokbrokem lanwis nomo i go, olsem se oli traehad a? Blo, olsem oli wantem se i blo olgeta nomo blo oli mekem bol i go insaed lo... Hemia hemia, taem olsem ia bae yu harem oli toktok olsem oli traehad we oli traehad […] Be taem oli stap lo haos olsem Bislama nomo, be taem oli go lo fil... hemia, oli traehad we oli traehad!*
> 'especially the boys, the young boys when they go play football, then when they play as a team, then, when they want to just talk among themselves, then they could, that's it, you'll feel this need for them to keep butchering *lanwis*, like they try hard eh? To, like they want to keep it to themselves to send the ball to... That's, that's, times like that you'll hear them talking and really really trying […] But when they're at home it's like, Bislama only, but when they go to the field... man, they really really try!'

Another reason that was given for using *lanwis* in this way was to politely find out information about visitors or newcomers to a community, without them knowing what was being asked. Naturally this could also extend to discussing people in less flattering ways without their knowledge. This side of restricting communication was mostly raised from the other perspective, as an outsider to other *lanwis* groups. Interestingly this was framed as an incentive to learn other *lanwis* in order to understand what people are saying about you, an experience I could relate to in my own language learning journeys.

> *mi glad tu from we mi save lanwis blo olgeta, olsem bae yumi talem olsem se, sipos yu go stap oli tokabaot yu be bae yu stil save, se olgeta oli tokabaot yu olsem.*
> ER: *Yes olsem nao!* [both laugh]
>
> 'I'm also happy because I know their *lanwis*, so like we'd say that, if they go and talk about you you'll still know what they're saying about you.

ER: Yes that's it! [both laugh]'

Participants also mentioned more serious reasons for using *lanwis* to restrict communication in situations of conflict. Some participants stressed the importance of girls learning their own *lanwis* so that if they move out of their own *lanwis* community when they marry, they can communicate any problems to their family over the phone without causing further conflict with their husband's family. Being able to hide arguments and rows from bystanders was an important reason for using *lanwis* to restrict communication, and unfortunately in Mele Maat this included hiding arguments from children, who were assumed not to have even receptive knowledge of Vatlongos.

5 Comparisons Across *Lanwis* Groups

So far, we have looked at how all Indigenous languages of Vanuatu are grouped together under the Bislama label of *lanwis*, and at some of the shared language ideologies that the implicit comparison between *lanwis* enables. This section will examine the explicit comparisons participants in Mele Maat make with other *lanwis* groups, focusing on how these comparisons might support maintenance of Vatlongos in a community where intergenerational language transmission is disrupted, and many community members struggle to communicate in their own *lanwis*.

Many participants experienced the linguistic behaviours of other *lanwis* groups through similar contexts. The most long-term reason for exposure to other *lanwis* groups was through family connections, especially on the mother's side when the participant's mother had married into the Mele Maat community from a different linguistic background. For participants with a mother from a different *lanwis* background, it was often only through spending time or living with their extended maternal family that they learned their maternal *lanwis* or experienced the sociolinguistic practices of their other *lanwis* community. Some participants were themselves women who had married into the Mele Maat community, and their direct experience of growing up in other *lanwis* communities invited comparisons with practices in Mele Maat. This group was another source of exposure to the practices of other *lanwis* groups, even for participants whose parents were both from Mele Maat.

Friendships and romantic relationships were another source of exposure to other *lanwis* communities, and were often initiated in the institutional context of Vanuatu's residential school system. Accessing education beyond primary level often requires moving away from home, staying in school dormitories or with local guardians or family members elsewhere on Efate or on other islands. As well as mixing with children from different *lanwis* backgrounds, students who stayed with local guardians in home-stay arrangements were further exposed to the linguistic practices of other groups. For both men and women, learning a romantic partner's *lanwis* was a sign of commitment, and for women, romantic relationships often involved staying with their (prospective) husband's family.

Some contact with other *lanwis* groups arose from Mele Maat's peri-urban location and proximity to the capital city Port Vila. Many participants were familiar with Mele Maat's neighbouring *lanwis* groups, especially Ifira-Mele speakers in nearby Mele, the *man ples* of the area who speak a Polynesian-outlier language, and groups from Tanna who live slightly closer to Port Vila along the main road, and share the same river and beach access. Many participants work and/or socialise in central Port Vila where they meet speakers of many different *lanwis* of Vanuatu, and observe public linguistic practices of other groups even in casual encounters.

This section will start by looking at how participants made comparisons with other *lanwis* groups in order to discuss different ways to use *lanwis*, for example using *lanwis* in different domains, locations, or interactions. For some participants the comparisons were inspiring examples of new possibilities for *lanwis* use, while for others there is an implicit criticism of how *lanwis* is used in Mele Maat. Then we will look at examples where participants have identified strategies for learning or teaching *lanwis* that are used in other *lanwis* groups. This is one the most direct ways that Vanuatu's national language context can support *lanwis* communities facing language endangerment, by sharing practices that support language maintenance. Finally, I will discuss limitations of these cross-*lanwis* comparisons, by examining places where the assumed parallels between *lanwis* communities make it difficult for participants to acknowledge real differences across sociolinguistic contexts. By projecting features of their own experiences onto the group they are describing, participants fail to recognise possibilities of engaging with *lanwis* differently, or miss opportunities for mutual support.

5.1 Different ways to use lanwis

The most common reason for participants to introduce a comparison with other *lanwis* groups into the *storian* was to point out that people in other groups use *lanwis* in ways that people in Mele Maat typically do not.

In this extract the participant explains the embarrassment that stems from not being able to use a *lanwis* to restrict communication in public, linguistically mixed environments like town. She imagines that people from other *lanwis* communities would judge her for being placeless, and ignorant of her roots. Rather than the more generic challenger we saw invoked in some of the extracts in section 4, she makes a specific comparison with people from Tanna living in a nearby peri-urban community, who she has observed use *lanwis* more consistently, avoiding Bislama.

> *Mi mi man Ambrym, sipos mi go lo publik, bae i gat tumas man, be bae mi toktok Bislama be bae olgeta i se, mi mi kam lo wan aelan, be mi no save, from olsem, nomali yu luk se, yu go lo ol aelan, o yu go lo ol pleises, sipos mi talem olsem olgeta blo Tanna, yu stap wetem olgeta bae yu neva harem se oli stori lo Bislama, afta bae oli go stret lo lanwis blo olgeta nomo. Mi ting se, sipos yumi olsem, Vatlongos, sipos i olsem bae i gud olsem. Olsem se, oli stap ia yu mitim olgeta olsem lo taon, sipos yu harem oli stap stori, bae oli no save stori lo Bislama, oli mas toktok lo lanwis blo olgeta.*
> 'I'm an Ambrym person, if I'm in public, and there's lots of people around, but I speak in Bislama, people will say, I come from an island but I don't know it, because like, normally you'll find if you go to the islands, or you go to other places, if say like, people from Tanna, if you stay with them you'll never hear them chat in Bislama, they'll just go straight into their own *lanwis*. I think, if we were like that, with Vatlongos, if it was like that it would be good. Like, if you meet them like in town, if you hear them chatting, they never chat in Bislama, they have to chat in their own *lanwis*.'

Introducing this point of comparison allows the participant to redirect from the emphasis on being judged or shamed, into the possibility of her own community doing things differently: *sipos yumi olsem* 'if we were like that'. But even after this hopeful conclusion, she circles back to her evidence for the behaviours of the Tanna community, assuring me that anyone could hear them for themselves, chatting in *lanwis* in town. The emphasis on the factuality of her

claims demonstrates how surprising she assumes everyone will find the linguistic practices of the other *lanwis* group.

Using *lanwis* with children, especially young children, was often framed as a surprising and impressive feature of language use in other *lanwis* communities by the Mele Maat participants. This is a worrying indicator of the extent of disruption of intergenerational transmission of Vatlongos in the Mele Maat community, especially because these unsolicited comparisons might be a more reliable indicator than explicit self-reports, where people may claim to use *lanwis* with children because they feel they should. However, comparisons with other *lanwis* groups are a useful way to de-normalise the expectation that children will not or cannot learn Vatlongos, as in this example where the participant compares how children use *lanwis* in Mele, with children's reactions to *lanwis* in Mele Maat:

A, taem yumi toktok lanwis, olsem se Vat-, lo Vatlongos, from taem olsem se, olsem se hemi gud a? From, bae yumi mas lanem, olsem, fo eksampol, mi bin go stap lo Mele smol taem, mi luk lo olgeta, olsem se olgeta oli toktok lo Vatlongos blo olgeta, olsem se lanwis blo olgeta, ol pikinini i go finis lo hemia hemi moa smol, afta olsem se mi stap tingting bakagen se sipos, olsem mi wis se sipos, yumi tu bae i olsem olsem bae i gud a?

ER: Okei, yes, sori

From olsem bae mi, am, mentenem lanwis blo yumi olsem bae i kaen, yumi, from fulap lo yumi naoia olsem pikinini lo vilij, fulap oli had blo toktok lanwis, olsem se ating, "bos vongien" [Vatlongos: gud naet] or "bos maakue" [Vatlongos: gud moning] nomo, oli save, be, yu go fosem samtaem bae oli toktok we bae afta yu harem save se oli ron afta bae oli laf from, en blo hem from hemi neva tok lo hem a?

'Um, when we speak *lanwis* [Vatlongos], like Vat-, in Vatlongos, because times like that, it's like it's good eh? Because, we have to learn, like, for example, I went and stayed in Mele for a bit, I saw that they, like they would speak their Vatlongos [Ifira-Mele], like their *lanwis* [Ifira-Mele], the children are at it already when they're smaller, so then it was like I was thinking to myself that if, like I wish that, if we were the same it would be good eh?

ER: Okay, yes, sorry.

Because like that we'd, um, maintain our *lanwis* [Vatlongos] like that so it would be kind of, we, because lots of us now like children in the village, lots of them find it hard to speak *lanwis* [Vatlongos], like maybe it's only "bos vongien" [Vatlongos: good night] or "bos maakue" [Vatlongos: good morning] that they know, but, if you go and force them sometimes they'll speak but then afterwards you'll hear them run off and they'll laugh about it, that's the end of it because they never speak it eh?'

The belief that *lanwis* is not for children is so deeply entrenched in the Mele Maat community that even when children are pushed to speak some Vatlongos, they react by laughing among themselves. It can be difficult to interrogate attitudes that have become so much a part of the logic of everyday life, but exposure to other groups who are successfully transmitting their own *lanwis* to their young children has enabled this participant to describe and question these beliefs.

Another interesting aspect of this extract is how much easier it is for the participant to use the category *lanwis*, instead of the fairly recently introduced specific language name, *Vatlongos*. The name *Vatlongos* was chosen by community translators working towards a Bible in Vatlongos (Wycliffe Bible Translators, 2015), and in the aftermath of the publication of the New Testament in 2015 has been gaining popularity and wider usage. It is interesting that this

participant hesitates over using the language name, and appears to be using it as a calque for the sense of *lanwis* described in section 3, using it as if it is also a locally determined label in the phrase *Vatlongos blong olgeta* 'their Vatlongos' to refer to the Ifira-Mele language used in Mele. Crowley (2004, pp. 9–10) discusses the absence of named languages in Paamese, and the situation in Vatlongos seems to have been very similar prior to the Bible Translation project.

This participant was also surprised at how the Mele community taught at least some *lanwis* to anyone visiting the community, even very short-term visitors. Witnessing the extreme example of teaching some *lanwis* to quite distant people gives her hope that in Mele Maat they might be able to teach *lanwis* to children.

> *wan samting we mi i olsem mi luk lo, i gud lo olgeta, olsem fasin we afta oli stap mentenem lanwis blo olgeta from oli toktok lo eni kaen man we i go stap lo vilij, iven olsem, go mekem wan woksop o wan man i mekem wan smol samting, be oli stil lanem hem we hemi mas lanem smolsmol. Afta mi stap tingting bakagen sipos, olsem ia, sipos yumi lo ples ia ating bae yumi mekem lo ol pikinini blo yumi ating bae i gud olsem blo holemtaet lanwis.*
> 'one thing that I can see is good that they do, like this habit that then maintains their *lanwis*, because they speak to anyone who goes into the village, even like, going to do a workshop or if someone comes and does something small, but they'll still teach them so they have to learn a little. So then I was thinking to myself again if, like this, if us here maybe did the same thing to our children maybe that would be good like to hold onto *lanwis*.'

Other participants were also surprised at how different *lanwis* communities used *lanwis* to communicate with newcomers and adult learners. Participants who had spent time with family from other *lanwis* groups were surprised firstly by how their family members used *lanwis* to the exclusion of Bislama while at home, and secondly by how they persevered in using *lanwis* despite their own presence as someone who did not speak or even understand the *lanwis* well. While the participants who had experienced this immersive approach to learning their other *lanwis* all commented on how difficult it was, they were also surprised to find they quickly learned to speak the *lanwis* in these circumstances. One participant described how after a few years staying with her mother's family members to attend school on another island, she started to speak her mother's *lanwis* with her mother when she returned to Mele Maat as well, although her mother's earlier attempts to teach her some *lanwis* had not been successful.

> *taem mi kam ale mami tu i stap toktok lo mi afta mi save, from mi stap lowe kaen olgeta oli no toktok Bislama oli lanwis nomo, evri dei evri dei lanwis afta mekem se mi mi mas brokem hed blo mi nomo blo toktok lo lanwis [laugh]*
> 'when I came back Mum started talking to me too now I knew it, because when I was there people there don't talk Bislama they just speak *lanwis*. Every day, every day *lanwis* so I had to break my head to speak in *lanwis* [laugh]'

These experiences in other *lanwis* communities helped the participants to understand that it is possible to learn a new *lanwis* as a teenager or young adult, and also demonstrated ways to learn and teach *lanwis*.

5.2 Strategies for learning or teaching lanwis

Many participants drew on their experiences with other *lanwis* communities when responding to questions about strategies for supporting revitalisation of Vatlongos in Mele Maat, giving examples of ways to learn or teach *lanwis*.[3] These strategies ranged from very broad advice like the need to keep speaking *lanwis* a lot at every opportunity, or to start small and build up, through to very specific ideas for resource creation based on experience of language support projects facilitated by outsider linguists in other communities.

Many of the strategies that were new to the Mele Maat participants related to encouraging and utilising learners' receptive knowledge before they had developed productive speaking skills. Some of the women who had married into the Mele Maat community described feeling frustrated or even rejected when they first moved to Mele Maat, because people were quick to switch to Bislama if they could not immediately respond appropriately in Vatlongos, even when they could understand what was said and were keen to learn more. In the other direction, one participant, who was born in Mele Maat but had been visiting her partner's family, was surprised that even when she initiated exchanges in Bislama, her partner's family members would reply in their own *lanwis*, which helped her gradually learn important phrases.

> *From mi mi blo difren ples, mi go mi stap talem "moning", mi wekap mi kam, afta mi mi talem "moning" lo olgeta bambae olgeta bae oli givimbak lo lanwis blo olgeta, se "teao marie" [Ifira Mele: gud moning] bae oli, olsem afta olsem se olgeta oli stap lanem mi, lo ol smolsmol steps olsem ia nao blo mi mi save [laugh]*
> 'Because I'm from a different place, I go and stay and I say "moning" [Bislama: morning], when I wake up and come out, then I'd say "moning" [Bislama: morning] to them, then they'd reply to me in their own lanwis, saying "teao marie" [Ifira Mele: good morning] they'd, like that then it's like, they're teaching me in little steps like that so that I can do it [laugh]'

One strategy for testing and rewarding receptive knowledge that was mentioned by a few participants was giving instructions in *lanwis* for the learner to follow. This is a good way to motivate learners in early stages of language learning, when receptive knowledge is growing but is not as obvious as progress in productive skills. This participant describes how the strategy combines with the motivating factor of social pressure to be helpful and respectful to her mother's relatives, and avoid being seen as lazy.

> *laek hemi pusum mi blo mi mas save from lukaot olsem talem sam samting mi no mekem oli tok lo mi se "e, mifala talem lo yu yu mekem hemia be afta yu no mekem from wanem?", from hemia nao mi no save*
> 'like it pushed me to have to learn because if not, like if they said something and I didn't do it they'd tell me off like "hey, we told you do this, so why didn't you do it?", but that's why, because I didn't understand'

[3] This article focuses on language learning strategies outside of contexts of formal instruction, which are relatively understudied in the literature (De Houwer, 2019). Opportunities to incorporate Vatlongos into early years education in line with Vanuatu's National Language Policy (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 2012) have been taken up to various extents in primary schools in Southeast Ambrym (see Franjieh et al., 2025, see companion issue). However, children in Mele Maat attend linguistically-mixed primary schools in Mele and Port Vila which teach in Bislama, and kindergartens in Mele Maat use Bislama and English rather than Vatlongos (Ridge, 2019, p. 75). There are currently no informal educational settings to learn Vatlongos in Mele Maat, although the possibility of establishing classes for adults to learn Vatlongos was raised as a language maintenance strategy in interviews and workshop discussions during this project.

This strategy is often supplemented with gestures and physical demonstrations, described as *mekem aksen* 'making actions'. Hoback (2024, p. 145) mentions similar multimodal strategies to support language acquisition in Denggan-speaking communities in Malekula.

> *olsem oli save, se mi mi no save lanwis ia [island name], be taem oli toktok afta oli stap mekem aksen tu se yu, yu toktok lo lanwis we [island name] be bae hemi aksen tu blo mekem olsem, olsem, olsem, o bae oli stap talem wanem olsem, be oli mekem ol aksen olsem mi andastandem smol*
> 'it's like, they know that I don't know [island name] *lanwis* but when they speak they make actions too like, you speak [island name] *lanwis* but like with actions as well to do like this, like this, like this, or they'll say whatever but they do actions so that I'll understand a bit'

The various strategies for teaching and learning *lanwis* that participants were exposed to in their relationships with other *lanwis* communities were a rich source of knowledge in thinking about how to support the maintenance of their own *lanwis*.

5.3 Limits of comparison

Although this article has focused on the positive potential of drawing parallels between different *lanwis* groups in Vanuatu, it is also important to acknowledge that encounters with other *lanwis* groups will not automatically challenge deep-rooted beliefs about language use. One reason for this is that the parallels are drawn in both directions, and participants project features of their own *lanwis* community and personal experiences onto their perception of language use in other groups. In the case of experiences with communities who have maintained their *lanwis* more successfully, sometimes participants acknowledged the very different outcomes, but struggled to imagine corresponding differences in underlying beliefs about language.

In this extract, the participant begins by describing how extensively Mele people use their *lanwis* in daily life. However, she goes on to position the Mele community as the exception, by describing how a neutral bystander who had never been to Mele would be shocked to see *lanwis* used so much. She assumes that the norm for language use in Vanuatu is more similar to her own experiences in Mele Maat.

> *Okei, am, lo tingting, lo tingting blo mi, yes, wan saed olsem lo kaen ia olgeta lo Mele oli mekem, ale, moning, olsem brekfest, oli toktok lanwis gogo... Sipos olsem man we i neva go lo Mele, sipos hemi go, bae, i harem olgeta, bae hemi sek, kasem we i stap lukluk oli go lo garen, oli wokabaot folem rod, oli toktok lanwis, iven gogo lo ol pikinini. Be ating yumi tu, bae yumi, yumi save mekem. Yumi save mekem, be sipos we, i depen lo, olsem we yumi talem, olsem, mi mi laki olsem se mi toktok lo hem from, Dadi blo Mami, olsem se hemi stap, rao lo mifala blo mas toktok lo hem, be, olsem se, bae yumi talem se, lo ol nara ples, ating be olgeta tu bae oli mas mekem kaen olsem.*
> 'Okay, um, in my, in my opinion, yes, one side of the kind of thing that people in Mele are doing, so, in the morning, like starting from breakfast, they keep on and on speaking *lanwis*... If someone who's never been to Mele, if they went they'd, if they heard them, they'd be shocked, and then if they watched them go the garden, they walk along the road, they speak *lanwis* even to the children. But maybe us too, we could, we can do it. We can do it, but if, it depends on, like we were saying, like, me, I'm lucky like that I can speak it because, my

> Mum's Dad, he would like, shout at us that we have to speak it, but, like, let's say, in other places, maybe they must do that kind of thing too.'

She is much more hesitant to suggest that Mele Maat could use *lanwis* in a similar way, as shown in the hedging, false starts and repetition at the point of transition to talking about *yumi* 'us, we, 1PL.INCL'. Part of her reluctance in imagining this possible future is that she assumes it comes at the cost of interpersonal conflict. She counts herself and her siblings lucky that they are relatively strong Vatlongos speakers compared to their peers in Mele Maat, and attributes their skills to her maternal grandfather's insistence that they speak *lanwis*, telling them off if they used Bislama in front of him. Her belief that children naturally prefer to speak Bislama over *lanwis*, rooted in her lived experience in Mele Maat, means that she can only deduce that the widespread use of *lanwis* by Mele children must be the result of disciplinary measures. This is an especially worrying conclusion to draw given evidence from other contexts that shaming from older generations can accelerate language shift (Florey, 2004). But despite spending a lot of time in the other community, she still finds it hard to believe or even to perceive that children might freely choose to speak *lanwis* in a context where *lanwis* is regularly used in everyday life by their wider community.

The assumption of similarity between *lanwis* ideologies in different *lanwis* communities also challenged the ability of newcomers into Mele Maat to perceive the extent of language endangerment in the community. One woman who had married into the Mele Maat community many years earlier, described how the current project had prompted conversations with other wives from outside the community, where they discussed their disbelief that they had not yet learned Vatlongos. She gave these examples of what the wives had been saying among themselves:

> *"Man, yumi kam stap lo ples ia hamas yia, yumi no save lanwis"*
> '"Man, how many years have we been here and we don't know *lanwis* [Vatlongos]"'

> *"mifala no save, mi kam stap hamas yia be yufala no lanem mi,"*
> '"We don't know, I've come and lived here for how many years but you lot haven't taught me"'

The sense of frustration, bordering on accusations that their Mele Maat husbands and in-laws have been withholding *lanwis* from them, reflects the different interpersonal meanings assigned to language acquisition for newcomers in their own *lanwis* communities. This participant described how in her own *lanwis* community, women who married in from elsewhere would learn the *lanwis* within a few years, as people would speak *lanwis* to them as soon as it was clear they were going to stay, and eventually their acquisition of *lanwis* would demonstrate they now belonged in their new home village.

> *Yes, olsem lo [place name] sipos we, ol man difren ples, sipos we oli lo Mele, i mared i kam lo [place name], bae i kam stap gogo olsem se bae i kam stap, be bae oli stap, toktok lanwis lo hem nao. Bae i lanwis gogo olsem se, bae i stap hamas yia be naoia, olsem se, i nomo stap lo vilij blo hem i kam kasem lowe, olsem naoia olsem se i save gud lanwis, olgeta i kam lo ples blo hem, i kam lo ples blo hem i toktok lanwis blo hem.*
> 'Yes, like in [place name] if, people from different places, like if they come from Mele and marry into [place name], they'll come and stay for a while like they're coming to stay, then they'll stay, then people will speak *lanwis* to them. They'll speak *lanwis* until like, when

> they've stayed for a few years, like, they're not living in their own village they came from over there, like then it's like they know *lanwis* well, they'll leave their own place, they'll come to their place and speak its *lanwis*.'

With this expectation that *lanwis* is going to be shared as a mark of acceptance and belonging in a new place, newcomers might view the failure to transmit *lanwis* to them through a frame of interpersonal rejection or rudeness on the part of their new community. Rather than considering that many people in Mele Maat find it difficult to speak Vatlongos themselves, she instead suggests that they look down on their own *lanwis*, while the outsiders have a greater appreciation for *lanwis*.

> *mi luk tu olsem, mifala olsem, olgeta, mifala aot we mifala i kam, olsem se, sam oli luk nating olsem, lanwis ia oli luk nating nomo olsem. Mifala olsem, mifala aotsaed we mifala i kam insaed, mifala olsem, mifala wantem, olsem, mifala wantem, se bae oli lanem mifala olsem, lanwis blo olgeta, be from taem we mifala i kam oli no stap lanwis lo mifala, olsem mifala i, taem we oli Bislama, mifala tu i Bislama olsem se, i difdifren nomo.*
> 'I think also like, us like, those of us from outside who've come here, it's like, some people look down on this *lanwis*, they look down on this *lanwis* like it's nothing. But us, like those of us from outside who've come into the community, we like, we want like, we want them to teach us like, their *lanwis*, but because when we arrive they don't speak *lanwis* with us, like we, when they use Bislama, we use Bislama too like, it's just different.'

The repetitions, pauses (marked with commas), and use of hesitation forms (*olsem* 'like') reflect the participant's difficulty in stating that she, and the other wives, want to learn *lanwis*, a topic which is fraught with the association of exclusion from her community of many years. The vulnerability of acknowledging this thwarted desire might be part of the reason for presenting the stronger expressions of frustration in the form of reported speech attributed to others, and for dwelling on the comparison with her original *lanwis* community to make her point by contrast, rather than directly addressing her current situation. The use of the reduplicated form *difdifren* 'different' to describe language use in Mele Maat is also revealing, as this word has more negative connotations in Bislama than in its English source word, reflected in Crowley's (2003, p. 68) dictionary in a second sense 'unusual, strange, odd, weird'.

If newcomers to *lanwis* communities experiencing shift to Bislama apply the same interpretive frameworks to language choice as they do in their home communities, this could accelerate language shift as the community's *lanwis* becomes associated with negative emotional connotations like rejection, exclusion and shame. Without any open discussion, newcomers are likely to follow what they see as their new community's preference for communicating with them in Bislama.

However, this participant was also one of the most enthusiastic about the language support workshops that took place as part of this project. As well as prompting frank discussions with her fellow wives from other communities, she also used the workshops as a premise for conversations with her husband about her desire to learn *lanwis*, and for setting up new routines for them to practice *lanwis* together with their children at set times in the home. This is a hopeful indicator that language revitalisation efforts informed by a cross-linguistic perspective can attend to the fraught emotional landscape of language endangerment and help break negative cycles that accelerate language shift. Forums that explicitly acknowledge language loss and make space for *storian* around language use can harness community members' varied experiences of other *lanwis* groups to support maintenance of threatened *lanwis*, and help

community members see beyond unhelpful language ideologies that feel like self-evident truths in the context of seemingly inevitable language loss.

6 Discussion

This section will situate the study within research on sociolinguistic and cultural frameworks in Melanesia, as well as wider research on multilingual language use, before looking at implications for language maintenance and endangerment in Vanuatu.

Lanwis is one of a number of terms in Bislama that rely on a relationship to particular places and groups for their specific interpretation. Jolly (2014, p. 252) explains that *kastom* ('custom, culture', see section 3.2) can be interpreted both "as locally specific and as nationally generic", a description that applies equally well to the interpretation of *lanwis*. Anthropologists have stressed the political usefulness of this equivocation in how the concept of *kastom* has been used to unite disparate groups across Vanuatu to resist colonialism and establish a new national identity in the aftermath of Independence (Jolly, 2014; Keesing, 1982; Lindstrom, 2008; Tonkinson, 1982). The place-based ambiguity of *lanwis* has similar potential to bring together groups across Vanuatu with the shared goal of supporting linguistic and cultural vitality.

These place-based terms in Bislama are interpreted in opposition to concepts figured as colonial or imported from outside. Jolly stresses that the generic sense of *kastom* is constructed in the face of experiences of colonisation, to identify "indigenous culture as opposed to those ways identified as exogenous or irrevocably European" (Jolly, 2014, p. 252). The phrase *man ples* 'Indigenous people, people belonging to a place' was contrasted with antonyms in the *storian* involved in this project. When it refers to people belonging to a specific place, it can be opposed *man kam* 'people who've come from elsewhere' (see Johansen, 2012), and when used to refer to all ni-Vanuatu or Indigenous people around the world, it is usually contrasted with *waetman* 'white people'. Section 3.1 demonstrates that the concept of *lanwis* is similarly constructed in opposition to the languages introduced to the region through colonisation. Other place-related nouns in Bislama such as *vilej* 'village' and *aelan* 'island' show a similar ambiguity of reference. In the extracts presented in this article *aelan* is sometimes interpreted to specifically mean Southeast Ambrym, and at other times to stand in for any place in Vanuatu that people could belong to. In this generic sense, *vilej* and *aelan* are constructed in opposition to *taon* 'town' – urban places and lifestyles. The linguistic distribution and scope of place-based terms could be investigated more closely as larger corpora of Bislama texts become available (e.g. Barth, 2020; Thieberger, 2023).

This study demonstrates the importance of investigating the meaning of metalinguistic terms in Bislama, especially as Bislama is often the contact language for researchers conducting sociolinguistic research. Subtle differences in the meaning of Bislama terms and their English or French source words can have important consequences for the analysis of language attitudes. To give just one example, Vandeputte (2018, pp. 31–32) discusses how Bislama, like other creole languages, is doubly criticised for not measuring up to the prestigious linguistic status of its lexifier languages English and French, and for being impure and inauthentic when it is used in styles that resemble the lexifier languages too closely. She cites statements like *bislama i no wan lanwis* 'Bislama is not a *lanwis*' and *bislama i no wan stret lanwis* 'Bislama is not a real *lanwis*', among evidence for the first criticism, that Bislama is not seen as a fully-fledged, independent language with all the institutional recognition that that implies for languages like English and French. However, if her participants intended the narrow sense of *lanwis* referring to Indigenous languages of Vanuatu, it may be that the speakers' criticisms in these particular quotations align more closely with the second criticism

Vandeputte identifies, that Bislama is too English-like and insufficiently authentic to serve as a *lanwis* of *man ples*. Unpacking conceptual differences between Bislama lexemes and equivalents in its lexifier languages could help researchers across different fields who conduct research in Bislama.

Looking closely at metalinguistic terminology in Bislama is a useful starting point for investigating the conceptual framework underlying contemporary multilingualisms in Vanuatu, which can be understood as a complex network of overlapping Multilingual Language Ideological Assemblages (Kroskrity, 2018, 2021, 2022). Kroskrity (2018, 2022) compares different ideologies of multilingualism in two Native American language communities and how these sets of beliefs and practices play out in histories of language maintenance, shift and language revitalisation efforts in each community. A similar attention to how language ideologies interact with political and economic ideologies could develop our understanding of different outcomes for *lanwis* communities in Vanuatu, as well as enabling the identification of ideological resources available within and between *lanwis* communities. While there are undoubtedly important differences in the language ideologies of different *lanwis* groups in Vanuatu (see for example Schneider, 2018), communities also have access and input to national ideological assemblages, through social and institutional contexts for mixing between groups, and through knowledge and use of Bislama itself.

The category of *lanwis* is an example of a context-specific understanding of multilingual language use that is very different from traditional Western models of languages as bounded systems used by monolingual speakers within national borders. Instead, languages spoken by culturally distinct but porous communities are grouped together in opposition to Vanuatu's wider languages of communication that were introduced through colonisation. All the languages identified as *lanwis* are expected to serve similar communicative purposes, and share parallel indexicality as markers of group identity and relationship to place. However, boundaries between *lanwis* remain central to this categorisation, as mutual unintelligibility is key to their role in restricting communication to exclusive groups. This emphasis on boundaries means that Vanuatu's multilingual practices cannot be subsumed under a translanguaging analysis of multilingual language use. Translanguaging approaches question the assumptions of Western nationalistic models of language use, but tend to deny the importance of boundaries between languages (Wei, 2018). The Bislama concept of *lanwis* is a valuable example of how language users in multilingual societies make sense of multilingual language use, beyond the highly urbanised and globalised settings that have been the main focus of translanguaging research (Vaughan & Singer, 2018).

Although shift to Bislama is a major threat to the maintenance of Vanuatu's Indigenous languages (Crowley, 2000; François et al., 2015; Lavender Forsyth, 2024, 2025, this issue), Bislama is also a vehicle for the dissemination of language ideologies across Vanuatu which can support language maintenance. The expectation that everyone should know at least one *lanwis* creates social pressure that can motivate language maintenance or acquisition, with the caveat that too much social pressure or shame can be counterproductive (Florey, 2004). We have seen that there are shared ideologies around the purpose and role of *lanwis*, which can be used to prove belonging to place and restrict communication in a variety of settings. Clearly defined roles for particular languages within a multilingual language ecology have been argued to be key to language maintenance (Lewis & Simons, 2016). When the assignment of these roles is disrupted within a particular *lanwis* community in Vanuatu, the national understanding of the role of *lanwis* is a potential insurance that could slow the pace of language loss. In particular, the epistemological framing of *lanwis* as an instantiation of *kastom* knowledge and cultural practices assigns a high level of prestige to Vanuatu's Indigenous languages (Hoback, 2024, pp. 139–142).

The Bislama category of *lanwis* facilitates the spread of these supportive language ideologies, because a claim about one *lanwis* is a claim about *lanwis* in general. On the other hand, it is less protective against language loss resulting from shift to another *lanwis*, which some linguists have suggested is a more serious threat to maintenance of Vanuatu's linguistic diversity (Crowley, 2000; Duhamel, 2025, this issue; Vari-Bogiri, 2005). By referring interchangeably to any Indigenous language of Vanuatu, the category of *lanwis* may encourage ni-Vanuatu to believe that knowledge of any one *lanwis* is sufficient, replacing the region's traditional equitable models of small-scale multilingualism (Lüpke, 2016; Pakendorf et al., 2021), with a hierarchical model of multilingual repertoires consisting of a single *lanwis*, Bislama for inter-group communication, and either English or French for education.[4] This demonstrates the importance of documenting multilingual language use, and exploring the ways in which different models of multilingualism support or threaten the maintenance of endangered languages (Di Carlo et al., 2021; Good, 2023; Lüpke, 2021).

7 Conclusion

The Bislama word *lanwis* 'language' is prototypically used to refer to Vanuatu's Indigenous languages as opposed to the national language Bislama, and the languages of education, English and French. Unlike Bislama, English and French which were all introduced to the region through European colonisation, Vanuatu's Indigenous languages have a key role in constituting relationships between people and places that are central to cultural identity in Vanuatu. Ni-Vanuatu people are therefore expected to know at least one *lanwis*, reflecting their affiliation with a local community.

Grouping all Vanuatu's Indigenous languages together under the label of *lanwis* allows parallel beliefs about their role in social life to be shared across *lanwis* communities. Two purposes for use of *lanwis* that recurred in interviews with participants in this project, and had a clear link to the place-based meaning of *lanwis* in Bislama, were proving belonging to a place, and restricting communication to an in-group. These functions were especially pressing for participants in the peri-urban community of Mele Maat, where intergenerational transmission of both *lanwis* and cultural knowledge is disrupted.

Categorisation as *lanwis* also invites both implicit and explicit parallels to be drawn between *lanwis* and *lanwis* communities across Vanuatu. Young people in Mele Maat used explicit comparisons with other *lanwis* communities to discuss different ways that *lanwis* could be used in their own community, and to identify strategies for teaching and learning *lanwis*. These comparisons show the potential for ni-Vanuatu in threatened *lanwis* communities to draw strength from the wider national context, as practices in other *lanwis* groups are seen as possibilities for their own community. But we have also seen examples where the assumption of similarity between *lanwis* communities made it difficult for participants to recognise differences in the sociolinguistic context across *lanwis* group boundaries, restricting the usefulness of witnessing language use in other communities, and making it more difficult for members of other groups to recognise language loss in a threatened community.

Ideally, the framework of metalinguistic terminology in Bislama could facilitate national discussions about the importance of cultural and linguistic heritage, experiences of language endangerment and strategies for countering language loss. However, the experiences of young people in Mele Maat show that contact with other *lanwis* groups is not by itself enough to

[4] One participant who had married into the Mele Maat community described how she would accidentally mix Vatlongos with her first *lanwis* when returning to her parents' village, to the confusion of her relatives, suggesting that in the process of learning Vatlongos she had categorised it with her first *lanwis*.

support *lanwis* maintenance. More structured opportunities for members of *lanwis* groups across Vanuatu to come together to share experiences and practices, informed by experiences of Indigenous language communities in (post-)colonial contexts elsewhere, could be a useful starting place for enabling Vanuatu's many *lanwis* communities to support each other in maintaining Vanuatu's diverse linguistic heritage.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the young people who took part in the 2023 research activities, including Alisen Japeth, Andre Joe, Brian Tahun, Bruce Orah, Creline Dick, Edward Tios, Elizabeth Shem, Ellena Charlie, Fiona Makilibu, Hanson Kiri, Hungai Markveri, Jima Sevio, Jimmy Enock, Joie Jokop, Jonathan Mark, Julian Peter, Karl Robert Mahit, Lesbeth Jonah, Lisa Evievi, Lyn Wesly, Marinette Lesly, Mary Lulu, Mawa Peter, Maxon Cyrus, Moses Johnny, Nep Nep Simon, Pamela Kalpram, Ruben Sickey, Salome George, Samantha Max, Sisi Metisou, Sylvie Johnny, Tahire Ezekiel, and Thelma Milton. I would also like to thank the Southeast Ambrym Port Vila Development Committee for administrative and logistical support. This research was supported by the Marsden Fund Council from New Zealand Government funding, administered by the Royal Society Te Apārangi, grant number MFP-MAU2105.

References

Abongdia, J.-F. A., & Willans, F. (2014). The position of English globally and nationally: A comparison of Cameroon and Vanuatu. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, *15*(1), 57–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2013.801062

Barth, W. (2020). *Bislama_Corpus* (PLAIN CCC1-Bislama). PARADISEC. https://dx.doi.org/10.26278/YVH2-ZE84

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Crowley, T. (1990). *Beach-la-Mar to Bislama: The emergence of a national language in Vanuatu*. Clarendon Press.

Crowley, T. (2000). The language situation in Vanuatu. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, *1*(1), 47–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664200008668005

Crowley, T. (2003). *A new Bislama dictionary* (2nd ed.). Institute of Pacific Studies; Pacific Languages Unit.

Crowley, T. (2004). The question of dialect and language in Oceania. In J. Bowden & N. P. Himmelmann (Eds.), *Papers in Austronesian subgrouping and dialectology* (pp. 3–20). Australian National University.

De Houwer, A. (2019). Uninstructed language acquisition in multiple language learners. In J. Darquennes, J. C. Salmons & W. Vandenbussche (Eds.), *Language contact: An international handbook* (Vol. 1, pp. 185–197). Walter de Gruyter.

Di Carlo, P., Ojong Diba, R. A., & Good, J. (2021). Towards a coherent methodology for the documentation of small-scale multilingualism: Dealing with speech data. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *25*(4), 860–877. https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069211023144

Duhamel, M.-F. (2020). Borrowing from Bislama into Raga, Vanuatu: Borrowing frequency, adaptation strategies and semantic considerations. *Asia-Pacific Language Variation*, *6*(2), 160–195.

Duhamel, M.-F. (2025). Do dominant languages affect linguistic diversity in Vanuatu? A call for further research. *Te Reo*, *68*(2), X–Y.

Florey, M. (2004). Countering purism: Confronting the emergence of new varieties in a training program for community language workers. *Language Documentation and Description*, *2*, 9–27.

François, A. (2009). The languages of Vanikoro: Three lexicons and one grammar. In B. Evans (Ed.), *Discovering history through language: Papers in honour of Malcolm Ross* (pp. 103–126). Australian National University.

François, A. (2011). Social ecology and language history in the northern Vanuatu linkage: A tale of divergence and convergence. *Journal of Historical Linguistics*, *1*(2), 175–246.

François, A., Franjieh, M., Lacrampe, S., & Schnell, S. (2015). The exceptional linguistic density of Vanuatu. In A. François, S. Lacrampe, M. Franjieh, & S. Schnell (Eds.), *The languages of Vanuatu: Unity and diversity* (pp. 1–21). Asia-Pacific Linguistics Open Access.

Franjieh, M., Clark, E., Corbett, G. G., & Grandison, A. (2025). Vernacular language use in schools: Teachers' perspectives on implementing the Vanuatu national language policy. *Te Reo*, *68*(3), 106–130.

Good, J. (2023). Adapting methods of language documentation to multilingual settings. *Journal of Language Contact*, *15*(2), 341–375.

Hammarström, H., Forkel, R., Haspelmath, M., & Bank, S. (2025). *Glottolog* (Version 5.2) [Dataset]. https://glottolog.org/

Hoback, B. (2024). *A sociolinguistic study of language documentation: Denggan (Banam Bay, Malekula, Vanuatu)* [Doctoral dissertation, Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington]. Open Access Institutional Repository. https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.25272091

Johansen, G. K. (2012). *Yu Blong Wea? An anthropological study of Vanuatu land struggle* [Master's thesis, University of Copenhagen].

Jolly, M. (1982). Birds and banyans of South Pentecost: Kastom in anti-colonial struggle. *Mankind*, *13*(4), 338–356. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1982.tb00999.x

Jolly, M. (1999). Another time, another place. *Oceania*, *69*(4), 282–299. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1834-4461.1999.tb00374.x

Jolly, M. (2014). *Women of the place: Kastom, colonialism and gender in Vanuatu*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315077147

Jourdan, C. (2007). Linguistic paths to urban self in postcolonial Solomon Islands. In M. Makihara & B. B. Schieffelin (Eds.), *Consequences of contact: Language ideologies and sociocultural transformations in Pacific societies* (pp. 30–48). Oxford University Press.

Keesing, R. M. (1982). Kastom in Melanesia: An overview. *Mankind*, *13*(4), 297–301.

Kraemer, D. (2020). Planting roots, making place: Urban autochthony in Port Vila Vanuatu. *Oceania*, *90*(1), 40–54. https://doi.org/10.1002/ocea.5239

Kroskrity, P. V. (2018). On recognizing persistence in the Indigenous language ideologies of multilingualism in two Native American Communities. *Language & Communication*, *62*, 133–144. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.04.012

Kroskrity, P. V. (2021). Language ideological assemblages within linguistic anthropology. In A. Burkette & T. Warhol (Eds.), *Crossing borders, making connections: Interdisciplinarity in linguistics* (pp. 129–142). Walter de Gruyter.

Kroskrity, P. V. (2022). Multilingual language ideological assemblages: Language contact, documentation and revitalization. *Journal of Language Contact*, *15*(2), 271–301.

Language Services Department (LSD). (2020). *The national language policy of the Republic of Vanuatu*. Government of Vanuatu. https://lsd.gov.vu/images/Legislation/policies/the-national-language-policy-of-the-republic-of-vanuatu.pdf

Lavender Forsyth, G. A. (2025a). Language endangerment in Vanuatu: Bislama likely does pose a threat in the world's most language-diverse country. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *12*(1), 1462. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05866-w

Lavender Forsyth, G. A. (2025b). Language endangerment in Vanuatu's 2020 census: Investigation of a national dataset for 250,000 people. *Te Reo*, *68*(2), X–Y.

Lewis, M. P., & Simons, G. F. (2016). Sustaining language use: Perspectives on community-based language development. SIL International.

Lindstrom, L. (1994). Traditional cultural policy in Melanesia (Kastom polisi long kastom). In L. Lindstrom & G. M. White (Eds.), *Culture-kastom-tradition: Developing cultural policy in Melanesia* (pp. 67–81). Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Lindstrom, L. (2008). Melanesian kastom and its transformations. *Anthropological Forum*, *18*(2), 161–178.

Lüpke, F. (2016). Uncovering small-scale multilingualism. *Critical Multilingualism Studies*, *4*(2), 35–74.

Lüpke, F. (2021). Patterns and perspectives shape perceptions: Epistemological and methodological reflections on the study of small-scale multilingualism. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *25*(4), 878–900.

McDonnell, S. (2023). *My land, my life: Dispossession at the frontier of desire*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Meyerhoff, M. (2003). Claiming a place: Gender, knowledge, and authority as emergent properties. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The handbook of language and gender* (pp. 302–326). Blackwell.

Meyerhoff, M. (2016). Borrowing from Bislama into Nkep (East Santo, Vanuatu): Quantitative and qualitative perspectives. *Language and Linguistics in Melanesia*, *34*(1), 77–94.

MPI Nijmegen, T. L. A. (2024). *ELAN* (Version 6.8) [Computer software]. Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan

Pakendorf, B., Dobrushina, N., & Khanina, O. (2021). A typology of small-scale multilingualism. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *25*(4), 835–859.

Ridge, E. (2018). Language contexts: Vatlongos, Southeast Ambrym (Vanuatu). *Language Documentation and Description*, *15*, 87–122.

Ridge, E. (2019). *Variation in Vatlongos verbal morphosyntax: Speaker communities in Southeast Ambrym and Mele Maat* [Doctoral dissertation, SOAS, University of London]. SOAS Research Online. https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00032205

Ridge, E. (2025a). National norms supporting small-scale multilingualism: Vatlongos communities in Vanuatu. In J. Darquennes, J. C. Salmons, & W. Vandenbussche (Eds.), *Language contact: An international handbook* (Vol. 2, pp. 245–266). De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110443011-014

Ridge, E. (2025b). *Young People's Vatlongos* (ER3) [Dataset]. Paradisec. https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/repository/ER3

Ridge, E. (forthcoming). Contact with a contact language: A corpus study of Bislama borrowings in Vatlongos speech. *Journal of Language Contact*.

Roe, D., Regenvanu, R., Wadra, F., & Araho, N. (1994). Working with cultural landscapes in Melanesia: Problems and approaches in formulating cultural policies. In L. Lindstrom & G. M. White (Eds.), *Culture-Kastom-Tradition: Developing cultural policy in Melanesia* (pp. 115–129). Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Sanga, K., & Reynolds, M. (2024). Telling it like it is: A framework exploration of Oceanic Oralities through the example of tok stori. In Y. Waghid & A. Al-Asfour (Eds.), *Values, education, emotional learning, and the quest for justice in education* (pp. 168–189). Brill.

Sanga, K., Reynolds, M., Rohoana, G., & Hiele, G. (2025). Enhancing oralities methodology: Ontological framing and cultural principles in research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 1–16.

Schneider, C. (2018). Ideologies, practices, and their effect on dialect vitality: A case study from Vanuatu. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *39*(1), 60–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2017.1311904

Thieberger, N. (2023). *Bislama corpus* (3PAC3) [Closed access]. PARADISEC. https://doi.org/10.26278/6TR4-Q919

Thomas, A. K. L. (2013). The process that led me to become an Indigenous researcher. In D. M. Mertens, F. Cram & B. Chilisa (Eds.), *Indigenous pathways into social research: Voices of a new generation* (pp. 41–58). Left Coast Press, Inc.

Tonkinson, R. (1967). *Bob Tonkinson's Vanuatu recordings* (Collection RT1) [Dataset]. PARADISEC. https://doi.org/10.26278/9SHJ-B819

Tonkinson, R. (1968). *Maat village, Efate: A relocated community in the New Hebrides*. University of Oregon.

Tonkinson, R. (1982). National identity and the problem of Kastom in Vanuatu. *Mankind*, *13*, 306–315.

Tonkinson, R. (1985). Forever Ambrymese? Identity in a Relocated Community. *Pacific Viewpoint*, *26*(1), 139–159.

Tryon, D. (1996). Dialect chaining and the use of geographical space. In J. Bonnemaison, C. Kaufmann, K. Huffman & D. Tryon (Eds.), *Arts of Vanuatu* (pp. 170–181). Crawford House Publishing.

Vandeputte, L. (2018). L'ambiguïté des représentations à l'égard du Bislama, langue nationale du Vanuatu (Mélanésie) [The ambiguity of representations of Bislama, the national language of Vanuatu (Melanesia)]. In M. Boubay-Pages (Ed.), *Vanuatu: Oscillation entre diversité et unité [Vanuatu: Oscillation between diversity and unity.* (pp. 27–44). Presses de l'Université Toulouse 1 Capitole. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.putc.2766

Vandeputte, L. (2020). Le multilinguisme à l'épreuve des idéologies et représentations des acteurs sociaux: La politique linguistique éducative du Vanuatu [Multilingualism in the face of the ideologies and representations of social actors: the linguistic politics of education in Vanuatu]. *Journal de La Société Des Océanistes*, *151*(2), 271–284.

Vanuatu Ministry of Education. (2012). *Vanuatu National Language Policy*. https://moet.gov.vu/docs/policies

Vari-Bogiri, H. (2005). A sociolinguistic survey of Araki: A dying Llanguage of Vanuatu. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *26*(1), 52–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710508668398

Vaughan, J., & Singer, R. (2018). Indigenous multilingualisms past and present. *Language & Communication*, *62*, 83–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.06.003

Velupillai, V. (2015). *Pidgins, creoles and mixed Languages: An introduction*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Walworth, M., Dewar, A., Ennever, T., Takau, L., & Rodriguez, I. (2021). Multilingualism in Vanuatu: Four case studies. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *25*(4), 1120–1141.

Warrick, O. (2009). Ethics and methods in research for community-based adaptation. *Participatory Learning and Action*, *60*(Community-based adaptation to climate change), 76–87.

Wei, L. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, *39*(1), 9–30.

Willans, F. (2011). Classroom code-switching in a Vanuatu secondary school: Conflict between policy and practice. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *14*(1), 23–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050903576038

Wycliffe Bible Translators. (2015). *The New Testament in the Southeast Ambrym Language of Vanuatu: Vanuvei Eo e sepinien Vatlongos na mol-Vatimol xil [The New Testament in the Vatlongos language of the people of Southeast Ambrym]*. Wycliffe.