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 162–185

December, 2025

Signs of Deaf Ni-Vanuatu: A sociolinguistic study

Jacqueline Iseli and Rachel McKee
Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington

Iseli, J., & McKee, R. (2025). Signs of Deaf Ni-Vanuatu: A sociolinguistic study. *Te Reo 68*(2) Vanuatu languages in context [Special Issue], edited by T. Rangelov, E. Ridge, L. Takau & V. Chen. (pp. 162–185)
This paper is a peer-reviewed contribution from https://www.nzlingsoc.org/journal/

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

Signs of Deaf Ni-Vanuatu: A sociolinguistic study

JACQUELINE ISELI AND RACHEL MCKEE
Te Herenga Waka || Victoria University of Wellington

Abstract

The sociolinguistic situation for individuals in Vanuatu who are deaf from childhood is under described. Geographical, economic and social circumstances mean that deaf individuals' access to education and social contact with other deaf people is minimal, which hinders development of a sign language that is widely shared among deaf people. This article firstly outlines the sociolinguistic circumstances for deaf individuals in this context and secondly, reports on the documentation of signs recorded from 19 deaf adults in disparate locations during fieldwork in Vanuatu in 2011-2012. Their personal sign repertoires are considered in terms of similarity to one another and iconic depicting strategies. This study contributes to understanding the ways in which deaf individuals innovate visual-gestural communicative repertoires in remote contexts like the islands of Vanuatu, where the potential for a deaf community sign language is constrained by geography, mobility, absence of accessible schooling, and opportunity for deaf sociality.

Summary in Bislama

Sam man Vanuatu oli bon be sora i fas, oli def. I no gat fulap infomesen long ekspiriens blong olgeta long saed blong lanwis. Plante man Vanuatu we oli def oli stap olbaot long ol difdifren aelan. Plante oli kam long wan famle we i no gat tumas mane. Oli stap wetem famle o long vilej nomo, oli no gat janis blong skul. Ol samting ia i mekem se i had blong olgeta oli divelopem wan saen lanwis, from oli no kam tugeta blong serem ol saen we oli yusum long haos. Atikel ia, hem i feswan we i tokabaot lanwis mo laef blong sam defman long Vanuatu. Mitufala i tokabaot filwok blong wan blong mitufala long 2011-2012. Mitufala i lukluk gud long ol defman long plante eria long Vanuatu. Mitufala i interes espeseli long sep blong ol saen ia – sam oli semak long ol difren eria o evriwan i difdifren long wanwan famle? Yumi save se laef i no isi blong ol defman long Vanuatu. Plante oli stap long haos nomo, i no gat wan komiuniti blong ol defman. Stadi blong mitufala ia i lukluk gud long ol fasin we ol defman oli krietem niufala saen blong yusum long famle mo vilej.

Keywords

deaf, Vanuatu, homesigners, depicting strategies

1 Introduction

The sociolinguistic context and signing of individuals who are deaf from childhood in Vanuatu has been little documented. Geographic, economic and social circumstances in Vanuatu mean

that deaf people's opportunities for education and for social contact with one another are minimal. Based on Iseli's volunteer fieldwork in Vanuatu in 2011-2012, this article aims firstly to describe the sociolinguistic circumstances for deaf individuals in this context. Secondly, a small sample of individuals' signs are considered in terms of similarity to one another and to iconic depicting strategies. This study contributes to documenting the ways in which deaf individuals innovate visual-gestural communicative repertoires in remote contexts like the islands of Vanuatu, where the development of a shared deaf sign language is constrained by geography and the absence of accessible schooling and deaf sociality (Friedner, 2011).

1.1 Background to the research

I (Iseli)[1] went to Vanuatu in September 2010 for two years, when my husband took up a position through New Zealand's Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) programme, based in Lakatoro, on the island of Malekula, the third largest centre in Vanuatu, which has approximately 750 residents. My experience as a hearing sign language interpreter with deaf and deaf-blind people in New Zealand (NZ) prompted my interest in the situation of local deaf people. I could not find any description (anecdotal or published) of communication used by deaf Ni-Vanuatu (local people), and I therefore hoped to meet some and to possibly encounter and learn local sign language(s). In an initial effort to locate deaf people, I contacted two disability-focused organisations, one based in the capital, Port Vila on Efate Island, and in the other main town, Luganville on Espiritu Santo Island. Through interaction with these organisations, I was invited by Mrs Doriane Naliupis of SANMA Frangipani Association (SFA), a disability advocacy non-governmental organisation, to teach a New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) workshop to a group of deaf and hearing people in Luganville in June 2011. Nine young deaf women and 15 hearing people with SFA connections attended. This encounter and information provided by Mrs Naliupis indicated that deaf people experienced linguistic, social and educational exclusion. We agreed that as a contribution to addressing this, I would document signs used by deaf individuals to create a 'dictionary' resource that might be used by families of deaf children to support their communication and to introduce an awareness among them of other deaf people in Vanuatu.

At the time I was not trained as a linguistic researcher and had no formal methodology planned. Based on my experience in Vanuatu I knew that travel logistics, social introductions, and communication would likely be challenging, and my approach to locating deaf people had to be opportunistic. In the course of his work, my husband and his Ni-Vanuatu counterpart travelled occasionally to outlying areas and other islands in the Malampa Province, so I accompanied them, aiming to identify deaf people in these more remote places and to record their signs if possible. I started learning Bislama (the local lingua franca) immediately upon arriving in Vanuatu, as part of VSA's Orientation Programme, and this developed over time. Nonetheless, there was opportunity for confusion between me and the Ni-Vanuatu mediators I interacted with, using a mixture of Bislama, English and gesture as I filmed signs used by deaf individuals in a variety of environments. These signs would be the basis for a dictionary containing photographs of the signers, with picture referents for meaning, to avoid reliance on literacy (Iseli, 2012). I collected this data between July 2011 and September 2012, from locations on seven islands, in four of the six provinces (see Table 1), according to opportunities to travel. After returning to NZ, I analysed formational aspects of the signs for a Master's thesis (Iseli, 2018), supervised by the second author Rachel McKee, an Applied Linguist in New Zealand. In the next section we outline how signs were recorded.

[1] First person pronouns in this article are in the voice of first author, Jacqui Iseli, who is the primary researcher.

2 Method

2.1 Locating deaf individuals

Being officially linked to SFA enabled me to move about under both VSA and SFA's organisational umbrellas whilst seeking permission to make contacts for this work. Cultural protocol in villages, particularly where I was unknown, required contacting the village chief first then meeting with family members to negotiate their agreement to meet with their deaf relative. At times, it was made clear that unaccompanied foreigners such as myself were not allowed. Everywhere I went, I asked informally if anyone had *nambut* 'deaf and mute' family or friends; I always used New Zealand signs whilst speaking hoping that a deaf person might notice my signs and approach me.

Signs were recorded with 19 deaf individuals located in seven islands, as described in Table 1, in which pseudonyms are used and specific locations omitted to protect the identities of participants.[2] The stated age is approximate in most cases, as birth dates in Vanuatu may be unrecorded. As far as possible, I noted individuals' age of onset of deafness, the reported cause of their deafness, presence of deaf family/friend, family situation, schooling opportunities, and employment. Obtaining information about deaf individuals was difficult at times due to cultural and communication constraints. Biographical facts could not always be asked and/or verified as family members either did not know the answers, were not present during my visit, or occasionally it was inappropriate for me to ask, due to gender customs or because I was an outsider. Additionally, my time was limited to when the Tourism Department's hired truck or boat was moving on, sometimes allowing only half an hour. It was not possible to confirm personal information retrospectively, except in cases in which the individual was known to SFA in Luganville.

Forming a properly nuanced account of deaf people's sociolinguistic reality and communicative practices ideally entails participant observation of daily life over extended time (Kusters, 2012a, 2012b; Nyst, et al., 2012; Hou & De Vos, 2022). Furthermore, research with deaf individuals and communities is best conducted by deaf researchers who share some aspects of lived experience, bringing deaf sensibilities to the collection and interpretation of data (Kusters, 2012b; Hou, 2017). However, the circumstances in which I undertook to document deaf individuals' signs did not allow for an embedded or deaf-led ethnographic approach. Although I met participants relatively briefly and at most three times, according to my opportunities to travel to disparate and hard-to-reach locations, I lived in Vanuatu for two years, meeting deaf people and their hearing associates in the contexts of rural village life, and sometimes in primary and adult education contexts, and this informed my understanding of their context. During this time, I did not meet anyone who was identified as a sign language interpreter.

[2] Ethical perspectives differ on the anonymisation of data from participants in non-Western cultures, who may prefer to be identified as owners of their knowledge (see discussion in Kusters 2012b in Adamorobe and Smiler 2013 in New Zealand, for example). In Vanuatu, local advice was that identifying deaf participants, and by association their families, might increase their vulnerability in some cases. However, all signers in illustrations approved the inclusion of their images in the original dictionary in which they first appeared (Iseli, 2012).

Table 1. Participant data (blanks indicate unknown information)

Province	Participant (gender, approx. age)	Age of onset & cause of deafness	Communication & interlocutors	Education & Occupation[3]
Sanma	Yonathon (M, 17)	2 years Accident	Homesign Mother owns MS, ASE dictionaries[4]	Home-schooled Works for parent
	Hillary (F, 21)		Homesign	Employed
	Maryann (F, 18)		Homesign	
	Lisa (F, 22)		Homesign	
	Edna (F, 20)		Homesign	Two years at school Housekeeper
Penama	Jean-Marie (M, 34)	Prelingually deaf	Homesign	
	John (M, 50+)		Homesign	
	Rosemary (F, 40+)		Homesign Mother (children not present)	
Malampa	Grace (F, 40+)		Homesign Mother (child not present)	
	Paul (M, 40+)	Postlingually deaf Malaria	Homesign Married to Susan (below) Signs with children	Copra production
	Susan (F, 40+)	Postlingually deaf	Married to Paul (above) Homesign shared with children	
	Daisy (F, 54)	Prelingually deaf	Homesign shared with cousin (different location) Mother (adult children not present)	
	John (M, 17)	Prelingually deaf	Homesign	
	Jeanine (F, 25+)		Homesign Mother of young children	
	Renjo (M, 20)	Prelingually deaf	Homesign	

[3] if other than subsistence work, see section 3.4.

[4] Melanesian Sign, Australasian Signed English, see section 3.6 Contact with foreign sign languages.

Province	Participant (gender, approx. age)	Age of onset & cause of deafness	Communication & interlocutors	Education & Occupation[3]
Shefa	Édouard (M, 20+)	Prelingually deaf	Homesign	
	Jane (F, 20+)	Postlingually deaf Malaria	Some conventional signs (NZSL) Speaks	Some schooling (prior to deafness) Employed
	Serah (F, 35+)	Prelingually deaf	Mother Homesign with some FJSL & NZSL signs (owns NZSL dictionary) Signs shared with a teenage child	Some schooling in Fiji Employed
	Isabella (F, 19+)	Prelingually deaf	Homesign	

2.2 Eliciting and recording signs

In preparation for recording signs, I created a collection of photographs portraying various aspects of life in Vanuatu (see examples in Table 2). Aiming to make a resource for families of deaf children, I included items relevant to children in their first few years, gradually adding cultural items and activities relevant to Vanuatu village life. For example, for concepts related to food production and tools I collected photographs in the market, the local store, or homes. Work and leisure activities were relevant to some deaf individuals who had experienced activities, such as cricket (see examples in Table 2). If a deaf person offered a sign for a concept not in the collection, I would try to add an appropriate picture; for example, Renjo produced a sign for 'whale', which was not in my photos. Progressive expansion of the stimulus photos made for some inconsistency in the data that was collected over time.

When meeting a participant, I took a small book of photographs of my family members to identify myself as part of a family in keeping with local custom, and a map of Vanuatu and the world to locate my origin in New Zealand. These visual identifiers assisted in developing rapport, using gestures and signs to communicate. Apart from a few instances where the child of a deaf parent was fluent in their signs, I observed a variety of communication modes used between hearing and deaf Ni-Vanuatu, including speaking, shouting (by hearing people), gestures, pointing, homesigns, and occasionally drawing on the ground, a practice which I observed to be used by Ni-Vanuatu in general.

Signs were elicited in three ways:

(i) The deaf participant responded to a familiar object in the physical context or a photo of a familiar object or activity.
(ii) The participant responded to an open question from me (e.g., about their daily life, family members, work) relayed through a familiar mediator – whomever was available and willing to communicate between myself (using Bislama and gestures) and the deaf person. This process sometimes revealed difficulty in communication between deaf people and their interlocutors. In some instances when a deaf participant appeared to understand a prompt with head nodding, their signed answer was rejected by the mediator as being irrelevant or inadequate. Upon reflection, this

kind of relayed question-answer interaction was likely a novel situation for participants which affected the signing they produced.

(iii) The participant was invited to sign freely on camera. After the mediator relayed my request as best they could, some participants described something about their daily activities or family members, while others did not respond.

I used a Flip video-camera to record signs which was conveniently small and unobtrusive to use and travel with. In most cases recording occurred outside because Ni-Vanuatu customarily socialise outdoors, and most domestic dwellings had neither electric lighting nor windows. This situation was challenging for deaf participants, in some cases perhaps intimidating, as many villagers came to watch the novel occasion, shouting suggestions and gesturing at the deaf participant. Some participants could partially hear or see the onlookers' noise but not make out words, which caused distraction. These circumstances may have affected the communication they produced.

Table 2. Description of sample items represented by photos in elicitation materials

Semantic domain	Target concept	Description of photo or picture
People	Father	Man, walking with child
	Mother	Woman with child hugging her
Feelings	Sad	Boy sitting with head in hand
State of being	Pregnant	Pregnant woman standing in profile
Places	Island	Photo from plane looking down on whole island
Actions	Pretend	Boy bent over with a walking stick pretending to be old
Household objects	Broom	Woman standing with a broom by her side
Food	Green coconuts	Green coconuts tied in bunch and hanging from pole
Animal	Pig	Pig (local type, rope around neck)
Custom	Statues	Carved statues stacked on the ground
Medical	Sick	Woman blowing her nose with tissue
Transport & Work	Canoe	Three canoes on the beach

2.3 Ethics

Formal data collection protocols exist for research with deaf people, such as those advised by the University of Bristol and the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics (Kusters, 2012a). However, Kusters notes that such guidelines assume literacy and education levels that deaf participants and their families lacked in her fieldwork experience in global south contexts. For the same reasons it was not feasible to implement a formal "consent to participate" process in my data collection. To deaf participants' family members or friends, I explained that this project could not help them directly (e.g., in the form of money or goods), but that family members of deaf children born in the future could use the dictionary to support sign language learning and education. Also, I attempted to communicate to the deaf participant that individuals who had been previously photographed or videoed were also deaf like them. Their response to seeing these images was invariably big smiles. Agreement of the deaf person and their close family members to be videorecorded was considered a form of consent, although

I was very aware of the imbalance of power in being a white person with technology arriving in a truck, and my limited capacity to communicate the purpose of filming, particularly to the deaf people themselves.

At the end of my fieldwork, a letter from my SFA advisor, Mrs Doriane Naliupis was obtained before leaving Vanuatu in 2012 and renewed in 2017, giving permission to use the filmed data for further professional education and research. Subsequently, this was approved by the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee for use in a Master's thesis and associated publications in consideration of the specific circumstances.

2.4 Data analysis

Living and travelling in Vanuatu for two years developed my familiarity with the physical and social details of village life, and also allowed me to observe and gain local perspectives on the situation of deaf people. Familiarity with daily life provided essential context for collecting and analysing data, particularly as many signs were visually motivated by the objects and activities of everyday life.

Video recordings were downloaded to my PC, from which I transcribed the data including the mediators' commentary and my voicing of sign meaning as I understood it at the time. ELAN 5.2 annotation software (ELAN, 2024) was used to transcribe and analyse data. As far as possible, all signs in utterances were glossed. Glossing by word approximations can be problematic for many reasons, even when representing conventional signs by interlingual glossing (van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2012; Zwitserlood, 2010). In this case it was an inexact process to capture the meaning of utterances that contained mainly idiosyncratic signs, gestures, mimesis, pointing, and some signs from FJSL (Fiji Sign Language). In many instances the mediator and I could only comprehend the gist of what the deaf person was expressing. Clarification of meaning after the fact was not technically possible for every sign or action. There were no sign language specialists, informal interpreters, or reference resources available in Vanuatu. Some data was discussed with a Deaf linguist and a Deaf NZSL tutor, and a Ni-Vanuatu couple who knew deaf people (one of whom knew some FJSL). These are inherent limitations on analysis.

In addition to identifying signs used to express semantic concepts, my aims were to identify formational parameters of signs, to observe use of non-manual elements, and to describe depicting strategies. Data was glossed and coded in ELAN for meaning, the formational parameters of signs, and non-manual signals (NMS). Signs for selected concepts were compared across participants to consider similarity or variation. Addressing all of these aspects is beyond the scope of this article and more detail about the analysis process and findings about formational aspects are reported in my thesis (Iseli, 2018).

The next section summarises the sociolinguistic context for deaf Ni-Vanuatu, drawing on information from documentary sources, direct interaction with deaf people, and local informants who were familiar with deaf people. Observations and information at the time of fieldwork are supplemented by sources that have been published subsequently.

3 Social Context for Deaf Ni-Vanuatu

3.1 Geography and spoken languages

The 83 (plus) islands of Vanuatu stretch over 1,300 kilometres from north to south (Nunn et al., 2016). The closest neighbouring countries are the Solomon Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia

(Noumea), Australia, and Papua New Guinea (PNG). The terrain is mountainous and volcanic, largely covered by tropical rain forest with a small proportion of arable land (Nunn et al., 2016). The largest towns are the capital Port Vila, on Efate Island, Luganville on Espiritu Santo Island, and Lakatoro on Malekula Island. Although Port Vila and Luganville have populations in the tens of thousands, two-thirds of the population live rurally and are engaged in small-scale agriculture and fishing (Clarke et al., 2013). Vanuatu is classified as one of the world's least developed countries (UNICEF & Republic of Vanuatu, 2014).

Vanuatu has the world's highest density of languages per capita, with an estimated 138 Indigenous Austronesian languages spoken as first languages and three official languages reflecting a colonial legacy: Bislama (a creole), English, and French (François et al., 2015). Multilingualism within villages and households is the norm due to customary exogamous marriage between language groups, although Bislama is gaining dominance as a lingua franca and threatening some vernacular languages (François, 2012). Language is key to inclusion in the everyday life of a society and Regenvanu's (2005, p. 41) definition of Vanuatu kastom (culture) includes Indigenous language. As spoken languages are at least partly inaccessible to Ni-Vanuatu children who are deaf from an early age, they likely experience constraints on participation in cultural traditions, but extended ethnographic fieldwork would be necessary to capture this accurately.

3.2 Deafness

The incidence of pre-lingual and post-lingual deafness in the Vanuatu population is anecdotally high due to malaria and dengue fever, and compounded by limited access to medical services. Vanuatu has no public transport system and arranging travel within and between the islands is subject to breakdowns and weather contingencies (Jayaraman & Ward, 2006). Transport challenges reduce the likelihood of deaf children having contact with medical and educational services. Data from the 2020 Census shows 7 percent of the population over five years and nearly 41 percent of the population 70 years and older experience some degree of deafness (UNFPA, 2023). The Disability Thematic Report (UNFPA, 2023) based on the 2020 Census states that for those 5 years and older, 3.4% had mild hearing loss (8,500 people), 0.9 moderate hearing loss (2,250 people), 0.1% profound hearing loss (250 people) and 2.2% were unknown. Due to the scarcity of audiologists, detailed information on etiology and hearing loss levels is unreported or unreliable, however delayed diagnosis means that language acquisition is commonly delayed for children who are deaf or hard of hearing (Vanuatu Skills Partnership, 2018). People with hearing loss are unable to access hearing aids, due to cost and difficulty with their maintenance in tropical conditions.

3.3 Education for deaf and disabled children

Universal primary education and secondary education is available in Vanuatu, however, participation of children depends upon parents' values, educational experiences, and their financial resources (UNICEF & Republic of Vanuatu, 2014). International influence has supported changes in government policy for gender equality and inclusion of people with disabilities, and various disability organisations operate with support from New Zealand and Australian volunteers (CRIN, 2014; DESP, 2006; UNICEF & Republic of Vanuatu, 2014). Nevertheless, children with disabilities are significantly less likely to attend school or attain literacy than their non-disabled peers (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2020; UNFPA, 2023), as in Pacific countries generally (Armstrong et al., 2023). The 2020 census data on disability showed that 44.3 percent of children with a moderate disability and 8.3 percent with a severe disability attend school, and that children and adolescents with disability are more

likely to be illiterate, although deafness was not specifically reported (UNFPA, 2023). Children with disabilities tend to be a source of stigma, and are often hidden away by parents; grandmothers frequently raise these children. Consequently, the prevalence of disability, including childhood deafness, is under-reported (UNFPA, 2023).

In 2018, it was reported that for deaf children, "there are significant barriers to enrolling in and attending educational institutes with some schools either denying enrolment or expelling students, and some families are unaware of their right to education or the ability of deaf and hard of hearing children to learn" (Vanuatu Skills Partnership, 2018, p. 3). Disability organisations SANMA Frangipani Association (SFA), Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities (VSPD) and Disability and Promotion Advocacy Association (DPA) have independently attempted to introduce sign language to some schools in Vanuatu in an effort to better include deaf children.

Recently, the government has also directed attention to the education of deaf children. A Situation Analysis in 2017-2018 reported that "Vanuatu's National Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2018 – 2025 recognises the particular barriers faced by deaf and hard of hearing people to school, training and work. In particular the absence of a national sign language and the exclusionary impact of this is noted. The policy implementation plan stipulates the need for targeted support towards the establishment of sign language, to be led by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET)" (Vanuatu Skills Partnership, 2018, p. 29). As part of this effort, in 2024, a Ni-Vanuatu deaf man, Leniker Thomas, originally from Espiritu Santo, who received education in New Zealand was employed as a sign language specialist with the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) by MoET. Leniker reported that in 2024 the Ministry published the "first ever online dictionary – 'Nasonel Saen Lanwis Blong Vanuatu' on SOOSL software", which is intended for use by teachers of deaf and special needs students in some inclusive schools (Personal Communication, Lenniker Thomas, by email to Iseli July 14, 2024.)[5] Since 2021, some deaf children have been attending a school in Port Vila where they are using sign language together; as of 2025, the group numbers twenty (as reported by Miles & Mayberry 2025, see companion issue). These developments signal significant progress on extending education and deaf sociality to children which, in time, is likely to foster the development of a deaf community, at least in this urban context.

3.4 Work and employment

Paid employment opportunities are scarce in Vanuatu generally. In rural areas most people, including deaf individuals, are involved in domestic food production, and if living near a plantation, then paid work processing copra and/or cacao is available. It is not known whether deaf individuals in such employment have pay equity. A male participant in the study recounted that he travelled to New Zealand with his village group for seasonal orchard work and that the share he was paid upon return to Vanuatu was less than he would have earned working locally, suggesting discriminatory treatment by his village group.

People with disabilities are less likely to be employed outside the home and more likely to be either self-employed or working in a family business (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2020; State Department, 2023). In general, Vanuatu women tend to have lower literacy and numeracy, and comprise 39% of the paid workforce; more than 70% are engaged in handicraft, food production, fisheries and the marketing of domestic produce, as well as domestic work (The Government of Vanuatu, 2015). Deaf men appear to be more free to move to where work

[5] See Eldads Vira et al. (2025, see companion issue), which describes ongoing work.

is available, with a degree of independence rarely observed among deaf women. Infrequently I encountered a deaf person who was self-employed, although recently Vanuatu's Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs have increased self-employed options for some deaf people with practical skills, such as sewing. The few deaf participants who were raising families and earning incomes lived independently from their parents, but with extended family.

Gender-based violence affects the lives of deaf and disabled women in Vanuatu; a recent Human Rights country report states that one in three girls younger than 15 reportedly experience sexual abuse (State Department, 2023). Worldwide, violence against deaf and disabled women is attested at a rate two to three times higher than average, due to disparities in their access to information, social status, and capacity to communicate about abuse (Anderson et al., 2011; Kvam, 2004; Nosek et al., 2001; Sobsey & Doe, 1991). This effect has also been reported for females with disabilities in Vanuatu (Vanuatu Women's Centre, 2011; Royson, 2014, p. 1; Douglas, 2002). Education on these social matters and judicial options in Vanuatu is being progressed (Shah, 2013).

3.5 Social contact and signing practices

The deaf individuals I met in Vanuatu were living within a village of hearing people, and most could be described as not having "sustained access to the linguistic resources of a named language" (Goico & Horton, 2023, p. 3278). Contact between deaf people is relatively rare for several reasons. Firstly, they are distributed across many islands and villages, and transport is limited. Secondly, at the time of the study there were no social or educational settings which host regular interaction among deaf children or adults. Thirdly, a generally pejorative attitude to deafness likely discourages deaf individuals from making themselves visible to other deaf people, and to recognise that they share common experiences. The deaf people I encountered appeared reluctant to sign in public places, limiting the chance of them being identified by other deaf people. For example, I observed Paul to be a confident person in his home environment but when meeting at the marketplace away from his village he was reluctant to sign and kept to the periphery of the market. The layout of villages, with separate homes that are relatively hidden, offers little opportunity for chance encounters between deaf people, and in the larger towns a deaf person might be unaware of deaf people living or working nearby. In PNG Reed and Rumsey (2020) also noted that hearing people could more readily identify the location of deaf individuals than deaf people could, likely due to their greater mobility and access to local knowledge. Fourthly, familial allegiance underpins social relations (Regenvanu, 2005) and takes priority over social connection with others from outside the kinship network. Therefore, for many deaf Ni-Vanuatu, opportunities to meet and form a sense of affinity with other deaf people (described by Friedner, 2011, as 'deaf sociality') are limited or non-existent. At the time of this study, and reiterated in a situation analysis in 2018, there was no nationally shared sign language, with "detrimental effect on access to education, employment and socialisation opportunities for deaf people" (Vanuatu Skills Partnership, 2018, p. 2).

Personal relationships between deaf individuals appeared to be rare. Among the people I met, two participants were a married couple, and another two deaf individuals lived in the same village but apparently had little interaction with one another due to differences in age, gender and other social factors. Five of the deaf women had a child or children, and some of these women had been abandoned by hearing partners. Most of the deaf people I encountered were single. Exclusion from expected social roles, such as spouse and parent, may reflect a societal belief that deaf individuals retain a child-like status into adulthood, as observed in Nicaragua (Polich, 2005) and in PNG (Reed, 2020; Reed & Rumsey, 2020).

Various terms have been used to categorise differing sociodemographic contexts for deaf sign languages or signing practices, including contrasts such as urban/village, established/emerging, deaf/shared, family sign, local sign (see Hou & de Vos' 2022 commentary on changing typology). The situation of deaf Ni-Vanuatu bears little similarity to descriptions of either urban ('established' over generational time) deaf communities or 'village' signing communities in which both deaf and hearing people use a shared sign language (Polich, 2005; de Vos, 2012). Conditions in Vanuatu are more similar to contexts described for individual deaf signers interacting with hearing people in PNG (Kendon, 1980; Reed 2020; Reed & Rumsey, 2020), and to Washabaugh's early (1981, 1986) account in Providence and Grand Cayman Islands where he observed deaf individuals to be geographically dispersed and attitudinally marginalised, with restricted social interaction and linguistic exchange. Washabaugh noted that these circumstances limited the development of a sign language shared among deaf people (as cited in Meir et al., 2012).

It is widely attested that without access to a conventional sign language(s) of a deaf community, deaf individuals (especially children) tend to create their own repertoire of "homesign" in interaction with hearing interlocutors (Brentari & Coppola, 2013; Goldin-Meadow, 2003). Theorising of this phenomenon is evolving as a wider geographical variety of situations are documented, and this article does not provide a complete account (for overviews of this field, see Hou & de Vos, 2022, and Goico & Horton, 2023). Relevant to the Vanuatu situation is Nyst et al.'s (2012) term 'rural homesign' coined to characterise the practices of deaf individuals in Mali as distinct from the term homesign which originated in a Western context to describe the signing of deaf children intentionally exposed only to spoken language. In Guatemala, Horton (2022, p. 11) describes the situation of a single signer in a hearing family as an "individual ecology", in contrast with "peer ecologies" where interaction with other signers may be occasional or frequent. Hou (2017) uses the term "family sign" rather than homesign to highlight shared use. Closer to Vanuatu, in PNG Hatfield (2016) documented Mehek signs used by a single deaf person and their immediate family and friends, finding some signs to be apparently conventionalised while others were apparently used "ad hoc" (p. 400). In PNG Highlands locations, Reed and Rumsey (2020, p. 145) introduce the term "local sign network" to describe the practices of deaf individuals who communicate with a circle of familiar hearing interlocutors extending beyond immediate family. Such repertoires may overlap with other local sign networks and include conventional signs that are commonly used in the wider communicative ecology. Applying a translanguaging and multimodal lens to describing signing practices of mixed deaf-hearing families in Yucatan villages, Safar (2019) highlights how their co-constructed sign repertoires incorporate cultural gestures and material resources present in joint everyday activities. Safar notes that although these repertoires have some limits on context-removed communication, they exhibit complexity and "stable lexical and grammatical conventions" within a single generation of use (p. 35).

The deaf Ni-Vanuatu individuals in this study appear to have shared communication with one or a few familiar others, such as a sibling or their child/ren. Several of the studies mentioned above observe that effective communication between a deaf individual and hearing interlocutors is supported by shared experience of everyday life and activity contexts in which information does not always need to be made explicit. Nevertheless, as noted in the preceding section on methodology, this fieldwork did not allow for extended observation of situated communication in various social contexts, and so it is not possible to confidently determine whether terms such as 'local sign network' (Reed, 2020) or other terms might apply to some Ni-Vanuatu signers' situations.

3.6 Contact with foreign sign languages

A few participants used some signs concordant with Fiji Sign Language (FJSL) (Tamarua & Stebbins, 1994), identified as such by reference to dictionaries and discussion with a Ni-Vanuatu couple, one of whom knew some FJSL from training there, as well as a Deaf NZSL tutor familiar with Australasian Signed English (ASE). ASE is a sign system that was designed to manually code spoken English, used in Australia and New Zealand.[6] It was introduced into Fiji deaf education in the 1980s, and to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the early 1990s, where it was called "Melanesian Sign" (MS). Due to this origin, Fiji Sign Language (FJSL) lexicon overlaps substantially with that of MS, both being based on ASE. FJSL also includes local Fiji signs and some American signs introduced by deaf missionaries, (Nelson et al., 2009). Describing signing varieties in PNG, Reed & Rumsey (2020, p. 155) explain that "the parallel adoption of (Australasian) Signed English in other Pacific countries such as the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Kiribati means many deaf people across the Pacific who have been exposed to deaf education use similar SLs." Reed and Rumsey (2020, p. 156) report that most deaf people in PNG now identify themselves as PNGSL users, a language which draws lexicon from MS and local signs, and has grammar features consistent with natural sign languages (see Reed 2020 for a detailed account of this situation).

Over recent decades a number of New Zealand and Australian volunteers concerned about the educational exclusion of deaf children have attempted to introduce sign language to deaf and hearing people in Vanuatu. For example, in 2006 under the auspices of VSPD, a deaf-blind individual from New Zealand (not a fluent NZSL user) set up NZSL and Braille training programmes, which continued for several years. One of the participants in that training subsequently taught a sign language workshop on Ambae. In total, nine participants in this study confirmed indirect contact with vocabulary originating in ASE or NZSL at some time. One participant had attended VSPD's training, while another three, and a few other deaf individuals I met, had secondary, but not regular, contact with attendees of that programme. One deaf participant used some FJSL signs as a result of having attended school for a period in Fiji. A few had accessed NZSL dictionaries in various forms. Three participants demonstrated some use of the two-handed fingerspelling alphabet.

Around 2010, a hearing Ni-Vanuatu woman undertook early childhood teacher training in Fiji where she learned some FJSL and subsequently shared this with some deaf individuals in Port Vila. For several years, ASE was also used in pre-school sessions for children with disabilities, including a few deaf children. In 2012, some SFA Fieldworkers volunteered to support some deaf children with sign language in schools, but this proved unsustainable due to their limited training and a lack of funding to pay for their work (also noted in Vanuatu Skills Partnership, 2018). In 2019 and 2020 a Ni-Vanuatu teacher, Edikiel Haisoch, took various deaf students to spend time in a deaf school in Fiji where they learned and brought back some FJSL into a Vanuatu school setting (Vanuatu Daily Post, 2021).

I did not intend to disseminate NZSL whilst in Vanuatu, in keeping with World Federation of the Deaf recommendations for working with deaf people in developing countries (World Federation of the Deaf, n.d.). However, in 2011 SFA requested that I run a short course in

[6] Australasian Signed English is a pedagogically devised sign system that adapts sign vocabulary from a natural deaf sign language, (in this case Auslan), with the addition of contrived signs to represent English words and grammar. Such artificial sign systems aim to manually code a spoken language, and are frequently used by (hearing) teachers simultaneously with speaking. As such, signed systems are very different in structure and visual comprehensibility from the natural sign languages that originate in deaf communities, which utilise the visual properties of space, motion, and iconicity in their grammars. Artificial sign systems are understood best by those who are proficient in the spoken language, which is not the case for children deaf from infancy.

NZSL for 9 young deaf women and 15 hearing associates, including SFA Fieldworkers. In 2013, after publication of "Storian wetem han olgeta" (Iseli, 2012) containing local signs I had documented, 22 workshops were held to promote the use of that lexicon with deaf children. These were well attended by teacher aides working through SFA, and SFA-affiliated people. Other attendees included one teacher of a deaf child, one grandparent, but no parents of deaf children. It is not known to what extent the resource has been used recently, but further documentation and sharing of deaf individuals' signs is in progress, as reported by Eldads Vira et al. (2025, see companion issue).

4 Lexical Characteristics

In this section we illustrate variation among participants by illustrating two concepts. We also briefly discuss the use of object and handling handshapes in iconic depictions. A more detailed account of their signing and analysis of formational aspects of signs (such as handshapes, locations, movements, signing space) is available in Iseli (2018) and is beyond the scope of this article.

4.1 Signs and meanings

Concepts recorded referred to items in the physical context of our encounter, items in my elicitation pictures, and concepts that participants raised spontaneously. Abstract concepts were more difficult to represent graphically or to identify in spontaneous discourse. As such, the data is unlikely to represent any signer's entire repertoire, only those concepts which were accessible by elicitation or by their own initiation in our encounters. Approximately 1,385 "signs" with 1,117 meanings were collected from 19 participants, who individually provided between three to 227 signs each. The large number of signs is due to idiosyncratic variants produced for most concepts, such as six forms of 'pig'. In addition, many participants produced a sequence of depicting gestures or actions in response to a stimulus item, each of which is counted as a "sign" for the purpose of this description. For example, Lisa's response to the picture 'spider' comprised three parts: (i) a spider's crawling motion; (ii) outlining a body; and (iii) outlining a web.

As noted above, the picture elicitation task was apparently a new experience for participants, and it was often unclear whether their responses were: (a) spontaneously describing the target object as they saw it; (b) describing their association with a picture; (c) showing how a target object is used - such as collecting and preparing a plant for eating; or (d) producing a sign that they regularly use to refer to the item. As such, the "lexical" status of these signs is uncertain. This is also noted as a challenge in a recent sign documentation project in Vanuatu described by Eldads Vira et al. (2025, see companion issue).

Signs were documented in the following semantic domains: Family and social identity; Emotions and States; Household items and associated tasks; Actions; Transport and work; Food; Sport; Animals; Natural environment and weather; Time; Modifiers; Numbers; Hospital/healthcare. The range and forms of these signs can be seen in the photographic lexicon compiled by Iseli (2012).

4.2 Variation across participants for selected concepts

Considerable variation in lexicon and syntax is expected where unifying conditions for transmission and use of an emerging sign language are not present (Meir et al., 2012, p. 253). In small-scale sign languages, overlap in lexical repertoires of individuals may reflect the

frequency of their interaction with one another (Mudd et al., 2021; Horton, 2022). Given the geographical separation of most deaf Ni-Vanuatu from one another, there is little basis for expecting many similar signs across individuals. However, the capacity for iconicity or direct visual representation is a significant resource in all signed languages (Nyst et al., 2022) and idiosyncratic signs often share a common iconic mapping for the referent (Horton, 2022). For example, Sandler et al. (2011) describe signers of Al-Sayyid Bedouin SL (ABSL), which is a 'young' sign language, producing various mimetic representations of a dog's mouth barking or biting to convey 'dog', which they identify as an "iconic prototype". This example of an iconic prototype ('dog') is also found in the Vanuatu data. Conventional cultural gestures or signs also contribute to similar repertoires. For example, Paul, Daisy and Grace, who live in relatively distant villages on the island of Malekula and were anecdotally not in contact produced similar variants of 'married' (Figure 1 below), which is a Melanesian island gesture that means 'married' or intimate partner (Personal Communication, Kolika Markie, June 10, 2018; Dr Paul Wolffram Aug 1, 2025).

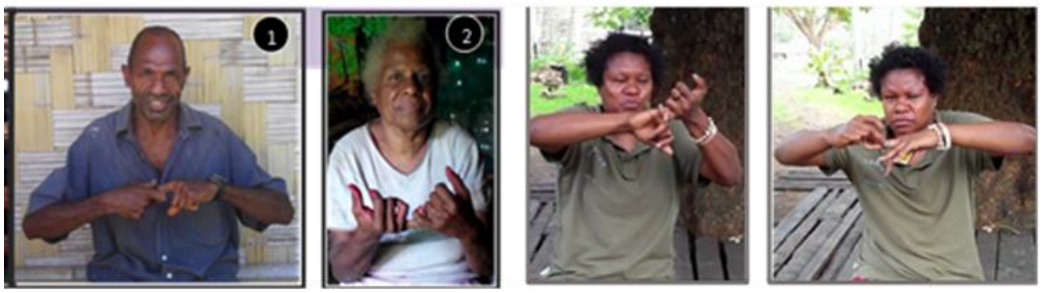

Figure 1. Malekula variants for 'married' or 'partner' by signers in three separate villages

Two individuals on adjacent islands (but not apparently in contact) both used a sign to convey 'catch fish' in which the forearm is seized by the other hand, also identified as a conventional gesture for 'catch' (Personal Communication, Kolika Markie, June 10, 2018).

Due to the variable circumstances for data collection as outlined above, and the differing responses of individuals, it was not possible to compare a consistent set of concepts across all participants, nor to confidently attribute similarities to contact between deaf individuals or their hearing interlocutors (cf. Reed & Rumsey, 2020). Overall, there was more diversity than similarity in the signs produced by individuals in response to the same stimulus items or in free expression. To illustrate briefly, we present variants for two concepts: 'pig', which has been also described in neighbouring PNG, and for some celestial time concepts, for which signs have been described in other traditional cultures, such as Kata Kolok in Bali (de Vos, 2012), and for the deaf isolate Kagobai in Rennell (Solomon Islands) (Kuschel, 1974).

4.2.1 Pig

Seven signs were collected for pig, one in response to a picture of a Nakamal (meeting house), which is the place of ceremonial pig killings. Four of the variants recorded for 'pig', (1, 2, 3 and 6 in Figure 2 below) depict tusks, which are visually prominent in local pigs and valuable as currency. Variant 4 is a facial personification, while variant 5 is a modified borrowing from FJSL, (this signer had attended school in Fiji).

Figure 2. 'Pig' variants

Reed and Rumsey (2020) report that many local signs for 'pig' in the PNG Highlands have an iconic base of a pig's leg tethered to a post, while a form documented in Enga mimics the pig rooting in the ground, as suggested by variant 4 above. These similarities across locations suggest that iconicity is a more likely the basis of similarity than transmission between signers.

4.2.2 Celestial time constructs

Time concepts were relatively difficult to elicit and rarely occurred in spontaneous communication. In free discourse, there was little evidence of metaphorical timelines to locate events, as commonly seen in in established sign languages (e.g., British Sign Language; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999), although three participants who had some exposure to FJSL or NZSL indicated a past timeframe by pointing back over their shoulder.

In response to photos showing the sun in positions of sunrise, noon, and sunset, both Paul and Daisy pointed to or traced the sun's position and movement (Figures 3 to 5), similar to strategies described in Adaromobe SL (Nyst, 2007). In both of their variants of 'sunrise' and 'sunset' their pointing suggests the use of absolute or cardinal direction, towards the east for rising and towards the west for setting (a strategy described in Kata Kolok; de Vos, 2012). Paul, the only deaf participant to wear a watch (and having previously worked in New Zealand), related the sun's position to clock time by pointing to positions on the sun's trajectory, and then indicating a number: sunrise: five (am); noon: two (12pm); sunset: five (pm), seen in images 2a and 2b in Figures 3, 4, and 5.

Figure 3. 'Sunrise'

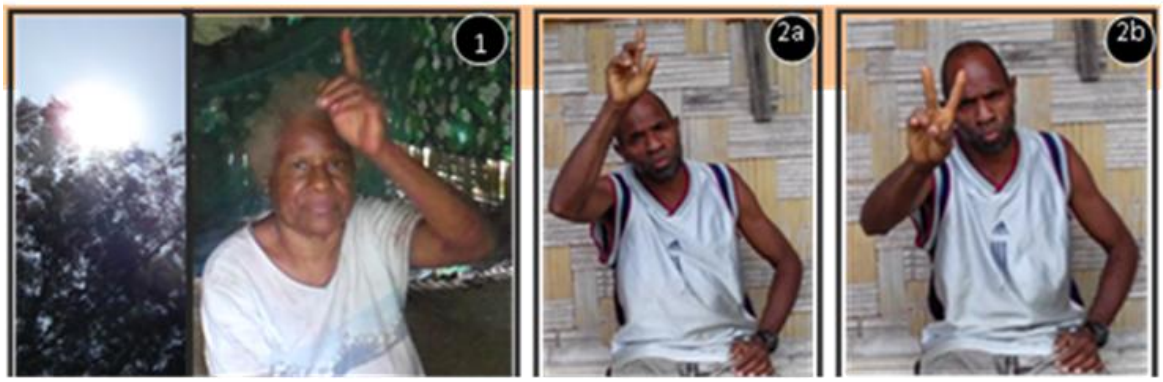

Figure 4. 'Midday'

Figure 5. 'Sunset'

Lisa conveyed 'afternoon' by tracing a lateral arc, suggesting the sun's path later in the day (Figure 6, first image). Two variants for 'day' indicate the sun moving downward through the sky: in Jean-Marie's case, it rises in front of him and sets behind his shoulder, suggesting his own perspective on its trajectory (Figure 6, third image).

Figure 6. 'Afternoon', and two variants for 'day'

Two instances of 'month' occurred (Figure 7), one in Paul's discourse, and one in Daisy's response to a picture. Both traced the moon's path, rising (image 1) or circling (image 2).

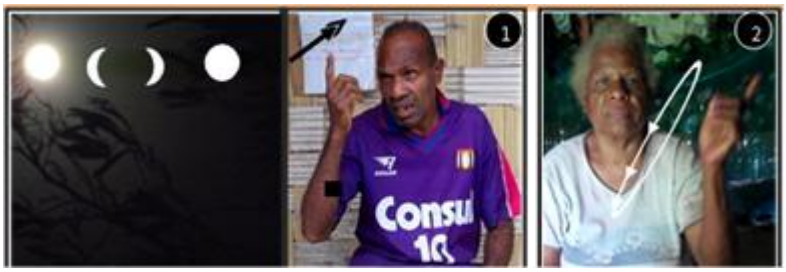

Figure 7. 'Month'

These examples of variation in forms for 'pig' and for time concepts show individual's signs to be diverse yet also to have commonalities in their iconic basis and depiction strategies. While there was little available evidence of social contact among these deaf signers, it is possible that some of these signs are mediated by hearing interlocutors, as described by Reed & Rumsey in PNG (2020), or may reflect Vanuatu conventional gestures.

4.3 Depicting strategies

Nyst et al. (2022) address questions about the extent to which depicting strategies (mapping iconicity) are patterned in different signed languages. They build on a precedent in this strand of enquiry in Padden et al.'s (2013) study of how sign languages of differing historical ages depict the use of tools and objects in signs. Padden et al. found that each sign language in their dataset displayed a general preference for the use of iconic handshape types representing either an object (the instrument) or handling (use of an instrument), and suggested that this general preference might be an early characteristic of an emerging SL, even before a lexicon has stabilized. However, Nyst et al.'s recent (2022) re-examination of this hypothesis across eleven African sign languages found that while some languages and groups of related languages favour either handling or object depiction, an equally large number of languages do not show a consistent pattern. Their study was also not able to confirm a relationship between iconic patterning and language age or community size, but did note alignment between signer strategies and the gestural preferences in surrounding spoken languages.

Although the signs documented here cannot be categorised as "a sign language" in the sense of being widely shared and having time depth (that we know of), we briefly discuss four main depicting strategies that were observed. These are identified as Handling, Tracing, Instrument and Body Part, as per Padden et al.'s (2013) study.

Handling strategy (depicting grasping an object while performing a canonical action) was most prevalent, used in 40.93% (n=264) of signs by all participants – mainly in reference to objects and actions. Food items in the stimulus materials rarely prompted names of a food but rather descriptions of cultivation and preparation processes involving tool use, depicted mainly by handling strategies and/or eating with the hands. Similarly, in Rennell (Solomon Islands), Kuschel (1974) reported that Kagobai's signs for objects tended to represent the canonical action associated with its use or handling. For example, signs referring to "water" consistently used handling strategy, depicting how water is obtained (except for "bottled water" which used an object handshape), seen in Figure 7.

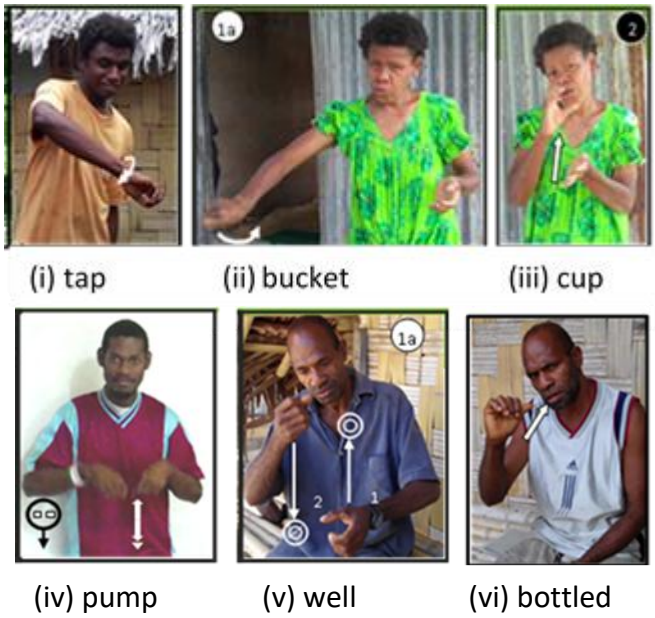

Figure 7. Handling depictions referring to 'water'

Tracing the outline of an object (as commonly used by home signers; Hunsicker & Goldin-Meadow, 2015), was the second most frequent strategy, used in 17.83% (*n*=115) of signs. Figure 8 below illustrates some examples of: (i) "dolphin" - beak traced; (ii) "statue" - eyes and body patterns traced; (iii) "laplap-leaf" - positions traced onto imaginary ground; (iv) "egg" - circular outline traced on the palm; (v) "pregnant" –an enlarged belly protruding from the torso is traced.

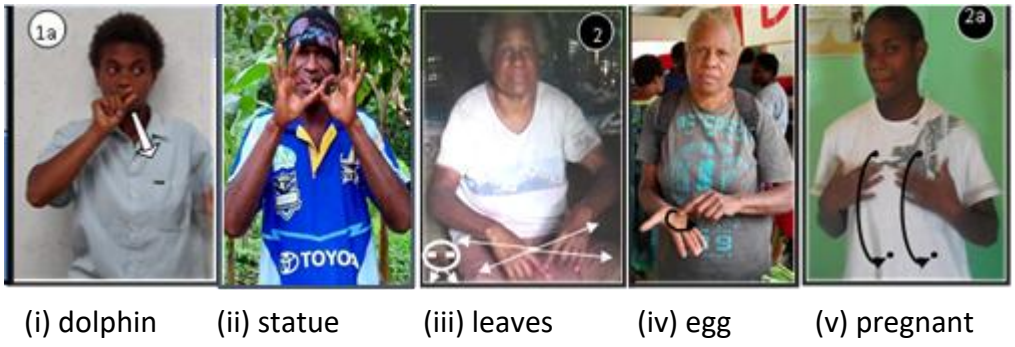

Figure 8. Tracing depictions

Instrument strategy, depicting a feature of an object in a handshape while performing a canonical action with that handshape, was the third most frequent, used in 16.39% (*n*=107) of signs, although four participants never or rarely used this strategy. Broad-bladed bush knives are the main tool used in daily tasks and participants referred to this using an instrument handshape to depict a knife blade (represented by the flat dominant handshape) acting upon another object, such as preparing fruit and vegetables, or cutting plants.

(i) bush knife (ii) small knife (iii) knife cutting chicken wings

Figure 9. Instrument depiction: using knives

Overall, the main depicting strategy to express tool and instrument use was handling, which aligns with neither the American homesigner described in Hunsicker & Goldin-Meadow (2015) nor ABSL (a 'young' language) (Padden et al., 2013), who favoured instrument strategies.

Depiction of a **body part** was used in nearly 50% of animal signs. This contrasts with the Mexican "Z Family" signers' preference to depict handling of the animal, or a feature unique in dealing with that animal (Haviland, 2013). Some participants produced a sequence of tracing the size and shape of a body part, followed by mimesis of the animal walking or running. Like Mexican home signers' depiction of a "neck-wringing" action to refer to "chicken" (Haviland, 2013), several participants identified an animal by depicting (by mimesis) the manner of its capture or killing, such as prodding sticks into an underwater rock crevasse for 'octopus', or slapping the forearm for 'mosquito', as also described for Kagobai in Rennell (Kuschel, 1974).

5 Conclusion

This article has outlined the sociolinguistic circumstances of deaf Ni-Vanuatu individuals and given a glimpse of the nature of signs they use within their individual sign ecologies (Horton, 2022). Their observed life circumstances, along with other documentary evidence from Vanuatu suggest that they hold low social status and have few opportunities for education, paid employment and conventional social roles (including marriage). This reflects Nyst et al.'s (2012, p. 251) observation that "in fact the majority of deaf people in the world are in precisely this situation, i.e. isolated from large deaf communities, with limited (if any) access to health care or education." These deaf individuals nevertheless demonstrate linguistic innovation in the diverse and creative repertoires of signs that they use with familiar interlocutors in their home contexts.

At the time of fieldwork, the absence of interaction among deaf people in education or social organisations had not offered conditions for the development of a common sign language. Social organisation in Vanuatu generally prioritises interaction with extended family over non-kinship relationships, and limitations on personal mobility and other sociocultural factors make it unlikely for deaf people in different locations to seek out or form social bonds with one another. In this situation, a shared 'Vanuatu sign language' is unlikely to evolve without interventions that bring deaf people (especially children) into contact with one another, such as congregated schooling, which has been the catalyst for new sign languages to emerge in other locations (Kegl et al., 1999; Polich, 2005; Coppola, 2022; Fusellier-Souza, 2012; Mineiro et al., 2017). The beginning of such a process has been described in the Solomon Islands, following the establishment of a rural vocational training centre for Deaf adults which brought deaf isolates together (Murray & Rokotuibau, 2011). It is customary in Vanuatu for

many hearing children to leave their home island to attend boarding schools, which could be a model for providing specialised deaf education that supports the collective use of sign language, although current government policy is, in general, focusing on inclusion in local schools. Currently, strategies are being implemented by government to address the linguistic and social challenges facing deaf people. For example, the development of an online dictionary of local signs (Eldads Vira et al., 2025, see companion issue) is an important project which aims to expand communication opportunities for deaf children, their families and teachers. The current emergence of shared sign language, including contact with FJSL, among a cohort of 20 deaf students in a school in Port Vila is explored in Miles and Mayberry (2025, see companion issue). Facilitated events such as a deaf camp run by an NGO in 2017, and an increase in regional activities facilitated by World Federation of the Deaf[7] will likely contribute to the growth of deaf sociality and shared language among those who are able to participate in these opportunities. Given that Fiji plays a leading role in Deaf development activities in the Pacific region (McKee et al., 2019), and that there is some ongoing contact with deaf education in Fiji, it is likely that FJSL will continue to be an element in the evolving sign language landscape.

Notwithstanding the limitations of this research, the study has highlighted variation and commonalities in the signs that deaf homesigners in this context use to communicate in their everyday interactions. Mutual comprehension among these diverse and geographically disparate individuals was untested. As noted in other Melanesian contexts (PNG being the most documented), a common iconic base for many signs (referencing salient visual and physical characteristics of referents) and the use of conventional cultural gestures seems more likely to account for similarities in signs across individuals and locations than direct interaction between signers. The circumstances of this research did not allow for tracing the potential role of hearing associates of deaf individuals in the creation or transmission of local signs in Vanuatu, as described in other contexts for deaf individuals in the region, leaving scope for more extended research.

Acknowledgements

Jacqui Iseli's opportunity to do the original project work in Vanuatu was supported by VSA and by Mrs Naliupis of SANMA Frangipani Association (SFA). We appreciate the constructive feedback offered by two anonymous reviewers and the Special Issue Editor which improved this article. Any remaining flaws and omissions remain ours.

References

Anderson, M., Leigh, I., & Samar, V. (2011). Intimate partner violence against Deaf women: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *16*, 200–206. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2011.02.006

Armstrong, A. C., Johansson-Fua, S., & Armstrong, D. (2023). Reconceptualising inclusive education in the Pacific. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *27*(11), 1177–1190. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1882057

Brentari, D., & Coppola, M. (2013). What sign language creation teaches us about language. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science, 4*(2), 201–211. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1212

[7] Vanuatu Deaf Association was admitted into the World Federation of the Deaf as an Ordinary Member on 5 July 2024. See https://www.facebook.com/WFDOceania/

Child Rights International Network. (2014). *Vanuatu: Children's rights references in the Universal Periodic Review*. https://archive.crin.org/en/library/publications/vanuatu-childrens-rights-references-universal-periodic-review-0.html

Clarke, M., Leach, M., & Scambary, J. (2013). Reconciling custom, citizenship and colonial legacies: Ni-Vanuatu tertiary student attitudes to national identity. *Nations and Nationalism*, *19*(4), 715–738. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12009

Coppola, M. (2022, September 26–30). *How interacting minds make language: The creative forces behind homesign, sign languages, and all human communication* [Keynote presentation]. 14th International Conference on Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research (TISLR 14), Osaka, Japan.

de Vos, C. (2012). *Sign-Spatiality in Kata Kolok: How a village sign language of Bali inscribes its signing space* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Radboud]. Radbound Repository. https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/99153/99153.pdf?sequence=1

Department of Economic and Sector Planning. (2006). *The Republic of Vanuatu's priorities and action agenda 2006–2015.* Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (Vanuatu). https://www.adb.org.

Douglas, B. (2002). Christian citizens: Women and negotiations of modernity in Vanuatu. *The Contemporary Pacific, 14*(1), 1–38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23717638

ELAN (Version 6.8) [Computer software]. (2024). Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan

Eldads Vira, A., Thomas, L. & Miles, R. (2025). Towards a National Sign Language in Vanuatu. *Te Reo*, *68*(3), 5–19.

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.

Friedner, M. I. (2011). "Future Life How?": The making of deaf sociality and aspiration in urban India. *UC Berkeley*. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7g53c2gs

Fusellier-Souza, I. (2012). Multiple perspectives on the emergence and development of human language. In M. Watorek, S. Benazzo, & M. Hickman (Eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on Language Acquisition* (pp. 223–241). https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847696045-014

Goldin-Meadow, S. (2003). *Resilience of language: What gesture creation in deaf children can tell us about how all children learn language*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Goico, S. A., & Horton, L. (2023). Homesign: Contested Issues. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, *9*, 377–398. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguistics-030521-060001

Haviland, J. B. (2013). The emerging grammar of nouns in a first generation sign language: Specification, iconicity, and syntax. *Gesture*, *13*(3), 309–353. https://doi.org/10.1075/gest.13.3.04hav

Hatfield, Adam. (2016). *A grammar of Mehek* [Doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo]. ERIC Database. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED589163

Horton, L. (2022). Lexical overlap in young sign languages from Guatemala. *Glossa*, *7*(1), 1–44. https://doi.org/10.16995/GLOSSA.5829

Hou, L. (2017). Negotiating language practices and language ideologies in fieldwork: a reflexive meta-documentation. In A. Kusters, M. De Meulder, D. O'Brien. (Eds.) *Innovations in deaf studies: The role of deaf scholars* (pp. 339–359). Oxford University Press

Hou, L., & de Vos, C. (2022). Classifications and typologies: Labeling sign languages and signing communities. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *26*(1), 118–125.

Hunsicker, D., & Goldin-Meadow, S. (2015). How handshape type can distinguish between nouns and verbs in homesign. In J. B. Haviland (Ed.) *Where do nouns come from?* (pp. 111–33). John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/bct.70.05hun.

Iseli, J. (2012). *Storian wetem han olgeta A Dictionary of Deaf Ni-Vanuatu Family Signs.* (1st ed.). Volunteer Service Abroad. https://www.academia.edu/143660823/Digital_Storian_Wetem_Han_Olgeta

Iseli, J. (2018) *Deaf Ni-Vanuatu and their signs: A sociolinguistic study* [Master's thesis, Victoria University of Wellington]. ResearchArchive@Victoria University of Wellington. https://openaccess.wgtn.ac.nz/articles/thesis/Deaf_Ni-Vanuatu_and_their_signs_A_sociolinguistic_study/17134766

Jayaraman, T. K., & Ward, B. D. (2006). Economic growth in a vulnerable island nation: An empirical study of the aid-growth nexus in Vanuatu. *Asia-Pacific Development, 13*(2), 93–112.

Kegl, J., Senghas, A., & Coppola, M. (1999). Creation through contact: Sign language emergence and sign language change in Nicaragua. In M. DeGraff (Ed.), *Language creation and language change: creolization, diachrony, and development* (pp. 179–237). MIT Press.

Kendon, A. (1980). A description of a deaf-mute sign language from the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea with some comparative discussion. Part II: The semiotic functioning of Enga signs. *Semiotica, 32*, 81–117.

Kuschel, R. (1974). *A lexicon of signs from a Polynesian outliner island*. Kobenhavn. http://www.bellona.dk

Kusters, A. (2012a). Adamarobe: A demographic, sociolinguistic and cultural profile. In U. Zeshan & C. de Vos (Eds.), *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 347–352). De Gruyter Mouton.

Kusters A. (2012b). Being a deaf white anthropologist in Adamorobe: Some ethical and methodological issues. In U. Zeshan & C. de Vos, (Eds.) *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 27–52). De Gruyter Mouton

Kvam, M. (2004). Sexual abuse of deaf children. A retrospective analysis of the prevalence and characteristics of childhood sexual abuse among deaf adults in Norway. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 28*(3), 241–51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2003.09.017

McKee, R., Iseli, J., & Murray, A. (2019). Sign language interpreting in the Pacific: A snapshot of progress in raising the participation of deaf people. *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies*, *7*(2), 185–196. https://doi.org/10.1386/nzps_00005_1

Meir, I., Sandler, W., Padden, C., & Aronoff, M. (2012). Emerging sign languages. In M. Marschark & P. E. Spencer (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of deaf studies, language, and education (Vol. 2)*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195390032.013.0018.

Miles, R., & Mayberry, R. (2025) Argument marking in a new sign language. *Te Reo*, *68*(4), 152–177.

Mineiro, A., Carmo, P., Caroça, C., Moita, M., Carvalho, S., Paço, J., & Zaky, A. (2017). Emerging linguistic features of Sao Tome and Principe Sign Language. *Sign Language & Linguistics*, *20*(1), 109–128. https://doi.org/10.1075/SLL.20.1.04MIN

Mudd, K., Lutzenberger, H., De Vos, C., & deBoer, B. (2021). Social structure and lexical uniformity: A case study of gender differences in the Kata Kolok community. In T. Fitch, C. Lamm, H. Leder & K. Teßmar-Raible (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 43rd annual conference of the Cognitive Science Society (CogSci 2021)* (pp. 2692–2698). Cognitive Science Society

Murray, A., & Rokotuibau, J. (2011, July 14–16). Working together to support the Solomon Islands: An emerging Deaf and interpreting community. In B. Costello, M. Thumann & R. Shaw (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th conference of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters* (pp. 12–23). World Association of Sign Language Interpreters.

Nelson, K. Tawaketini, I., Spencer, R., & Goswell, D. (2009), Isa Lei: Interpreter training in Fiji'. In J. Napier (Ed.), *International perspectives on sign language interpreter education* (pp. 171–89). Gallaudet University Press.

Nosek, M., Howland, C., Rintala, D., Young, M., & Chanpong, G. (2001). National study of women with physical disabilities: Final report. *Sexuality and Disability*, *19*(1), 5–40. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010716820677

Nunn, P. D., Kumar, L., Eliot, I., & Mclean, R. F. (2016). Classifying Pacific Islands. *Geoscience Letters*, *3*, article 7. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40562-016-0041-8

Nyst, V. (2007). *A descriptive analysis of Adamorobe Sign Language (Ghana)* [Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. UvA-DARE. https://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.266338

Nyst, V., Sylla, K., & Magassouba, M. (2012). Deaf signers in the Dogon, a rural area in Mali. In U. Zeshan & C. de Vos (Eds.), *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 251–276). De Gruyter Mouton.

Nyst, V., Morgado, M., Hadjah, T., Nyarko, M., Martins, M., van der Mark, L., Burichani, E., Angoua, T., Magassouba, M., Sylla, D., Admasu, K., & Schüller, A. (2022). Object and handling handshapes in 11 sign languages: Towards a typology of the iconic use of the hands. *Linguistic Typology*, *26*(3), 573–604. https://doi.org/10.1515/lingty-2021-0026

Padden, C., Meir, I., Hwang, S., Lepic, R., Seegers, S., & Simpson, T. (2013). Patterned iconicity in sign language lexicons. *Gesture*, *13*(3), 287–308. https://doi.org/10.1075/bct.70.03pad

Polich, L. (2005). *The emergence of the deaf community in Nicaragua*. Gallaudet University Press.

Reed, L. W. (2020). "Switching caps" Two ways of communicating in sign in the Port Moresby deaf community, Papua New Guinea. *Asia-Pacific Language Variation*, *6*(1), 13–52. https://doi.org/10.1075/aplv.19010.ree

Reed, L., & Rumsey, A. (2020). Sign languages in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. In A. Kendon (Ed.) *Sign language in Papua New Guinea: A primary sign language from the Upper Lagaip Valley, Enga Province* (pp. 141–183). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Regenvanu, R. (2005). The changing face of "custom" in Vanuatu. *People and Culture in Oceania, 20*(14), 35–46.

Royson, W. (2014, October 2). Be alarmed! Vanuatu rates of violence against women and children. *Vanuatu Daily Post*. http://dailypost.vu/news/be-alarmed-vanuatu-rates-of-violence-against-women-and-children/article_fbf9a7fb-4f4c-58f4-a305-cfc8058accec.html

Safar, J. 2019. Translanguaging in Yucatec Maya signing communities. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *10*(1), 31–53. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2017-0082.

Sandler, W. (2012). Dedicated gestures and the emergence of sign language. *Gesture*, *12*(3), 265–307. https://doi.org/10.1075/gest.12.3.01san

Shah, S. (2013). Sexual offences in Vanuatu under the light of custom and law: An avenue for restorative justice. *Asian Journal of Criminology*, *8*(4), 257–275. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-013-9159-1

Smiler, K. (2013). *Ka puāwai ngā kō hungahunga turi. A study of the nature and impacts of early intervention for Māori deaf children and their whānau* [Doctoral dissertation,

Victoria University of Wellington]. ResearchArchive@Victoria University of Wellington. https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.17142989.v1

Sobsey, D., & Doe, T. (1991). Patterns of sexual abuse and assault. *Sexuality and Disability*, *9*(3), 243–259. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01102395

Sutton-Spence, R., & Woll, B.. (1998). *The linguistics of British Sign Language: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Tamarua, J., & Stebbins, K. (1994), *Melanesian signs for communication with the Deaf*. Department of Education, Papua New Guinea.

The Government of Vanuatu (2015) *National gender equality annual report* [Unpublished report].

United Nations Children's Fund & Republic of Vanuatu. (2014). *Children, women and men with disabilities in Vanuatu: What do the data say?* UNICEF Suva. https://www.medbox.org/document/children-women-and-men-with-disabilities-in-vanuatu-what-do-the-data-say

United Nations Population Fund. (2023). *2020 population and housing census. Vanuatu thematic report on disability* (Vol. 4, Issue June). https://vbos.gov.vu/sites/default/files/Disability Thematic Report Vanuatu_061223_print.pdf

U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. (2023). *Vanuatu 2023 Human Rights Report.* https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/528267-VANUATU-2023-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf

van Herreweghe, M., & Vermeerbergen, M. (2012). Transcription. In R. Pfau, M. Steinbacj & B. Woll (Eds.), *Sign language: An international handbook* (pp. 1045–1074). De Gruyter, Inc.

Vanuatu Daily Post. (2021, January 7). Meet Vanuatu's first sign language teacher. *Vanuatu Daily Post*. https://www.sista.com.vu/meet-vanuatus-first-sign-language-teacher/

Vanuatu National Statistics Office. (2020). *Children, women and men with disabilities in Vanuatu: What do the data say?* https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/children-women-and-men-disabilities-vanuatu-what-do-data-say

Vanuatu Skills Partnership (2018). *Situation analysis: Sign language in Vanuatu*. Governments of Vanuatu and Australia. https://www.vanuatutvet.org.vu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/WEB_Situation_Analysis-Sign-Language-in-Vanuatu_8.pdf

Vanuatu Women's Centre. (2011). *Vanuatu National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships*. Vanuatu Women's Centre. https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/research_database/Vanuatu_National_Survey_on_Womens_Lives_and_Family_Relationships.pdf

Washabaugh, W. (1981). Sign language in its social context. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *10*(1), 237–252.

Washabaugh, W. (1986). The acquisition of communicative skills by the Deaf of Providence Island. *Semiotica*, *62*(1–2), 179–190. https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.1986.62.1-2.179

World Federation of the Deaf (n.d.) *Sign language rights: Sign language work.* https://wfdeaf.org/resources/sign-language-rights/

Zwitserlood, I. (2010). Sign language lexicography in the early 21st century and a recently published dictionary of sign language of the Netherlands. *International Journal of Lexicography, 23*(4), 443–476. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijl/ecq031