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Introduction: Vanuatu languages in action

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Introduction: Vanuatu languages in action

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The Special Issue on *Vanuatu languages in action* is a collection of articles that explore language planning and policy, the place of language in the educational system and in other institutions, and language's function as a vehicle for cultural knowledge and practices.

Several contributions in this special issue focus on language planning and documentation as tools for social inclusion and cultural empowerment. Angelinah Eldads Vira, Leniker Thomas and Rachel Miles report on the creation of a national sign language dictionary to support the human rights of deaf and disabled people in Vanuatu. Their work highlights the importance of centering deaf leadership and promoting awareness of linguistic diversity beyond spoken languages. Lyndal and Ross Webb describe how the gradual development of a critical thinking course in Bislama has required the creation of new technical and educational terminology in the national language, exemplifying how language planning can serve both pedagogical and social goals. Brittany Hoback reflects on the process of developing orthographies for lesser-documented languages through Indigenous methodologies, showing how participatory, community-based dialogue ensures that writing systems are grounded in local values. From a historical perspective, Lamont Lindstrom examines nineteenth-century missionary translations into Nafe (Kwamera), offering insight into how early translators grappled with representing foreign theological concepts in local languages.

The implementation of Vanuatu's vernacular language educational policy, a topic that has generated significant debate in the traditional and social media in recent years (e.g.

Willans, 2017; Taman et al., 2025, companion issue) is the main theme of two contributions in this special issue. Reuben Tarihehe and Fiona Willans present findings from West Ambae showing strong community support for vernacular education but also major gaps in implementation, resources, and teacher training. Similarly, Michael Franjeh, Emily Clark, Greville Corbett and Alexandra Grandison survey three other communities and find that teachers often lack sufficient resources and must negotiate between policy ideals and practical classroom realities. Together, these studies demonstrate the importance of evidence-based insights that move beyond polarized online and offline discussions in order to make progress toward constructive policy evaluation and support for schools.

The status and use of Bislama and English in institutional and educational contexts is discussed by Cindy Schneider, Charlotte Gooskens, Owen Kapelle and Inés Antón-Méndez, whose intelligibility study finds that Bislama should play a greater role in official and legal domains, which has implications for education and public communication. This is in line with Lyndal and Ross Webb's long-term teaching project, which demonstrates that Bislama can effectively serve as a medium for complex cognitive skills.

Finally, a set of contributions explore the cultural knowledge and worldviews embedded in Vanuatu's languages. Anna Naupa and Helen Naupa document the *vilyhoru* wind terms of Erromango, revealing how linguistic categories encode ecological expertise and how collaboration between community experts and linguists can complement earlier research. Sandrine Bessis and Alexandre François compare oral traditions from the Torres–Banks and Shepherds archipelagos, showing how differences in narrative form and content reflect local histories and social organization. Both studies highlight how Vanuatu's languages serve as repositories of environmental, historical, and social knowledge.

Together, the articles in this issue showcase the diverse roles that languages play in Vanuatu—from instruments of inclusion and education to carriers of identity, tradition, and intellectual creativity. In the following paragraphs, we offer a brief overview of each contribution in the Special issue on *Vanuatu languages in action* in the order in which they appear in the volume.

In the first article, “Towards a national sign language in Vanuatu”, Angelinah Eldads Vira, Leniker Thomas and Rachel Miles report on a project led by the Curriculum Development Unit to record and collate signs used by deaf people across Vanuatu, creating a dictionary database to be disseminated to stakeholders such as deaf people, their families and communities, teachers and disability organisations. They reflect on the progress and challenges of language planning in this context, and the importance of centering deaf leadership, while challenging stereotypes about deaf people and sign language in the wider community.

The next article focuses on two of Vanuatu's official languages, Bislama and English. In “English and Bislama in professional contexts: Perspective from an intelligibility study in Vanuatu”, Cindy Schneider, Charlotte Gooskens, Owen Kapelle and Inés Antón-Méndez investigate the intelligibility of five varieties of English, including Vanuatu English, and Bislama, for groups of university students and graduates from Vanuatu and Australia. This is the first systematic study of the mutual intelligibility of Bislama and English and confirms that Bislama is a separate language from English, with the Australian participants performing little better than chance when distinguishing true and false sentences in Bislama. The study also shows that even the most highly-educated ni-Vanuatu citizens understand Bislama better than any variety of English, and the authors therefore argue for a greater role for Bislama in public services in Vanuatu, especially in the legal system. Another surprising

finding is the relatively poor comprehension of Australian and New Zealand English by ni-Vanuatu participants, compared to other varieties of English.

Lyndal and Ross Webb's contribution "Developing a critical thinking course in Bislama" demonstrates how Bislama could be extended to new domains, via careful linguistic adaptation to bridge cultural and educational gaps. The article describes the development over 13 years of a course in critical reading skills, including for engaging with Bible texts, and critical thinking skills essential for navigating the complexities of daily life. The authors also elaborate on their choice of Bislama as the language of instruction, including the advantages of using Bislama, the related challenges and solutions.

The next two articles discuss vernacular language education in Vanuatu. Reuben Tarihehe and Fiona Willans's "Implementation of Vanuatu's vernacular language policy: Insights from primary schools in West Ambae" is a study with three main facets: (i) assessment of the language skills in English, Bislama and Nduidui of pupils in Years 1 and 4, (ii) investigating the teaching and learning process through classroom observation, and (iii) eliciting teachers' and community members' perspectives about Vanuatu's vernacular language policy through interviews and *hunguhungu*, a local practice for bringing together the whole community for discussion of important issues. They find local support for the policy but also gaps in its implementation.

In a similar vein, in "Vernacular language use in schools: Teachers' perspectives on implementing the Vanuatu National Language Policy", authors Michael Franjeh, Emily Clark, Greville Corbett and Alexandra Grandison report on a survey conducted in three communities on Santo and Ambrym. They investigate how vernacular languages are used in local schools, the pupils' language competence, and the resource needs of teachers, and extend some recommendations for strengthening vernacular language education in Vanuatu.

In her article "Yumi stori: How we can use the Melanesian methodology of *tok stori/storian* to better inform orthography decisions", Brittany Hoback reports on her experience using the Melanesian methodology of *storian/tok stori* in efforts to develop an orthography for the Malekula language Denggan. The article focuses on the methodology's importance for relationship building and enabling a wide range of community voices. One of this methodology's strengths is that it can be used both within and outside of formal workshop settings.

Anna Naupa and Helen Naupa's article "Changing winds: Notes on the *vilyhoru* of Erromango, Vanuatu" shows the importance of cultural and environmental knowledge embodied in Vanuatu's Indigenous languages. Naupa and Naupa report on a community-led project to document traditional maritime knowledge in Erromango, in the process correcting and expanding earlier linguistic research by Terry Crowley and John Lynch, and resolving the question posed by Lynch (2017): Why do Erromangan wind terms appeared to be turned by 90 degrees compared to other languages of Southern Vanuatu? This article demonstrates how the work of community experts and outsider linguists can mutually inform each other, including as an unexpected legacy of earlier language documentation, addressing both community priorities and research questions in linguistics.

The last two articles in this issue take a historical perspective on languages in action. Lamont Lindstrom's "Two early Nafe (Kwamera) language catechisms from Tanna (Vanuatu)" offers a comparison and analysis of two 19th-century catechisms written in the Tanna language Nafe (Kwamera). Lindstrom investigates the missionaries' choices for expressing Christian concepts in Nafe and makes inferences about the Nafe language in the

19th century noting some dialectal differences between the varieties used in the two catechisms.

In “Myths, tales or history? On two storytelling traditions in Vanuatu”, Sandrine Bessis and Alexandre François delve into the world of oral literature, comparing narratives from the Torres–Banks archipelago and the Shepherds archipelago. They compare the narratives from the two regions in terms of genre and content, and relate the differences to social organisation and historical events. The genres and narrative structures they describe will be familiar to communities and researchers across Vanuatu, even as they draw attention to the subtle differences that can play out in different regions and research contexts.

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