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*Yumi stori: How we can use the Melanesian methodology of tok stori/storian to better inform orthography decisions*

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## **Yumi stori: *How we can use the Melanesian methodology of tok stori/storian to better inform orthography decisions***

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### **Abstract**

Creating an orthography with a community is often a part of language documentation projects, especially in Vanuatu where there has been a push from the education system for linguists to help aid the formation of a writing system for the different Vanuatu vernacular languages for school use. While there are helpful guidelines around facilitating the linguistic decision making in the creation of such orthographies, it can be helpful for budding linguists to have more real-life examples of how the logistics of these projects work. Orthography decision making can often take place in workshops or in a series of workshops, which can mean that community members who feel comfortable speaking in these formal settings contribute the most to the discussion. Yet people external to these workshops or community members who may be hesitant to speak up in these workshops may have their voices excluded from the decision-making process. Since *tok stori* as a methodology is already gaining traction as an appropriate and well-suited Melanesian methodology for Pacific research, this paper suggests that using *stori/tok stori* as a method of gathering opinions and perspective outside the official orthography workshops can build relationships between the linguist and the community and can open the decision-making process around the orthography creation to a wider range of community voices. I use my fieldwork creating a community orthography for Denggan language (previously Banam Bay Language) in SE Malekula as an example of how *stori* as a methodology can gather community perspectives during orthography creation from both inside and outside the official orthography workshops.

### **Summary in Bislama**

*Yumi stori: Hao nao yumi yusum tok stori/storian insaed long ol woksop wetem komuniti blong mekem disisen long raetem langwis*

Long Vanuatu, i gat plenti lingwis we oli stap wok wetem ol komuniti blong mekem disisen long hao nao blong raetem langwis. Hemia wan impoten wei wea ol lingwis we oli stap wok blong dokumentem langwis oli save givhan long komuniti mo Dipatmen blong Edukeisen we oli wantem raetem ol langwis blong yusum insaed long ol skul blong ples. I gat sam lingwis we oli givem infomesen long hao nao blong jusem stret speling wetem komuniti, be hemi stil save givhan long ol niufala lingwis blong hao nao yumi mekem kaen projek ia. Taem mi stap wok wetem komuniti long SE Malekula, mifala i bin faenem insaed long ol woksop blong raetem langwis, ol man wea oli konfiden gud, oli save toktok, be ol man wea oli no stap or oli no konfiden blong toktok oli save stap aot long ol disisen. Plenti man raon long Pasifik oli stap yusum wok blong tok stori or stori olsem wan pat blong risej blong olgeta from hemi fit gud long fasin blong ples blong yumi long Melanesia. Tok stori o storian hemi wan wei we ol

lingwis oli save bildimap rilesensip wetem komuniti mo givem wan ples blong tok raon long ol desisen aotsaed long ol woksop long speling. Long pepa ia, mi stap telemaot wei we mifala i bin yusum stori aotsaed long ol woksop blong speling blong helpem ol narafala man we oli no stap toktok insaed long woksop blong gat jans blong gat vois yet long ol desisen we mifala i mekem.

## Keywords

orthography creation, Vanuatu languages, Pacific methodologies, *tok stori*, *storian*, Banam Bay language, Denggan, decolonizing methodologies, Community language documentation

## 1 Introduction

Language projects in Vanuatu often include the creation of an orthography to aid a community of speakers in developing a written literacy for languages primarily in an oral domain. In looking at recommended methodologies for linguists aiding in projects around orthography creation, there is advice on how to approach orthography decisions (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Himmelmann, 2006), how to evaluate readability and acceptance (Bird, 1999), and some of the social issues linguists may need to be aware of as they facilitate orthography decisions (Bird, 2001; Gelles, 2018; Sebba, 2012; Seifart, 2006). These are useful, but there can still be a gap around how to include perspectives of community members who may not feel comfortable taking part in the formal discussions around orthography decisions or how to use more locally appropriate methodologies within such community language projects. One such methodology which could be useful for linguists in Vanuatu to consider is the practice of *storian* or *tok stori* as a specific Melanesian cultural practice and research methodology.

*Storian* is something that I engaged in frequently due to living in and being a part of the community, however I had not previously thought of it as a methodology within data collection. In Sanga et al. (2018), researchers from the Pacific talk about having ‘ah-ha’ moments of understanding that the ‘methodology’ which was most appropriate, was the one they had been using all along as a part of their interactions with their community members. Similarly, I found myself engaged in *storian/tok stori* as a cultural practice before understanding this as a research methodology. Utilising *storian/tok stori* benefited the research by allowing me to first focus on the relationships with individuals around the community, which in turn allowed the research to progress in ways it wouldn’t have otherwise. This helped me reflect on the question of how we as linguists can use the Melanesian methodology of *tok stori/storian* within, and alongside, community orthography workshops to better inform orthography decisions.

Using my experience working with the Denggan speaking community, this paper provides evidence for the appropriateness and benefit of using a Melanesian-based methodology of *storian/tok stori* to support decisions within a language project, specifically focusing on orthography development. This paper also reflects on how *storian/tok stori* conversations helped deepen the creation of Denggan orthography inside and outside of the formal orthography workshops held with the Denggan speaking community.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been adapted from my PhD Thesis: A sociolinguistic study of language documentation: Denggan (Banam Bay, Malekula, Vanuatu). (Hoback, 2024)

## 2 Description of the Language Project and Orthography Workshops

The Denggan language project was a project that stemmed from the community's wish to comply with the change in education policy to start incorporating the local vernacular language into the first three primary school years to support first-language literacy (Republic of Vanuatu, 1999). This is a community into which I had been married into and have lived in from 1-8 months at a time over the last 16 years. The project included building an orthography, deciding on the name of the language, documenting oral use of the language, and creating a grammatical description of the language. The full Denggan documentation project is described in further detail in Hoback (2024).

The Denggan language is spoken primarily in southeast Malekula. The speaker area extends along the coast from Burmbar, north of Black Sands and Lamap to the south, up to Fartafo before Tesman and Aulua villages to the north. Denggan has previously been recorded in wordlists under the names Banam Bay Language (Charpentier, 1982; Crowley, 2000), or as three separate language names corresponding to the villages where there exists some variation in the language use: Burmbar, Lepaxivir, and Fartavo<sup>2</sup> (Tryon, 1976). As part of this language project, the community decided the name they would like to use is *Denggan*, meaning 'of place' (Hoback, 2024).

The project began initially with my partner and I recording words and stories in Denggan to help me have a better grasp of the grammar and phonetics. Upon receiving approval for the project from the local chiefs, we then widened this project to include recording community members' stories and plans to facilitate community orthography workshops to make decisions around spelling and word boundaries. Our first period of language documentation and the language project was in 2017-2018, focused on recording stories and events. In 2018-2019, we then returned to Vanuatu from New Zealand with the goal of leading the orthography workshops to create a preliminary spelling system so that my partner could transcribe the recordings we had collected last time. The goals were also to edit some of the custom stories to develop small reader booklets for the local school.

The language project for this period included two orthography workshops with representatives from each of the Denggan speaking villages gathering to decide upon a written orthography for Denggan transcription and print literacy materials. The goals of these workshops included creating a preliminary, agreed upon orthography for transcription of the documentation files, recording specific vocabulary words that were starting to be less frequently used, such as numerals and cardinal directions, and preparing for the eventual output of basic print literacy materials for the primary school written in Denggan. These sessions were recorded to document the decision-making processes around building a written form of a language traditionally in an oral domain.

When we began the orthography workshops, community members and teachers had begun to employ a non-standardised orthography to start incorporating Denggan on community signs, classroom materials, and written hymns. However, many of these individuals expressed frustration at not knowing how to write sounds that were not similar to represented sounds within English or Bislama, and they were eager to participate in the workshops to discuss how to address these sounds. Therefore, in early 2019, with funding through the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (SOAS University of London), my partner and I and the village of Repaksifir and Sunesup Primary School staff were able to host two language workshops at the local primary school (17 January 2019 and 23 February 2019) with the

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<sup>2</sup> The spelling in Tryon (1976) is Burmbar, Lepaxivir, and Fartavo, however I will later refer to these in the current Denggan orthography as Burmbar, Repaksifir, and Fartafo.

Denggan speaking community. We designed these workshops to be collaborative and to facilitate the discussion around the major orthography decisions.

Based on the suggestions from community members who helped in the organisation of these workshops, the information about the language project was distributed in advance to every major village of speakers, and representatives from each community gathered to participate in the workshops. There were about 22 recorded attendees for the first workshop and 35 recorded attendees for the second workshop. The distribution of male to female participants was about 25% female, 75% male for the first workshop and 35% female, 65% male for the second workshop. The ages represented by participants were from about 21 to 70, but the majority of the participants were probably middle-aged, (35-60 years). Transportation was provided to help older community members from other villages attend.

The chiefs from each of the main villages were able to come. Teachers, the local headmaster, and the local pastor also supported the events. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) suggest that not only does an orthography need to include all of the different speech varieties, but also suggest that for use in a vernacular education program, “an orthography must also be acceptable to authorities (including religious leaders, familial or clan heads, and civil leaders) who have influence over the educational practices of the community” (p. 138). Therefore, the inclusion of these members addressed the need for representation of speakers from different dialectal varieties, as well as authenticating the process through the traditional and religious authorities.

Both workshops followed a similar format for the days’ events. There was a welcome and an opening prayer. Then the morning was spent discussing spelling options and specific word boundaries or visual representations in the writing system. We broke about midday for lunch prepared by local families and paid for with our project funding. When we reconvened, we spent the afternoon translating specific stories or reviewing specific vocabulary that the community of the workshop wanted to have documented. The afternoon work for both workshops ended with a kava ceremony and food packaged in leaves for participants to enjoy there or take with them.

In the first workshop, I introduced the language project, the work that I had already been doing on the grammar sketch, and the decisions we wanted to discuss for this first meeting, such as the name of the language, the spelling system, and the representation of prefix/proclitic subject agreement markers. The head teacher and I used the blackboard for writing examples. We, then, facilitated the discussions from the front of the assembled classroom of speakers. During discussions, community members were encouraged to voice their opinions. Different speakers took turns standing and voicing their opinion about a certain grapheme or the motivations for considering certain decisions.

In preparation for the workshop, I had prepared some of the different symbol possibilities for the different sounds I had encountered through my phonological analysis. I provided the different possible representations from orthographies of English, Bislama, and some of the other Malekula languages that have existing orthographies. We started the process by going through all of the different sounds of Denggan. I asked to be corrected anywhere I may not be capturing the sound correctly or if there were any sounds that they thought I had not covered. We discussed different possible graphemes for phonemic representation. We then went through different sample words of the different sounds and the different possible letter representations for each to discuss and see what everyone liked best.

For the orthography process as a whole, Grenoble and Whaley (2006) advocate that developing an orthography should be an iterative process of making decisions, testing those

decisions, and making necessary adjustments (p. 157). They suggest that there should be early experimentation to see if diacritics or symbol choices cause any confusion with speakers or potential readers. To create an iterative decision-making process, we used the two workshop sessions as a way to not only resolve difficult decisions for orthographic representation, but also to revisit decisions made earlier to ensure that they were the best choice for new readers. Having two workshops also enabled us to include contributions to the discussion that may have arisen outside of the orthography workshops. In this way, we were able to incorporate the informal *storian/tok stori* around orthography decisions that occurred in the weeks between the two workshops into the formal process of the orthography design.

The second workshop was used for reviewing the previous decisions and discussing implications for the primary school's use of the materials we would produce. Using both *storian/tok stori* that had occurred in the time between the two workshops and the preliminary reading samples we had created and tested, we revisited some of the decisions made in the first workshops, especially around the graphemes for pre-nasalised plosives. The second workshop was also a chance to address some of the morphological questions around what constituted a word, and what grammatical features would be written as a separate orthographic unit. Both workshops had small stories translated or transcribed as a small output for the day's work.

### 3 Literature and Background of *Storian/Tok Stori* as a Methodology

In this section, I discuss the literature related to *storian/tok stori*. Because much of the literature has focused on *tok stori*, I will use this term when quoting or citing literature specifically on *tok stori*. I would argue that the practice and methodology are the same, however, and will use *storian* in the context of Vanuatu or use both terms to show the same practice known by different names (*tok stori* in Solomon Islands and *storian* in Vanuatu).

*Storian* is a part of day-to-day life in Vanuatu. In my experience in Vanuatu, it happens in the morning over morning tea when family members gather, and neighbours drop by and are offered hot tea and a plate of food. It happens in times of waiting for events to happen or over food preparation. It happens when taking a break from work in the garden when men are rolling tobacco or when we are sitting around turning roast bananas or taro on the fire while roasting in the garden. It happens when people go into a nearby home to hide from the rain or take a break after washing to relax on the sand beach and watch the kids play in the water. It happens as we sit together to work on a project, whether weaving mats, sticking thatch for roofing, or preparing *laplap* or *kava*. I have found that *storian* is a practice of taking time to converse and talk over different topics. It often occurs informally, but sometimes also in official spaces such as *nasara* 'family' meetings or community disputes where a topic is discussed from all different sides to reveal different perspectives before a decision is reached.

Similarly, scholars note that *storian/tok stori* can refer to "a range of conversational activities; from telling jokes and anecdotes and discussing local gossip to relating events of historical importance. The emphasis is thus on *stori* in its active sense, and conversation is given great social value" (Van Heekeren, 2014, p. 174). Dr. Andrina Komala Lini Thomas (2013) explains, '*Storian* is described in [Bislama]....as personal narratives, conversations, or storytelling.' (52) She notes that "*Storian* has always existed in Vanuatu's cultural context, as stories, personal conversations, and narratives have been used to transmit culture, tradition, genealogy, and land ownership rights from one generation to the next" (p. 52-53).

*Storian* mirrors closely the similar practice in Solomon Islands of *tok stori*. Sanga et al. (2018) explain that *tok stori* is a traditional oral process of discussion, a method of sharing information and knowledge and a relational form of knowledge creation through discussion

(Sanga et al., 2018). They define *tok stori* as “a Melanesian Pacific relational mode of communication, widely practiced and understood, capable of application in a wide variety of Melanesian contexts” (p. 3). Traditionally, *Tok stori* is used as a method of peace keeping and reconciliation (Sanga et al., 2018). It can be used as an exploration of truth and critical discourse (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001) and it can include story telling with the purpose of revealing a specific lesson (Sanga et al., 2018). It can also include more informal discussions happening in the in-between moments of everyday life (Thomas, 2013). Similar to *talanoa* (Fua, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2008), *tok stori* is a practice which emphasises the relational aspects of discourse. Because *storian/tok stori* is a practice which already exists as a cultural practice within Melanesia, it is now also being recognized as an appropriate methodology for decolonising research within the Pacific based on its’ applicability within Melanesian ontology and its usefulness as a way of navigating decisions and knowledge creation (Bolinga, 2023; Sanga et al., 2018; Sanga & Reynolds, 2021).

Within Melanesian ontology, reality and knowledge are created and negotiated through relationships (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Lee et al., 2014; Meyer, 2001; Nabobo-Baba, 2005, 2008; Sanga, 2004; Smith, 2014; Taib, 2014). The definitions of *tok stori* as a method and as a practice highlight this ontological relationality (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019). For example, Fasavalu and Reynolds (2019) note that, “*Tok stori* can be understood as a relational ontology (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019). The act of storying contributes to relational closeness (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019) because, through story, a shared reality is constructed” (Fasavula & Reynolds, 2019, p. 14). Similarly, Sanga et al. (2018) explain *tok stori* as “a Melanesian expression of commitment to togetherness manifest through engaging in *stori*, a shared narrative which dialogically constructs reality” (p. 8). These explanations recognise that *tok stori* is consistent with the epistemology which acknowledges that knowledge is not held with one person, but instead is constructed socially to include many perspectives and to communally critically assess and come to conclusions. As Sanga et al. (2018) state, “To Melanesians, *tok stori* reality exists subjectively in the shared social interactions and social space between *tok stori* participants or actors. Such a reality is contextually defined and exists within relational settings” (p. 15).

Not only is *tok stori* enacting the relational epistemology (Sanga et al., 2018; Sanga & Reynolds, 2021), but also, by encouraging individuals to enter into communal discussion through *tok stori*, relationships are further strengthened. Thus, *storian/tok stori* can also be used to reinforce social cohesion. As Sanga et al. (2018) conclude, “*Tok stori*, then, is a Melanesian expression of commitment to togetherness manifest through engaging in *stori*” (p. 8). *Tok stori* is a methodology which emphasises the relational process of understanding and knowledge-gathering and further reinforces these relationships through the practice of coming together in conversation.

Along with being an appropriate practice/methodology for Melanesian ontologies, reinforcing relationships and social cohesion within knowledge building, *storian/tok stori* as a methodology also allows for an integration of formal and informal dialogue to be part of knowledge building. For example, Bolinga (2023) highlights *tok stori*’s knowledge sharing within an informal setting, stating, “*tok stori* research approach is described as a Melanesian informal meeting including a storytelling session that enables embedded information to be released through conversation” (p. 203). Because of the occurrence of *storian/tok stori* in informal spaces and informal times, it can also break the hierarchy which can occur within more traditional forms of Western academic data collection. As Thomas (2013) explains, *storian* can allow for “sharing emotions within a non-hierarchical-conversational relationship and uses friendship through stories” (p. 53). Thomas notes that *storian* can be a method better

suited for face-to-face conversations in which participants can share their stories in their own words and in ways that are more comfortable to them.

Lastly, using *storian/tok stori* as a methodology not only recognises the appropriateness of the practice as a methodology, it is also an act of decolonisation because it uses a local cultural practice and applies it directly within that culture rather than using an outside/Western methodology (Smith, 1999). In advocating for methodologies such as these that emphasise Indigenous values and fit within a relational epistemology, Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem et al. (2019) suggest that prioritising Indigenous research methods, such as the exchange of stories, can help participants connect to their own research in a more meaningful way. Furthermore, utilising such methods does not have to mean the rejection of Western research methods. They state, "Decolonising research methodologies do not totally dismiss Western methodological approaches; they encourage us as Indigenous researchers to connect research to our own worldviews and to theorise based on our own cultural notions in order to engage in more meaningful and useful research for our people. Indigenous storywork exemplifies this approach by prioritising the Indigenous principles on which our stories are shared, respected and treasured" (p. 6).

In using *tok stori/storian* as a methodology, there are ethical concerns that need to be considered. Sanga and Reynolds (2021) highlight that within *tok stori* there can be limitations on what can be presented based on who is permitted access to certain knowledge. This can be based on private knowledge domains (genealogy, specific knowledge held based on seniority or clan membership, etc.). Furthermore, because of the informal nature of *tok stori/storian*, the lines between what is given as informal knowledge and what is given as formal knowledge can be blurred and therefore needs to be addressed with sensitivity by following the lead of participants. For example, Kwai (2022) shared that when using *storian* in her research, there was a certain point where her family members warned her that she was now asking too many questions and that they could start responding in lies. Kwai discusses how this was given as a warning that informal *storian* taken as formal knowledge about things they may or may not have the right to share could be dangerous.

Furthermore, while *tok stori/storian* can be a good way to maintain relationships and can gain new insights around an issue, because *tok stori* often occur in an informal setting, and therefore may not be recorded in the same way as other data collection, these insights can be subject to memory-based recollection and potential subjective bias. One way this could be addressed is to bring the insights from the *tok stori/storian* into more formal discussion spaces to be debated and validated before coming to conclusions. This could increase the rigor of the data collected through informal *tok stori/storian*. Having validation in a formal discussion space can also allow for the proper authorities of certain knowledge to either affirm, claim, or caution away from domains that may not be appropriate for recording as data.

In developing an orthography with the Danggan speaking community, I have used the methodology of *tok stori* within this research first and foremost to develop my relationships within the community and to increase my linguistic and cultural competencies. I have further used *tok stori* as a way of recognising that not all knowledge is created in formal settings, as will be seen in the descriptions of the orthography workshops.



## 4 Description of *Storian/Tok Stori* Contributing to the Orthography Workshops

Within the process of the Denggan orthography building, *storian/tok stori* occurred in four main ways. The first instance was how sharing information about the language project in an informal *storian* conversation led to figuring out the logistics for the orthography workshop that would work well for the community and was community led. The second was in facilitating an iterative communication style of *storian* within the more formal workshops. The third was in incorporating *storian* that happened in between the workshops to inform what decisions may need to be revisited or what perspectives we may need to include to re-examine some of the decisions from the first workshop. The fourth was incorporating *storian* that happened in the breaks on the days of the orthography workshops in order to include voices of community members who were present in the orthography workshops, but may not have felt comfortable speaking in the formal space of the classroom.

### 4.1 *Storian/tok stori* leading to a community-led organisation of the orthography workshops

The first example of how *storian* helped with the language project was when an informal *storian/tok stori* in the kitchen between making *laplap* became the impetus for arranging the logistics for the first orthography workshop. During the time in which we were planning to host and facilitate orthography workshops with the community, there were two deaths of close family members within our community. In Vanuatu, the mourning period consists of different time frames for different members of the community or immediate family. These consist first of a five-day period, then ten days and thirty days with different expectations around each of these time periods. As family members of the deceased, my partner and I were expected to be part of these mourning periods and this stopped most formal outside work that could be done. During these time periods, we were expected to make food to take to the place of the deceased to provide company and support to the family and to host visiting community members that were also coming to pay their respects. This meant that while no formal activities in terms of the workshop planning or facilitating could be done, there was a lot of time for informal *storian* with many community members visiting the family of the deceased.

One of the days in this mourning period, as I was participating in making tea and food for visitors, my sister-in-law and the headmaster from the local school were with me in the kitchen drinking tea and helping with *laplap* preparations. We started *storian* about some of the work my partner and I had been doing with the recordings we had taken the year before of some custom stories. I was explaining the ideas around the next steps for the project in wanting to have workshops where we could discuss the spelling choices in order to start creating a standardised spelling for Denggan. From this, my sister-in-law, a local teacher at the primary school, and the headmaster of the primary school started discussing how these workshops could be organised, where, how, and who needed to be invited and how I could do this.

While organising the orthography workshops had not been my intention of the conversation, by the end of our discussion, we had a date for the first orthography workshop, a location and a plan for inviting specific language authorities from the different Denggan-speaking communities. The plans that came from this informal *storian* were appropriate to the community and led by these two community members (with input also from other community members passing in and out of the kitchen). Further *storian* also informed how we could ensure that the workshops were culturally appropriate for valuing the work (for example, by having

food provided, having the workshops opened with prayer by the local pastor, and by having a kava ceremony to close the workshops to acknowledge the work that had been done).

This example captures the idea that *storian/tok stori* is a method of research that is primarily focused on building and maintaining relationships. By not having a pre-determined plan for the orthography workshops and by respecting the restrictions around mourning periods, but using informal *storian* as a way of sharing the information about the language project, the *storian* became a way to give space for the community to lead the organisation of the logistics of the first orthography workshop and ensure that these logistics were handled in a way that was culturally appropriate. This also allowed for more ownership of the project by the community rather than a program that was externally imposed.

#### 4.2 Description of *storian/tok stori* within the orthography workshops

While in a more formal setting, the discussion that happened within the orthography workshops could also be seen as a form of *storian/tok stori*. Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2001) give a description of a long process of *tok stori* in which Kwara'ae community members in Solomon Islands critically evaluate cultural practices and how they want to record their custom and cultural practices. Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2001) talk about how this socially constructed knowledge happens through the group “discussing, (re)constructing, and sharing knowledge” (62). Similarly, in the orthography workshops, we would broach a topic, such as the different options of graphemes for a sound, and different community members would share their opinions on why one or the other might be preferable. During these discussions, I would try to sit down so that the floor would be entirely in the hands of the community members forming the discussion. While this kind of discussion was a more formal *storian/tok stori*, it still allowed for the decisions to be discussed and revisited in an iterative process. It also used the relational process of making decisions together by discussing the topic until a consensus was reached.

This is consistent with other researchers' experience of facilitating *tok stori* for more formal research purposes. For example, Bolinga (2023) notes in her sessions of ‘*yumi tok stori*’, that “The main characteristic of *yumi tok stori* is the free-flowing nature of the conversation; people are free to talk, but they know the reasons for the meeting. The participants and researcher are involved in the conversation and engage together in the co-construction of knowledge (Vaioliti 2013)” (p. 213). In this, Bolinga recognizes that the form of meetings may be the dialogical knowledge building inherent in *tok stori*, but that the researcher also “may have a plan or agenda in mind” and can use that plan to guide the flow of the conversation towards the meeting objectives (p. 213). This is consistent to what occurred in the formal orthography meetings for the Denggan community.

#### 4.3 Description of *storian/tok stori* to include voices outside of, and in-between, workshops

The third way in which *storian/tok stori* helped to contribute to the orthography decisions was the way in which *storian* happened outside of the workshops and in the time between the workshops. These conversations helped contribute to my understanding of what decisions may need to be revisited and what other perspectives might need to be shared that did not arise in our first orthography workshop discussions. This was especially important because it enabled us to include some of the voices of community members who had not been able to attend the first formal discussion.

While many community leaders were able to attend the first orthography workshop, the date of the workshop did occur on the same day in which some of the custom leaders of the

community, authorities in keeping language and custom stories and songs, were called away to help lead the custom for the breaking of the fence (coming out of seclusion) for a circumcision/coming of age ceremony. Thus, they were absent from the initial orthography workshop. Furthermore, some of the men of the community were helping to cook during the morning and afternoon of the first workshop. This meant that these voices were not a part of this first initial orthography workshop. In the weeks after the first workshop, however, sometimes these individuals were able to *stori* with me about what they heard had happened in the workshop or ask questions about what we did in the workshops. I was able to explain what happened in the workshops and what they had missed within these times of *storian*. Often these conversations were not intentionally planned conversations. Instead, they were happenstance, conversations over morning tea or when neighbours passing by were pulled in for a meal.

In these informal *storian* conversations, I learned that there was some disagreement with decisions that had been made in the first workshop. This allowed me to have more insights as to how I could facilitate revisiting these points in the following workshop where these leaders would be present to further offer their positions. By explaining some of the things that we covered in the workshop, these leaders were also able to ‘catch up’ on what we had covered, so that they could propose agendas for the following workshop of what we should also discuss and include (such as what vocabulary we wanted to document in these sessions and why). As I explained the orthography workshops and what we had discussed within these informal times of *storian*, it gave them a chance to contribute to the decision-making outside of the formal workshop.

This example of *storian* highlights the way that the practice of *storian/tok stori* connects to the value and epistemology of relationality. It is the relationality within the community that dictates that neighbours be invited in to share food and for taking the time for conversation and *storian*. This shows *storian* primarily as a relational practice, but it also gives space for talking over a subject or event in order to shed new insights on an event or decisions that had taken place.

By using the usual breakfast and midday *storian* to inform orthography decisions and discussions, I was recognising that all knowledge creation does not have to be constrained within the physical space of the workshops, nor did it need to be constrained within the temporal bounds of the workshop days themselves. Not only did this allow more participants to be included in the decision-making process for developing the Denggan writing system, but it also gave me a better understanding of which issues to revisit and clarify these positions within the formal setting of the second workshop.

Furthermore, by engaging in *storian* with community members who had missed the first workshop, they were able to feel that their participation in the creation of the Denggan orthography was valued. Thus, the relational part of *storian*, spending time with these individuals and listening to their opinions, also helped create a space for reconciliation for the mistake of having the original workshop on a date that excluded them. These times of *storian* helped include their voices, but it also helped rebuild our relationship by giving them space to talk and be heard and know that their voices mattered. This helped then give them further incentive to come and contribute to the next workshop’s discussions.

#### 4.4 Description of *storian/tok stori* within the breaks of the workshops

The final example of how *storian/tok stori* was used in deepening the decision-making process of the Denggan orthography creation, was the *storian/tok stori* that happened in the breaks of the orthography workshop sessions. While many of the discussions happened inside the classroom setting of the orthography workshops, there may have been spatial and social

barriers for some of the community members to participate fully in the discussion. *Storian* in the breaks of the workshops allowed for these individuals to voice more of their perspectives in a less formal space.

The orthography workshops were held in the local primary school. Due to limited space and the nature of an event happening with curious onlookers, many of the invited participants in the orthography workshop were seated inside, however, other community members leaned at the doorframe or through the open windows to hear the discussion. There were also community members who were helping to prepare food during the workshops so that everyone would have food when we were ready to break. Due to the formal space of the classroom and the gendered space of men often being able to speak first in formal meetings, there may have also been individuals less comfortable joining into the decision making<sup>3</sup>. This meant that while there was free discussion within the workshops themselves, there were people who from their position in the room, their position within the community, or their position as supporting the workshops, were not able or comfortable contributing within the formal discussions. Based on their understanding of what was going on in the discussion, however, these individuals were happy to express their opinions or ask questions about what had happened in less formal settings.

The orthography sessions had both a lunch break and, upon the closing of our work, a time for kava and leaf-packaged dinners. Often during the lunch break, we congregated on mats to eat outside. This was a time where conversations about what we were doing could take place within a less formalised setting. This served as a time for additional questioning, reflection and contextualising of the project between community members and me.

While the workshops were integrated in terms of gender, during the breaks, the spaces were more gendered. For the first workshop men from the community were in the kitchen area of the school cooking the lunch. The rest of the men from the workshops congregated higher on the hill under a large mango tree. The women congregated on mats near the school building on the opposite side of the yard to wait for lunch and rest in the shade of the buildings.

Due to the gendered spaces, some of the conversations that occurred between the men and myself happened while I checked with my partner on how the cooking was going. Since I was able to break the gendered space as my role as facilitator of the workshops, when I checked in with my partner, this was a space where the men who were not in the workshops, because they were volunteering to cook, were able to *stori* with me about the day's events. One gentleman who had missed the morning part of the session began asking me questions about Denggan spelling, reflecting on his experience trying to find English orthographic equivalents to express the sounds in Denggan while trying to write copies of hymns he had composed. It gave me a chance to reiterate some of the justification of these workshops that he had missed from my morning introduction and explain that those were the kinds of decisions we were discussing in the workshop and invite him to join in the afternoon to share some of his own expertise. Because we were not in a formal space, he was able to voice more of his personal experience and opinions about the orthography decisions. This helped me have more insight into some of the strategies for orthography that were already being used when I went back into the next session (where he was present). I could then incorporate the strategies he had mentioned (for

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the setting of the classroom, a more Western space, seemed to subvert some of the gender expectations around who was able to speak and lead. Often in family meetings, the men lead the discussion. In this setting however, the headmaster was female, as I am, so having two women lead within a space which may be more acceptable for women to lead (a school classroom), may have allowed for more freedom for women to speak in the workshops. Indeed, there were several strong female voices which contributed to the discussion and lead the language project.

example, not having explicit prenasalisation at the beginning of words due to confusion for readers) into the following formal discussion as an additional option for the orthography decisions.

Similarly, over lunch, the conversations started in the workshops continued over the lunch break through *storian/tok stori* about the day. When I went to eat my lunch, I was seated with the women. This gave a chance for some of the women who had not participated in the discussion as much, but had reflections on the decisions being made, to *stori* with me about their opinions about some of the decisions that had been discussed. Their opinions were expressed more comfortably because it was in the time of reflection and a less formal physical setting where they were more comfortable speaking freely.

While these conversations which happened in the breaks of the orthography workshops were not recorded as part of the official documentation of the orthography workshops, they were, nonetheless, able to inform my facilitation of the discussion upon resuming the workshops. By incorporating *storian/tok stori* which happened outside of the formal setting of the workshop discussions, I was able to bring their reflections anonymously into subsequent discussions. This allowed us to make space for voices that may have wanted to disagree within the orthography workshops, but also did not want to disturb the general consensus. When I voiced some of the reflections that I had heard outside of the classroom walls, it gave space for those people to further argue their position with support. This process allowed for validating the opinions that were voiced during the *storian* in informal space and because they were revisited in the formal workshops, these views were still recorded in the orthography discussions. Thus, by using *storian/tok stori* from the breaks, we allowed the individuals who had something to say but were not able to or did feel comfortable sharing within the official space of the classroom to still contribute to the discussion and have their opinions and perspectives be part of the final decisions around the Denggan orthography.

While the process of socially constructed knowledge was encouraged inside the classroom, there may have been spatial or social factors which inhibited free contribution. By including conversations outside of the classroom as part of this dialogic knowledge construction, we were able to construct and reconstruct the knowledge and decisions around the orthography creation. This knowledge was then able to be validated or put into the discussion within the more formal spaces.

## 5 Conclusion

As seen from the experience of Denggan orthography workshops, allowing for *storian/tok stori* around the logistics of a project can allow for the organisation of the workshops to be negotiated and decided upon by community members, thereby giving them more of a leadership role within the project. Furthermore, it ensures that community wisdom around logistics which an outside linguist might miss will be included, for example, having the ceremony of kava being an important part of making the language project official.

The understanding of *storian/tok stori* as a tool for dialogic knowledge building can also help linguists and community leaders lead the workshops to allow for decision making to be an iterative and relational process. Engaging in *storian/tok stori* can result in better relationship depth between linguist and community members. Furthermore, *storian/tok stori* can have immediate useful applications when approaching complex decisions within transitioning a language from an oral tradition into a written literacy, making it a practical and appropriate methodology for linguists and community members facilitating language projects. Within the context of orthography development, understanding the value of *storian/tok stori* inside and

outside of formal decision-making discussion also allows informal discussions to complement formal proceedings around decision making. By doing this, it allows more voices to be a part of this knowledge creation, creating better ownership and acceptance of the orthography decisions from the community. This highlights how Melanesian methodologies, such as *storian/tok stori* are relevant and appropriate for projects that could otherwise sit in a more Western-approached space.

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