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Changing winds: Notes on the vilyhoru of Erromango, Vanuatu

Anna Naupa

Erromango Cultural Association

Australian National University

Helen Naupa

Erromango Cultural Association

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

Changing winds: Notes on the vilyhoru¹ of Erromango, Vanuatu

ANNA NAUPA

Erromango Cultural Association

Australian National University

HELEN NAUPA

Erromango Cultural Association

“Nempigon vilyhoru amnelimsi go empatap kokim langkili magku nemetagi ontacoh.”

(When the north wind picks up, we know a cyclone is coming).

Captain Andrew Naling, Potnarvin, Erromango

Abstract

In 2017, drawing on the extensive linguistic documentation that Terry Crowley undertook on two of Erromango island’s languages – Sye and Ura – as well as his own expansive knowledge of the maritime vocabulary of Vanuatu’s southern islands, esteemed linguist John Lynch (2017) asked, “Why did Erromangan winds turn 90 degrees?” Lynch concluded that, whilst demonstrating linguistic similarities with wind terminologies of the other southern islands of Vanuatu, Erromango’s wind directions were turned 90 degrees. In 2021, a community traditional marine knowledge and story-telling project led by the Erromango Cultural Association undertook a mapping of Erromangan wind directions which revealed an early misreading of terminology. This paper shares community insights into the expansion of common linguistic understanding of Erromangan wind directions, as revealed through the 2021 cultural heritage documentation project. Through a community-driven initiative, contemporary Erromangan seafarers and cultural elders ‘corrected’ and expanded linguistic terminology relating to winds, building on Terry Crowley’s valuable 2000 Sye dictionary and situating within John Lynch’s studies of the maritime vocabulary of Vanuatu’s southern islands. The initiative underscored the importance of community-driven approaches in the growth of linguistic research on indigenous languages in Vanuatu, and the value of long-standing partnerships with linguists in this process.

Summary in Bislama

Pepa ia hemi lukluk long wan kwestin we let John Lynch hemi bin askem long 2017. Wan man we hemi wok plante long ol langwis blong Vanuatu, Lynch hemi bin askem “From wanem ol win blong Erromango oli tantanem olgeta 90 digri?” Lynch hemi bin yusum ol rekod we let

¹ Sye language term for ‘wind’. In Terry Crowley’s (2000) *An Erromangan (Sye) dictionary* the spelling is *vulyoru* and popular community spellings vary between *viliyuru* and *vilyhoru*. We use the latter spelling here to reflect its quotidian use and preference at time of writing.

Terry Crowley hemi bin mekem long 2 aot long 6 langwis blong Erromango: Sye mo Ura. Lynch hemi luksave se ol toktok blong talemaot ol win long langwis oli klosap semak long ol nara aelen long TAFEA provins, be Erromango nomo hemi tanem daereksen blong win igo 90 digri. Long 2021, Erromango Kaljoral Asosiesen (ECA) hemi bin mekem wan komiuniti projek blong save moa long ol storian mo kastom save blong solwota. Tru long ol komiuniti woksop mo storian, ECA hemi faendem aot se no, ol win blong Erromango oli no tantanem olgeta evriwan, mo olgeta long Erromango we oli stap long solwota plante oli ‘stretem’ ol wod long Sye diksonari. Pepa ia hemi soemaot impotens blong ol komiuniti-bes patisipesen long ol langwis risej long Vanuatu, mo impotens tu blong ol patnasip wetem ol riseja olsem let Lynch mo Crowley.

Summary in Sye (Nompun Nam)

Imo nam tampoli iyi hai tangkili en hai levsau, John Lynch yi tangkili ra nevi 2017. Iyi yompurak orog ovon nam ra ovon nompuwo mangkau Vanuatu, Lynch yi tangkili mocu, “Ra se ma vilyhoru en Erromango umampolu voli ra 90 digri?” Lynch yivai ovon imo nam marongi nam netipe en Terry Crowley yompi nduru (2) marongi nam mehkai (6) en nompuwo Erromango: Sye im Ura. Lynch yokhi mokili mocu ovon nam gi vilyhoru ra ovon nompuwo nogkon TAFEA provins iyi potpot haitenven, kou nompuwo Erromango wokon iyi amampoli voli amampe 90 digri hogku ma. Ra nevi 2021, ECA yompi hai projek worohrongi momu nam gi ovon vuvu im gi taru vuvu gi toc. Ra projek ECA yokhi mocu, tawi, ovon vilyhoru utu mampoli voli, tawi wokon. Iror mori umante go ra nomplatok, iror ma, umnompipi veh nam gi Sye ra netai nokili. Imo netai amesesi ovon nompunam gi ovon nompipi en ovoteme, aman yoki sak netvaru aremai veh im nokhi orog Vanuatu, aremai veh momu gi ovon nam nokilu mori Lynch im Crowley ndwompi.

Keywords

Vanuatu, Erromango, Sye language, winds, traditional knowledge, maritime terminology

1 Introduction

In a 2017 paper examining one of Erromango island’s remaining languages – Sye, often referred to as ‘Erromangan’ – esteemed Pacific linguist John Lynch asked, “Why did Erromangan winds turn 90 degrees?” Lynch observed that, whilst demonstrating linguistic similarities with wind terminologies of the other southern islands of Vanuatu, Erromango’s wind directions appeared to have turned 90 degrees. In 2021, a community-led traditional marine knowledge and story-telling project facilitated by the Erromango Cultural Association² (ECA) undertook a detailed mapping of Erromangan wind terminology which provided an expanded understanding of Erromangan weather terms and language use. Contemporary colloquial language use by Erromangan seafarers and cultural elders, further added, nuanced, and in some cases changed, wind terms recorded in linguist Terry Crowley’s valuable 2000 Sye

² The Erromango Cultural Association began informally in the 1970s, as a grassroots organization dedicated to the documentation, preservation and promotion of Erromangan people’s linguistic and cultural heritage, working with anthropologists and linguists such as John Lynch and Terry Crowley, as well as closely engaged in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre fieldworker network. In 2008, the ECA was formally registered enabling it to run community-based cultural and linguistic heritage preservation activities. See also: Taki and Tryon (1997), Erromango Cultural Association (2025).

dictionary. These community insights also prompted a revisiting of John Lynch's exploration of Erromangan wind terms to ask "Did Erromangan winds *really* turn 90 degrees?"

This paper outlines the process that the ECA undertook in 2021 to broaden and nuance understanding of Erromango's maritime vocabulary, particularly as it relates to winds (*ovon vilyhoru*), building on the considerable contribution to linguistic data collection made by the late Terry Crowley³ and John Lynch⁴ on Erromango. Over several decades, the ECA has pursued various community linguistic projects working closely with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and partner linguists, including archaeologists and anthropologists (Taki & Tryon, 1997, p. 369; Erromango Cultural Association, 2025). In engaging with the historical linguistic database and academic literature from an Indigenous perspective, this paper aims to expand and nuance understanding of Erromango's Sye language maritime vocabulary as it relates to winds, as well as describe the processes via which these conclusions were reached. The initiative has underscored the importance of community-driven approaches in the growth of linguistic research on indigenous languages in Vanuatu, and the value of long-standing partnerships with linguists in this process. In documenting [Erromangan] people's traditional knowledge of winds (*ovon vilyhoru*), we pay tribute to the invaluable linguistic scholarship and legacy that Terry and John gifted Erromango and continue the linguistic partnership in their memory.⁵

2 Context

Erromango is the largest island in the southern Vanuatu province of TAFEA, which also comprises the islands of Tanna (Tanauta), Aniwa, Futuna and Aneityum (Keamu). Vanuatu's southern islands have been populated for over three thousand years, with reported populations in the tens of thousands at the point of initial European contact in the nineteenth century. As Crowley (1997, p. 33) describes Erromango's linguistic ecology, "Erromango ... has the dubious honour of having suffered the greatest amount of linguistic devastation in the region of Oceania outside of Australia." He estimated that up to five-sixths of the original number of languages had become extinct on the island.

As the zone of initial missionization in the entire archipelago, commencing on Aneityum island in 1848⁶, the southern islands bore the brunt of early Christianization, as well as extensive depopulation and linguistic erosion on Aneityum and Erromango. Similarly, early written records document between 5 to 7 languages on Erromango island at initial European contact, of which today only one – Sye – is the main language and less than 10 speakers have been recorded for Ura (see Fig. 1).

³ Terry Crowley passed away in January 2005 in Hamilton, New Zealand, aged 51 years. A prolific publisher, he contributed widely to Vanuatu's language studies, including Bislama and is widely known on Erromango island for his extensive and detailed work on the Ura and Sye languages. For a comprehensive summary of his life and works see Lynch (2005).

⁴ John Lynch passed away in Port Vila, Vanuatu in May 2021, aged 74 years. An internationally recognised historical linguist from Australia, John made tremendous contributions to the scholarship on Melanesian languages. For a comprehensive bibliography of his work see Early and Spriggs (2022).

⁵ This article also addresses the Erromango gap in the recent work on wind lore by Harrison et al. (2024) which explores wind systems across four (Tanna, Aniwa, Futuna and Aneityum) of the five inhabited islands in southern Vanuatu.

⁶ Aneityum lost 80% of its population, after hosting the first sandalwood station in 1844, then the first mission station in 1848 (Spriggs, 1989).

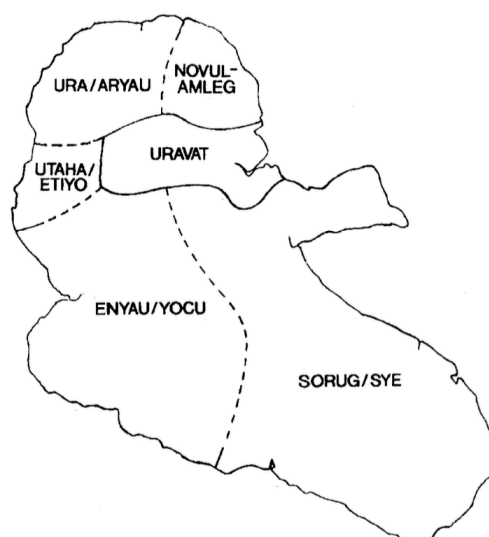


Figure 1. Erromango historically comprised six language groups (from Crowley 1997: 52)

2.1 *What is known about Erromangan languages to date*⁷

Studies of Erromango's languages have spanned more than 160 years, commencing with the early writing of German scholar H.C. von der Gabelentz (1861–1873) who identified at least two main language groupings, then Reverend James D. Gordon (1889) whose 'Sketch of the Erromangan Grammar' detailed five languages. Gordon also pioneered the written form of Sye for mission texts, producing early vernacular versions of hymns and biblical readings. Dutch scholar Hendrik Kern (1906) compared Erromangan and Aneityumese languages, and Sidney Ray (1926) provided a sketch of Sye grammar based on missionary texts. It was not until Arthur Capell's (1957, 1972) work on Sye that an expanded grammar was documented, extending beyond missionary records.⁸ John Lynch's work on the Erromango languages in the 1970s and early 1980s consolidated and expanded earlier records of grammar and phonology, urging deeper work on Erromango's languages.

In 1983, John Lynch edited and wrote a valuable volume on salvage linguistics of Erromango. With contributions by Arthur Capell and essential guidance from Erromangan informants such as James Foto, Tom Kiri, Simeon Lovo, William Mete and John Naupa⁹, the volume entitled *Studies in the languages of Erromango* provided a survey of both presumed extinct and viable languages of Erromango with the intent of stimulating future scholarship of these languages (Lynch, 1983, p. vi).

Over a decade later, Terry Crowley picked up the more intensive linguistic exploration that Lynch had hoped would occur on Erromango. Prior to Terry Crowley's intensive work on Erromangan languages between 1994 and 1998 that resulted in records of Ura and Sye grammars as well as an early Sye dictionary, the primary form of written documentation used by communities were contained in the *Netai Tagkli*, a mission text of hymns translated into the Sye language. In addition, some community members held copies of partially documented linguistic terms in early mission records such as by Reverends Gordon (1889) and James

⁷ This section is informed by Lynch (1983), Crowley (1997), Lynch and Crowley (2001) and Crowley (2007), and is summarised here for community readers in particular.

⁸ For a complete summary of historical linguistic studies on Erromango see Lynch (1983: 3-5).

⁹ The first author's father and the second author's brother.

Robertson (1902) whose focus was on only one language around the mission station in Dillons Bay, western Erromango (Lynch, 1983, p. 3). This focus on one language for practical purposes has been a key driver in the Sye bias in written forms of Erromango's languages. Nonetheless, these early missionary records also report other spoken languages on Erromango, such as Yoku/Yocu, Ura, Utaha and Sorug¹⁰ (see Fig. 1).

Crowley's introduction to Erromango came through his friendship with an Erromangan university student at Waikato University in Hamilton, NZ, named Edward Nalyal¹¹ who invited Crowley to visit his home island (Lynch, 2005, p. 227). He was adopted into Nalyal's family and spent a subsequent 1-2 years working primarily in southern Erromango to develop an initial Sye language dictionary (over a total period of seven months on-island). Since the publication of the Sye dictionary in 2000, there have been no subsequent editions, although the Erromango Cultural Association has since published more than thirteen Sye language texts and four Ura language texts, as well as identified areas of linguistic updates through projects such as the *Netai en Namou Toc* ocean storytelling project in 2021.

2.2 *Ovon vilyhoru: Evolving linguistic understanding of Erromango's winds*

In 2017, John Lynch re-explored Sye linguistics for a curated book on *Linguistic travels in time and space*, penning an article entitled "Why are Erromango's winds turned 90 degrees?" As the last formally published linguistic paper about Erromango, author Anna Naupa was fortunate to discuss the paper's argument with John Lynch prior to his passing in 2021, and to learn more about Erromango's historical linguistics.

According to Lynch (2017, p. 129), as a non-Polynesian language, Sye's maritime terminology was borrowed from the neighbouring Polynesian outlier language, Futuna-Aniwa (see Fig. 2). The same is true for other non-Polynesian languages in southern Vanuatu, on Tanna and Aneityum. However, despite this similar linguistic foundation for wind names, Lynch (2017, p.135) observed that Erromango's Sye language wind directions were turned 'off-course' by 90 degrees, usually clockwise, a matter that he described as a 'funny' thing.

¹⁰ People on Erromango tend to write the sound /ŋ/ with the single letter <g> (Crowley 1999: ix). This article maintains this spelling throughout.

¹¹ Edward Nalyal is also the cousin and nephew of the authors.

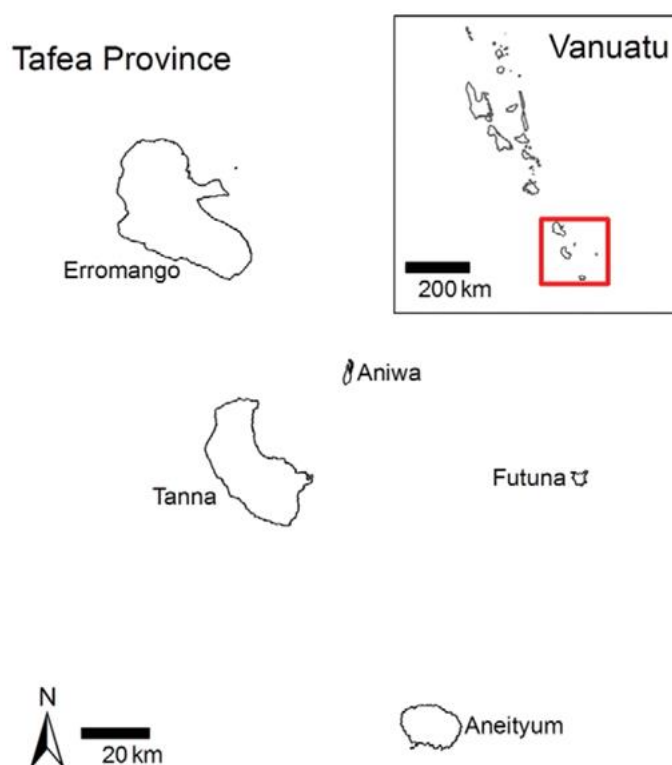


Figure 2. Map of TAFEA Province in Vanuatu

Drawing on Crowley's dictionary work, as well as his own notes, Lynch (2017, p. 131), compared Sye wind terms with those of neighbouring islands and found that despite the fact that many of the wind terms are cognate, the directions which the Erromangan wind terms refer to differ from those of the cognate terms in languages of neighbouring islands (see Fig. 3).

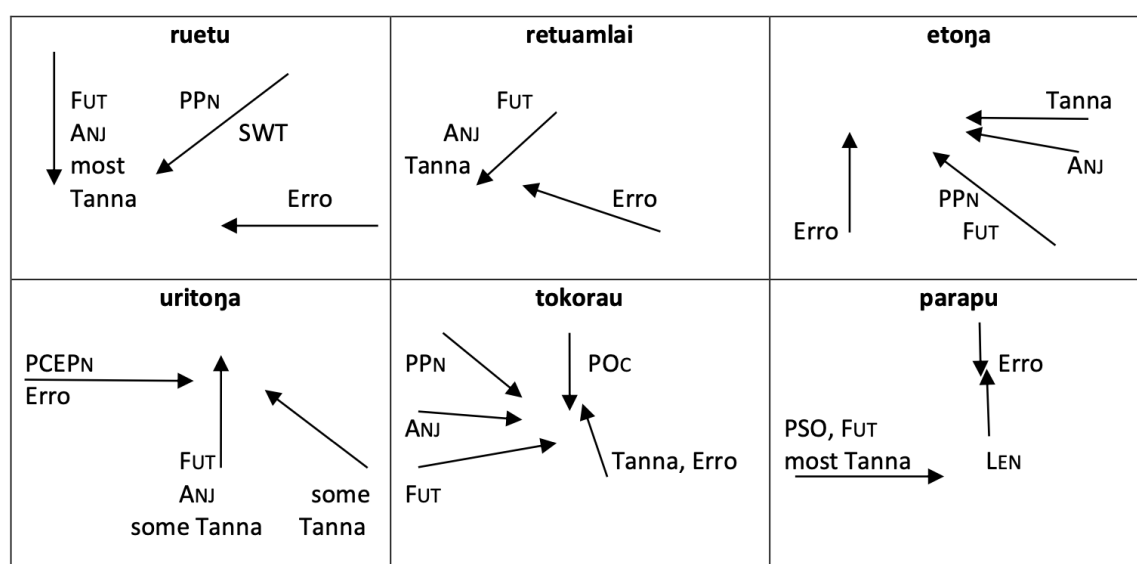


Figure 3. Lynch's illustration of wind terminology in southern Vanuatu (2017)

The slight exception to this 'off-course' terminology was Erromango's southern *natuga* wind, which was only 45 degrees 'off-course' from the Tanna, Futuna and Aneityum root terms

of ‘*etunga*’ which pointed from the south-east (SE) as per Fig. 3. Lynch (2017, p.135) speculated that the general 90-degree difference in the clockwise direction could have been due to imperfect learning from the Futuna-Aniwans which then got passed on between Erromangans in the ‘wrong’ form which has since stuck. He also considered the historical context of Erromango potentially having had less intense contact with Futuna and Aniwa, based on archaeological work to date, a possible reason for less embedding of borrowed terminology (Stuart Bedford p.c. referenced in Lynch, 2017, p. 135). There was no opportunity to interrogate this further until the 2021 Erromango community-driven initiative.

3 *Netai en Namou Toc: Reconnections with Traditional Wind Knowledge through Stories about the Sea*¹²

Wind terminology shared by community members in the ECA’s *Netai en Namou Toc* (Traditional Ocean Stories) project¹³ workshops in 2021 provided additionally different directions and terms. Workshop participants were not aware of Lynch’s 2017 article, and very few had access to Crowley’s Sye dictionary from 2000. So, while Lynch’s (2017) analysis might have explained the historical difference in Erromangan wind terms from that of island neighbours, drawing on Crowley’s data, it could not account for the contemporary differences and fluctuations in wind terms, as we documented in 2021.

Assessing historical linguistic analysis against contemporary language use necessarily has to take account of language evolution as well as any early documentation limitations, for example the types of word lists used in dictionary development. In this regard, the account provided here of additional documentation of wind terminology in 2021 is not intended to discount nor discredit the earlier documentation and linguistic analysis. We also recognise that traditional wind systems can conceive of space and geography in distinct ways that may vary from ideas of fixed cardinal points on a compass (François, 2003). Therefore, we aim to expand on Crowley and Lynch’s earlier work and highlight how cultural heritage documentation processes have assisted to revive linguistic knowledge of traditional marine and maritime knowledge.

Community workshops were held in two coastal villages on the east coast (Potnarvin and Ipota), and at Unpongkor / Dillons Bay on the west coast of the island. We also held a community workshop in Port Vila, on Efate island, with Erromango’s urban diaspora who had grown up on Erromango (referred to as the ‘village generation’ spanning young adults to the elderly). Discussions were also held out at sea, while travelling between Ipota and Potnarvin by boat. The authors also informally conducted several follow-up discussions in the margins of community gatherings with individual seafarers and elders who had participated in the workshops to confirm understanding. All wind terms were discussed in Sye, as the primary surviving language. We recorded seven different community-informed versions of wind directions. Of note, the community ‘wind’ advisers—comprising a mix of seafarers, farmers, and elders from across the island—offered variable terms to explain the northern and eastern wind terminology, and consistently reported a different term to the Sye dictionary for the western winds (see Table 1). The only community consistency with the Sye dictionary records was the term for the south wind, *natuga*, as well as some local winds. It did indeed seem that

¹² Literally “Stories of Mother Ocean”. The Sye word for sea is also sometimes spelled *n’toc* to reflect its pronunciation. Please note that in the course of developing traditional wind charts, the ECA also gathered data on the meteorological links to traditional knowledge of clouds, and also collected Sye language terms for different types of clouds and weather signals.

¹³ This project was generously supported by the One Ocean Hub’s DEEP Fund, managed through the University of Strathclyde.

Erromango's winds were again doing 'a funny thing' as Lynch (2017) had suggested and that they were generally very messy. But, we countered amongst ourselves, perhaps this was only a linguistic mess rather than a practical mess if Erromangan seafarers are able to safely, and regularly, navigate the winds to cross the seas.¹⁴

Reaching out to Vanuatu linguist Robert Early for advice, he reminded us that, "Dictionaries are living documents. There will always be evolution in word counts, terminology and so on." Early (p.c.) encouraged us to reflect the wisdom of contemporary seafarers in our documentation, to recognize scope for linguistic evolution and to allow for pragmatism. His advice resonated with Crowley's earlier approach to the Sye dictionary. Crowley (1997, p. 33) recognized that "present-day oral tradition provides some previously unrecorded information about the linguistic past as well" in addition to early European records and dictionaries. Crowley was a pragmatic linguist who "strongly believed that much of what he produced should be of use and value to the speakers of the languages themselves" (Lynch 2005, p. 227). In this regard, Crowley's production of the Sye dictionary was oriented towards use by speakers, rather than by linguists, and as such provided a reflection of regular language use. We found this advice particularly empowering in a context where textual knowledge is so often privileged over lived, spoken knowledge.

Bearing this in mind, and after discussions with Port Vila-based marine experts, Erromangan seafarers and linguists, we concluded that the most accurate maritime knowledge would come from those most often on the water, navigating winds and seas: the master seafarers. For this wind study, we particularly relied on community master seafarers Andrew Naling, Joe Nemenuk and Willie Netai (Potnarvin), Matthew Narwa, Pauline Narwa, Tavo and Harry Nari (Cooks Bay), Naling Nompwi and Dick Yauliki (Antioch), Pierre Yahwo, Killion Namel and Belten Kiamu (eastern Erromango), as well as regular land and sea travellers along the west coast of Erromango Jonah Molou, Daniel Dam Atnelou, and Giben Nilwo. Several of these traditional knowledge holders have resided in different areas around Erromango in their lifetime and so were able to share terminology from specific coasts and locations. For example, Pauline Narwa and Killion Namel grew up in Unpongkor in western Erromango, moving to the eastern side of the island for work and marriage.

¹⁴ Traditional trade routes between Erromango and the neighbouring southern islands, carrying traditional items of wealth from as far as the Loyalty Islands in New Caledonia were regularly travelled, trading yam, *navelah* (fossilized clam shell of tremendous traditional wealth on Erromango), and even red clay (Bonnemaïson, 1996; Naupa, 2011).

Table 1. Variation between Sye dictionary terms and community mariners

Sye wind terms	Wind direction/quadrant (in the Sye dictionary, Crowley 2000)	Wind direction/ quadrant (community seafarers 2021)
Nompuravu	North	North, East, West
Norwotu orog		North
Norwotu	East	East
Norwotamlai	ESE	NE
Natuga	South	South
Nouritugo	West	Anywhere but mainly SW
Natocrau	SE	SE

Note: light gray shading indicates a shift in direction

Subsequently, over several months we triangulated and clarified the Sye wind vocabulary with these frequent seafarers and cross-checked traditional knowledge with elders such as Uyou Nenvi of Potnarvin, Willie Nepenu, Kelma Ishmael and Jack Novoi of Unpongkor.

We discovered that the nuances that had emerged during the multiple community discussions related to varied understandings of directionality, island geography, seasonal wind knowledge and general maritime knowledge; factors that we also consider having likely influenced the documentation undertaken by Lynch and Crowley during their work on Erromango. We identified consistent convergence in wind terminology across all compass quadrants amongst the key seafarer-advisers, including a reasonable cross section of elders and ‘village generations’, that suggested not all Erromango’s wind terms were ‘off-course’ from their root Aneityum-Futuna borrowings as originally thought by Lynch in 2017 (Table 1). In fact, seafarers consistently reported two types of wind – the *norwotamlai* and the *nouritugo* – in close alignment with root wind term directions, as with the southerly *natuga* (see Table 2).

Table 2. Erromangan wind terms ‘corrected/updated’ in 2021

Futuna	Aneityum	Erromango (as in 2000, 2017)	Erromango (in 2021)
retuamlai (NE)	narutu-amlai (NE)	norwotamlai (ESE)	norwotamlai (NE)
nuritunga (due S)	nauritoonga (due S)	nouritugo (W)	nouritugo (SW)
parapu (W)		nompuravu (N)	nompuravu (N and W)

Note: Adapted from Fig. 3 ‘Erromangan wind terms’ (Lynch, 2017, p. 132).

So, what was going on here? Why, when compared to the Sye dictionary, did only the southern wind (*natuga*) remain consistent in direction, but the other terms were – in practice – more directionally aligned to cognate wind term directions from neighbouring islands? We considered a few possible explanations for this variance. Firstly, the main informants for the Sye dictionary’s wind terms had possibly not been regular seafarers. Secondly, this suggested a possible reason for the Sye dictionary record that turned some winds 90 degrees ‘off-course’. Colloquial maritime language use reported the *nompuravu* winds to span the western and northern quadrants, with qualifying suffixes of *-manwo*, *-imis* and *-orog* to indicate a specific direction and strength within the quadrant (see Fig. 4). The *nouritugo*, recorded in the Sye

dictionary as a ‘west’ wind, also emerged from the community workshops as ‘a dry, fine wind anywhere, but mainly SW’, placing it 45 degrees closer to the Aneityum-Futuna terms (see Table. 2).

We considered a third possible explanation: had contemporary seafarers attempted to ‘correct’ the original misrepresentation of wind terms to move closer in alignment to the Aneityum-Futuna terms? However, the consistent use of terminology by Erromangan seafarers, confirmed by the village generations’ childhood recollections of sea-based travel and fishing, overwhelmingly led to the possible conclusions that the original informants of the 2000 Sye dictionary – largely based in south west Erromango, within the original home of Sye – were either not regular seafarers, experienced directionality in a markedly different way from the rest of the island due to their unique local geographies and orientation towards the various mountain ranges on the island, or used adapted terms that reflected historical movement of people across the island.¹⁵ Our 2021 community consultations engaged with people from across the island, reflecting a wider consensus of spoken practice and ultimately producing the wind rose depicted in Fig. 5.

3.1 Directional knowledge

The interaction of island geography with directional winds is an important factor in the recording of wind terminology.¹⁶ As a mountainous island comprising primarily coastal communities in the present day, save for a small number of interior hamlets, Erromango’s contemporary population resides primarily in the east, south and western coasts of the island, the northern coasts having been depopulated during European contact. The mountainous interior, and lower-lying eastern coast, create several local wind patterns, distinct from the more regional, prevailing winds.

As we learned through community consultations, Erromango’s wind system comprises *mama* ‘mother’ winds, described as major winds that blow from across the sea, and *pikinini*¹⁷ ‘child’ or subsidiary winds that are local to the coastal geography and blow over short distances. We were told in Sye and Bislama, *Taem tufala mama win oli mared, oli mekem wan niufala win bakegen* (“When the two types of winds meet, they produce a new wind.”). In such cases, the ‘mama’ wind name that leads in the terminology is judged by strength. For example, when the *nompuravu* – which spans the West to the North quadrant – is more dominant, such as from the NW, the dominant name remains as *nompuravu orog* ‘big North wind’. Other times, the eastern blowing *norwotu* may be more dominant, and the NE wind named accordingly, *norwotamlai* (‘little or false East wind’). The prevailing SE trade winds, *natocrau*, remain in the lexicon, relating to Polynesian/neighbouring island term *tokorau* albeit different to the

¹⁵ David Nash’s (2013) exploration of wind direction words in the Sydney language of Australia, for example, highlights how a switch in cardinal directions potentially also reflects historical movement of people. For example, in a group who have moved from where rivers flow west to the sea to where they flow north, so the term for west comes to mean north. While this is not the case for Sye dictionary informants in the period between Terry Crowley’s work from 1997, it does potentially suggest that historical movement of people and blending of different languages across Erromango may be a reason for the shift in cardinal directions.

¹⁶ See, for example, Alexandre François’ (2003) exploration of space directionals in the Mwotlap language of northern Vanuatu which highlights how the architecture of space is organised and reflected in directional vocabulary. Geo-centric directionals in Mwotlap organise along either a *land* → *sea* or *down* → *up* axis, dividing terrestrial space into four quarters. At sea, François (2003, p. 431) documented that the navigational scale altered depending on visibility of land, with the *land* → *sea* axis disappearing and the *down* → *up* axis emerging to divide ‘the whole maritime space into two halves instead of four quarters.’

¹⁷ Use of the Bislama terms *mama* ‘mother’ and *pikinini* ‘child’ reflects the descriptions provided to the authors and refers to understandings of the relationships between types of winds.

latter's westerly direction (see Fig. 3). Of note, this term and direction is shared by both Erromango and Tanna in contrast to the other southern Vanuatu islands, a matter that Lynch (2017, p. 133) attributes to imperfect learning from Aniwa and Futuna neighbours.

The *pikinini* 'child' local winds generally move over shorter distances than the *mama* 'mother' winds, shaped by topographic features and temperature differences. Coastal water and mountain temperatures can affect local winds and alternate wind directions depending on whether it is night or day. For example, in northern Erromango the offshore wind is named *manwo* because it comes in the direction from the plateau of that name (see Fig. 4). The term for onshore winds, *imis*, is a general term to describe the wind directions based on coastal geography. The suffix *-imis* can be used to indicate the onshore nature of the wind at the relevant time of day, e.g. *nompjavu-imis*.

Around Erromango island, there are additional names for local winds¹⁸ such as *Urogrog* and *Solpunei*¹⁹ (Unpongkor, West Erromango), *Yarinu* (also *Sorpunei*, a cold wind blowing from the interior along the river at Pongkil, West Erromango), *Swotu* (Unorah, South-West Erromango), *Telauwat* (Ifo, South-East Erromango), *Yaliwau* and *Nanmai* (Cooks Bay, East Erromango), and *Moleni* (Potnarvin, North-West Erromango) – see Fig. 4. In naming these winds, location was cited as more of a characteristic than directionality.

¹⁸ Note we have capitalised the names of these local winds as they are specific to an area and are referred to in conversation as specific entities (distinct from directional winds).

¹⁹ A seasonal interior wind in the Unpongkor region that signals the yam (and garden) planting season (from July to September).



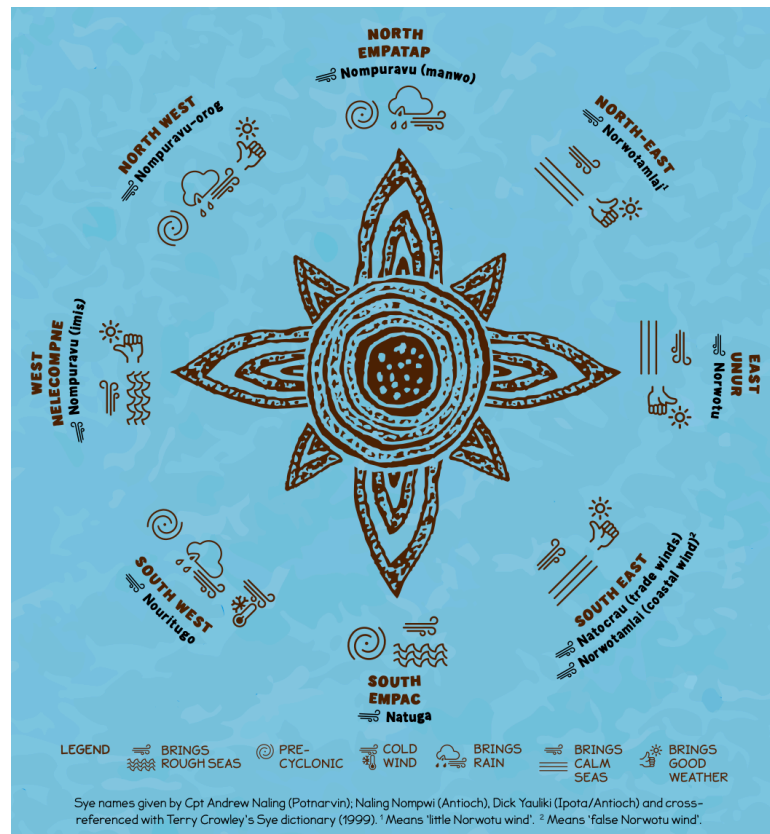


Figure 5. Ovon vilyhoru, Erromango's major winds (Sye)

Note: Produced by Erromango Cultural Association in 2022.

3.2 Seasonal winds

Located in the humid tropics, Erromango island experiences two main seasons each year: the hot, wet and cool, dry seasons. Wind terminology across the seasons show that the characteristics of strength are important. The 'rainy' winds from the north to SW points use terms of either *nouritugo*, for a cold south-westerly wind, or *nompuravu*, for a strong north-to-westerly wind that is also associated with cyclone season. *Norwotu* and *norwotamlai* ('little, false' *norwotu*) from the E and NE respectively bring dry, fine weather.

During the cool, dry season, the eastern and southern winds predominate. For example, the NE *norwotamlai* is a gentle onshore wind found along the eastern shoreline that brings calm seas and good weather predominantly during the cooler season (June–August). All winds from the south, generally the *natuga*, bring the cold winter winds.

During the hot, wet season, the western winds predominate and are known to bring bad weather. For example, the rainy weather *nompuravu* wind is characterised by bringing rough seas and is pre-cyclonic, found in any of the north and western quadrants on a compass, and predominates during the warmer, cyclone season (November to April). The additional descriptors of *orog* 'big' further indicate the impact of that wind on gardening and sea travel.

3.3 Travelling winds

Erromangan maritime and wind knowledge also extends to terms for daily, regular maritime navigation. With almost no passable road on the island, people depend significantly on boat travel to reach remote coastal villages. Erromangan seafarers generously shared their

knowledge of different types of seas, winds, currents and passages to ensure safe journeys of passengers around the island. Of note for this article are the types of ‘travelling winds’ encountered when navigating the seas around Erromango’s coast.

The *norvinelpo*n is a cross-wind that blows across the wave, causing rough passage for travellers. Crowley’s Sye dictionary (2000) defines the *norvinelpo*n as a ‘south wind’ although master seafarers clarified that the term refers more to how they would angle boats and canoes to maintain balance and steer through the rough seas, no matter what coast they were near. The *seinipmi* (literally ‘spear eye’) is a headwind that, similar to the *norvinelpo*n, occurs during maritime conditions of strong winds and rough seas, causing all passengers to get wet in the boat. The *tavlipmi* (literally ‘follow direction’) is a tail wind that blows strongly, aiding the captain in speed.

The distinct terms for navigators, to describe the travelling winds rather than assign a specific name, further nuances our knowledge of Sye language wind terms.

4 Discussion

So, is there something ‘funny’ about Erromangan winds? As both John Lynch and Terry Crowley recognized across their decades of linguistic scholarship, oral tradition contains a wealth of previously undocumented information about language use and speech forms are always evolving. Perhaps, therefore, the most ‘funny’ thing about Erromangan winds was that until the ECA’s efforts in 2021, Sye’s linguistic records had not been maintained in step with modern oral patterns. Indeed, it is now 25 years since the Sye dictionary was produced by Crowley.

Ongoing effort in linguistic documentation is essential in comprehensively recording language for continued use within communities. The Vanuatu Government’s emphasis on the development of vernacular resources in the *National Language Policy*, underscores this need for documentation (Early, 2021). However, the process of dictionary development in Vanuatu has been varied and has evolved over the years, in line with new approaches in linguistic scholarship and available resources. Additionally, Vanuatu’s Ministry for Climate Change has increasingly invested in traditional knowledge documentation for weather and climate forecasting, providing an important avenue for language documentation (Malsale et al., 2018). Harrison et al.’s (2024, p. 22) comprehensive study of wind systems in four islands within the Erromangan neighbourhood, highlights the importance of wind lore to traditional knowledge in acknowledging ‘named winds are part of a larger system of ethno-meteorology, time-reckoning (e.g. environmental calendars), mythology, and weather lore/magic’. The Erromango Cultural Association’s effort to record more detailed traditional meteorological knowledge for example, builds on this work to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of wind systems in southern Vanuatu and highlights the importance of indigenous engagement in such linguistic scholarship.

Terry Crowley acknowledged a vibrancy in Sye language, despite the relatively small speaking population, and was vocal in his view that Melanesian languages will continue to be spoken for generations to come (Crowley, 1997; Lynch, 2005, p. 231). This recognition underscores the importance of vernacular literacy and efforts for dictionaries to reflect the oral needs and interests of the speakers. Documenting a specialised domain of terms, such as winds, also benefits from the involvement of a broad section of the community of language speakers. Crowley’s development of the Erromango Sye dictionary was only able to engage with a narrow group of speakers due to time and other constraints of his fieldwork. His early passing limited the opportunity to have ongoing work over the years since. There can be a trade-off

between trying to publish a dictionary so that information is available, versus waiting until there has been an opportunity for greater consultation with a broader section a language community. Linguists working on dictionary development in the 21st century, such as Catriona Hyslop-Malau's work on the Vurës language of Vanua Lava in northern Vanuatu, benefited from lengthier timeframes that have allowed for broader community consultation on specialised domains like weather. For example, the Vurës dictionary (Malau, 2021) has extensive vocabulary for meteorological terms, reflective also of recent national government interest in climate-related traditional knowledge. Similarly, Nicholas Thieberger's multi-decadal linguistic research in the Nafsan language community of South Efate in Vanuatu has produced new, collaborative dictionary editions to reflect more nuanced vocabulary and linguistic records than early missionary records were able (see Thieberger et al., 2021).

The additional nuancing to Sye language wind terminology introduces a greater depth to contemporary understanding of Erromango's socio-cultural language use, building on the valuable linguistic documentary work that all linguists, most notably John Lynch and Terry Crowley, have undertaken on Erromango. The ECA's pursuit of a more detailed documentation of Sye language marine and wind terminology highlights the importance of indigenous engagement in linguistic scholarship. The *Netai en Namou Toc* community project also highlighted additional opportunities to expand documentation of other (non-wind) maritime vocabulary such as *nemomenom* 'tsunami' and certain phraseology that contemporary seafarers indicate are common in Sye, such as the range of clouds and rain types. Finally, Lynch's invaluable observations of the alignment of maritime vocabulary between the southern islands highlights entry points for scholars and community members alike to build a deeper picture of historical inter-island connection and shared ocean terminology. For example, *(ne)metagi* 'cyclone' is a shared term between Erromango and Tanna. A next step to Lynch's analysis would be to explore weather and cloud vocabulary to assess for continued linkages between the islands of southern Vanuatu.

5 Conclusion

The continued evolution of Erromango's linguistic record is an important endeavour for our communities and linguist collaborators to support. In the words of Terry Crowley, whose final book was published posthumously, "The task of *fully* documenting any single language is enormous" (Crowley, 2023, p. 10). Even with the valued efforts of all linguistic documentation on Vanuatu's languages, both Crowley and John Lynch recognized that most of these – well over 80 – were undescribed or only slightly known (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 19). The ECA's expansion of Sye language description in relation to wind terminology therefore represents our efforts to continue Terry and John's legacy in advancing documentation for our present and future generations of Erromangans.

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Key ‘wind’ informants

Here are the names of people who worked on the wind terminology.

Imo ovon nin ovoteme mori ndwimpi ovon nompurak gi vilyhoru. Nin ror umante ra imo nator:

Potnarvin (E. Erromango): Andrew Naling, Joe Nemenuk, Willie Netai, Uyou Nenvi

Cooks Bay (E. Erromango): Pauline Narwa, Mathew Narwa, Tavo Harry Nari

Ipota (E. Erromango): Belten Kiamu, Pierre Yahwo, Killion Namel

Punamlah (N. Erromango): Helen Naupa, Willie Narai Nepenu

Antioch (S. Erromango): Naling Nompwi, Dick Yauliki

Port Vila: Jonah Umah Molou, Daniel Dam Atnelo, Giben Nilwo, Jack Novoi, Esther Naru Warri, Kelma Uruknte Ishmael, Lena Atnelo, Margaret Nial (incl. north, south, east and west Erromango)

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