



Te Reo
the Journal of the Linguistic
Society of New Zealand

Volume 68

Issue 2 (*Special Issue*): Vanuatu languages in context

Research Article

2025

Pages 246–291

December, 2025

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Séverin, N. (2025). Efate and Shepherd Islands language ecology. *Te Reo* 68(2) Vanuatu languages in context [Special Issue], edited by T. Rangelov, E. Ridge, L. Takau & V. Chen. (pp. 246–291)

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

Efate and Shepherd Islands language ecology

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Abstract

The Efate and Shepherd Islands of Central Vanuatu have long been a site of linguistic and cultural interaction, shaped by migration, contact, and major historical events. While existing research has provided valuable contributions to the region's history, historical linguistics, and language documentation, it has tended to overlook certain areas (e.g., East Efate) and the more recent developments of the past century. This article presents a detailed survey of the current distribution of languages in the region, combining historical perspectives with fieldwork conducted in 2024. This study documents previously unrecorded locations where both traditional and immigrant languages are spoken, offers revised estimates of the number of active speakers per language in the area, and traces the growing role of Bislama as a main home language. Findings indicate that while traditional vernacular languages remain the main language used in many places, several varieties are increasingly vulnerable to language shift driven by intermarriage, migration, urbanization and educational practices privileging Bislama. At the same time, immigrant languages from other islands are becoming established in rural Efate. This highlights the coexistence of continuity and change in the region's language ecology and confirms the urgent need for more documentation of understudied varieties, present-migration patterns, and policies to support the vitality of traditional vernacular languages of the region.

Summary in Bislama

Long ol aelan blong Efate mo Shepherd i gat long taem i kam ol intereksen long saed blong lanwis mo kalja. Hemia hemi from ol difdifren grup blong ol pipol oli kam stap long ples ia mo from sam nara samting we i hapen long histri olsem Tombuk erapsen. Fulap long ol risej oli fokas long histri ia, mo ol difdifren lanwis. Be oli fogetem sam lanwis mo sam ples, olsem East Efate, mo oli no stap lukluk tumas long wanem we i stap hapen naoia wetem ol man we oli stap muv i kam stap long ples ia. Atikol ia i traem blong lukluk se long Efate mo Shepherd ol man oli stap toktok wanem lanwis naoia mo lo wea, mo i gat hamas man i stap toktok ol lanwis ia lo haos naoia. Atikol ia i soem se Bislama i stap kam antap. Fulap long ol orijinol lanwis blong yumi oli strong i stap be wanwan long olgeta i stap ko blong lus from edukesen mo ol man difren ples oli kam afta i stap mekem se Bislama i kam antap. Mo tu sam lanwis blong sam difren aelan oli kam antap long Efate. Hemia i soem se fulap samting blong past oli stap be fulap samting tu i stap jenis long saed blong lanwis. Mo i stap talemaot se yumi mas fokas plante long ol lanwis ia we bae oli lus. Yumi mas risej tu long ol man we oli stap kam stap: hamas i kam? Oli stap kam blo stap wea? From wanem oli aot long aelan long olgeta? Hao nao oli integret long lokol kalja? Olgeta oli oraet long niufala hom blong olgeta? Atikol ia i stap konfimim bigfala nid blong kat ol polisi blong sapotem ol lanwis blong yumi blong Efate mo Shepherd.

Keywords

Efate, Shepherd Islands, language ecology, distribution of languages, Vanuatu languages

1 Introduction

Vanuatu (see Figure 1) is divided into six provinces (from north to south: Torba, Sanma, Penama, Malampa, Shefa, and Tafea). Shefa province (an acronym derived from Shepherd, Epi, and Efate) comprises many islands, including fifteen inhabited ones, stretching from north to south: Lamén, Epi, the Shepherd Islands group (Tongoa, Tongariki, Buninga, Emae, Makira, and Mataso), Efate's offshore islands (Emao, Nguna, Pele, Moso and Lelepa), Efate, and Ifira (see Figure 1). The capital, Port Vila, is situated on Efate Island. This article focuses on the Shepherd Islands, Efate, and its offshore islands.

Except for two Polynesian languages - Emae and Mele-Ifira - the languages of Efate and the Shepherd Islands belong to the Southern Oceanic language subgroup (Lynch & Crowley, 2001; François et al., 2015) - which is a branch of the Oceanic languages, part of the Austronesian family - spoken in Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Despite their proximity to the capital city, which makes them quite accessible for research, the languages spoken in this area have been studied unevenly. Published sources (Tryon, 1976; Clark, 1985; Lynch & Crowley, 2001; Lynch et al., 2002; Clark, 2009) diverge in their conclusions concerning both the total number of languages and the definition of their boundaries. The most recent survey of Vanuatu languages, François et al. (2015), identifies seven languages spoken in the area: Nakanamanga (NKM), Namakura (NMK), Lelepa (LLP), Eton, Nafsan (SEF), Fakamae (MAE) and Mele-Ifira (MF) (see Figure 1). Appendix 1 provides further details about orthography of place names and language names.

This region has a long history of interaction and intercommunication, influenced by historical events that produced an unusually complex distribution of languages. For example, in the Shepherd Islands, Namakura is spoken alongside Nakanamanga on Tongoa and Emae; Nakanamanga is also found on Epi, Efate's offshore islands, and on North Efate. The situation is further complicated by the presence of two Polynesian outliers, Mele-Ifira and Fakamae (see Figure 1). As Hermann & Walworth (2020) note, this makes the Efate-Shepherds area an “intercultural sphere unique in Oceania”¹ (my translation). Clark (1996, p. 280) also highlights that the region stands apart from the rest of Vanuatu, with a lower density of languages per square kilometre than is typical elsewhere in the archipelago. This is significant not only because it points to a distinctive historical trajectory - as a result of a volcanic eruption (Clark, 1996) - but also because it offers a valuable site for examining how languages evolve in contexts of sustained intercommunication, where processes of divergence, diffusion, and borrowing can all be observed in real time. This lower density of languages may also have fostered an ecology in which larger networks of interaction were possible, as speakers could communicate across broader areas with fewer language boundaries than is typical elsewhere in the archipelago. At the same time, this picture remains provisional, since ongoing documentation could reveal a greater degree of linguistic diversity than is currently recognised. Today, demographic changes - particularly immigration, urbanisation, and the expanding role

¹ “une sphère interculturelle unique en Océanie” (Hermann & Walworth, 2020, p. 257).

of Bislama, the national creole based on English, French, and vernacular languages - are further reconfiguring this already atypical configuration for the Vanuatu context.

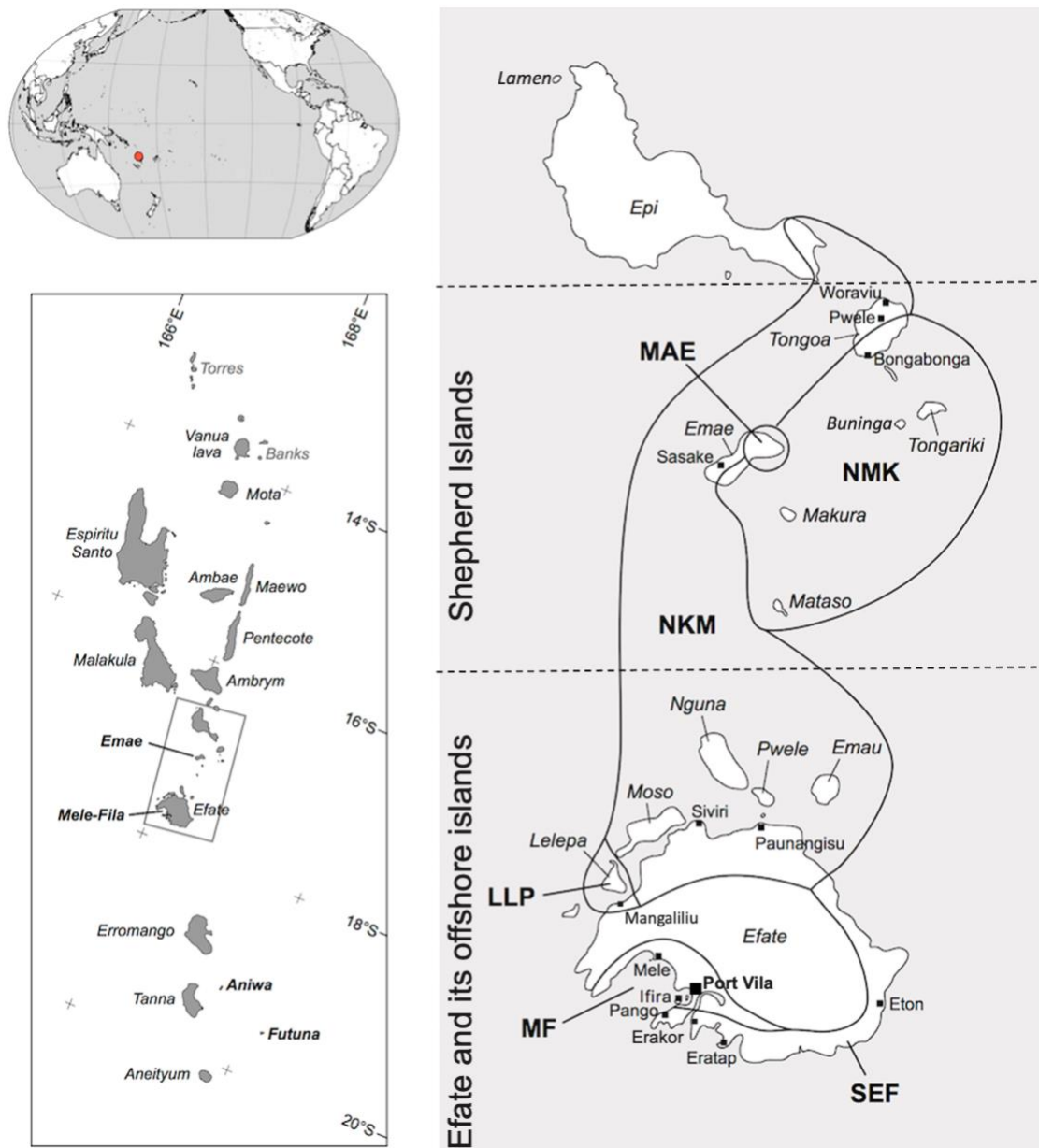


Figure 1. The languages of Efate and Shepherd islands (adapted from Hermann & Walworth, 2020, with the authors' permission) [The abbreviations refer to languages. NMK: Namakura. MAE: Fakamae. NKM: Nakanamanga. LLP: Lelepa. MF: Mele-Ifira. SEF: Nafsan.]

Yet, most existing research continues to focus on the traditional vernacular languages and historical context of the region, overlooking the current situation and the immigration that has taken place in recent decades.

This article aims to document the present-day distribution of languages in Efate and the Shepherd Islands, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of language use in the region and its connections to migration. In particular, it details the languages spoken in each village today, including villages not previously mentioned in the literature and areas that have received less attention, as well as unexpected occurrences of certain vernacular languages outside their traditional locations.

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 examines the historical factors that have shaped the distribution of languages over centuries in Efate and the Shepherd Islands. Section 3 reviews existing research on the current distribution of languages and the social and demographic factors shaping it. Section 4 presents the methodology used to establish the current distribution of languages. Section 5 provides a detailed account of the distribution of languages in Efate and the Shepherd Islands. Finally, Section 6 discusses and highlights the new findings.

2 Historical Context Shaping the Distribution of Languages of the Region

From the south of Epi to Efate, the distribution of languages of the region is distinctive, with Nakanamanga spoken across several islands - and in-between Namakura-speaking areas - and Polynesian languages also present in the region. This distribution can be explained by historical factors, which will be explored in more detail, particularly the historical connections between the Shepherd Islands and Efate.

2.1 *Austronesian languages*

The Lapita peoples, speakers of Austronesian languages, were the first to colonize Remote Oceania - including Vanuatu - around 3,000 years ago. Archaeological research (Bedford, 2015, 2018) suggests that Vanuatu's north-south island configuration facilitated sequential settlement moving southward along the archipelago. Genetic studies (Lipson et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2022; Arauna et al., 2022) indicate that the genomes of early Lapita settlers were primarily derived from an East/Southeast Asian-related source, with later contributions from Papuan-related populations. The work of Posth et al. (2018), combining genetic, archaeological, and linguistic evidence, further supports this model. This migration likely played a major role in the current north-to-south arrangement of the dialect chains in Vanuatu.

Archaeological research on the Lapita culture is heavily informed by the discovery of pottery, a distinctive feature of their civilization. The earliest phases of settlement indicate a relatively homogeneous culture across the islands. Over subsequent generations, however, regional variation developed throughout Vanuatu (Bedford, 2018, p. 4). Despite this broader diversification, a notable continuity in pottery design, decoration, and shell artefacts has been observed between Efate and the Shepherd Islands (Bedford, 2018, p. 5; Henderson et al., 2025), in contrast to the differences found between these islands and the neighbouring island of Erromango to the south. This suggests sustained contact between Efate and the Shepherd Islands from the earliest stages of settlement.

2.2 *Polynesian settlements and interactions*

All of Vanuatu's traditional vernacular languages (138 in total; see François et al., 2015) belong to the Austronesian family. Most are classified as Southern Oceanic languages (Lynch & Crowley, 2001; François et al., 2015), with the exception of three Polynesian outliers. Two of these are found in Efate and the Shepherd Islands - Mele-Ifira, spoken in the Ifira and Mele areas of Efate, and Fakamae, spoken mainly in two villages on the island of Emae (Walworth et al., 2021) - while the third, Futuna-Aniwa, is spoken further south on the islands of Aniwa and Futuna.

The presence of two Polynesian languages in central Vanuatu reflects a history of sustained interaction with Polynesian societies. Oral traditions, supported by archaeological and ethnographic accounts (Garanger, 1972; Guiart, 1973), recount the story of Roi Mata, a

chief of Polynesian ancestry remembered for bringing peace to Efate and establishing new chiefly lines in the Shepherd Islands around 1200 CE (Garanger, 1972, p. 82). Guiart (1973) notes that Roi Mata was not a single historical figure but the title borne by a succession of chiefs, the last of whom reportedly died and was buried on Eretoka - one of Efate's offshore islands - around 1600 CE (Zinger et al., 2024). Oral histories describe the dispatch of new chiefly lines to the Shepherd Islands as marking the first major *kaming* (from Bislama 'coming') - a large-scale voyaging and settlement movement by canoe - that remains foundational to chiefly titles, social relationships, and land ownership in the region today.

Historical sources also point to long-term exchange networks, including a proposed kava trade between Vanuatu and Tonga involving Shepherd-Efate in its later phase, until the Tombuk eruption (1452 CE) (Luders, 1996). Recent studies converge on the view that these interactions were continuous and multidimensional. Archaeological research (Hermann et al., 2023) demonstrates sustained contact with groups from Western Polynesia, including Samoa, since the initial Lapita settlement, with interactions taking place in Vanuatu. Genetic analyses (Lipson et al., 2020; Arauna et al., 2022; Zinger et al., 2024) further reveal Polynesian ancestry not only in Polynesian-speaking groups but also across non-Polynesian-speaking communities of southern Vanuatu, Efate, and the Shepherds, reinforcing the conclusion of a sustained contact with long-term integration and potential matrimonial exchanges (Zinger et al., 2024). These sustained interactions contributed to the emergence of Polynesian linguistic outliers and to the blending of Polynesian and Melanesian cultural elements, such as governance structures (Guiart, 1973; Bonnemaïson, 1986) and mythology (Guiart, 1973), into local practices in both Southern Oceanic and Polynesian-speaking communities (Hermann & Walworth, 2020). Reciprocal linguistic borrowings - phonological, lexical, and syntactical - also occurred between Southern Oceanic languages of Efate and the Shepherd Islands and the Polynesian outliers (Clark, 1986; Hermann & Walworth, 2020).

Together, this combined evidence traces the migration and contact events that gave rise to the Polynesian-speaking communities found today in Efate and the Shepherd Islands.

2.3 *Tombuk eruption redistributing the languages*

Prior to the 15th century, the island of Kuwae existed as a substantial landmass comprising what are today Epi and Tongoa, and it may have been the fifth largest island in Vanuatu (Henderson et al., 2025, p. 45). In the mid-fifteenth century CE, Kuwae underwent the Tombuk eruption - estimated to have occurred around 1452 CE - which split apart Epi and Tongoa (Henderson et al., 2025). This eruption is often characterized as among the largest eruptions in the past millennium, with impacts potentially felt across the globe (Witter & Self, 2007; Ballard, 2020, p. 98; Ballard et al. 2023).

Some people took warning signs for the eruption - such as earthquakes - seriously and sought refuge on Efate and nearby offshore islands, according to oral traditions (Garanger, 1972; Guiart, 1973; Ballard et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2025). In particular, the descendants of chiefs from the first *kaming* are remembered as having responded to these signs (Ballard, 2016). These accounts are corroborated by stories preserved among communities who received the refugees, such as in Nguna (Schütz, 1969, pp. 185–195). In the stories, some dramatic elements are added, such as canoes escaping just before a tsunami struck. Henderson *et al.* (2025, p. 52) argues it is unlikely that escape could have occurred at the very last moment. After the eruption, the chiefs later returned to Tongoa, forming what oral tradition remembers as the second *kaming*. The existence of these chiefs has been confirmed by archaeological findings (Garanger, 1972).

As Nakanamanga was most likely originally spoken only on Efate and its offshore islands, this history helps explain its presence today on Tongoa and Emae (Clark, 1996). Following the Kuwae/Tombuk eruption, which rendered much of Epi uninhabitable (Henderson et al., 2025, p. 52), Nakanamanga speakers settled in areas that became habitable again, particularly in South Epi (Clark, 1996; Hermann & Walworth, 2020). This interpretation is reinforced by records of Livara, a now-extinct variety of Nakanamanga once spoken in East Epi (Ray, 1893).

The presence of Namakura on Tongoa is more difficult to explain. One widely told story in the region (Garanger, 1972; Guiart, 1973; Ballard et al., 2023) recounts a single male survivor of the eruption, Ti Tongoa Liseiriki, who was rescued by Namakura speakers from Makira and eventually became the first to resettle Tongoa. Archaeological evidence also supports his existence, with his death dated to the early phase of post-Kuwae recolonization (Garanger, 1972). This narrative is invoked to explain the presence of Namakura on Tongoa. However, oral traditions collected on Tongoa consistently trace origins back to Efate (Guiart, 1973) through the two canoe *kaming*. A possible explanation of the presence of Namakura language in Tongoa is that Namakura arrived through marriage links, with women from Makira transmitting the language maternally. This type of language replacement is attested on Emae, where Namakura has supplanted Fakamae within a few generations in some communities (Walworth et al., 2021).

Taken together, the Tombuk eruption not only reshaped the physical landscape but also acted as a pivotal historical factor linking demographic movements, oral traditions, and language shift. In this way, the eruption is an essential key to interpreting the connected histories of settlement and distribution of languages in Efate and the Shepherd Islands.

2.4 *Internal migrations as a result of colonisation and missionary activities*

Another historical factor that shaped the distribution of languages in the region (as elsewhere in Vanuatu) was the arrival of missionaries. Missionaries encouraged communities to relocate to coastal areas, where access was easier and populations could be centralized for evangelization and schooling. For example, on Makira, missionaries consolidated four villages - Lindorua, Tavia, Lapua, and Mwalakoto - into a single settlement at Mwalakoto (Garanger, 1972, p. 78).

Prior to the arrival of missionaries, Efate was densely populated in its interior (Sand, 2023), with numerous villages where distinct varieties were likely spoken (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 109). Reports suggest that inland populations subsequently moved toward the eastern and western coasts, a process that may have caused closely related languages to become geographically distant. These relocations also created new zones of contact where speakers of different languages interacted, sometimes resulting in language shift as communities adopted the dominant language of a larger or more influential group, or in processes of bilingualism and linguistic convergence.

Another factor driving internal displacement was the colonial alienation of land. For example, in Mele, villagers from the island's interior were displaced toward the coast to benefit the Société Française des Nouvelles Hébrides (Guiart, 1973, p. 278).

Despite these demographic shifts - including depopulation from 19th-century diseases, blackbirding (see Section 2.5.), and the importation and sale of firearms (Sand, 2023), both of which also contributed to language loss - Clark (1985, pp. 25–26) argues that the distribution and relationships among the various linguistic varieties remain “relatively coherent” within the dialect continuum. This suggests that these events did not substantially disrupt the distribution

of languages. Nevertheless, these historical factors collectively explain the depopulation of Efate's interior.

At present, the Vanuatu Indigenous Lands Defense Desk (VILDD) has conducted a research project (VILDD, 2025) on internal displacements on Efate, with a particular focus on two villages (Emua and Epao). This work shed further light on internal displacements and languages.

Regarding the Shepherd Islands, Guiart (1973) notes that, apart from Emae, the geography of these islands - steep coasts and few safe anchorages - protected them from European contact and the diseases they brought. Consequently, the demographic impact was less severe than on other islands in Vanuatu, including Efate. This pattern may help explain recent migration processes observed in Section 5.

2.5 Blackbirding and the emergence of Bislama in Vanuatu

Another historical factor influencing the current distribution of languages on Efate and the Shepherd Islands is blackbirding, which contributed to the emergence of Bislama in Vanuatu. Vanuatu, along with other Melanesian countries such as the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, shares a tragic collective history: during the blackbirding period at the turn of the 20th century, many people were forcibly recruited or deported to work on plantations in Samoa, Fiji, New Caledonia, and Queensland (Australia). On Queensland plantations, the “workers” developed a common language to communicate, a pidgin (Meyerhoff, 2013), which continued to evolve independently after their return to their home islands. Over time, this process gave rise to Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, Pijin in the Solomon Islands, and Bislama in Vanuatu (Lynch, Ross & Crowley, 2002, p. 27). Bislama is a creole formed from English, French and Oceanic languages, largely as a result of the blackbirding period.

Taken together, five main historical factors shaped the distribution of languages in Efate and the Shepherd Islands: the initial settlements, Polynesian influence, the Tombuk eruption, the arrival of missionaries and blackbirding. Since that time, language distribution has continued to evolve under the influence of contemporary social and demographic factors. The next section turns to recent research on the current distribution of languages in the region and the factors currently shaping it.

3 Recent Studies of the Distribution of Languages in Efate and the Shepherd Islands

In their survey of Vanuatu languages, Lynch & Crowley (2001, pp. 107–118) provide a focus on Efate and the Shepherd Islands. Their approach is language-oriented rather than place-oriented: they describe the languages of the region and where they are spoken, rather than offering a systematic account of the distribution of languages by locality. The emphasis is on traditional vernacular languages, though the authors also note immigrant languages in four more recent settlements (Lynch & Crowley 2001, p. 118) as well as the presence of Namakura on Efate. They also highlight that most of Vanuatu's traditional vernacular languages are also present in Port Vila. While not mentioned in other language surveys, Lynch & Crowley (2001, p. 108) acknowledge the existence of a peri-urban area on Efate, stretching from Bukura to Rentapao, though they provide little detail beyond their discussion of Blacksand. Finally, Lynch & Crowley (2001, pp. 142–143) offer a valuable sociolinguistic literature review on the growth of Bislama and its interaction with vernacular language maintenance.

Despite its importance, this work is more than 25 years old and based on even earlier data. Obviously, it does not reflect the significant demographic and linguistic changes that have taken place in the intervening years. Some localities already in existence at the time were not mentioned, and apart from Saama village, there is little explicit information about the Bislama sociolinguistic situation in specific places. Moreover, the survey includes Lelepa as a variety of Nakanamanga and Eton as a variety of Nafsan, whereas François *et al.* (2015) consider these separate languages.

François *et al.* (2015) provide the most recent major survey of Vanuatu languages, with a primary focus on vernacular languages and the traditional communities in which they are spoken. It does not provide data on immigrant vernacular languages or on the use of Bislama in the Efate and Shepherd Islands.

In addition to these academic surveys, government statistics could in principle serve as a source of information on the distribution of languages. The decennial population surveys conducted by the Vanuatu National Statistics Office include a question on whether individuals speak a traditional vernacular language. However, to date (e.g., VNSO 2020), the census does not identify which language is spoken, nor does it document domains or frequency of use. While the census question is valuable for assessing general trends in traditional vernacular maintenance versus shift to Bislama (Lavender Forsyth, 2025), it cannot provide a clear picture of the present-day distribution of specific languages on Efate and the Shepherd Islands.

One key factor shaping the distribution of languages is the growth of the capital, Port Vila, which has attracted large numbers of migrants from other islands and from abroad. This urbanization, along with the social transformation it generates, has been documented in recent studies such as Kraemer (2013; 2020), Mitchell (2013), Lindstrom & Jourdan (2017), and Servy (2017). Other studies have examined particular aspects of urbanization in specific communities within Port Vila and its peri-urban areas. For instance, Chung & Hill (2002) reported on informal settlements such as Beverly Hills and Blacksand (see Figure 7), while Rawlings (2002) analysed the post-colonial impacts of urbanization and demographic change on livelihoods in the South Efate village of Pango (see Figure 1). Lindstrom (2011) explored peri-urban settlements and migrant networks, focusing on people from Samaria village in Tanna. Petrou (2020) studied the migration of Paama islanders from the 1980s to the early 2010s, particularly to Port Vila and its surroundings.

At the same time, a number of descriptive linguistic studies have been carried out on languages spoken on Efate and the Shepherd Islands. These works vary in the extent to which they include information on language vitality, domains of use, and frequency of use. Notable examples include Thieberger (2006) and Thieberger *et al.* (2021) on Erakor, Lacrampe (2014) on Lelepa, Malau (2018) on Mele-Ifira, Dewar (2020, 2025) on Fakamae, and Ridge (2019) on Vatlongos, a language spoken in Mele Maat (see Figure 7). Walworth *et al.* (2021) also conducted a survey in two Fakamae-speaking villages, focusing on multilingualism within these communities. Research on the contemporary status of Bislama has likewise expanded, particularly through the works of Vandeputte (2014, 2018, 2020). Other studies have examined the influence of Bislama on traditional vernacular languages (e.g., through borrowings), such as Lindstrom (2007) on Kwamera, a language of Tanna Island, Budd (2011) on Bierebo, a language of Epi Island, and Duhamel (2020) on Raga, spoken on Pentecost Island. To my knowledge, however, only Clark (2003) has investigated to some extent the influence of Bislama on a traditional vernacular language of Efate and the Shepherd Islands (Mele-Ifira).

Overall, much research has focused on Port Vila itself, with some attention to its immediate suburbs and a few peri-urban villages. However, many peri-urban and traditional communities on Efate and the Shepherd Islands remain under-documented, particularly in

terms of language use. Several significant communities across Efate, shaped by long-standing migration and the influence of the capital, are poorly described linguistically. In particular, it remains unclear which languages are spoken where, and we lack detailed records over time for individual villages, making it difficult to track recent shifts. While the works cited above provide valuable findings and perspectives, the information is fragmented and requires consolidation and supplementation with new data. Addressing these gaps is a central aim of the present study.

4 Methodology

The objective of this study is to gather detailed information on the current distribution of languages across Efate and the Shepherd Islands. Specifically, it aims to identify the traditional vernacular languages of the communities included in this survey, document other languages spoken, and estimate the proportion of residents using them as their main language at home. Focusing on proportions provides a more nuanced picture in cases where the traditional vernacular language is spoken by a subset of the population, where several languages coexist, or where Bislama has replaced other languages.

4.1 Population figures

Population figures were provided by the Department of Local Authorities (personal communication, December 2024) based on data supplied by Shefa province and its Area Administrators (AAs) and Area Secretaries (ASs). These numbers reflect the up-to-date population at the end of 2024. However, some areas were not included in these numbers. Where figures were missing, population numbers were supplemented with VNSO (2020) data and responses to the first survey question (see Section 4.3).

Because of high mobility between Port Vila and surrounding islands, census data do not always reflect permanent residency. Many people temporarily relocate to Efate in search of economic opportunities, to prepare for seasonal work abroad, or to obtain administrative documents such as passports and police clearances. They may stay with relatives or find temporary work, and if present during a census, are sometimes counted as part of the host village. In contrast, residents of the Shepherd Islands often spend extended periods on Efate, though they may still be regarded as members of their home communities. However, in both cases, this mobility is an important aspect of life in the area, it is a reality, and it is reflected in the population numbers provided here.

4.2 Informants

Fieldwork was conducted between October and December 2024 through a combination of in-person visits and phone interviews, with priority given to direct engagement on the ground. Informants were identified through Shefa Province and VKS (Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta - Vanuatu Cultural Centre) networks, as well as personal contacts. Care was taken to select individuals with extensive knowledge of their communities, including Area Administrators (AAs), Area Secretaries (ASs), village chiefs, VKS fieldworkers, adult residents.

Area Councils (15 in total across Efate and the Shepherd Islands) constitute the level of government closest to local communities, making their representatives (AAs and ASs) particularly well positioned to provide reliable information. VKS fieldworkers have a role of preserving and valorising the culture of their respective communities.

As Port Vila is known to host speakers of most of Vanuatu's languages (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 107), it was excluded from this survey in order to set clear boundaries for the study. The focus here is on Efate rural and the Shepherd Islands, which allows for a detailed analysis of communities outside the capital. This definition follows administrative boundaries: areas sometimes regarded as part of Port Vila in everyday terms (e.g., Manples Kokoriko) are in fact administratively part of Efate rural and are therefore included in this survey.

4.3 Data collection

Interviews were conducted primarily in Bislama and translated into English for reporting purposes. Informants were asked the following questions:

1. How many people currently live in [name of the village/community], including children?
2. What is the traditional vernacular language of [name of the village/community]?
3. Approximately what percentage of residents (including children) speak [this language] as their main language at home?
4. Which other languages are commonly spoken as the main language at home by residents?
5. For each of these languages, please estimate the proportion of residents who speak them as their main language at home.

Depending on their position and knowledge, informants answered these questions either for their own village or, in the case of AAs, ASs, and VKS fieldworkers, for multiple communities within their jurisdiction. For questions 3. and 5., given the large survey and because some villages have substantial population, informants were not asked to assign each person or household from a village to a specific language. Instead, they provided overall estimates. For smaller communities, if informants were uncomfortable with percentages, they were asked for approximate number of speakers, from which percentages were calculated. In larger communities, when informants could not provide percentages, qualitative questions were used, such as: "Is this language spoken by the majority of people, or close to the majority?" These qualitative responses were then converted into percentages. Informants were generally asked to estimate the proportion of speakers in increments of 10% (e.g., 10%, 20%, 30%), although more precise figures were occasionally provided.

This method is subject to biases that are difficult to eliminate, even in more robust surveys. Informants may emphasize either the vitality or the vulnerability of their vernacular language, while household situations (e.g., intermarriage, mixed language practices, or children speaking Bislama at home) complicate estimates. Children, who constitute a significant portion of the population, often speak Bislama at home and may not be fully accounted for. Additionally, informants may be influenced by what residents choose to present to the informants, which could misrepresent estimates. Despite these limitations, the survey offers an important overview of the Efate–Shepherds region's language ecology, though the results should be interpreted with caution rather than as precise counts.

4.4 Mapping the distribution of languages

The maps presented in this article are intended to provide a practical overview of the distribution of traditional vernacular languages and other commonly spoken languages across Efate and the Shepherd Islands. Creating these visual representations, however, required a series of methodological decisions, including how to represent the diversity of languages, and determine which varieties to display at the community level. This section explains the rationale

behind these choices, clarifying the principles and compromises that guided the mapping process.

I represented on the maps of this article the languages identified by Francois *et al* (2015): Mele-Ifira, Fakamae, Namakura (NMK), Nakanamanga (NKM), Lelepa, Eton, and Nafsan (SEF). Two additional varieties, Epao and Emao, are presented individually. Epao speakers strongly emphasize the uniqueness of their language, although linguistic evidence suggests affinities with Eton, Nakanamanga, Emao, and Lelepa (Séverin & Heeringa, in preparation). Given the absence of sufficient data (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 111) to classify Epao definitively, it is presented here as distinct. Emao was likewise highlighted, as both its speakers and neighbouring communities identify it as separate from Nakanamanga varieties spoken in North Efate, Nguna, Pele, Moso, Emae, and Tongoa.

In situations of high language diversity, the distinctions between languages are complicated by overlapping domains of language use, social context (e.g., intermarriage), and the high degree of multilingualism (with nearly 100% of the population fluent in Bislama). For this reason, no separate categories were created for “Bislama” and “Mix of other locally less-common languages”. Instead, two combined categories were introduced: Mix–Bislama, where various languages are spoken more frequently than Bislama, and Bislama–Mix, where Bislama predominates alongside other languages.

For smaller islands beyond Efate, such as Emae, and Tongoa, only a single circle is displayed, either because sociolinguistic data were consistent across villages or because detailed data were unavailable.

To create a comprehensive overview, only one language is shown per location, specifically the main language spoken at home. Traditional varieties are represented also in areas where Bislama appears today to be more widely spoken (e.g., Lelepa, Mangaliliu, Eton, Pangpang, Pango). The varieties of Namakura, Nakanamanga, and South Efate were grouped together into the labels ‘Namakura’, ‘Nakanamanga’ and ‘Nafsan’, avoiding excessive visual complexity on the maps.

However, distinctions between these varieties are presented in zoomed-in maps, where twenty traditional varieties are identified. These zoomed-in maps represent community-level multilingualism - the range of languages actively used within a community - rather than individual repertoires. Although many individuals are multilingual (often speaking at least both a vernacular language and Bislama), the focus is on the main languages used at the household level.

Once the data was collected and compiled (see Appendix 2), the software QGIS (QGIS Development Team, 2023) was used to create the maps, which were then refined in their design by the author.

5 Results: The Current Distribution of Languages on Efate and Shepherd Islands

This section presents the distribution of languages on Efate and the Shepherd islands. Therefore, Figure 2 presents a comprehensive map of the main place names across Efate and the Shepherd Islands, with the dominant language spoken in each area. Languages spoken on Efate and Shepherd Islands. To provide a more detailed analysis, zoomed-in sections (see Figures 3 to 9) were added, focusing on specific areas. For each location mentioned, pie charts are incorporated to illustrate the proportion of speakers for each language, with the size of each chart corresponding to the population of that area. Larger pie charts represent areas with higher

populations, while smaller ones reflect communities with fewer inhabitants. In Figure 2, the area between Mele and Port Vila appears congested; Figure 8 offers a closer look at this densely populated region.

Some locations mentioned in this survey (Figures 2 to 9) may be illegally occupied while others are subject to ongoing disputes over ownership, but the maps aim to represent the linguistic reality of these areas. The maps are intended solely as a guide to the geographical distribution of languages and should not be interpreted as indicating historical, traditional or territorial ownership. This study does not provide information on land status, such as ownership, acquisition, occupation, or inheritance.

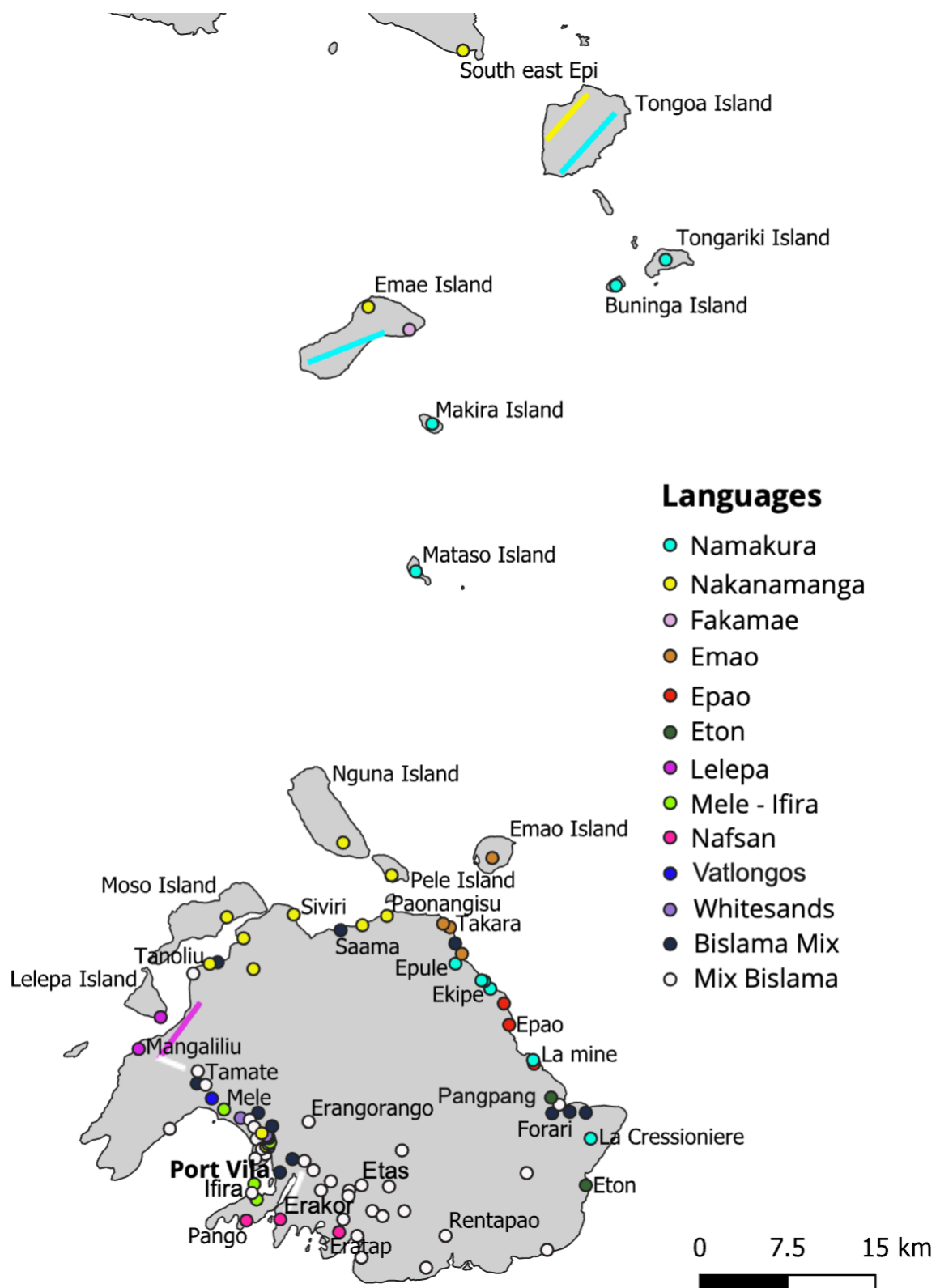


Figure 2. Current distribution of languages on Efate and the Shepherd islands

Lines are used on Emae and Tongoa islands to show that the same language is spoken across a few villages along those lines. On Efate, lines are used to illustrate the fact that people live along these lines, even though it does not represent formally recognised villages.

The following sections aim to provide as much detail as possible about the distribution of languages for each location.

5.1 *Ifira and Maltauriki*

Ifira Island (see Figure 3), located in Port Vila Harbour, is the home of Ifira speakers, with very few outsiders or children who speak only Bislama. Maltauriki, situated uphill opposite the wharf, is also predominantly inhabited by Ifira speakers, with the majority of the population speaking the Ifira language at home.

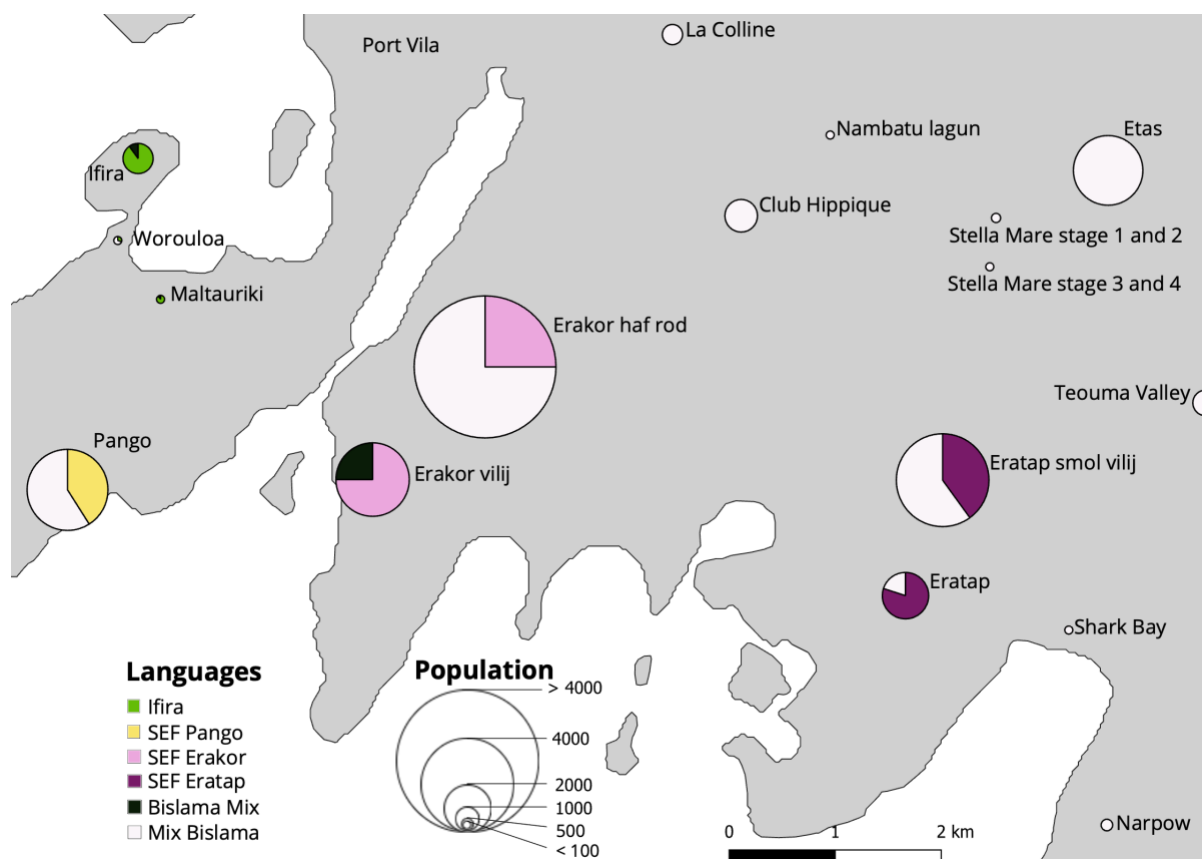


Figure 3. Current distribution of languages in South Efate

5.2 *Worouloa, Paradise Cove and Dream Cove*

Worouloa (see Figure 3), located at Ifira Point, and Paradise Cove as well as Dream Cove (not on the map), affluent neighbourhoods next to Ifira Point and north of Pango, are mixed communities composed of people from various islands and countries, speaking their languages including Bislama. A small minority speaking Ifira language is also reported to live in these areas.

5.3 *Pango*

Pango (see Figure 3) is a large village situated to the southwest of Port Vila. There is the main village, with surrounding peri-village communities extending all the way to the entrance of Port Vila. In the main village, the majority of residents speak SEF (Pango), while moving further from the central area, the population becomes more diverse, with people speaking languages from various islands and countries as well as Bislama. Pango area is particularly attractive due to its close proximity to Port Vila, drawing many people to settle there.

5.4 *Erakor*

Located south of Port Vila, Erakor (See Figure 3) is a large area with the main village, Erakor, situated at the end of the road. Between Erakor Bridge, located at the end of the lagoon separating Erakor from Port Vila, and the village lies an area called Haf Rod ('half road'), where a significant portion of the population resides, even outnumbering those in the village itself. Although there are a few hamlets within Haf Rod, I treat it as a unified area, separate from the main Erakor village.

In the main village, most people were born there, though there are some women and men who have married into the community. Additionally, people from various islands rent properties in the area. SEF (Erakor variety) is the predominant language spoken, but Bislama, particularly among the younger generation, and other vernacular languages are also spoken.

In Haf Rod, among the first to settle were people from Tanna and Futuna, who have integrated into the local community and can speak SEF (Erakor). Today, Haf Rod is home to individuals from all across Vanuatu, including Tanna, Paama, Ambrym, Tongoa, Pentecost, Malekula, Ambae, Maewo, Santo, Epi, and the Banks Islands, all speaking their traditional languages along with Bislama. Most of these recent settlers cannot speak SEF (Erakor). The largest group hails from Tanna, though there is considerable linguistic diversity even within that community. Around Erakor Bridge, there are sizable groups from Paama and Tongoa. A small number of households in Haf Rod are from Erakor and still speak SEF (Erakor) at home.

5.5 *Club Hippique*

Located northeast of Erakor, Club Hippique (See Figure 3) gets its name from a former ranch. The majority of residents in Club Hippique are from Tanna Island, with people from across the island speaking their various languages. Among others, there are also notable populations speaking languages from Paama, Pentecost, Tongoa, and Malekula, as well as Bislama and other languages.

5.6 *La Colline and Nambatu lagun*

La Colline and Nambatu Lagun (See Figure 3) are peri-urban communities. The population consists of people from a wide range of countries and islands within Vanuatu. In Nambatu Lagun fewer than 5% of the residents are from Erakor. Inhabitants speak their own languages including Bislama.

5.7 *Stella Mare*

Stella Mare (see Figure 3), located next to Nambatu Lagun, has been divided into four subdivisions. Most of the residents have purchased plots over the past 10-15 years, with more continuing to buy. The community is diverse, with people from all over Vanuatu, all speaking at home their traditional vernacular languages alongside Bislama.

5.8 *Etas*

Etas (see Figure 3) is a relatively large community located inland, next to Stella Mare, and is known for its proximity to the Port Vila Municipality waste dumping site. The majority of the residents speak various Tanna languages at home, though there are also people from all over Vanuatu. Bislama is commonly spoken alongside other languages.

5.9 *Eratap*

Eratap (see Figure 3) is a village located to the southeast of Erakor. The main village is situated on a hill, while the surroundings (called Smol vilij ‘small village’) has become more populous than the main settlement. In the main village, most people speak SEF (Eratap), while the smaller village is home to a majority of people speaking a mix of languages from across Tanna Island. Additionally, there are people speaking languages from Ambae, Pentecost, and other islands, as well as Bislama. A minority of inhabitants still speaks SEF (Eratap) in Eratap Smol vilij.

5.10 *Shark Bay*

Shark Bay (see Figure 3) is a small community located on a bay east of Eratap. The bay got its name due to an abattoir nearby, which discarded meat remains and bones into the ocean, attracting sharks. The community is made up of people from all over Vanuatu, with Bislama commonly spoken alongside other vernacular languages.

5.11 *Narpow*

Narpow (see Figure 3), located southeast of Eratap and south of Teouma, is predominantly inhabited by people from other countries, along with a mix of people from various islands in Vanuatu. They speak various languages as well as Bislama.

5.12 *Teouma and Erapo*

Teouma (Figure 4) is a large area divided into several distinct sections. Teouma Valley and Teouma Ville were subdivided and sold, with development beginning in the early 2000s. This was followed by the development of Stella Mare (Figure 3). The community is diverse, with people from various backgrounds speaking languages from various islands as well as Bislama.

Above Teouma Ville lies Erapo, a community mainly composed of people speaking NMK from Tongoa and Tongariki, along with people from North Tanna and other parts of Tanna.

Further east, Teouma Avoka has a large population of people speaking languages from Tanna, other islands, and Bislama.

Teouma Dak Bus ('Dark bush') hosts many people speaking Tanna languages, including a large community speaking Whitesands language, as well as speakers of NMK from Tongoa, along with speakers of languages from Ambae, and other islands in addition to Bislama.

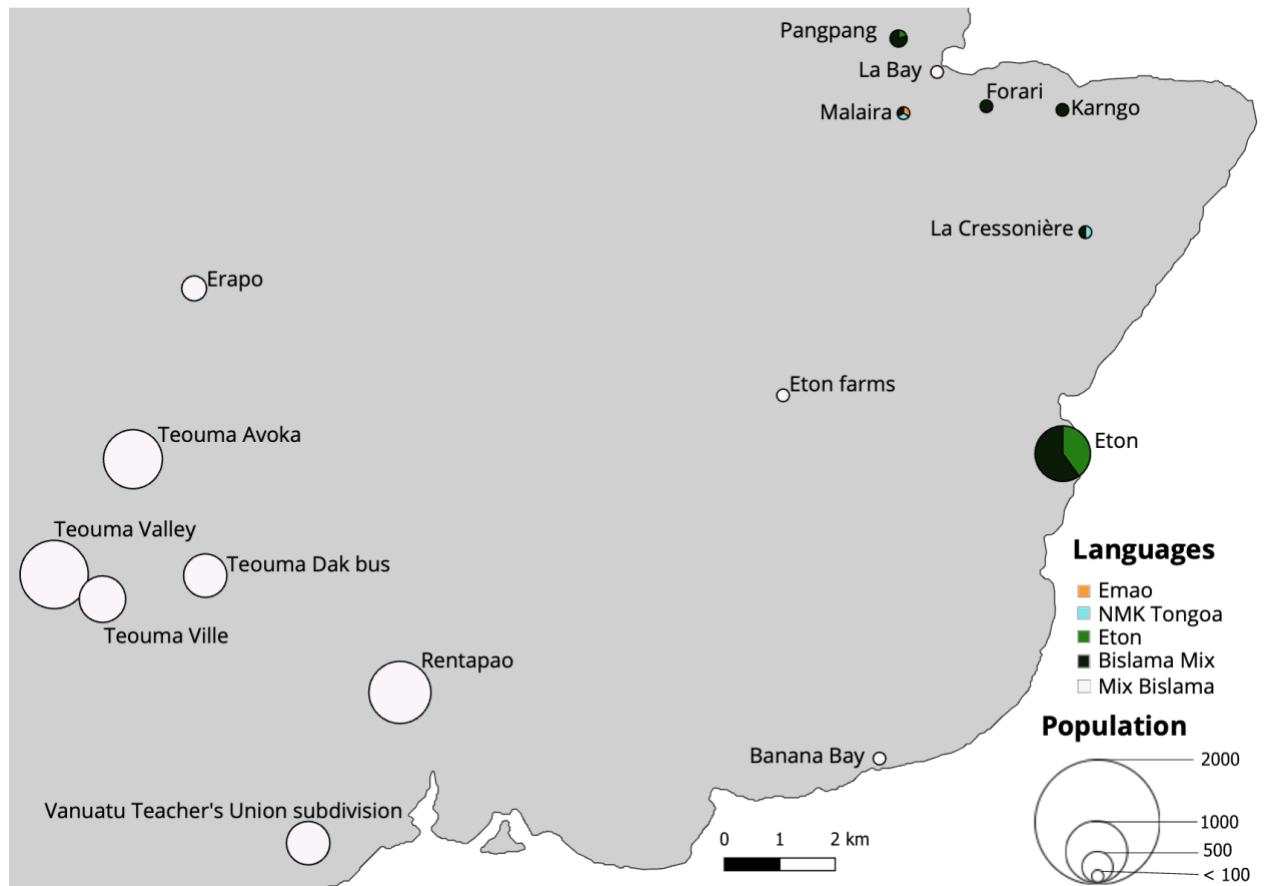


Figure 4. Current distribution of languages in East Efate

5.13 *Rentapao*

Rentapao (see Figure 4) is a community located next to Teouma on the way to Eton. The majority of inhabitants speak various languages from Tanna, with also people speaking languages from other islands alongside Bislama.

The Rentapao subdivision, also known as the Vanuatu Teachers Union subdivision, is home to people from all over Vanuatu, who speak their own languages including Bislama.

5.14 *Eton farms and Banana Bay*

Between Rentapao and Eton, the area is sparsely populated. There are Eton farms and Banana Bay (see Figure 4). The people living here mostly work on the plantations of the area. The majority speaks at home languages from Tanna and Ambrym as well as Bislama.

5.15 *Eton*

Eton (see Figure 4), the largest village on the east coast of Efate, is located along its beaches, which attract many families from Port Vila for day trips on weekends. Although many households are endogamous, with both parents originating from Eton, Bislama is increasingly spoken to children, which may pose a risk to the intergenerational transmission and survival of the Eton language.

5.16 *La Cressonnière*

La Cressonnière (see Figure 4) is a hamlet located north of Eton along a river. The area is primarily populated by people from Tongoa, with roughly half of them speaking Namakura and the other half speaking Bislama.

5.17 *Forari and Karngo Poe*

Forari (see Figure 4), a former manganese-mining centre north from Eton, once hosted a large group of semi-permanent labourers before Vanuatu's Independence in 1980. However, the settlement has since been abandoned, and the mine is no longer in operation. In Karngo Poe, people from Wallis and Futuna, who had worked in the mine, had established a community. While a few families still remain, most of these settlers have dispersed with some of their descendants living in Port Vila nowadays. Lynch & Crowley (2001, p. 118) mention “a substantial settlement of Kiribati people (locally known as Gilbertese)”, but this may require verification. If there were indeed Kiribati people present, they would likely have been a minority compared to those from Wallis and Futuna. Wallisian people and their language are not mentioned in Lynch & Crowley's work, which raises questions about the accuracy of the Kiribati reference. Today, Karngo Poe is home to a diverse group of people, including a few families from Wallis and Futuna, as well as settlers from Tanna, Banks, and other islands, who speak their own languages including Bislama. Additionally, people from Eton also live there. In Forari itself, the population is predominantly from Paama, with most people speaking Bislama. More recently, a new settlement called Malaira has emerged, primarily inhabited by people speaking NMK (Tongoa), Emao and Bislama.

5.18 *La Bay*

La Bay (see Figure 4) is a little community located on the right side after the remaining buildings of the Manganese mine. The majority of its residents speak various languages from Tanna Island, along with NKM from Tongoa.

5.19 *Pangpang*

Pangpang (see Figure 4), situated on the east coast of Efate, is reported to have lost its original vernacular language, probably following the displacement caused by missionary activities and outbreaks of disease. The traditional vernacular language seems to have been replaced by the Eton language for a while. Today, a minority of Pangpang inhabitants speaks the Eton language, while the majority communicates in Bislama.

5.20 *La mine*

La mine (see Figure 5) is a hamlet positioned between Pangpang and Epao, divided into two communities: La mine 1 and La mine 2. In La mine 1, most people speak Epao, whereas the majority of residents in La mine 2 are NMK speakers from Tongariki. Bislama is also commonly spoken at home in both parts of the community.

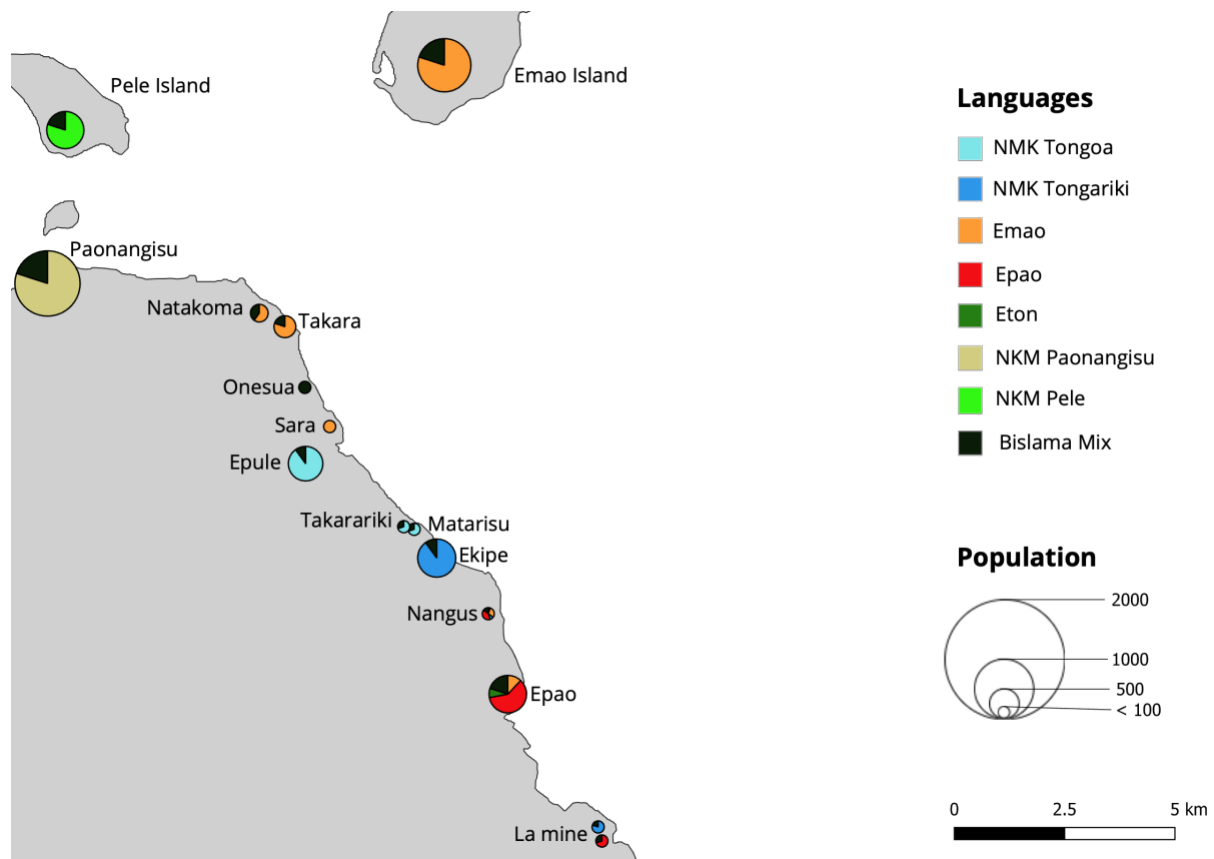


Figure 5. Current distribution of languages in North-East Efate

5.21 *Epao and Nangus*

Epao (see Figure 5) is on the eastern coast of Efate, where the traditional vernacular language, Epao, is endangered due to intermarriage with people from Emao and Eton. Significant minorities therefore speak Emao and Eton. While Epao remains the most widely spoken language, it has increasingly merged with Emao, Eton, and Bislama, creating a hybrid language spoken by around 50% of Epao speakers. During his research in Epao, Guiart (1973, p. 318) notes that, three descendants of extinct Eluk village still spoke its dying language. Other descendants of Eluk can be found in Eratap and Ifira (see Figure 3). VILDD (2025) identified Baeworel, a variety still spoken by a few elderly people.

Nangus, a satellite hamlet of Epao located further north, has Epao as the dominant language, though Emao is spoken by roughly the same amount of residents. Smaller groups speak NKM (Tongariki), Bislama, and NKM (Paonangisu).

5.22 *Ekipe*

Ekipe (see Figure 5) is a village located on the eastern coast of Efate north of Epao. People living there are from Tongariki and only a few people do not speak NKM (Tongariki), they speak Bislama instead.

5.23 *Matarisu, Takarariki, Epule*

The villages of Matarisu, Takarariki, and Epule (see Figure 5) are situated north of Ekipe, heading toward the northern part of the island. The vast majority of people in these areas speak NKM (Tongoa), with a very small minority speaking Bislama.

5.24 Sara

Sara (see Figure 5) is a very small community located just after Epule, inhabited by people who speak the Emao language.

5.25 Onesua and Ulei

Onesua (see Figure 5), located in the northeast of Efate, and Ulei (see Figure 10), situated in the northwest, are anglophone boarding schools. During the school seasons, they are inhabited by students, teachers and staff from all over Vanuatu.

5.26 Takara

Takara (see Figure 5) is a village on the northern coast of Efate, where there is the wharf to travel by boat to Emao. The village is administratively divided into two sections. Takara A, located by the ocean, is predominantly populated by people who speak Emao. In Takara B, situated closer to the main road, the majority speak Emao at home, with a minority using Bislama.

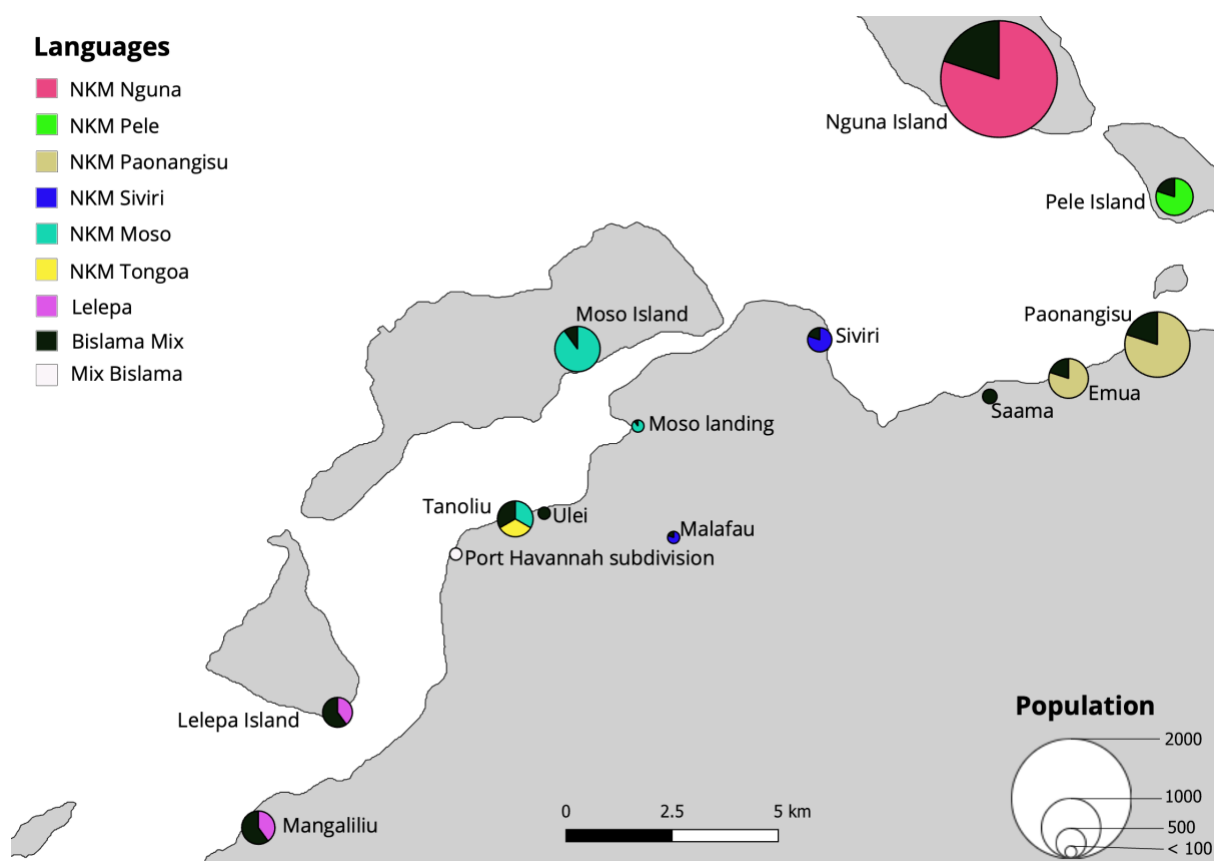


Figure 6. Current distribution of languages in North-West Efate

5.27 Paonangisu, Emua, Siviri, Nguna, Pele and Moso

Siviri, Paonangisu, and Emua (see Figure 6) are villages in northern Efate. Emua wharf is the departure point for boats to Pele and Nguna. Pele, Nguna, and Moso are offshore islands of Efate. Most residents speak their Nakanamanga variety at home, with a few outsiders and children using Bislama. Before missionary arrival, Emua inhabitants lived in the bush and spoke their distinct variety, Irafsa; a few older people still know the language (VILDD, 2025).

5.28 *Saama*

Saama (see Figure 6), a village in North Efate, is primarily inhabited by descendants of people from Pentecost - most specifically from Batavne, la Cascade and Baie Barrier (Guiart, 1973, p. 313) - who settled there permanently after working as plantation labourers in the 1930s and marrying local women (Guiart, 1973, p.313; Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 118). Over time, the children of this village grew up speaking Bislama as their primary language, making it one of the first rural villages in Vanuatu where this was the case (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 118). The original language is no longer spoken, with only one or two older individuals reportedly still speaking the original Pentecost language. According to Lynch & Crowley (2001, p. 118), many people also understand and speak NKM, although this claim needs further verification.

5.29 *Moso landing*

Moso landing (see Figure 6) is the departure point for boats traveling to Moso. A small community of Moso speakers resides here, where the Moso language is predominantly spoken.

5.30 *Tanoliu*

Tanoliu (Figure 6), a relatively large village in North-West Efate, has a population divided into three roughly equal groups: speakers of NKM (Moso), speakers of NKM (Tongoa), and another group of people from Tanna and other islands speaking primarily their languages including Bislama. This linguistic situation in Tanoliu requires further study, particularly because Moso suffered a major population decline. As a result, the possibility of repopulating the area with relatives from the Shepherd Islands was mentioned by Guiart (1973, p. 298).

5.31 *Port Havannah subdivision*

Port Havannah Subdivision (see Figure 6), though its exact name is uncertain, is a relatively recent development primarily inhabited by foreigners, speaking their own languages.

5.32 *Lelepa and Mangaliliu*

Located to the northwest of Efate, Lelepa Island and Mangaliliu (see Figure 6) share a common language, Lelepa. Mangaliliu itself is a relatively new village, founded after Independence by people from Lelepa who returned to land long occupied by colonizers. The language situations in Mangaliliu and Lelepa seem similar, with many parents being Lelepa speakers, but using Bislama when communicating with their children. As a result, Lelepa is now considered endangered by the community, as while most children understand the language, they respond in Bislama. The surrounding areas, including those between Mangaliliu and Tanoliu, have a significant number of Lelepa speakers, following the same language trends.

5.33 *Snake hill, Lama Mountain, La cascade subdivision, Tamate*

Located between Mangaliliu and Mele, on the uphill side near the main road, there are several settlements (see Figure 7). These communities are composed of people speaking languages from various islands, with Tanna being the largest group, particularly in Tamate, with a community from Whitesands. In Lama Mountain, there is a notable minority speaking Ambrym languages. Additionally, the La Cascade Subdivision is a new development offering plots for

sale, attracting residents from various islands. In these settlements, Bislama is commonly spoken alongside other vernacular languages.

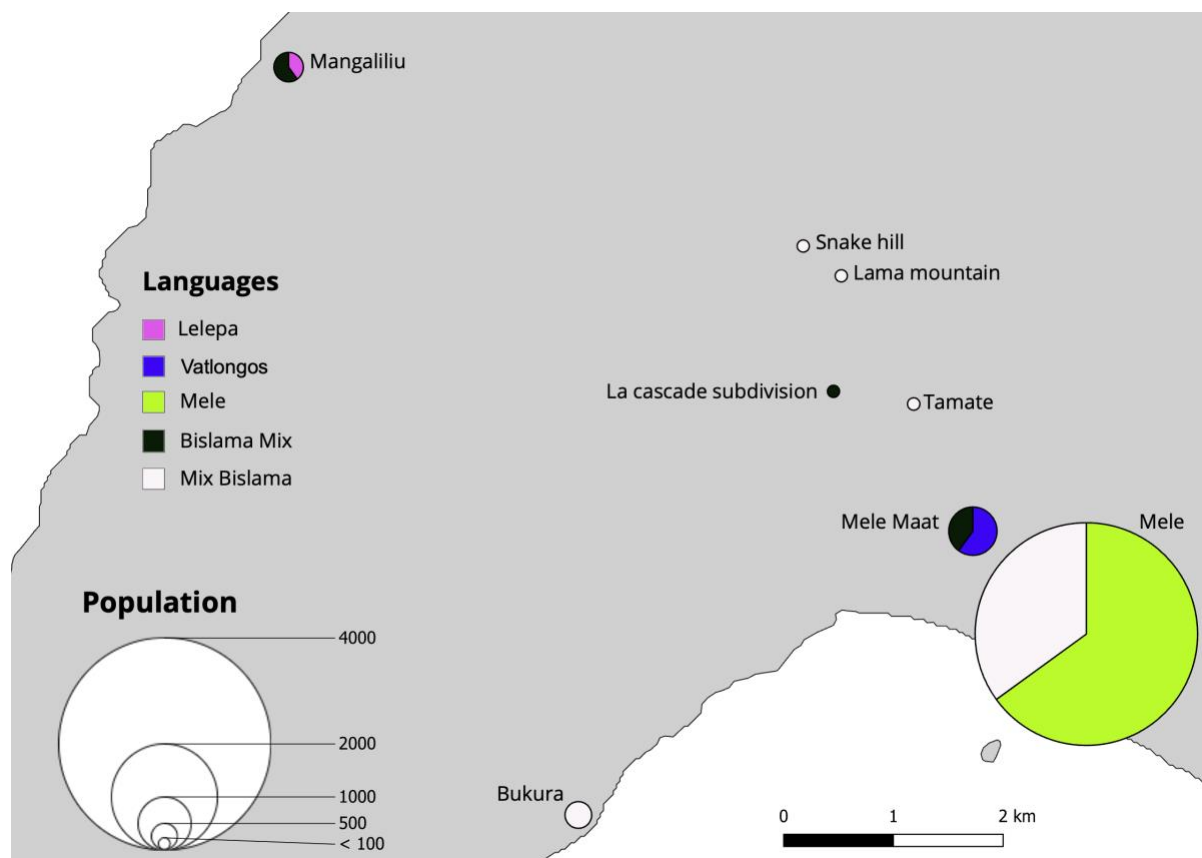


Figure 7. Current distribution of languages in West Efate

5.34 Bukura

Bukura (see Figure 7) is a community situated along the northern edge of Mele Bay. The area is populated by a diverse population, with residents from various countries and islands, each speaking their own languages as well as Bislama.

5.35 Mele Maat

Since 1952, residents from Maat village in the Southeast Ambrym-speaking region have been relocating to a village near Mele due to a volcanic eruption (Ridge, 2019, p. 32). This settlement is now known as Mele Maat (see Figure 7) and has grown to be larger than most villages on Southeast Ambrym itself, as noted by Tonkinson (Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 118). This survey shows that Vatlongos, Southeast Ambrym language, is still widely spoken at home by the majority of the inhabitants in Mele-Maat.

5.36 Mele

In Mele village (see Figure 7), located Northwest of Port Vila, the majority of people speaks Mele language. There is a hamlet called Malarifu located between Mele and Mele Maat, which is considered here as part of Mele, and is populated by people from various islands speaking their own traditional vernacular language and Bislama.

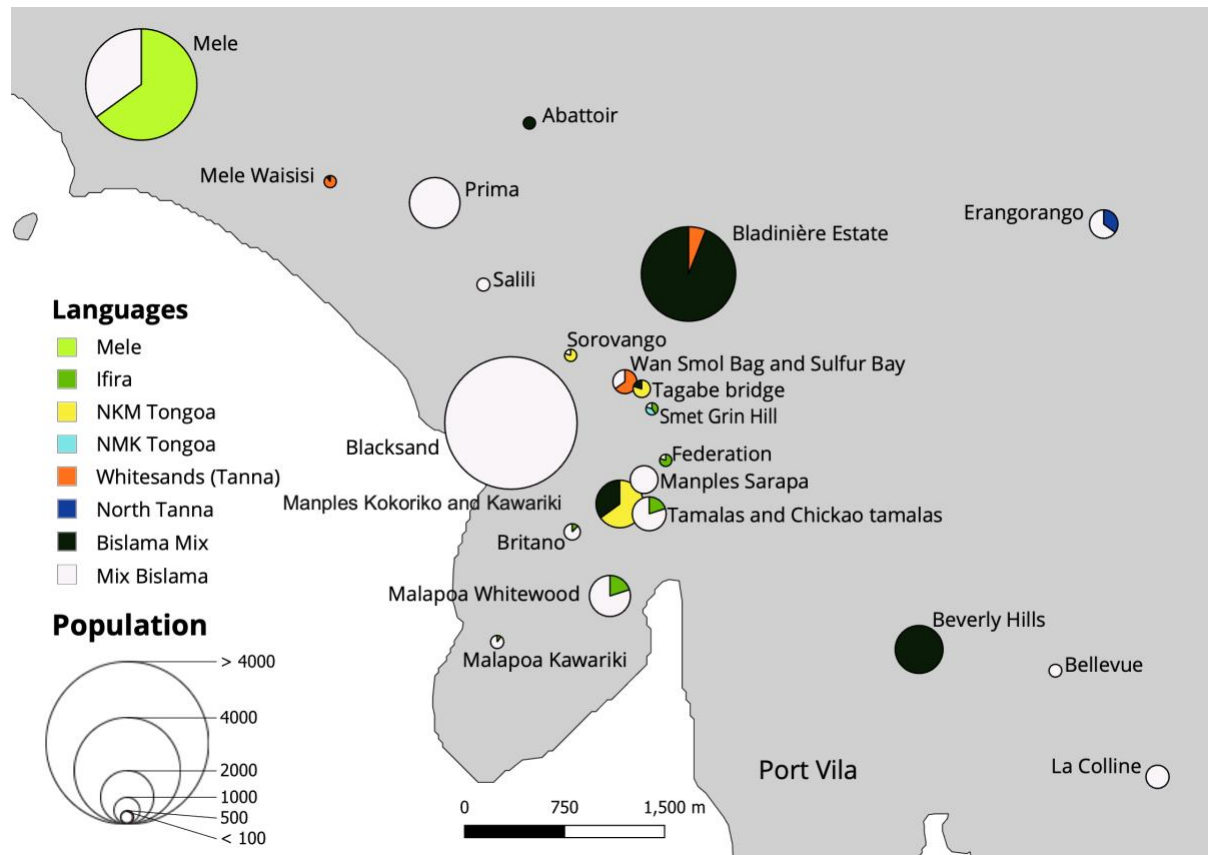


Figure 8. Current distribution of languages between Mele and Port Vila

5.37 *Mele Waisisi*

Located at the far end of Mele, on the way to Port Vila, Mele Waisisi (see Figure 8), named after a village in Whitesands area (Tanna) is a settlement predominantly composed of people from Whitesands (Tanna). They primarily speak Whitesands language at home, in addition to Bislama.

5.38 *Abattoir and Prima*

Abattoir and Prima (see Figure 8) are areas with residents from several islands, each speaking their own vernacular languages alongside Bislama. Abattoir is a smaller area, home to a minority of people speaking Mele, while Prima is a more recent and growing peri-urban neighbourhood. Notably, a community speaking Emao is also reported to reside there.

5.39 *Salili*

Adjacent to Prima, Salili (see Figure 8) is an area largely populated by people speaking various Tanna languages. There is also a smaller group speaking languages of Malekula, Paama, and Ambrym, in addition to Bislama.

5.40 *Blacksand*

Blacksand (see Figure 8) is a sizable peri-urban community located on the coast between Port Vila and Mele village. Mecartney (2000) offers a comprehensive description of how Blacksand developed into a permanent migrant settlement. The population primarily originates from Tanna Island, although it is a mix of people from various parts of Tanna, speaking different

Tanna languages (Lynch & Crowley 2001: 118). Additionally, there are large communities of people speaking Paama and NMK (Tongariki) as well as Bislama.

5.41 *Bladinière Estate*

Located just north of Port Vila municipality, Bladinière Estate (see Figure 8) is a large neighbourhood home to people from across Vanuatu, each speaking their own traditional vernacular language along with Bislama. Notably, there is a sizable community speaking Whitesands (Tanna).

5.42 *Erangorango*

Erangorango (see Figure 8) is situated behind Bauerfield International Airport and is divided into three distinct areas called “stages”. Stage 1 is predominantly inhabited by people speaking various languages from Tanna, with a significant minority of NMK (Tongoa) speakers. Stage 2 is home to people from several islands, who speak their respective vernacular languages as well as Bislama. Stage 3 is mainly populated by people speaking the North Tanna language.

5.43 *Federation, Smet Grin Hill, Tagabe bridge, Wan Smolbag, Sulphur Bay, Sorovango and Lagaetam*

These areas (see Figure 8) are very close to Port Vila, though not part of Port Vila Municipality, and located between Bladinière and Manples. They are home to people speaking a diverse range of languages from various islands.

In Sulphur Bay, residents come from Sulphur Bay (Tanna) and primarily speak the Whitesands language from Tanna. Most people living behind Wan Smolbag Theatre are also from Tanna, with a variety of languages spoken there. In Federation and Smet Grin Hill, there are some residents speaking Ifira language, alongside NMK (Tongoa) speakers in Smet Grin Hill. Tagabe Bridge and Sorovango are mainly inhabited by NMK (Tongoa) speakers. There is also a community named Lagaetam after a village in North Tanna, which comprises nearly 400 people, mostly speaking North Tanna.

5.44 *Manples, Malapoa and surrounding settlements*

Half of Manples falls within Port Vila Municipality, while the western portion is outside its boundaries. The areas of Manples Kokoriko and Kawariki (see Figure 8), located uphill, are mainly populated by NKM (Tongoa) speakers. Manples Sarapa, on the way down to the Manples Market, is also home to many NKM (Tongoa) speakers, although the population here is more diverse, with people from various islands, including Epi and Paama. Tamalas is largely inhabited by people speaking languages from all over Tanna, with a smaller community speaking Ifira, while Chickao Tamalas is mostly populated by people from Ambrym, who predominantly speak Bislama, alongside a significant minority speaking Ifira. In Britano and Malapoa, there are smaller communities of Ifira speakers. Britano is primarily home to people from Tanna, while Malapoa also hosts residents from a variety of other countries. In all these areas, Bislama is widely spoken at home in addition to the various vernacular languages.

5.45 *Beverly Hills*

Beverly Hills (see Figure 8) is a suburban neighbourhood situated uphill just above the Freswota area, which is part of Port Vila Municipality. Although Beverly Hills is not yet part

of the capital city municipality itself, it shares many of the same demographic trends as Port Vila. This relatively new subdivision attracts higher-income individuals living in Port Vila from across Vanuatu. The majority of residents speak Bislama and other vernacular languages.

5.46 *Bellevue*

Bellevue (see Figure 8), adjacent to Beverly Hills, is a less urbanized area characterized by larger plots of land. The community is quite diverse, with a majority of people from various countries as well as significant numbers speaking Paama, Malekula, Ambae, Tongoa, and Tanna languages. The area extends up to Montmartre, a Catholic compound with a Francophone school.

5.47 *Mataso, Makira, Buninga, Tongariki*

Mataso, Makira, Buninga, and Tongariki (see Figure 9) are four of the Shepherd Islands where Namakura is the primary language. While Namakura continues to be spoken by the majority as their main language, the use of Bislama as a primary language is increasing, particularly on Mataso and Makira.

5.48 *Emae*

Emae Island (see Figure 9) is home to three traditional vernacular languages: Nakanamanga, Fakamae, and Namakura. According to Sperlich (1991, p. 15), Namakura was introduced relatively recently by migrants from Makira. Moreover, some villages that today identify as Namakura-speaking - Finongi and Sangava (Guiart, 1973, p. 95; Sperlich, 1991, p. 18) - were traditionally Fakamae-speaking (Dewar, 2020; Walworth et al., 2021, p. 1130) raising concerns for the vitality of Fakamae. Guiart (1973) notes that during his time on Emae, Namakura was spoken exclusively in Finongi (i.e., not in any other villages on Emae), and only by some of its inhabitants. Sperlich (1991, p. 18) describes the case of Sangava - located south-west of Finongi -: around the turn of the 20th century, an illness caused many of the village's women to die. Women from Makira then married into the community, passed on their language to their children, and within two generations the village's language had shifted. Sperlich (1991, p. 13) also noted that the southwest of Emae had an airstrip but no permanent settlements; today, the Namakura-speaking village of Siwo occupies that area, illustrating the ongoing migration and demographic change since his fieldwork.

Walworth et al. (2021) report that Fakamae is still spoken in three villages. Their individual-level survey shows that in Makatea most residents are fluent in Fakamae, while in Tongamea proficiency is more limited and Namakura appears poised to become dominant. However, their study focused on multilingual repertoires rather than on which languages are used primarily at home, which may explain some discrepancies with my own findings.

Our survey suggests that Fakamae remains the primary language for the majority in Makatea and Tongamea, although Namakura and Bislama are also reported as home languages. Meanwhile, in Namakura - and Nakanamanga-speaking areas, these languages continue to be dominant, though Bislama is gaining importance, especially among younger generations. The number of Emae inhabitants who speak Namakura as their primary home language exceeds those who primarily use Nakanamanga or Fakamae.

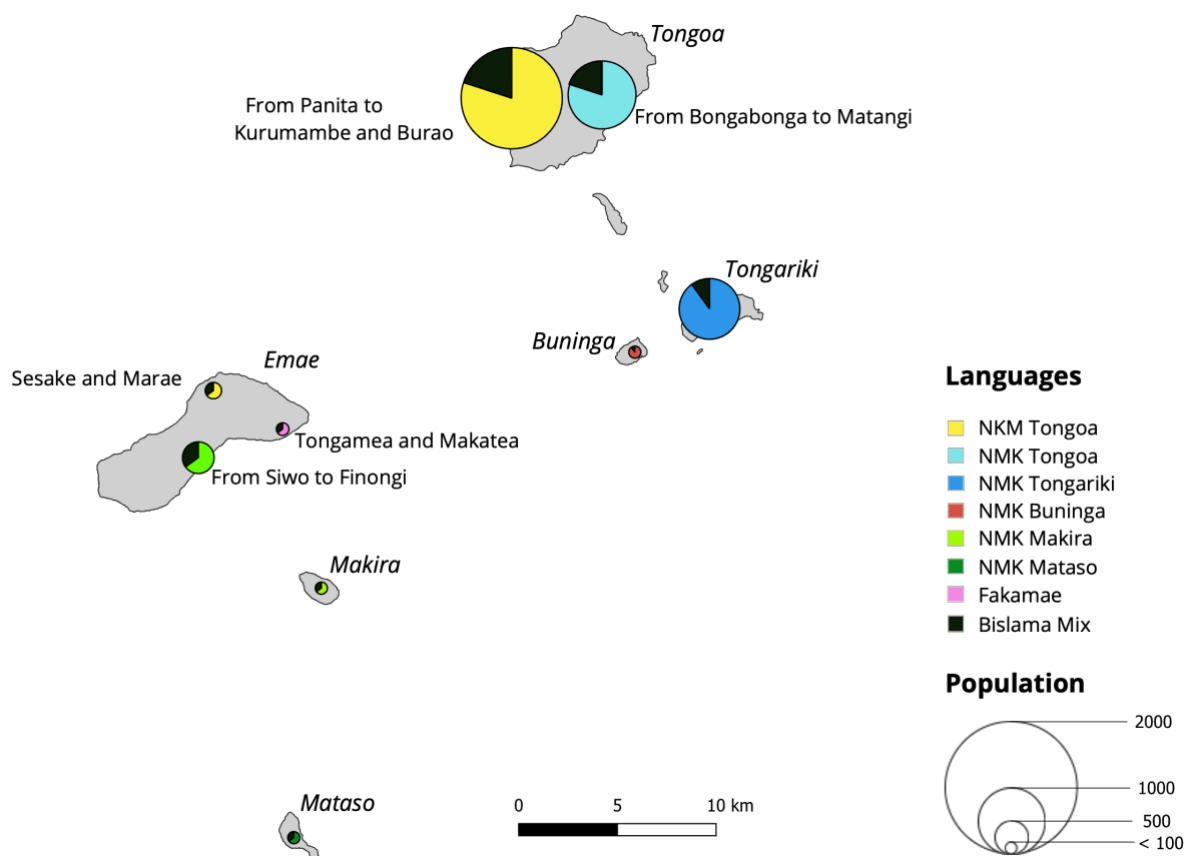


Figure 9. Current distribution of languages in the Shepherd Islands

5.49 Tongoa

Most existing literature represents Tongoa Island as divided into two areas: one for Nakanamanga speakers and another for Namakura speakers. In reality, the linguistic situation is more complex. For instance, the villages of Panita (within the Nakanamanga zone) and Euta (within the Namakura zone) are notable for their bilingual populations, reflecting the fluidity of this boundary. At the level of home language use, however, Nakanamanga remains dominant in Panita, while Namakura is primary in Euta.

Guiart (1973, p. 268) notes that in 1949, Nakanamanga speakers (876) slightly outnumbered Namakura speakers (720). Our survey indicates that this trend has intensified, with Nakanamanga speakers (1 529) now significantly outnumbering Namakura speakers (1 026) on Tongoa today. As in other Shepherd Islands, Bislama is also gaining ground at home, particularly among younger generations in both areas.

Finally, it has been reported that local varieties of both Nakanamanga and Namakura differ from one village to another, though this intra-island variation has not yet been studied in detail.

5.50 South Epi

South Epi was not part of my survey, but it is important to mention here as it is another area where traditional vernacular languages of Efate and the Shepherd Islands are spoken as primary languages. Nakanamanga is reported in a number of villages in south-east Epi (Early, 1994, p. 15; Lynch & Crowley, 2001, p. 107). Namakura is also spoken in several villages in South Epi (Early, 1994, p. 15; Bessis, 2023, p. 113). According to Bessis, this Namakura presence

may be a more recent development, whereas Early (1994) presents both Nakanamanga and Namakura as long-standing and ongoing phenomena.

6 Discussion

6.1 *Languages and locations not represented in earlier studies*

Previous maps and surveys have predominantly represented the traditional distribution of languages with for example, Efate's vernacular languages spoken in a continuous sequence along the coast. Such depictions, while capturing the historical factors influencing the distribution of languages presented in section 2, do not, however, capture more recent changes. These include cases where a language - whether from Efate and the Shepherd Islands or from elsewhere in Vanuatu - is the primary language in places not documented in the literature, even if this knowledge may be well known locally.

In the Shepherd Islands (see Figures 2 and 9), the current distribution of languages largely mirrors earlier descriptions. Yet these languages are also found beyond the Shepherds. For example, Namakura and Nakanamanga are both spoken in South Epi, a phenomenon already noted (Early, 1994; Lynch & Crowley, 2001). While Nakanamanga has long been recorded on Efate, Emae, and Tongoa, the presence of Namakura as the main language of several Efate villages has received only passing mention (Sperlich, 1991; Lynch & Crowley, 2001).

In fact, today, Namakura is the main language in three villages on Efate - Epule, Ekipe, and Matarisu (recently divided into Matarisu and Takarariki) - as well as in one subdivision of La Mine on East Efate (see Figure 5). This development, which likely began in the mid-20th century, is linked to migration from Tongoa and Tongariki. While further research is needed to fully explain this migration, it may be attributed to two key factors. First, unlike other islands, Tongoa and Tongariki did not experience the severe demographic decline of the 19th century (Guiart, 1973). Second, their geographical and social proximity to Efate facilitated movement between the islands.

Guiart (1973, p. 171) notes that Tongariki faced overpopulation, leading people from Erata village to establish a coconut plantation on Efate between Epule and Epao. This migration was enabled by kinship ties between chiefs in Epao and Erata, following the two canoe *kaming* (see Section 2.2). Today, Ekipe has a majority of Namakura (Tongariki) speakers, while Epule hosts a majority of Namakura (Tongoa) speakers. Guiart (1973) briefly mentions Epule (referred to as Ebule) but, unlike other villages, does not dedicate a section to it. Based on my understanding, Epule's land falls under the jurisdiction of Emua. An agreement was reached between Emua and the people of Tongoa, the majority of whom originates from the village of Mangarisu.

Guiart (1973, p. 269) also highlights that Namakura speakers on Tongoa faced marginalization by missionaries and the colonial administration, both of which were based in Nakanamanga-speaking areas. He suggests that Namakura speakers sought opportunities elsewhere due to limited local avenues for acquiring prestige and authority. Additionally, the colonial administration promoted cattle farming integrated with coconut plantations (agroforestry), a lucrative model well-suited to low-slope areas like the Namakura-speaking villages of Matangi and Itakoma (Guiart, 1973, pp. 269–270). Fathers reportedly advised their educated sons to seek opportunities outside the traditional system, as land - required for cattle farming - was reserved for less-educated siblings. This may further explain the migration toward Efate.

Additional Namakura-speaking communities are found in La Cressonnière, Malaira, and Teouma (see Figure 4) and continue to grow as relatives migrate from the Shepherd Islands or other locations. Beyond socio-economic factors, this migration may reflect the inheritance practices of a society organized around complex networks of kinship and relationships, as described by Guiart (1973). For example, entire families or tribes often relocated based on long-standing kinship ties - such as the 19th-century movement of people from Mataso to Tongariki (Guiart, 1973, p. 191) - or to establish new relationships, thereby expanding their networks. Guiart (1973, p. 171) also notes a continuous trend of migration from overpopulated areas like Mataso and Tongariki to less densely settled islands such as Buninga.

Emao, often considered a variety of Nakanamanga, remains understudied (Clark 1985, 2009), likely because the geographically neighbouring variety spoken on Nguna has been relatively well documented (Sperlich, 1991; Schmidt, 2023). Emao is not only the main language of Emao Island but is also spoken in North Efate (e.g., Takara - see Figure 5), East Efate (e.g., Epao, Malaira - see Figure 4), and peri-urban areas near Port Vila. This distribution may be explained by minimal demographic loss in Emao (Guiart, 1973, pp. 356–357), which led to population growth compared to neighbouring areas, as well as a land governance system that passed land through women, placing it under the control of the husband's group (Guiart, 1973, p. 356). Guiart (1973, p. 364) mentions a parallel expansion to that of Tongariki on Efate, with Emao people purchasing land between Epule and Paonangisu.

The early 20th-century migration from the Shepherd Islands and Emao to northeastern Efate may be linked to the fact that this land was not alienated by colonizers. Designated as 'Native land' on Guiart's map (1973, p. 467), it was easier for migrants to settle based on kinship ties, land rights, following population growth or other reasons. However, all these migration trends require further study.

Epao, overlooked as a distinct variety, is spoken in Epao, Nangus, and La Mine, which appear to be the traditional places where it has historically been spoken. Guiart (1973, p. 317), explains that Epao village was an isolated location with limited communication infrastructure, including roads. This isolation may account for the lack of linguistic research on the variety.

Previous research has sometimes represented Nafsan as extending continuously from Pango to Epao (Lynch & Crowley, 2001; Hermann & Walworth, 2020). François *et al.* (2015) depict Nafsan as spoken from Pango to Epao, excluding the area around Eton village. In practice, however, Nafsan is spoken in Pango, Erakor and Eratap (Figure 2 and Figure 3), while Eton is spoken in Eton and Pangpang (Figure 4). The two languages are separated by unpopulated land and areas where immigrant languages are spoken (Figure 3 and 4). This situation appears to have persisted since population displacements caused by missionary activity and colonization. Between Eton and Pangpang lie several communities (e.g. Forari, Karngo, La Bay, Malaira - see Figure 4) where neither Eton nor Nafsan is spoken. Forari and Karngo are known to have been created during the period of manganese mining, which brought workers from diverse places, though it remains unclear whether La Bay was also established at that time. Malaira appears to result from more recent immigration, although the specific circumstances are not yet known.

Tanna languages are prominent in the peri-urban area of Port Vila, where their presence as primary languages is stronger than maps and surveys have previously indicated probably because this migration has not been extensively studied (see, however, Mecartney, 2000; Lindstrom, 2011).

The visual representations in Figures 3 to 9 also provide the first detailed linguistic mapping of the peri-urban belt and of inhabited places that earlier maps left blank, especially

in the corridor between Mangaliliu and Mele Maat (see Figure 7). In addition, they offer a comprehensive account of East Efate, a region largely overlooked in previous studies, and call for further research on recent and ongoing migration processes.

Finally, the current language ecology of the Efate-Shepherds area complicates traditional assessments about language density. While the region might appear to have a relatively low density of languages per square kilometer when analyzed at a broad scale (Clark, 1996), this conclusion is highly sensitive to the unit of measurement. For example, islands like Tongoa and Emae are divided between two to three languages. Although Namakura is spoken on other islands with low internal diversity (Tryon, 1976), inhabitants of Tongoa and Emae still navigate multiple languages and may encounter a language boundary within just a few kilometres in their daily lives. The atypical distribution in the region therefore raises broader methodological questions: should density be measured across wide regions, per island, or according to how speakers themselves experience language boundaries? Should calculations take into account the considerable maritime space covered by the Shepherds, or be restricted to landmass, which would yield higher densities? Or should it even focus only on inhabited land?

Furthermore, recent evidence of strong and continuous interaction with Polynesians (see section 2.2), present prior to the Tombuk eruption, suggests that Polynesian languages should also be included in any historical calculation of density. More broadly, Efate and the Shepherds today host a large number of languages within a relatively compact geographical space. The region may in fact represent the highest concentration of linguistic diversity in Vanuatu. This raises further questions about how density should be measured: contemporarily, historically, or at a specific point in time, although knowledge of the distribution of languages before the 1800s is limited and documentation as well as classification today remains incomplete - and underscores the need for caution when referring to language density in particular areas.

6.2 *Revised estimates of speaker population*

Figures 3 to 9 highlight not only the distribution of languages but also the relative population sizes of each area, helping to situate the importance of these varieties in terms of speaker numbers.

This survey provides estimates of the number of individuals using each language as their main language at home in rural Efate (excluding Port Vila municipality) and the Shepherd Islands (see Table 1). These figures reflect only active use in the home. They do not include (i) fluent speakers who use another language at home (e.g., through intermarriage and shift to Bislama), (ii) individuals in the “mix category”, (iii) the large numbers of speakers based in Port Vila, nor (iv) speakers living elsewhere in Vanuatu or overseas.

This approach highlights an important distinction for language vitality studies, for example. Counting only speakers who use a language daily at home provides a stronger indication of transmission potential than including individuals who use it only occasionally (e.g., in phone conversations with relatives).

Table 1. Estimated number of speakers by variety, based on survey data

Variety	Number of speakers (main home language, Efate rural & Shepherd Islands)
Nafsan	8538
Nakanamanga	8274
Namakura	5064
Mele-Ifira	5026
Emao	1345
Whitesands (Tanna)	906
Vatlongos (South-East Ambrym)	547
Epao	487
Lelepa	483
Eton	463
North Tanna	376
Fakamae	124

Previous recent estimates (e.g., François et al., 2015; Hermann & Walworth, 2020) often relied on older data or extrapolations from village populations. Our findings suggest that several figures require revision. For example, the number of Nafsan and Mele-Ifira speakers is significantly higher than previously reported - 6,000 for Nafsan and 3,500 for Mele-Ifira (François et al., 2015; Hermann & Walworth, 2020) -, likely reflecting population growth. Because their traditional lands are close to Port Vila, few speakers permanently reside in the capital, which means our survey likely captures most of those who use these languages as their primary home language.

Earlier estimates suggest that Nakanamanga has around 9,500–10,000 speakers (François et al., 2015; Hermann & Walworth, 2020), which is higher than what our survey indicates. This difference arises because previous estimates were based on the total number of inhabitants in the communities, whereas our survey counts only the speakers who were reported as having Nakanamanga as their main home language. At the same time, I note the presence of large populations of Nakanamanga speakers in Port Vila, substantial communities on Epi, and numerous bilingual speakers who use Nakanamanga as a second language. Since these groups are not included in our survey, the overall number of Nakanamanga speakers is likely to be considerably higher than our figures suggest. If the Emao variety is included within Nakanamanga, the total number of speakers exceeds earlier numbers substantially. Taken separately, Emao accounts for more than 1,000 speakers, with additional significant populations in Port Vila and its peri-urban areas, such as Prima (see Section 5.38) and Tokyo, a community located at the edge of Port Vila on the road to Pango.

Namakura appears to have been significantly underestimated in previous work - 3750–4000 (François et al., 2015; Hermann & Walworth, 2020) -, in part because of limited information about Namakura-speaking villages on Efate. In addition to the rural communities surveyed here, Namakura has major concentrations in Port Vila (e.g., Seaside Tongoa and Seaside Tongariki, with a population of over 1,000; Servy, 2017), where, based on my field observations, Namakura is widely used as a home language, as well as in peri-urban settlements such as Teouma, and in South Epi. This makes Namakura one of the most widely spoken languages in the region.

My estimates for Lelepa broadly confirm earlier figures - 400–500 speakers (François et al., 2015; Hermann & Walworth, 2020), which were based on the extensive and relatively recent work of Lacrampe (2014) who reported 400 speakers. The apparent stability may reflect a balance between population growth and language shift toward Bislama, itself an indicator of Lelepa's threatened status. Because most Lelepa speakers prefer to reside in Mangaliliu and commute to Port Vila rather than migrate permanently, the figures reported here are likely reliable.

The number of Eton speakers aligns with François et al. (2015). However, the classification of the Epao variety remains unresolved: depending on whether it is grouped with Eton, Nakanamanga, or Nafsan, overall totals for these languages may shift accordingly.

This survey records approximately the same number of speakers of Fakamae as the main home language as reported in Dewar (2025, pp. 539–540). The figures highlight the linguistic evolution on Emae. Guiart (1973, p. 95) reports that in the mid-1950s, most of the population spoke Fakamae. Today, however, Namakura - or even Bislama - has become the dominant home language on Emae, despite Namakura being the least spoken language in the past, behind Fakamae and Nakanamanga.

This study also demonstrates the growing importance of immigrant languages in rural Efate. For example, Whitesands and Vatlongos are now more widely spoken in rural Efate than some traditional Efate languages such as Lelepa. This reflects long-term migration and settlement, particularly from Tanna.

Finally, examining individual varieties rather than aggregated languages reveals differing levels of vulnerability. For example, Namakura as a whole appears robust, but its island varieties are much less secure: Namakura (Makira) has 112 speakers, Namakura (Buninga) 106, and Namakura (Mataso) 84. While these numbers may be supplemented by additional speakers in Port Vila and other islands, they nevertheless highlight the fragility of smaller varieties compared to the language as a whole.

6.3 *The rise of Bislama as a main home language in Efate and the Shepherd Islands*

A major transformation in the distribution of languages in Efate and the Shepherd Islands over the past century involves an increase of the number of people who speak Bislama as their first language. This phenomenon is evident not only in Port Vila and peri-urban areas, but also in more distant villages. In Saama (see Figure 6), Bislama has become the primary mother tongue during the last few decades, while in Lelepa and Eton it is progressively replacing the traditional vernacular languages. The increase in Bislama spoken as the main home language is observable across the whole area, from Efate to the Shepherd Islands (Figures 3 to 9). This shift mirrors broader trends documented at the national level (Lavender Forsyth, 2025), where Bislama has evolved from a purely vehicular function to one increasingly tied to identity (Vandeputte-Tavo 2014).

Although Bislama is increasingly spoken as a main language at home across Vanuatu, the process is particularly marked in Efate because of sustained migration into the area. Migration to Efate reflects complex social, economic, and environmental developments. People move primarily in search of better work opportunities, education, and improved living conditions. Lindstrom (2011, p. 258) notes that many migrants say they relocate to Port Vila to be able to afford their children's school fees. For many, Efate represents a hub of economic activity and access to amenities unavailable in rural islands. Land shortages or resource pressures on home islands also act as factors.

In peri-urban areas such as Erakor and Pango, land purchase and rental by migrants from across Vanuatu have produced highly mixed communities. Community activities, such as meetings and church services, are conducted in Bislama to ensure understanding. Over time, these practices filter into homes, accelerating language shift.

Education represents another factor. While national policy promotes initial literacy in the child's first language before transitioning to English or French, in practice Bislama is increasingly used as the medium of instruction, especially in mixed-language communities. In peri-urban communities such as Erakor, children often learn to read and write first in Bislama. Similar trends are reported in the Shepherd Islands. The growing use of Bislama in schools reflects broader ideological and policy debates about multilingualism and language planning in Vanuatu (Vandeputte 2020). Moreover, limited teaching resources in vernacular languages (Ridge et al., 2023, p. 340) and the mobility of teachers - many of whom are not speakers of the local language of the community - encourage the use of Bislama. Local observations confirm this: in Mangaliliu, for example, children from Elepa-speaking households often return from school speaking Bislama, which then becomes the default language at home. Comparable patterns are reported in the Shepherd Islands.

Within communities, the growing role of Bislama can also be attributed to the increasing number of people from other regions marrying into local communities. In many parts of Vanuatu, it is uncommon for a son-in-law to live on his wife's traditional land, but this is more accepted on Efate. This practice likely derives from the Naflak system - a governance structure on Efate and its offshore islands, established before the Tombuk eruption to end tribal wars (Garanger, 1972, p. 26) - in which land was traditionally inherited through the female line. It also reflects families' intention to provide affordable housing close to the capital. Compared to other places in Vanuatu, this practice increases the number of outsiders living in the communities on Efate. In these situations, couples often adopt Bislama as the language of the household, facilitating integration while reducing reliance on the local vernacular language.

Finally, overseas labour migration programs - such as the seasonal worker program in Australia and New Zealand - exert additional pressure. When one parent spends extended periods abroad, the remaining parent may find it difficult to maintain vernacular language transmission alongside other household and community responsibilities. This challenge is compounded when children return from school speaking Bislama - when it is the language of schooling and peer interaction - to their parent at home who is also fluent in Bislama. In such cases, with limited time and energy, language preservation often becomes a lower priority amid other pressures. Bislama is then used for daily communication with children, especially if it is the language of schooling and community life. This reduces opportunities for vernacular transmission and accelerates intergenerational shift. This issue warrants further research.

Taken together, these findings support what Vandeputte (2018, 2020) has described: Bislama is not only consolidating its role for inter-community communication but is increasingly shaping identity, education, and everyday family life. While it is embraced as a unifying national language, its expansion is often perceived as a threat to vernacular languages maintenance. The case of Efate and the Shepherd Islands shows these processes in especially sharp relief.

The maintenance of traditional vernacular languages requires both documentation and applied measures. Priority should be given to recording varieties at risk of decline, including studies of mutual intelligibility to better understand language boundaries. At the same time, strengthening education in traditional vernacular languages is necessary. The development of teaching resources, teacher training, and government support for vernacular-based programs could reinforce language transmission. This would be especially effective if combined with

awareness campaigns encouraging families to use their traditional languages at home, as well as the production of materials in vernacular languages beyond the educational domain (e.g., disaster preparedness flyers). Community-based initiatives - such as the *Kastom* schools established in a few villages on Efate, where children spend half a day each week learning their community's traditional vernacular language alongside cultural practices (e.g., dances) - play an important role in supporting language vitality. Equally important are initiatives not yet widely implemented, such as programs that support families during periods of parental absence (e.g., seasonal labour migration), which could further strengthen intergenerational transmission.

7 Conclusion

The Efate and Shepherd Islands region has long been shaped by migration, historical events such as the Tombuk eruption, and a rich tradition of interaction. This study provides the first fine-grained mapping of the contemporary linguistic ecology of the region, showing how language practices have shifted under the combined influence of demographic change, inter-island migration, and the expanding role of Bislama. The detailed data on the distribution of languages presented here not only clarifies where particular varieties are spoken today but also offers a baseline for tracking future shifts in communities and language use. Such information is of value not only for linguistics but also for community development, administrative planning, and policymaking.

Moreover, this investigation into the Efate-Shepherds area raises questions about the calculation of language density which is not a fixed property, and depends on scale, measurement criteria, and historical as well as contemporary factors and forms of social interaction - highlighting the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches when comparing linguistic density across regions.

By documenting new language locations previously absent from the literature - such as East Efate -, refining speaker numbers with a focus on active home use across the region, and tracing the growing importance of Bislama, the study reinforces Hermann and Walworth's (2020) assertion that Efate and the Shepherd Islands form an "intercultural sphere unique in Oceania"² (my translation), where mobility and cultural mixing reinforce enduring multilingualism. Yet it also reveals the vulnerability of some varieties, where urbanization, intermarriage, and the dominance of Bislama threaten intergenerational transmission. Safeguarding traditional vernacular languages requires both documentation and revitalization. Recording endangered varieties, expanding education in traditional vernacular languages, and supporting community-based initiatives such as *Kastom* schools are essential steps.

Another key finding is the increasing presence of immigrant languages within Efate, not only in urban areas but also in rural communities, occasionally reducing communication between neighbouring groups that once shared close linguistic connections. Understanding these processes requires continued research on present-day sociolinguistic realities, including the integration of immigrant communities, the challenges they face, and their interactions with local cultural practices. Such work will be essential for shaping policies that support coexistence and preserve cultural and linguistic heritage.

² "une sphère interculturelle unique en Océanie" (Hermann & Walworth, 2020, p. 257).

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my informants and, in particular, the Shefa Province Area administrators and Area secretaries, as well as Lionel Emile, George Kalsilik and Leisara Kalotiti. I am especially grateful to Antoine Doncieux for generous assistance with the maps. This article has also benefited greatly from the support and contributions of Cindy Schneider, Charlotte Gooskens, Tihomir Rangelov, Ross Clark, Sandrine Bessis, Anja Schüppert, and Mary Walworth; the audience of my talk at the Friends of the Museum in VKS, Port Vila; and two anonymous reviewers. Finally, I extend my thanks to the editorial team of this special edition for their support and for their efforts in bringing this edition together.

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Appendix A: Note on Orthography of Place Names and Language Names

The spelling of place names and language names in Efate and the Shepherd Islands varies considerably across the literature, maps, and local usage. Table A1 lists the orthographic form adopted for place names in this article, along with alternative forms found in other sources (including Figure 1 reproduced in this article). The names provided by Shefa Province (i.e., those appearing in official government documents) were used in most cases.

Table A1. Orthography of place names

Orthography adopted in this article	Other orthographies
Efate	Vate
Ekiye	Ekip
Emae	Mae
Emao	Emau, Emaw, Mau
Emua	Emwa
Epao	Eṗao, Epau, Pwau, Epwau, Pao
Epule	Ebule, Ebuli
Erakor	Erakoro
Eratap	Eratapu
Finongi	Finonge
Ifira	Fila
Lelepa	Leleppa
Makira	Makura
Marae	Mangita
Mele	Mwele
Mele Waisisi	Mele Waesisi
Moso	Mosso
Pango	Ṗango
Paonangisu	Ṗaonangisu, Paunangisu
Pele	Ṗele, Pwele
Sangava	Sagava
Sesake	Sasake

As for language names, Lynch & Crowley (2001, p. 13) observe, the matter is “an extremely complex one” in Vanuatu. Languages may be referred to by several names, sometimes reflecting different languages, orthographies, or external designations introduced by missionaries, administrators, or researchers. Table A2 provides the form of language names used in the main text of this article, together with alternative names found in the literature (for further details see Rangelov & Ridge 2025).

Table A2. Language names

Name adopted in this article	Abbreviation adopted in this article	Glottocode	ISO_code	Other names
Eton		eton1255	etn	Fesan, Eastern Efate
Fakamae	MAE	emae1237	mmw	Emae, Makatea, Fakamakata, Emai, Emwae, Mae, Mai, Mwae, Amuna o Mae
Lelepa	LLP	lele1267	lpa	Leleppa
Mele-Ifira	MF	mele1250	mx	Ifira-Mele, Fila-Mele, Mele-Fila, Atara Imere
Nafsan	SEF	sout2856	erk	South Efate, Navsan, Fate
Nakanamanga	NKM	nort2836	llp	North Efate
Namakura	NMK	nama1268	nmk	Namakir, Namakuran
North Tanna		nort2847	tnn	Not Tana, Naka, Nən-naka
Vatlongos		sout2859	tvk	South East Ambrym, Taveak
Whitesands		whit1269	tnp	Nirak, Narak, Waesisi, Weasisi, Napuanmen, Nirak, Nagahatien raha

Finally, by ‘traditional vernacular language’, I mean the language historically associated with a community or village.

Appendix B: Population and Distribution of Languages by Location

GPS Coordinates	Location	Population	Bislama-Mix	Mix-Bislama	SEF Pango	SEF Erakor	SEF Eratap
17°46'34.1"S 168°17'23.3"E	Pango	3493		59%	41%		
17°46'30.8"S 168°19'01.0"E	Erakor vilij	3168	25%			75%	
17°45'10.4"S 168°20'15.5"E	Erakor haf rod	6121		75%		25%	
17°45'06.5"S 168°20'59.0"E	Club Hippique	1407		100%			
17°44'08.6"S 168°20'37.0"E	La Colline	874		100%			
17°43'41.6"S 168°20'11.0"E	Bellevue	482		100%			
17°43'36.2"S 168°19'36.3"E	Beverly Hills	1807	100%				
17°44'40.7"S 168°21'27.5"E	Nambatu lagun	300		100%			
17°45'07.2"S 168°22'20.6"E	Stella Mare stage 1 and 2	400		100%			
17°44'52.0"S 168°22'56.5"E	Etas	3000		100%			
17°45'22.8"S 168°22'18.6"E	Stella Mare stage 3 and 4	100		100%			
17°46'31.0"S 168°22'03.5"E	Eratap smol vilij	4000		60%			40%
17°47'07.9"S 168°21'51.6"E	Eratap	2000		20%			80%
17°46'06.3"S 168°23'27.7"E	Teouma Valley	1100		100%			

GPS Coordinates	Location	Population	Bislama-Mix	Mix-Bislama	Eton	NMK Tongoa
17°46'21.4"S 168°23'57.3"E	Teouma Ville	750		100%		
17°43'11.1"S 168°24'53.5"E	Erapo	400		100%		
17°44'55.7"S 168°24'16.0"E	Teouma Avoka	950		100%		
17°46'07.0"S 168°25'00.3"E	Teouma Dak bus	700		100%		
17°47'18.9"S 168°22'43.9"E	Shark Bay	80		100%		
17°48'21.2"S 168°22'56.1"E	Narpow	500		100%		
17°47'18.5"S 168°26'59.6"E	Rentapao	1000		100%		
17°48'50.8"S 168°26'03.4"E	Vanuatu Teacher's Union subdivision	700		100%		
17°44'16.6"S 168°30'54.4"E	Eton farms	156		100%		
17°47'59.0"S 168°31'53.5"E	Banana Bay	101		100%		
17°44'52.3"S 168°33'45.8"E	Eton	895	60%		40%	
17°42'36.7"S 168°33'59.7"E	La Cressonnière	95	50%			50%
17°41'21.8"S 168°33'45.6"E	Karngo	169	100%			
17°41'19.6"S 168°32'59.0"E	Forari	66	100%			

GPS Coordinates	Location	Population	Bislama-Mix	Mix-Bislama	Eton	Epao	NMK Tongariki	NMK Tongoa	Emao	NKM Paonangisu
17°41'23.8"S 168°32'08.2"E	Malaira	142	33%					33%	33%	
17°40'58.6"S 168°32'28.8"E	La Bay	105		100%						
17°40'38.1"S 168°32'05.2"E	Pang Pang	275	80%		20%					
17°39'00.3"S 168°31'16.0"E	La mine 1	127	30%			70%				
17°38'49.5"S 168°31'13.1"E	La mine 2	71	20%				80%			
17°37'07.5"S 168°30'03.7"E	Epao	630	20%		8%	60%			12%	
17°36'05.7"S 168°29'48.7"E	Nangus	50	15%			40%	10%		30%	5%
17°35'23.0"S 168°29'09.1"E	Ekipe	641	10%				90%			
17°35'00.9"S 168°28'51.7"E	Matarisu	195	30%					70%		
17°34'58.9"S 168°28'43.7"E	Takarariki	52	30%					70%		
17°34'10.5"S 168°27'28.3"E	Epule	580	10%					90%		
17°33'42.0"S 168°27'46.8"E	Sara	20							100%	
17°33'11.9"S 168°27'27.7"E	Onesua	School	100%							
17°32'25.3"S 168°27'12.4"E	Takara	368	20%						80%	

GPS Coordinates	Location	Population	Bislama-Mix	Mix-Bislama	Emao	NKM Siviri	NKM Paonangisu	NKM Moso	NKM Tongoa	NKM Nguna	NKM Pele
17°32'14.9"S 168°26'52.7"E	Natakoma	297	40%		60%						
17°29'04.5"S 168°29'14.9"E	Emao Island	893	20%		80%						
17°31'52.1"S 168°24'09.9"E	Paonangisu	1095	20%				80%				
17°32'19.1"S 168°22'58.9"E	Emua	665	20%				80%				
17°28'20.4"S 168°22'03.3"E	Nguna Island	1955	20%							80%	
17°29'54.3"S 168°24'23.6"E	Pele Island	625	20%								80%
17°32'33.5"S 168°21'56.0"E	Saama	243	100%								
17°31'48.3"S 168°19'40.1"E	Siviri	407	20%			80%					
17°31'55.7"S 168°16'26.6"E	Moso Island	760	10%					90%			
17°32'57.1"S 168°17'14.9"E	Moso landing	40	10%					90%			
17°34'25.9"S 168°17'43.4"E	Malafau	137	20%			80%					
17°34'06.6"S 168°15'60.0"E	Ulei	School	100%								
17°34'11.1"S 168°15'36.9"E	Tanoliu	600	33%					33%	33%		

GPS Coordinates	Location	Population	Bislama-Mix	Mix-Bislama	Lelepa	Mele	Whitesands (Tanna)	Vatlongos
17°34'39.2"S 168°14'49.4"E	Port Havannah subdivision	100		100%				
From 17°35'50.3"S 168°14'45.7"E to 17°38'21.6"S 168°12'53.6"E	150	60%		40%				
17°36'45.4"S 168°13'14.9"E	Lelepa Island	500	60%		40%			
17°38'17.3"S 168°12'11.6"E	Mangaliliu	558	60%		40%			
17°39'00.4"S 168°13'56.9"E	Snake hill	120		100%				
17°39'21.8"S 168°15'02.5"E	Lama mountain	133		100%				
17°39'57.5"S 168°15'00.1"E	La cascade Subdivision	222	100%					
17°40'01.4"S 168°15'24.9"E	Tamate	234		100%				
17°40'40.7"S 168°15'43.2"E	Mele Maat	912	40%					60%
17°41'12.5"S 168°16'18.3"E	Mele	4202		35%		65%		
17°42'08.4"S 168°13'41.2"E	Bukura	504		100%				
17°41'37.2"S 168°17'06.4"E	Mele Waisisi	116	10%				90%	
17°41'22.3"S 168°17'57.1"E	Abattoir	148	100%					
17°41'42.6"S 168°17'33.0"E	Prima	1909		100%				

GPS Coordinates	Location	Population	Bislama-Mix	Mix-Bislama	NMK Tongoa	Ifira	North Tanna	Whitesands (Tanna)
17°42'03.4"S 168°17'45.4"E	Salili	490		100%				
17°42'38.6"S 168°17'52.4"E	Black sand	5000		100%				
17°43'22.6"S 168°18'17.6"E	Malapoa Whitewood	1550		80%		20%		
17°43'34.3"S 168°17'48.9"E	Malapoa Kawariki	495		90%		10%		
17°43'06.3"S 168°18'08.0"E	Britano	615		88%		12%		
17°43'01.7"S 168°18'27.6"E	Tamalas and Chickao tamalas	1280		80%		20%		
17°42'48.1"S 168°18'31.8"E	Federation	200		20%		80%		
17°42'35.0"S 168°18'28.3"E	Smet Grin Hill	380		20%	40%	40%		
17°42'28.1"S 168°18'21.4"E	Wan Smolbag and Sulfur Bay	904		35%				65%
17°42'00.7"S 168°18'37.6"E	Bladinière Estate	3565	94%					6%
17°45'33.2"S 168°17'53.1"E	Maltauriki	82	10%			90%		
17°44'48.2"S 168°17'45.9"E	Ifira	1303	10%			90%		
17°45'14.4"S 168°17'39.4"E	Worouloa	156		70%		30%		
17°41'48.0"S 168°20'23.3"E	Erangorango	1075		65%			35%	

GPS Coordinates	Location	Population	Bislama- Mix	Mix- Bislama	NMK Tongariki	NMK Tonga	NMK Buninga	NMK Mataso	NKM Tonga	Fakamae
17°42'53.0"S 168°18'26.3"E	Manples Sarapa	1050		100%						
17°42'59.2"S 168°18'20.1"E	Manples Kokoriko and Kawariki	1795	35%						65%	
17°42'29.9"S 168°18'25.7"E	Tagabe bridge	656		20%					80%	
17°42'21.4"S 168°18'07.6"E	Sorovango	210		20%					80%	
17°15'14.9"S 168°25'33.8"E	Mataso	129	35%				65%			
17°08'07.5"S 168°26'21.0"E	Makira	173	35%					65%		
Emae island	Sesake and Marae	248	35%						65%	
Emae island	From Siwo to Finongi	479	35%		65%					
Emae island	Tongamea and Makatea	191	35%							65%
17°01'23.2"S 168°35'18.1"E	Buninga	118	10%			90%				
17°00'09.1"S 168°37'26.0"E	Tongariki	917	10%	90%						
Tonga island	From Bongabonga to Matangi	1026	20%		80%					
Tonga island	From Panita to Kurumambe and Burao	1529	20%		80%				80%	