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The Language Situation in Vanuatu

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One of the smallest nations, Vanuatu is also linguistically the most diverse. In addition to its English-lexifier pidgin national language, English and French are official languages. While local languages are valued symbols of identity, little attempt has been made to promote functional literacy in local languages, while English and French have been promoted by education. Although Bislama is the national spoken language, little attention has been paid to developing its written form. It has been difficult to speak of ‘language planning’ regarding local languages, the approach having been one of maximum non-involvement, though some changes are now envisaged.

Introduction

Vanuatu is a politically independent republic located in the south-western Pacific between Fiji, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia, about 1700 km north-east of Brisbane in Australia (Figure 1). Formerly known as the New Hebrides, Vanuatu gained its independence from joint Anglo-French colonial control in 1980. This political ‘condominium’ was not established until 1906, which possibly makes Vanuatu the last part of the pre-colonial world to have ever been colonised by a European power.

Ni-Vanuatu (as the people of Vanuatu are known) and people from the neighbouring island groups of Fiji, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Irian Jaya (in the eastern part of Indonesia) and Torres Strait (between the Queensland mainland and Papua New Guinea) are normally described as Melanesians. This name derives from the physical appearance of the people who are darker in complexion than their Polynesian, Micronesian and South-east Asian neighbours.

The population of Vanuatu is currently estimated to be about 195,000, which is fewer than what in many countries would be regarded as a regional city of very moderate size. This population is spread throughout a large number of islands of varying size in a Y-shaped archipelago that spreads over a north-south distance of approximately 850 km (Figure 2). Inter-island travel is often difficult, dependent on irregular (and often uncomfortable) shipping, or relatively expensive plane flights which only service a restricted range of locations.

While travel between islands can be difficult, travel within islands can sometimes also be awkward. Only the largest and most populated islands of Espiritu Santo, Malakula, Efate and Tanna have road networks of any extent. These roads are for the most part fairly rough, and they are easily damaged (or even made impassible) by bad weather. Only on Efate is there a road that links all populated centres on the island, though it too can be impassible in bad weather. On all other islands, roads typically extend only to those places where construction is least
disfavoured by topography or rainfall, and people on some islands frequently have to walk some distance to reach the nearest road.

Telecommunications have improved considerably since independence (though it is only possible to say that because telecommunications were particularly basic before 1980). There is now a direct-dial telephone network (powered by solar cells in the outer islands where there is often no electricity supply) linking all islands (as well as linking Vanuatu to the outside world). However, telephone calls are quite expensive given most local people's incomes, and it is not uncommon for community telephones to have to be disconnected due to non-payment of bills in the outer islands where people are limited in their income-generating capacities.

While in some rural areas there is a fairly dense coverage of private telephone connections, many villages have no telephones at all. People in some villages are able to make do with the less satisfactory teleradio alternative, which can be patched into the telephone network. The sound quality with this system is much
Figure 2 Islands of Vanuatu
worse and there is no privacy, so anybody who is listening on the network can eavesdrop on a conversation. Of course, many villages have neither a telephone nor a teleradio, which means that long distance communication depends on a willingness – or ability – to travel (often on foot) to a village where there is some means of telecommunication. Under such circumstances, something as simple as making a phone call can sometimes take people two or three days of their time.

There are only two urban centres of any size in Vanuatu, the capital Port Vila on the central island of Efate (with a population of approximately 35,000) and Luganville on the northern island of Espiritu Santo (with an approximate population of 10,000). The Melanesian population lives overwhelmingly in small rural villages following largely subsistence lifestyles, with only about 15% of Ni-Vanuatu living in either of the towns. The gross domestic product per capita is approximately $US1000 (Siegel, 1996a: 98), which reflects the relative lack of exploitable resources in the country, so there is a high dependence on external aid. The major export commodities produced in Vanuatu are copra, cocoa, beef, coffee and kava, while tourism (mostly from Australia and New Zealand) and a tax-exempt finance centre provide additional employment for educated local people, as well as opportunities for investment.

The Language Profile of Vanuatu

National/official languages

Vanuatu is linguistically the world’s most diverse nation in terms of the number of actively spoken indigenous languages per head of population, with at least 80 local languages spoken by an average of only about 2500 speakers each. This extreme linguistic – and accompanying cultural – diversity is acknowledged in the preamble to the constitution of Vanuatu, which states:

We the people of Vanuatu
Proud of our struggle for freedom
Determined to safeguard the achievement of this struggle
Cherishing our ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity
Hereby proclaim the establishment of the united and free Republic of Vanuatu.

The constitution declares that Bislama is the ‘national language’, while Bislama, English and French are all declared to be ‘official languages’. In addition, the ‘principal languages of education’ are declared to be English and French:

The national language of the Republic is Bislama. The official languages are Bislama, English and French. The principal languages of education are English and French. (The Constitution of Vanuatu, Article 3:1.)

In addition to the high status accorded to these three lingua francas, there is also a paragraph which protects the indigenous vernaculars, and which even provides for the possible elevation of any one of these languages to the status of ‘national language’ at some time in the future if the circumstances warrant.

There is actually a slight difference in the wording of the English and French versions of the constitution with regard to the status of these languages. Article 3:1 in the French version reads as follows:
La langue véhiculaire nationale de la République est le bichelamar. Les langues officielles sont l’anglais, le bichelamar, le français. Les langues principales de l’éducation sont l’anglais et le français.

*Langue véhiculaire nationale* translates as ‘national lingua franca’, not as ‘national language’ as it appears in the English version of the constitution. On the basis of the French wording, it is arguable, therefore, that the original framers of the constitution had in mind the idea that Bislama would effectively function as the official spoken language at the national level, while English and French would function as the official written languages.

Charpentier (1999) comments that he was one of those originally involved in the framing of this aspect of the constitution, claiming that it was decided at the time that in the case of any dispute between the English and French versions of the constitution, the French version would prevail. However, this provision was not written into the constitution itself and no minute noting such a provision can now be located, so this argument presumably no longer has any legal standing. The practice since independence has certainly been to base constitutional arguments on the basis of the English document, since the vast majority of trained lawyers in the country are English-educated. In fact, the ombudsman’s report to parliament on the observance of multilingualism in 1996 even makes the specific recommendation that ‘the Attorney-General undertake to have the French version of the Constitution revised so that it faithfully reflects the English version’ (Office of the Ombudsman, 1996), which implies that the English version is now seen as prevailing over the French version.

The constitution also includes certain safeguards to ensure the preservation of multilingualism in the country by clearly stating that citizens have a right to obtain the services of the government in whichever of these three languages they use (Article 62:1). Citizens are guaranteed by Article 62:2 that any complaints about breaches of the preceding article can be heard by the ombudsman. The ombudsman, furthermore, is required to submit an annual report to parliament concerning the observance of multilingualism in the country, and any steps needed to ensure its continuance (Article 62:3).

Although the constitution provides strong safeguards for the status of Bislama, English and French, there is some provision for change in this area. I have already referred to the possibility that one of the local languages could be promoted as a (presumably co-equal) national language alongside Bislama under Article 3:2. Since independence there have been no suggestions at all that any of the local languages should be considered as a national language, a fact which is hardly surprising given that the largest local language in the country reaches less than 6% of the total population. There was some brief debate in the immediate run-up to independence concerning the possibility of adopting Nakanamanga (of northern Efate and parts of the Shepherd Islands) as a national language, though the limited geographical spread of this language ensured that such a suggestion could not be too seriously considered.

There is yet another article in the constitution which allows for the status of any one (or two, or all three) of these three official languages to be altered:

A bill for an amendment of a provision of the Constitution regarding the status of Bislama, English and French . . . passed by Parliament under Arti-
To date there has not been any serious proposal made by Ni-Vanuatu for any such changes to be considered, though one occasionally hears casual suggestions that maintaining French alongside English as an official language is wasteful for such a small country, and that the country would be better off with just English as a single metropolitan language. Equally, however, one hears words of support for the maintenance of French as an official language alongside English because of the unique perspective in the Pacific that this gives Vanuatu, linking it more closely to developments in francophone polities such as neighbouring New Caledonia, as well as to more distant Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia.

By this set of constitutional provisions, Vanuatu has established itself as a nation that is unique in the Pacific in a number of significant respects. It is firstly the only country in the region that gives both English and French equal constitutional status. In all other newly independent or self-governing polities in the Pacific, only one of these two languages is given such recognition. Vanuatu, therefore, represents the only point at which the anglophone and francophone worlds intersect in the Pacific.

Secondly, if we assume that a ‘national’ language is higher in standing than an ‘official’ language, then Vanuatu is the only Pacific Island nation where a non-metropolitan language (in this case, Bislama) is given higher constitutional status than a former colonial language. While in some polities there are constitutional guarantees for the equal status of a local language with the former colonial language, there is usually some additional constitutional rider which states – as in the case of the Kiribati constitution – that ‘in the event of any inconsistency between the two texts [of the constitution], this English text shall prevail’. The intention that is implicit in such provisions is presumably that English ultimately should be viewed as having higher constitutional status than the local language.

Finally, Vanuatu is the only country in the Pacific – indeed in the world – in which a European-lexifier pidgin language has been declared to be a national language. Bislama, along with Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea and Pijin in Solomon Islands, constitute mutually intelligible varieties of a single language which we can refer to generically as Melanesian Pidgin. However, in these two other countries there is no constitutional statement about what is the national language. The fact that both constitutions were promulgated at independence exclusively in English can be taken as implying that this was to be regarded as the de facto national language in the two cases.

As the national language, Bislama functions as more than just the major lingua franca within Vanuatu, as it also carries some of the emblematic functions that we typically associate with a national language. Vanuatu’s coinage is inscribed in Bislama only (Ripablik blong Vanuatu ‘Republic of Vanuatu’), while the motto on the national coat of arms is given in Bislama (Long God yumi stanap ‘In God we stand’). Finally, the words of the national anthem are sung exclusively in Bislama:

Yumi, yumi, yumi i glad blong talem se
Yumi, yumi, yumi i man blong Vanuatu.6
By way of contrast, the coinage in both Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands is inscribed only in English, and the national anthems of both countries are also sung only in English.

Bislama is a relatively new language, having evolved initially as a result of multilingual contact in camps of recruited labourers in the islands of southern Vanuatu around the mid-1800s when sea slugs and sandalwood were processed for sale to China by a work force recruited from a variety of different speech communities (Crowley, 1990a: 71–100). In this situation where Ni-Vanuatu labourers had limited access to the English of their European overseers, an English-lexifier pidgin rapidly emerged and became the lingua franca of these labour camps. The sea slugs were often called by their French name biche de mer, and the pidgin that grew up in the context of the trade in this commodity came to be referred to as biche de mer English. This was rapidly abbreviated to simply bichelamar as a language name (which became Beach-la-Mar to English-speakers), eventually yielding modern Bislama.

In the second half of the 19th century, tens of thousands of Ni-Vanuatu were recruited – and some were forced – to work on plantations further afield, mostly in Queensland, with some also going to Fiji. The 19th-century antecedent of modern Bislama rapidly became the lingua franca of these overseas plantations. Many people signed up for contracts of three years’ duration and then returned home having acquired a knowledge of this language. Many of those who stayed for more than the minimum three years were repatriated with the end of the practice of recruiting Melanesians as plantation labourers just after Australia’s federation in 1901, which was just before the establishment of the Anglo-French condominium in Vanuatu in 1906.

After this time, people began for the first time to move in significant numbers to a variety of locations as plantation labourers within Vanuatu. People from the Banks Islands were recruited to work on plantations in the areas of southeastern Espiritu Santo, Aore and Malo, while people from Espiritu Santo, Ambae, Maewo, Pentecost, Malakula, Ambrym, Paama and the Shepherd Islands were recruited to work on the plantations of northern Efate (Crowley, 1990a: 100–107). This large-scale recruitment of labour resulted in the continuation of the spread of Bislama as a plantation lingua franca to many parts of the country where it had previously been unknown or little known.

During the early 1940s, in parts of Vanuatu – particularly the island of Efate and the south-eastern part of Espiritu Santo – huge American military bases were established from which Japanese positions in the Solomon Islands were attacked. There was never any Japanese occupation of any islands in Vanuatu, nor was there any significant bombing in rural areas, though the American military occupation did have the effect of further spreading Bislama as a lingua franca, as large numbers of young men were recruited from many different parts of Vanuatu to work as manual labourers in the construction of roads and airfields (Lindstrom and Gwero, 1998).²

Bislama is now used practically throughout the country as a lingua franca. There are parts of Vanuatu where young children do not speak the language, notably on islands such as Erromango or Aneityum where just a single vernacular is spoken and there are few outsiders, and where relatively few children have the opportunity to travel to town. Even on such islands, however, children inevi-
tably learn Bislama as they get older, with few people over the age of ten being unable to speak it. It is not uncommon for older (and even middle-aged) women in rural areas to have a somewhat restricted active command of the language, though they usually have at least a reasonable passive command. At the present, the only parts of the country where there are significant numbers of adults with little (or no) familiarity with Bislama are parts of the interior of Espiritu Santo and Malakula, but even in such isolated communities it is almost certain that some individuals will have a reasonable proficiency in the language.

**Minority languages**

In the Vanuatu context, it makes little sense to make any distinction between ‘major’ and ‘lesser’ minority languages, as is often made in countries such as the Philippines (Gonzalez, 1998: 487) or Mozambique (Lopes, 1998: 441–9). There is a very real sense in which all of the 80 actively spoken indigenous languages should be regarded as a ‘minority’ language in that no single language is spoken by more than 6% of the total population of the country. The average-sized language accounts for no more than 1.25% of the total population. Of course, some languages have more speakers than others, though only three languages have more than 9000 speakers. As many as 37 of these languages have fewer than 1000 speakers each, so clearly the largest number of languages fall into this category of very small language communities. A breakdown of the number of languages for each population range is set out in Table 1. Figure 3 shows the location of those languages that have over 5000 speakers.

All of these indigenous languages of Vanuatu are ultimately related to each other as members of the approximately 500-strong Oceanic subgroup of languages, which extends from Easter Island in the east, New Zealand in the south, Hawaii in the north, and parts of Irian Jaya in the west. These languages in turn belong to the considerably larger Austronesian language family, which extends further westwards into Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. This language family also includes the indigenous languages of Taiwan as well as the Malagasy language of Madagascar.

Within Vanuatu, the languages of the islands of Aneityum, Tanna and

**Table 1 Vernaculars according to population size**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Size</th>
<th>Language Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–999</td>
<td>37 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000–1,999</td>
<td>16 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,000–2,999</td>
<td>6 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,000–3,999</td>
<td>5 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,000–4,999</td>
<td>4 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000–5,999</td>
<td>3 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,000–6,999</td>
<td>3 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7,000–7,999</td>
<td>2 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8,000–8,999</td>
<td>1 language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9,000–10,000</td>
<td>2 languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000+</td>
<td>1 language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3 Largest vernaculars of Vanuatu
Erromango in the southern province of Tafea are rather distinct from the languages of the rest of the country, and specialists have suggested that these southern languages are likely to be more closely related linguistically to those of neighbouring New Caledonia (Lynch, 1998: 48). There are also three languages in Vanuatu that are of Polynesian origin, namely those of Ifira and Mele on, or immediately offshore from, the island of Efate, Emae in the Shepherd Islands, and Aniwa and Futuna in the south. These languages reflect relatively recent ‘back migrations’ from Polynesia in the east. The remainder of the languages of Vanuatu are also recognisably interrelated within a single linguistic subgroup, though they are nevertheless quite distinct languages in the sense that they are all mutually unintelligible.

It should be pointed out that the number of 80 languages cited above should at this stage be regarded as tentative only. Other figures have been quoted in published sources, with perhaps the most widely quoted figure being 105 languages (Tryon, 1976, 1979, 1981). However, numbers have ranged between 52 in Capell (1954: 95–110) to 109 in Grimes (1996: 918–28), 110 in Tryon (1972: 45), and 113 in Tryon (1996a: 171). While such discrepancies may be puzzling to non-specialists, several explanations can be offered for this. Some of the higher numbers include moribund languages with just a handful of speakers, whereas the figure that I have cited excludes those languages that are no longer actively spoken, even though there may be a handful of elderly people who still maintain an ability to speak such dying languages if they are called upon. We could therefore add to the total of 80 at least an additional dozen or so languages that are almost extinct, as they can each still claim a small number of residual speakers (and this number may turn out to be higher as additional information comes to hand).

However, there are other explanations as well for these discrepancies. The lower earlier figure cited by Capell was based on incomplete linguistic information, which was all that was available at the time. Capell’s (1954: 102) reference to a single language on Ambrym, for example, must now be increased on the basis of current evidence to at least five distinct languages. Charpentier’s (1982) documentation of southern Malakula is far more detailed than that of Tryon (1976), and for the same area Charpentier recorded six languages not noted at all by Tryon. However, there are still parts of Vanuatu where the precise linguistic situation has not yet been fully documented, so this figure of 80 should be reconsidered when more detailed information comes to hand. In particular, the linguistic situation in many parts Espiritu Santo has been only scantily documented, and further surprises may await us there as more research is carried out, with possibly more languages needing to be recognised.

Of course, we also face the inevitable problem of what constitutes the difference between ‘dialects’ of a single language and separate ‘languages’. Since people from the villages of northern Efate and southern Efate cannot understand each other, we would be justified in recognising two distinct languages here. However, people from villages on the eastern coast of the island between these two areas appear to be understood by people both in the southern and northern parts of the island. This eastern area could therefore equally be taken to represent an extension either of the northern language or of the southern language. Alter-
natively, perhaps, it could be called a separate language in its own right (Clark, 1985).

Such situations are referred to by linguists as ‘dialectic chains’, and they result in sometimes arbitrary decisions being made as to how many languages are involved. The situation on Tanna today is of the same nature (Lynch, 1978: 719–20) and the scanty evidence that we have from some parts of Espiritu Santo suggests that such phenomena may well be widespread there as well. Early (1994: 31–2) indicates that there is a similar situation on parts of Epi, and it is possible that this kind of phenomenon was more widespread there before massive depopulation and demographic realignment affected the distribution of languages on the island in the 19th century, resulting in the extinction of some intermediate varieties.

While I have indicated that there are at least 80 actively spoken vernacular languages in Vanuatu, just about all of these languages exhibit some degree of dialect diversity. Some languages are in fact extremely diverse, and even small geographical distances can involve some significant degree of linguistic divergence. The island of Paama, for example, is less than 10 km from north to south, yet there is an immediately recognisable north-south divide between dialects, and more detailed study shows that there are even regional differences within these two areas. We have nowhere near enough information even to guess how many recognisably distinct dialects of all of these 80 languages there might be, but the number would certainly run into the hundreds in total.

Of all of the published censuses to date, only in the census of 1989 has there been a question relating to proficiency in local languages. The question was worded in such a way as to elicit information only about how many people spoke ‘a local language’, without attempting to seek to record which local languages were spoken by people in which locations (Crowley, 1994). The population figures for each language that are presented in this monograph have been derived instead by estimating where language boundaries are thought to lie and then totalling the published populations of villages within these areas (and then extrapolating to the present on the basis of the average annual population increase among Ni-Vanuatu). It should be recognised, however, that there are several potential problems with these figures:

1. It is usually almost impossible from the published census results to establish the number of people resident in an area who come from other language groups. The numbers of such people are usually small, but there are some rural areas where it is known that there are significant numbers of plantation labourers who often come from other islands, e.g. rural Efate, parts of coastal Malakula, and south-eastern Espiritu Santo, including Aore and Malo.

2. It is also usually almost impossible to establish how many speakers of a particular language are resident either in one of the two towns, or in some other language area as short-term visitors, or as temporary, or even permanent residents. There are probably no language communities in the entire country where all speakers live within their traditional home territories. However, some communities have larger proportions of their populations resident away from ‘home’ than others. People from overpopulated small
islands such as Paama and Tongoa, for example, are encountered in relatively large numbers in town and on rural plantations throughout the country.

(3) We very often do not know for sure which villages lie within which particular language area, especially in border areas.

(4) As with any census, not all population centres were covered equally well. People from some areas – typically those from fairly conservative isolated rural locations – have traditionally been opposed to being included in the census, as they are suspicious of the intentions of the national government in recording the kinds of information that are sought. The number of speakers of languages spoken in such rural areas may therefore be underestimated.

Another census was conducted in 1999, though it will be some time before the results are analysed and published. Language questions were dealt with slightly differently in this later census, with heads of households being asked what was the predominant language used within the household. Individuals within each household were then asked separately whether they could speak ‘a local language’, Bislama, English, French, or ‘any other language’, and there was a separate question asking if people could read and write in ‘a local language’, Bislama, English, French, or ‘any other language’.

Census enumerators in both the 1989 and 1999 censuses were not asked to record local language names, merely to tick ‘a local language’ as a generic category. There are actually several very good reasons why they should not have attempted to record more detailed information without at least some special training in the elicitation of such information. While it may seem obvious that all that is needed is for the census to include a question which asks each person in the country for the straightforward information ‘What is your language?’ and ‘What local languages can you read and write?’, it is not difficult to envisage all sorts of problems with the answers that such questions would produce.

To begin with, many languages in Vanuatu simply do not have names. There is only a single language spoken on Paama, and the language has no name in the local language. When speaking their language, the people of Paama will generally refer to it as *selusien tenout Voum* ‘the language of Paama’, or simply by the word *lanus* ‘vernacular’ (ultimately from English *language*). Any response to a question asking what language is spoken by somebody from Paama will necessarily represent an ad hoc solution, and most people would end up saying something like ‘I speak the vernacular’.

A census enumerator on nearby Southeast Ambrym would face exactly the same problem, as there is no separate language name there either. In linguistic terms, people from Paama and Southeast Ambrym speak quite distinct languages, as people who have not learned each other’s languages cannot understand each other. However, a linguistically naive census enumerator would have no way of knowing whether the separate responses ‘I speak language’ from Paama and Southeast Ambrym mean that people speak the same ‘language’ or different ‘languages’.

On a multilingual island such as Malakula, a linguistically naive census enumerator asking people from the north-eastern part of Malakula, including the islands of Atchin, Wala, Rano and Uripiv, might receive a variety of answers
at differing levels of specificity or generality. Some people might answer that they speak the ‘language of Atchin’ or the ‘language of Wala’, while others might say that they speak the ‘language of north-east Malakula’. Finally, if the enumerator happens to be recognised as a non-Malakulan, the respondent might answer simply that he or she speaks a, or the, ‘language of Malakula’. All of these answers would be quite correct, though entering numbers of speakers on a census return form for ‘Atchin’, ‘Wala’, ‘Rano’, ‘Uripiv’, ‘Northeast Malakula’ and ‘Malakula’ as separate ‘languages’ would suggest that there are six distinct languages here. However, there is in fact just a single language involved, and all of these different answers simply refer to locations where that language is spoken at different levels of generality.

Another problem relates back to the issue of the boundary between language and dialect. While the distinction can be difficult enough in purely linguistic terms, folk perceptions on this question can vary quite considerably in Vanuatu. There is a widespread tendency in Melanesia for people to exaggerate minor differences in speech in such small-scale communities. In linguistically highly fractured southern Malakula, for instance, the separately named varieties of Ayauleian, Mbotok, Natanggan and Nioleien are, to a linguist, mutually intelligible dialects of a single language (Charpentier, 1982: 44), though there is no local name for the language as a whole. It is likely, therefore, that a linguistically naive census enumerator would end up counting many more languages than a linguist would recognise in the same area.

At the same time, other individuals may underestimate linguistic differences. While most people from Paama and Southeast Ambrym would immediately recognise that there are two quite distinct languages involved, I have sometimes heard people say that the two languages are ‘the same’. Such a claim can only be interpreted as implicitly comparing the language of Southeast Ambrym with both Paamese and the other languages of Ambrym that people may be familiar with to some extent. It does not take even a linguistically fairly naive person very long to realise that although Paamese and Southeast Ambrym are different languages, there are many more similarities between Paamese and Southeast Ambrym than there are between Southeast Ambrym and the languages spoken on other parts of Ambrym. A speaker of Paamese hearing Southeast Ambrymese when it is spoken can frequently recognise words, and occasionally even complete phrases, even if the overall meaning is obscure. However, a speaker of Paamese hearing normal speech from any other part of Ambrym is almost guaranteed to recognise nothing. The expressed opinion that Paamese and Southeast Ambrymese are ‘the same’ should therefore be interpreted in linguistic terms as meaning that ‘as two separate languages go, Paamese and Southeast Ambrym are not as different from each other as some other languages are’. Again, however, a linguistically naive census enumerator should not be expected to be able to read such subtleties in this kind of answer.

For some parts of Vanuatu, the only sources of linguistic information that we have about the distribution of local languages are very short wordlists, gathered in most cases by people who had little (or no) special familiarity with the languages of that area. In such cases, it is perhaps inevitable that forms will be either phonemically over- or underdifferentiated, as well as sometimes being incorrectly transcribed or given an incorrect translation, or even being mixed...
with unrecognised illicit loans either from other local languages, or even from Bislama. Such lists have been taken by Tryon (1976) as the basis for a lexicostatistical comparison in order to arrive at an estimate of the number of languages in an area, with the lexicostatistical figures inevitably being distorted – almost invariably downwards – as a result.

Lexicostatistics is, in any case, nothing but a very crude method of determining the number of languages in a given area. The results of any application of this method should always be regarded at best only as suggestive, to be tested later against more detailed information involving observations on the ground of local language choice along with local statements about mutual intelligibility, as well as information about degrees of structural and phonological divergence between linguistic varieties. For some parts of Vanuatu – most notably parts of the Torres and Banks Islands, Espiritu Santo and Malakula – we are completely reliant on very short wordlists for any conclusions about how many languages may be spoken in those areas.

While Tryon’s (1976) massive lexicostatistical survey of the languages of Vanuatu produced some valuable hypotheses about the numbers of languages in some areas, these have probably sometimes unjustifiably come to be regarded as accepted fact by less well-informed outsiders. Semantic errors – or failure to recognise that different forms in two wordlists represent legitimate variants in both varieties – resulted in published cognate figures that can repeatedly be shown on the basis of more accurate later information to be as much as 20% too low. Such discrepancies have clearly led to errors in the drawing of a number of language boundaries. A reinterpretation of Tryon’s data suggests that he may have recognised mutually intelligible varieties as distinct languages in a significant number of cases, thereby providing an unjustifiably high number of languages in the country. Partly for this reason, then, the widely quoted figure of 105 languages for Vanuatu has been tentatively revised downwards to the figure of 80, which is felt to be more plausible given the nature of the data that we are forced to operate with at the present.

Religious languages

Vanuatu is today an overwhelmingly Christian country, as indicated by the national motto Long God yumi stanap ‘In God we stand’. This situation results from extensive mission activity dating from around the mid-1800s, with the new faith being well established in most parts of the archipelago by the first decades of the 20th century. However, there still remain pockets of animist or ‘cargo cult’ resistance in parts of Tanna, Malakula and Espiritu Santo.

Prior to the widespread acceptance of Christianity, the Melanesian people practised a range of animist beliefs, but their traditional worldview involved the ready acceptance of many outside practices and items of technology. The Christianity that has evolved in Vanuatu involves something of a syncretism between a belief in traditional spirits and the newly introduced Christian faith. While Christian missionaries often attempted to suppress traditional practices, some Christian ceremonies came to be tied in with traditional celebrations, such as that for the harvest of the new season’s yams, which is associated with Easter.

Traditional song-styles in Melanesia, in which essential aspects of the traditional religion are often expressed, were often only partly understandable.
Lindstrom (1990: 121–2) points out that on Tanna, formulaic songs and spells typically include nonsense words, which are often interpreted as being the speech of the ancestors. Such ‘opaque nonsense’, he indicates, allows individuals to be seen as revealing knowledge, while at the same time maintaining its secrecy, and thereby also its value as a commodity. Given that such phenomena are widespread in Melanesia (Lindstrom, 1990: 151), one might suppose that early Christian Ni-Vanuatu would have expected that the variety of their languages that were used for the new religion should be different in significant ways from the ordinary spoken languages. This has led in some cases to an apparent willingness among speakers of Vanuatu languages to accept structurally odd translations into their languages by European missionaries as models to emulate in producing new written religious texts.

Religion, literacy and education for much of Vanuatu’s pre-colonial and colonial history were very closely intertwined. All of the writing systems that are used for most of the local languages in the country have been developed by Christian missionaries of a variety of denominations over the past century and a half, with most orthographies being produced in the 19th and early 20th centuries, based on the Roman alphabet, often with some adaptation involving the use of diacritics. Literacy was originally taught in church-run schools, whose primary purpose for a long time was simply to propagate the Christian message (Lynch, 1979: 9–15). Just over half of the languages of the country have had at least some printed materials produced in them at some stage by church organisations, and some of the major proponents of vernacular literacy in the modern context are also primarily religious organisations, such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Some local languages were adopted for use as religious languages also outside their traditional territories, which gave them added status as religious languages. Those languages that are known to have been adopted in this way as mission lingua francas in Vanuatu include the following:

1. **Aulua**: The Aulua language of Malakula was propagated by the Presbyterian Church in the 19th century as a mission lingua franca among speakers of the Banam Bay, Port Sandwich, Maskelynes, Avok, Nisvai, Nasvang and Axamb languages of the south-eastern part of the island.

2. **West Ambrym**: The language of West Ambrym was apparently also used as a lingua franca among speakers of the South Ambrym and North Ambrym languages (but not, apparently, with speakers of Southeast Ambrym, where there is a possibility that Paamese may have been used in this way to some extent). However, this did not prevent missionaries from also producing small amounts of materials translated specifically for speakers of the languages of South Ambrym, North Ambrym and Southeast Ambrym.

3. **Mota**: The language of the small island of Mota in the Banks Islands has a particularly interesting history as a mission language. Tryon (1996b: 619–20) reports that Bishop Patteson was responsible for the use of Mota for teaching purposes for over half a century between the 1860s and 1931 at the training school for the Anglican Mission that was established on Norfolk Island. It was eventually decided that training should be conducted in English, but during the period that Mota held sway, a regular newspaper
entitled *O Sala Ususur* ‘The way of the story’ was produced in the language. Graduates of this institution were posted to a number of islands throughout the Torres and Banks islands of northern Vanuatu, as well as Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost where the Anglican Church was (and still is) influential. Since Mota was abandoned as a language of instruction at the mission training school in 1931 in favour of English, the use of Mota outside its home island has declined considerably in the intervening years, though the Mota word *mama* ‘father’ is still widely used in the areas where Mota was formerly used as a church language as a term of address for an Anglican priest.

(4) *Efate-Shepherds*: The only other area of Vanuatu where a mission language was used outside its traditional area is in the central islands of Efate and the Shepherd group. The situation that developed there was unique, and is particularly worthy of mention. Clark (1985: 4) refers to three separate attempts to create a written standard uniting the separate languages of the area, each of which exhibits a certain amount of dialect variation:

(a) In 1889, a translation of the New Testament was produced in what was intended to represent an artificially created compromise between the quite distinct South Efate and Nakanamanga languages.

(b) A second attempt in 1908 involved a translation of the Old Testament that was produced with some books written in the local variety spoken in Havannah Harbour, some in the variety spoken on Nguna, and some in the speech of Erakor on the southern part of Efate. This translation failed to be accepted because the South Efate sections were simply not sufficiently intelligible to readers from further north.

(c) Finally, an artificial written standard combining features from the Nguna and Tongoa varieties of Nakanamanga was created. This translation was more successful, being used throughout the Nakanamanga-speaking area, as well as by speakers of the separate Emae and Namakir languages. Clark (1985: 4) reports that this written variety is still widely used, though it should be pointed out that there is also small body of translated material in the quite separate Namakir language.

On the subject of religious languages, some additional comment is warranted in this section on the form of religious translations into Vanuatu’s vernaculars and the extent to which these translations have had an impact on secular literacy practices. Christian missionaries came to Vanuatu with a range of linguistic aptitudes. Some learned the local vernaculars extremely well and produced quite workable translations of the New Testament (or greater or lesser amounts of the Bible). The languages of Vanuatu vary somewhat in their phonological and morphological complexity, with the languages of the southern islands exhibiting the greatest degree of phonological and morphological complexity.

Translated materials in the Erromangan language, in particular, systematically incorporate a wide range of clearly ungrammatical constructions in printed texts that have been in regular use on the island for generations. This, combined with an awkward and inconsistent spelling system, as well as a considerable amount of apparently archaic vocabulary, serves to render much
of the printed literature in the language almost unreadable for many younger speakers.

There would be little point in presenting a simple catalogue of grammatical errors in the linguistic work of 19th-century European missionary translators if there had been no enduring effects from the work that they did. A catechism and hymnal in Erromangan were produced in 1867 and these hymns continue to be sung on a regular basis today. The original hymns and catechism, as well as the Lord’s Prayer, have been reprinted (almost without change) many times over the years. The latest reprinting was in 1992, and in this version of the hymn book, a large number of newly produced hymns was added to the original collection in a volume entitled *Narufo tomper Erromango* ‘Hymns of Erromango’. These were all written by native speakers of Erromangan under the supervision of an exclusively Erromangan publishing committee.

Many of the newly composed hymns that are included in the 1992 reprint of the hymnal contain structural features that do not appear in the normal spoken language at all, or which appear only very rarely. For the most part, these divergent features correspond to some of the more unusual features of the oldest hymns and other religious materials that were originally produced by the 19th-century missionaries. Effectively, then, the linguistic features found in translated materials, which originate from the work of the first missionaries, appear to have been adopted as models for a new variety of written ecclesiastical Erromangan.

This variety differs in significant ways from the ordinary spoken language, and is only ever used in the production of written ecclesiastical texts such as hymns. Some of these features include verbal prefixes which are illicitly remodelled in the direction of the corresponding independent pronouns, e.g. *ko(k)le-* ‘we (plural inclusive future tense)’ is often written incorrectly as *koskle-* , because of partial similarity with the free form pronoun *kos* ‘we (plural inclusive)’. The quite distinct categories of inalienable and alienable possession in the spoken language are incorrectly collapsed together in this written ecclesiastical variety, with the suffix expressing a third person singular inalienable possessor being reanalysed as part of the root, and this new noun is then marked with a postposed possessive pronoun that normally expresses only an alienable possessor. Thus, in contrast to spoken *ni-m* ‘your name’ we often find in nineteenth-century hymns written by European missionaries – as well as hymns recently composed by Erromangans – the once incorrect construction *ni-n sorom* to express the same meaning, despite the fact that it is literally nonsensical, meaning ‘your his/her name’. Effectively, then, the early missionaries on Erromango established a written variety of the language as an ecclesiastical literary norm.

In doing this, these missionaries were doing nothing unique in Vanuatu, though the extent of their ungrammatical adventurism was certainly more noticeable in Erromangan because of the particular complexity of the language that they were attempting to translate into. Early biblical translations into some of the other languages of Vanuatu also contain some structurally and stylistically odd features. In the case of Paamese, biblical materials in the local language are also no longer nearly as publicly accessible, as there have been no reprints for many decades. Such materials have therefore not had the same effect on Paama as on Erromango in terms of providing a model for a modern written ecclesiasti-
cal form of the language. However, when Paamese people do have a chance to refer to these old materials, any deviations from normal conversational patterns that result in difficulty of understanding are generally attributed to the failure of the reader to understand the esteemed ‘old language’, rather than being explained as earlier missionary errors of translation.

Early (personal communication) reports that native speakers of languages on Epi with whom he has worked on Bible translation projects will often accept— and sometimes even produce themselves—translations that are completely ungrammatical, unnatural, or even unintelligible, as long as they feel that they somehow accurately reflect the source text that they are translating from. Even if translators have no previous model of materials badly translated by earlier missionaries, it seems that they are prepared to produce written religious materials that violate their own native-speaker intuitions about the language, in keeping with a widespread assumption that religious language must be somehow ‘special’.

However, there is little evidence that any of the aberrant features in the translated written literatures have systematically made their way into any spoken variety of modern Vanuatu languages. When Erromangans pray and preach in church, they speak spontaneously, without the help of notes or pre-prepared sermons, and the resulting speech is typically much more like the ordinary spoken language, and is not characterised by the same preference for structurally aberrant and archaic features that we find in, for example, recently composed hymns.

Christian missionary activity during the 19th and early 20th centuries was generally conducted exclusively through the medium of local languages, and people completely avoided the use of Bislama as a language of religion. It should be remembered that at that time, Bislama was lexically and structurally a fairly basic sort of language that was used predominantly on plantations. There were often strained relationships between European missionaries and labour recruiters, with the former accusing the latter (often quite correctly) of attempting to kidnap people against their will, forcing them to leave their home islands for long periods. Those Ni-Vanuatu who went voluntarily to work in Queensland often did so to escape trouble or obligations in their home communities, so Bislama effectively came to be regarded as the language of social deviants and troublemakers, both by missionaries and by members of local communities.

Given these sorts of attitudes, it is scarcely surprising that the question seldom arose of making use of Bislama as a language for religious purposes. In any case, Bislama was probably not sufficiently widely known in many parts of Vanuatu during the late 1800s and early 1900s. It is quite likely that very few women would have spoken the language (and even today, middle-aged and older women from many parts of Vanuatu often speak the language without great confidence). In addition, Bislama would not have been spoken by children (and again, in some parts of Vanuatu, children do not learn to speak Bislama until they begin having social contact with people outside their home communities when they begin to attend boarding school to complete their upper primary levels of education).

There were, however, some apparent exceptions. Père Pionnier was a Catholic priest who was posted to Vanuatu during the periods 1886–87 and 1893–99. He failed to learn any local language, and apparently made use instead of Bislama in his dealings with local people. It is likely, however, that his use of Bislama was
oral rather than written. He did leave some written records of materials that he had produced in Bislama to assist him in religious services (Pionnier, 1913), but there is no evidence that these materials were intended to be read by local people.

Mission organisations largely avoided the use of Bislama as a religious language even until the 1960s, as it was not regarded as a language that could successfully ‘reach the hearts’ of Ni-Vanuatu (Camden, personal communication). However, attitudes towards Bislama began to change rapidly in the 1970s when it became a language of serious political debate in the run-up to independence. Around this time mission organisations began also to take the language seriously as an evangelical medium. The translation of parts of the New Testament into Bislama commenced in 1967 under the influence of Pastor Bill Camden, and the four gospels were circulating in print, at least in parts of Espiritu Santo, shortly before the formation of the first of the political parties. In 1971 the four gospels were finalised in Bislama as Gud Nyus bilong Jisas Krais (‘The Good News of Jesus Christ’), and the Acts of the Apostles was published as Ol Wok blong ol Aposol in 1974.

Since then there has been a series of hymnbooks produced in Bislama, known as the Nyu Laef (‘New Life’) books, and these are widely used throughout the country, in some cases alongside older vernacular hymnals, while in other cases almost completely replacing vernacular hymnals, which on many islands are now often out of print. In 1996 the full text of the translation of the Old and New Testaments appeared in Bislama as Baebol long Bislama (‘The Bible in Bislama’). Within a period of thirty years, Bislama has changed from a language that was almost completely avoided in religious contexts to the language in which the largest number of people now read religious materials. 

Church services in villages around Vanuatu these days are often fairly multilingual occasions. The sermon and associated announcements may be given in the local language if the pastor/elder/priest is from the local community, while hymns may be in either the local language or Bislama. Prayers may be offered in the local language or Bislama, with more fundamentalist Protestant participants – from, for example, the Apostolic, Seventh Day Adventist or Assemblies of God churches – seemingly preferring Bislama over the local language, and, a little incongruously, often preferring the archaic King James English version of the Bible for readings. Ultimately, however, the choice of language seems to be a matter of personal taste, as well as being dependent on whether or not there are any visitors speaking other languages who might be present. Bible readings are more likely to be in Bislama, or even a metropolitan language (Masing, 1992: 32), though any following exegesis for the benefit of the congregation will usually be presented in the local language.

However, even today attitudes against the use of Bislama and in favour of the use of vernaculars in church are sometimes encountered. Masing (1992: 4–5), for example, reports a dispute which broke out in her local community on Malakula in which an older person attacked some younger preachers for having used Bislama rather than the local Aulua language in church. As no outside visitors were present, the elder maintained that the ‘much richer’ Aulua language should have been used.

I have already mentioned an apparent tendency among more fundamentalist groups to make greater use of Bislama in church services, in contrast to estab-
lished churches such as the Presbyterians, the Anglicans and the Catholics, who make greater use of vernaculars in sermons and prayer. In terms of written church materials, newly established religious organisations in Vanuatu such as the Mormons, the Baha’i and the Seventh Day Adventists appear to be putting all of their efforts into providing written materials exclusively in Bislama. The longer-established churches are still making some effort to produce new vernacular translations in a variety of languages, with the Summer Institute of Linguistics working under the auspices of the Vanuatu Christian Council, with translation projects currently under way for a number of languages, including some on Tanna, Epi, Malakula and Espiritu Santo. Yet other vernacular translations of biblical materials have been produced by different church organisations on Malakula, Ambae and Tanna, as well as into the language of Ifira.

English and French are little used in the religious context in Vanuatu with an exclusively Ni-Vanuatu congregation, except for an occasional Bible reading, or when producing fixed expressions such as when people say grace before a meal (‘For what we are about to receive . . .’) or when one feels the spirit of the Lord suddenly upon oneself (‘Hallelujah, praise the Lord!’). However, while Catholic sermons in rural communities are generally given in the local language or Bislama, the liturgy itself – with its verses from the priest and its set responses from the congregation – is only celebrated in French. Effectively, then, the incomprehensible Latin Mass has in Vanuatu presumably become the incomprehensible French Mass for some rural Catholics.

However, although English and French are little used in Vanuatu as religious languages, there is a strong association in Vanuatu between being Catholic and francophone on the one hand, and, by implication, between being Protestant and anglophone on the other. This association derives historically from the fact that the Catholic faith was initially introduced to Vanuatu by exclusively French-speaking priests from France and New Caledonia, while the various Protestant denominations were introduced by English speakers from a variety of countries. Because schools in Vanuatu were established in the first place by the missions, it was only natural that Catholic missions would teach French as a subject, while Protestant missions would be expected to teach English as a subject.

It should be pointed out, however, that the francophone-Catholic and anglophone-Protestant overlap actually represents something of a stereotype. While there are probably relatively few professed Catholics in Vanuatu who are not francophone, there are certainly many Protestants who have attended French-medium government schools, and these schools are completely independent of the Catholic Church, and there are also some francophone Protestants who have links with evangelical churches in neighbouring New Caledonia.17

Languages of literacy

As indicated in the preceding section, ‘languages of literacy’ and ‘languages of religion’ are by and large coterminous in Vanuatu in the context of local vernaculars. Masing (1992: 51) shows that in the rural society that she investigated, just over three quarters of all books in the village were religious in content, and my own experience would suggest that this would be fairly typical for any randomly chosen village in the country. About two thirds of the books that she counted were in a metropolitan language (in this case, English), just over a quarter were in...
Bislama, and just under 4% were in the local language. As is typically the case in rural areas, vernacular books have often been out of print for many years. These books are often old and fragile, with damaged spines, lost covers or torn or missing pages. Cyclones regularly ravage the islands and these take a huge toll on people’s valued books, and even something as simple as spilling sweet tea on a book will inevitably attract destructive cockroaches.

Despite the close relationship between literacy and religion, there is still some validity in Vanuatu in making a distinction between ‘languages of religion’ and ‘languages of literacy’ in that there are some recognisable distinctions in literacy practice according to the nature of the domain. The figures in Table 2, derived from Masing (1992: 52), demonstrate clearly that in this rural Malakula community, vernacular literacy is encountered exclusively in the domain of religious materials. My own experience suggests again that this distribution of materials according to language and domain is quite typical for the entire country.

There are some language communities in Vanuatu in which secular materials are available, though the range of titles is invariably very small for any given language, and the number of languages involved is small. Crowley (1980) and Crowley & Mael (1984) are secular sources for Paamese, Carlot (1983) for South Efate, Viralalao (1981) and Vira et al. (1997) for Duidui, Tabi & Buli (1985) and Mabonlala (1986) for Apma, Luwi et al. (1988) for Lewo, and Crowley (1997a) for Erromangan, all of which are short collections of vernacular stories, for the most part traditional. There are also some collections of vernacular texts written by academics, though the nature of the accompanying translations and discussion clearly indicates that they were intended primarily for an academic rather than a local reading audience, and there has generally been no attempt to distribute these academic volumes to members of local communities.

Charpentier (1997: 226–8) argues that literacy, being a non-traditional practice, has no legitimate place in modern Vanuatu societies, implying it only takes root when a people have become completely westernised, and that any vernacular literacy in particular is seen as being ‘useless’ (Charpentier, 1997: 228). In fact, however, observations show that people engage in a significant amount of active literacy throughout Vanuatu. Masing (1992: 57) reports that the majority of people in the community that she investigated write fairly frequently (though I think it would be fair to say that people generally write far less frequently than we find among westerners). English was the language that was most widely reported as being used among secondary school leavers, while others predominantly used Bislama. Nobody in her survey group reported using the local vernacular for writing, though a broader sample over a wider area would probably have shown people using the local language, most typically for letter writing. A range of different sorts of written messages are produced by members of the

<p>| Table 2 Distribution of books in Lumbulbatui village according to language and content |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Secular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bislama</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aulua</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
community, ranging from invitations to social functions, reports of village meetings, assignment of communal tasks, requests for financial support and letters.

For the most part, however, secular literacy in Vanuatu is practised increasingly through the medium of Bislama or metropolitan languages, with minimal use being made of local languages. Lynch (1979) and Crowley (1989a:123) report that one of the major consequences of the reliance on metropolitan languages for access to a wide range of information has effectively led to the establishment of a ‘New Information Order’ in Vanuatu societies, in which the control of valuable information is no longer exclusively in the hands of respected elders, but is now only accessible to younger formally educated people. This can be seen as thrusting a kind of ‘premature maturity’ upon these younger people, as well as resulting in the traditionally highly valued knowledge of older people being devalued.

There has never been any comprehensive survey at the national level of literacy levels in Vanuatu, and any published figures probably represent estimates. As mentioned earlier, the 1999 census included a question on reading and writing ability in ‘a local language’, Bislama, English, French or ‘any other language’. However, even before the results of this census are published, caution will need to be exercised in interpreting the results, as different enumerators appear to have interpreted their instructions differently. Some insisted on ticking just a single box, assuming that it was not possible to be literate in more than one language. Other enumerators, while allowing for the ticking of more than one box, were forced to treat both fully competent vernacular literacy and marginal vernacular literacy with the same tick for ‘yes’.

**Linguistic profile of Ni-Vanuatu**

Table 3 presents a list of the 80 actively spoken vernaculars in Vanuatu, arranged alphabetically, along with an indication of the island where each language is spoken, its currently estimated number of speakers, and a figure indicating the proportion of the national population that is represented by that language. The column dealing with the writing system indicates whether any printed materials have been produced in that language, along with a rating of the writing system according to the following scale:

- ***** writing system available in print that is fully in accord with modern principles of orthography design
- **** writing system that is fully in accord with modern principles of orthography design which is not yet in print or which is currently undergoing development
- *** writing system in print which is basically sound according to modern principles of orthography design, but perhaps with relatively minor imperfections
- ** writing system in print only in old sources with no recent study to attest to its reliability
- * writing system in print only in old sources which is known to be of dubious quality
- Ø no writing system at all known to be in print.

Where some stars are included in parentheses, e.g. ***(*)**, this means that there is an established three-star writing system, but that improvements on this in the light of more modern linguistic study are currently under way.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language name</th>
<th>Island</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
<th>Percentage of population</th>
<th>Writing system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anejom</td>
<td>Aneityum</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>*<strong>(</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apma</td>
<td>Pentecost</td>
<td>7,800</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aulua</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avok</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axamb</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baetora</td>
<td>Maewo</td>
<td>1,330</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baki</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>**<em>(</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banam Bay</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bierebo</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>**<em>(</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Cumberland</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Santo</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>(****)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duidui</td>
<td>Ambae</td>
<td>8,700</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>*<strong>(</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emae</td>
<td>Shepherds</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erromangan</td>
<td>Erromango</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td><em>(</em>**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futuna-Aniwa</td>
<td>Futuna, Aniwa</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>*<strong>(</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiw</td>
<td>Torres</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ifira-Mele</td>
<td>Efate</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiai</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwamera</td>
<td>Tanna</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>*<strong>(</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakona</td>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamen</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>**<em>(</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laravat</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenakel</td>
<td>Tanna</td>
<td>11,500</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>*<strong>(</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lendambo</td>
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<td>800</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewo</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>**<em>(</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loh</td>
<td>Torres</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mafea</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malua Bay</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maskelynes</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>(****)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merlav</td>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>1,550</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mkir</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>175</td>
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<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
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<td>Mores</td>
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<td>75</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>Ø</td>
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<td>Ø</td>
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<td>Banks</td>
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<td>1.14</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Malakula</td>
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<td>0.57</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakanamanga</td>
<td>Efate, Shepherds</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language name</td>
<td>Island</td>
<td>Speakers</td>
<td>Percentage of population</td>
<td>Writing system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namakir</td>
<td>Shepherds</td>
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<td>Ø</td>
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<td>Nefe’ei</td>
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<td>0.17</td>
<td>Ø</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nefwerfwer</td>
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<td>1,250</td>
<td>0.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nevat</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninde</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Ambrym</td>
<td>Ambrym</td>
<td>4,900</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Tanna</td>
<td>Tanna</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>**<em>(</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Ambae</td>
<td>Ambae</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Malakula</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>(***)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nume</td>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paamese</td>
<td>Paama, Lopevi</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>*<strong>(</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Sandwich</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raga</td>
<td>Pentecost</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sa</td>
<td>Pentecost</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakao</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seke</td>
<td>Pentecost</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shark Bay</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinesip</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Ambrym</td>
<td>Ambrym</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Efate</td>
<td>Efate</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Gaua</td>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-Central Santo</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Ambrym</td>
<td>Ambrym</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Santo</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Santo</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Tanna</td>
<td>Tanna</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunwadaga</td>
<td>Maewo</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunwadia</td>
<td>Maewo</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamambo</td>
<td>Malo</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolomako</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutuba</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unua-Pangkumu</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ureparapara</td>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vao</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V’enen Taut</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>3,350</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera’a</td>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vovo</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It should be pointed out, however, that for those languages that are indicated as having no writing system in print (marked on the table as Ø), members of local communities often do write in these languages. When people do this, they typically transfer spelling conventions on an ad hoc basis from more widely known writing systems, such as those of other vernaculars, Bislama, or metropolitan languages. The resulting writing system may be evaluated in linguistic terms as anywhere between one- and five-star status, depending on a variety of factors, such as the orthographic creativity of the individual writer, or the inherent difficulty involved in writing that particular language.

These figures add up to a total of 90.65% of the population of Vanuatu that is indicated as speaking one of the 80 indigenous languages of the country. The remainder represent the small proportion of the population who are not Ni-Vanuatu, along with non-vernacular speakers who represent the minority of Ni-Vanuatu, who live predominantly in the urban centres and who grow up for the most part as first-language Bislama speakers (Crowley, 1995a). While there is some variation from island to island in terms of the proportion of people who live in town as against rural areas, this is generally close to the national average of 15% urban dwellers and 85% rural dwellers for all languages. (Figures 4–13 show the geographical locations of the languages shown in Table 3.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language name</th>
<th>Island</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
<th>Percentage of population</th>
<th>Writing system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vurës</td>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>1,050</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Ambrym</td>
<td>Ambrym</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitesands</td>
<td>Tanna</td>
<td>7,500</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wusi</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 (cont.) Vanuatu local languages and their speaker-populations

Figure 4 Torres Islands
Apart from young children, it is extremely rare for anybody in Vanuatu to be monolingual. Most people speak their own community language as well as Bislama with complete fluency. In some of the linguistically more diverse islands, especially in parts of Malakula and Espiritu Santo, it is not uncommon for people also to speak one or two (and sometimes more) other local vernaculars in addition to their own, as well, of course, as Bislama (and possibly some English and/or French). A substantial number have learned English or French (and sometimes both) at school, with the 1989 census figures showing that 40.5% of people over the age of six claimed to be able to speak some English, while 21.4% of people claimed to be able to speak some French (Office of Statistics, 1991: 127). It should be pointed out, however, that the vast majority of people seldom actually use either of these languages for spoken purposes.

**Language Spread**

**Languages in education**

Siegel (1996a: 99–100) indicates that western-style education in Vanuatu was set up in the first place by missionaries who operated initially through the medium of the local languages, and promoted vernacular literacy, with the ultimate objective of enabling people to understand the new message of Christianity. The content side of early schooling was not very broad, and Lynch (1979: 9) reports one elderly Ni-Vanuatu who had attended one of these mission schools speaking in Bislama and describing his education as basically *Baibel, baibel, singsing nomo* ‘Bible, more Bible, and just singing’. The products of mission schools by and large had a very restricted access to information, as the only printed materials that such people had access to were entirely religious in content, with typically no information being made available to people about local issues, history or cultural practices (Lynch, 1979; Crowley, 1989a: 123).
Masing (1992: 33) reports that the mission schools did not divide students up into classes. Students moved instead from one learning task to another at their own pace as they mastered the previous stage. Students were required initially to recite the alphabet in the local language and then memorise material from the catechism, after which they were taught to read, and then to write, in the local language. Successful students were ultimately sometimes taught something of either of the metropolitan languages, though this was not the ultimate goal of these mission schools.
The Anglo-French condominium government paid little attention to education for most of its history, leaving responsibility for schooling in the hands of the missions, which continued to operate through the medium of the vernaculars until the 1950s. From the 1960s, the British administration moved to set up English-medium primary schools in rural areas in different parts of the country, while a secondary school and a teacher training college were established in Port Vila. Seeing the political loyalties of the local people being tempted by the provision of schools by their condominium partners, the French administration responded by setting up competing schools, often with better facilities and fund-
ing (and no school fees), to lure parents to send their children instead to French-medium schools. The current generation of younger educated Ni-Vanuatu have, therefore, been educated exclusively through the medium of one of the two metropolitan languages, with only the older generations remembering what it means to experience vernacular education.

Not only was vernacular literacy not taught in these government schools, but there have generally been strict rules prohibiting the use of either local vernaculars or Bislama by students in school hours, both in English- and French-medium schools. This has usually been with either the tacit or explicit approval of local parents, who came to see success in school as being closely linked to successful learning of a metropolitan language, and the use of Bislama or local languages was regarded as interfering with this process.

After Vanuatu gained its independence in 1980, the government moved to unify the two originally quite distinct systems of education for the two languages into a single national system. The intention was to have a single national curriculum to replace the completely different curricula of the two condominium governments, which would be taught equally through the medium of the two languages in different sets of schools spread all around the country. There were to be parallel teaching materials in both languages, a single set of employment
provisions for teaching staff, and a single set of school fees for all schools regardless of the medium of instruction.

Under this unified education system, the Ministry of Education now encourages all children in Vanuatu to attend pre-primary kindergarten classes. These are widely, though not universally, available throughout the country, being staffed by local people with a minimal amount of basic early childhood education training. These pre-schools are run entirely by local communities, and much of the labour is voluntary. The facilities are usually very basic, but children are at least introduced to the idea of being in a classroom. They participate in a range of pre-reading activities and perform other structured activities in preparation for
The Language Situation in Vanuatu

Figure 10 Efate and the Shepherd Islands

Figure 11 Erromango
Figure 12 Tanna

Figure 13 Aniwa, Futuna and Aneityum
formal schooling, often using locally made artefacts or materials that can be found locally such as seeds and shells (Brown & Crowley, 1990).

There seems to be a range of language practices in kindergartens. Most kindergarten classes are conducted in the local languages or sometimes Bislama, though children do sometimes get some exposure to English or French in the songs or games that they are taught. However, some urban kindergartens appear to make much greater use of metropolitan languages in order to give children a head start for the first year of primary schooling. Kindergartens in the towns are often privately run as business enterprises. Children attending such kindergartens are certainly often exposed to more English or French than would be the case in rural areas, to prepare them for what their parents presumably hope is greater success once they get to primary school.

There has for some time now been six years of compulsory primary education in Vanuatu. Students usually attend lower primary classes in schools that are close to a child’s local village so they often continue to live with their parents in their own village (or perhaps other close relatives if the school is a bit further away). Classes are conducted in either English or French by locally trained Ni-Vanuatu teachers, for whom neither English nor French is their first language.

While there are often school rules in force prohibiting the use of local languages or Bislama, the reality has often been that teachers who happen to come from the local community do make some use of local languages to explain points that are being taught in English or French. Lynch (1996: 247) reports that there was some official sanction in 1982 from the ministry for the use of vernaculars in the teaching of traditional or artistic subject matter, though not in more academic subjects. However, other ministerial directives on the place of vernaculars or Bislama in the classroom have been less positive, with one minister in 1995 stating that any use of languages other than English or French in the classroom by teachers would be regarded as ‘professional misconduct’ (Lynch, 1996: 248).

The government of Vanuatu is currently in the final stages of adopting an Education Master Plan, the drawing up of which is being backed financially by the World Bank, and which will be implemented with the help of a number of other international aid donors. Among other things, this plan proposes that the current universal six years of education be extended to eight years, and that early primary education (i.e. a universal preparatory year, along with years one and two of primary schooling) should be conducted through the medium of the local vernacular in places where the local community make this choice.¹⁸ The primary motivation behind this change of policy is an educational one, with the argument being that the current policy of imparting initial literacy through an unfamiliar metropolitan language is educationally damaging to the child (and ultimately, the country).

However, the question of language maintenance is also seen as an important issue, the argument being that instilling initial literacy through the medium of the local vernacular will also serve to strengthen local languages against the pressure of metropolitan languages. While there is perhaps some truth to the claim that incorporating local languages into the formal education system may give those languages some additional status that they did not have formerly, it has to be conceded that the overall effect in terms of language maintenance is not likely
to be great, given that the most that is being proposed is the development of two years’ worth of primary teaching materials, with no provision at all for the development of broader-based vernacular literacies operating at all levels within local societies.

It should be stressed that this plan is still at the discussion stage, though there does appear to be fairly widespread political and community support for it, as well as a substantial degree of interest having been expressed from potential aid donors. However, there has also been a variety of less positive reactions to the plan. Criticisms have come in particular from some in the francophone sector of the education system, who suspect that there may be a hidden agenda to diminish the status of French, despite explicit wording within the plan itself that English-French official bilingualism at the national level should not only be maintained, but that it should be strengthened. In particular, one of the specific goals of the Education Master Plan is to promote greater individual bilingualism in English and French at the upper secondary level.

Bracken (1998) reports that the World Bank backers of the proposed plan found ‘unanimous support among Ni-Vanuatu to preserve the country’s vernacular languages’. However, it should be pointed out that this sentiment clearly does not necessarily equate to giving unanimous support to the proposed revisions to educational policy, and the people referred to in the World Bank report as supporting the proposal may be confusing the educational advantages of initial vernacular education and its potential spin-off in terms of language maintenance.

Bracken (1998) also reports that the World Bank backers encountered the greatest amount of opposition from expatriate circles when earlier versions of the Master Plan were being drawn up. Such people typically expressed concerns about the practicalities of implementing such a policy, or concerns that this policy would have a negative effect on the learning of English and French. The latter point is relatively easy to counter on the basis of evidence from other countries, but the former is more serious.

Since this proposal has not yet entered its initial implementation stage, we have no way of knowing to what extent all of the requirements for success will be taken fully into account. There is therefore a danger that political pressures both from within Vanuatu and from expatriate advisers who are not completely familiar with the linguistic situation on the ground in Vanuatu may force an attempt to implement this plan too quickly, with the possibility that some essential considerations may be side-stepped. For instance, in 1999 the Ministry of Education moved ahead to set up pilot projects in individual schools in over a dozen different language areas. No real monitoring processes were set in place, and there was minimal special training provided for teachers. Teachers were also expected to produce their own reading materials on ministry-supplied rolls of brown paper. If these issues are not properly addressed and the full implementation of the vernacular education proposal falters as a result, this may well sour the appetite of the public for another more carefully implemented proposal in the future.

It is planned to phase in initial vernacular education throughout the country over a period of at least ten years, beginning in the early 2000s. Some of the
important practical questions that need to be addressed before such a policy could be successfully implemented would include the following:

1. It needs to be established which languages already have efficient and accepted writing systems that are reasonably widely used by members of the community in order to be able to decide which languages could be brought into this system earlier on, and which languages need further linguistic documentation and study before they can be incorporated into the programme.

2. Another consideration for determining which languages can be brought into the programme relatively early involves the question of which languages are spoken in places where there is regular exposure to the written form of the language in the form of (at the very least) a hymnal, or other religious materials.

3. Some unwritten languages are spoken by dialectally quite diverse communities, and it would need to be established which linguistic communities would most readily accept a single writing system for all varieties, rather than insisting on separate writing systems being developed for the different regional varieties.

4. Another consideration is which languages have published dictionaries so that teachers can check the spellings of words.

5. Some languages are spoken in areas where speakers of that language constitute the sole school population, and such languages could be brought into the programme relatively early. In other schools, however, there is likely to be a linguistically mixed enrolment. In such cases, more complex decisions would presumably be necessary.

6. It would need to be established which schools are located in areas where Bislama, rather than local language, is the major medium of local exchange. In towns, as well as in some rural areas, the main community language is Bislama, so the future role of Bislama within the education system of the country would need to be addressed, and this may require a certain amount of public re-education given that many parents may harbour negative attitudes to Bislama in the educational context.

7. The question of which languages have trained personnel who are capable of producing the relevant curriculum materials of an acceptable standard will also need to be taken into account. This will also involve determining the extent to which designated teachers are themselves adequately literate in their own languages.

8. The success of such a programme will also depend on establishing which languages have trained or trainable teachers. The proposal, as it is currently formulated, provides for unemployed Year 10 leavers who are resident in their local communities and are willing, to be trained as early primary teachers. One problem is that it is intended to pay these teachers only a fraction of what a fully trained primary teacher receives, even though they will be heavily involved in the demanding activity of materials preparation.

9. For such a programme to succeed, it is essential that there should be a written literature in the local language which reflects the natural form of the
language, rather than consisting exclusively of translated biblical materials. Such material could be incorporated into the curriculum in the form of story-telling and vernacular reading exercises.

(10) Public acceptance will also have to be considered. It is possible that some languages will have speakers who have been successfully primed and who are enthusiastic about the idea of initial vernacular education, while people in some areas may be reluctant to accept change. If this reluctance is based on any misconceptions, there would be a need for the re-education of parents. I have already referred to the question of public attitudes to Bislama, though public misconceptions also in some cases seem to centre around the idea that it is intended to ‘revive’ moribund languages which have only a handful of usually elderly speakers. Some members of the public also mistakenly think that ‘vernacular’ education in Vanuatu means choosing one of the various languages of the country for teaching in all of the country’s schools.

Such a policy also needs to be implemented with great care to ensure that all possible problems are anticipated before they arise, and so that all necessary training and resources development can take place. Any implementation of such a programme also needs to be done with evaluation strategies at each stage.

While some languages could be adopted in the very near future as languages of initial primary instruction, there are many other languages which are extremely poorly described, and for which we have little idea of what kind of writing system should be adopted. In other cases, languages may have been written for over a century in a writing system that is poorly suited to the sound system of the language, which it would possibly be counterproductive to attempt to teach to children. In such cases, it may even be essential to develop a writing system from scratch on the basis of completely new linguistic research. There are some parts of the country where our ignorance of the linguistic situation is so profound that we are even uncertain as to the number of the languages that are spoken. Finally, there are areas where there are reasonably well described languages which may have tolerably efficient writing systems, but where we are uncertain as to the location of the precise boundaries between these languages and those of neighbouring groups (assuming, of course, that discrete boundaries can even be drawn), as already noted in The Language Profile of Vanuatu.

For the successful implementation of any policy of universal initial vernacular education, the description of all languages in the country – especially those that are spoken in areas where the languages are particularly poorly known – must be encouraged, along with the recording of spoken materials in these languages to form the basis of a secular written literature that is not made up exclusively of translated religious materials. At the moment, however, there is no formal mechanism available for systematically promoting the description of the languages of the country. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre can guide potential academic researchers in particular directions, but it has no resources to support the description of particular languages that are seen as having high priority if there are no researchers actively seeking permission to carry out linguistic research in the country.
Upper primary classes are often conducted in schools that service a wider area, so students often need to attend schools as boarders outside their home language area. For some students, this may be the first time that they come into contact with Bislama, though they usually rapidly acquire fluency in the language outside the school context (given that the language is, of course, normally prohibited in the context of formal schooling). For those students whose upper secondary education continues within their own language area, they may not be exposed to Bislama until they begin their secondary schooling at about the age of twelve. School rules will again typically prohibit the use of languages other than English or French, and at this level, teachers do not attempt to make use of local languages or Bislama as a tool for explanation in the classroom as they sometimes do with junior students.

It is much more difficult for students to be accepted to secondary level in Vanuatu. Places are far more limited and only about 20% of the initial primary intake proceed to junior secondary school (Masing, 1992:24). Those who fail to be accepted often return to their local community having undergone six years of schooling in English or French, which they will in all probability no longer use except perhaps very occasionally (Masing, 1992: 32). Some will attempt to find jobs in town, though with such a low-level qualification, they are most likely to acquire only non-skilled jobs for which a knowledge of a metropolitan language is of no special value in any case. Some vocational training is available in rural areas for such early school-leavers, but many such classes are conducted largely in Bislama, so metropolitan languages are again of limited value.

Those who proceed to secondary level attend one of a restricted number of English- or French-medium institutions, most of which require students to board outside their home communities. At such schools, there are usually only limited possibilities for students to keep in regular contact with their families except during school holidays. There is selection of students again for admission from junior secondary to senior secondary education, and only 15% of those eligible are accepted for further study (Masing, 1992: 24). There is once again a choice between English- and French-medium upper secondary schools.

Students attending English- or French-medium secondary schools are required to take the other language as a subject up till Year 10. For Years 11–13, the other language becomes an elective subject. There is strong interest in French among students at the main English-medium schools, though interest in English among students at French-medium schools is considerably higher. No other languages are taught as subjects at secondary schools in the country at which the enrolment is predominantly Ni-Vanuatu. 19

The role of the two metropolitan languages within the country became a major political issue in the run-up to independence in the late 1970s, and the issue has boiled over in public a number of times since then. In fact, it is arguably the relative position of English and French – rather than the status of Bislama or any of the local vernaculars – that represents the only major linguistic issue to have been seriously addressed in public in the last twenty years.

The largest street demonstrations that Vanuatu has ever seen were by French-educated people and their supporters protesting in the late 1970s at perceived threats to French-medium education from the predominantly English-educated Vanuaaku Pati government that was in power in Vanuatu
before independence. The British and the French had for decades been playing Ni-Vanuatu off against each other, and had successfully divided people into opposing ‘anglophone’ and ‘francophone’ sides. In the words of the first Minister of Education in independent Vanuatu, this political posturing:

... has affected the historic, political, social and economic progress of this country and has provided the main basis of division between the Melanesians, by creating them either ‘Anglophone’ or ‘Francophone’. (These terms are mostly used by those whose aim has been to divide and rule and to disrupt our unity and progress towards independence.) (Kalpokas, 1980: 240–41)

There is a common myth outside Vanuatu that the country is, or used to be, divided up into discrete ‘anglophone’ and ‘francophone’ areas (e.g. Watson-Gegeo, 1987: 30). This was never so, and it is not so today. It is quite common to find both French-medium and English-medium schools in very close proximity to each other, not infrequently even within the same village, and some families even have some of their children going to English-medium schools and others going to French-medium schools. In fact, since independence, a number of schools have been converted to ‘bilingual’ schools, in the sense that students following the same curriculum materials take their classes in either English or French depending on which stream they belong in.

Since independence, however, there have been very significant shifts in the enrolment figures for English-medium and French-medium schools. There has been a gradual, but consistent shift in primary enrolments, from figures which slightly favoured French-medium at independence, to a nearly two-thirds majority for English-medium within seven years (Crowley, 1989b: 41). By 1998, the proportion of English-medium enrolments had increased to over three quarters, despite a number of years of government by a coalition that was dominated by a party which actively promoted French-medium education to counteract the very obvious erosion to English-medium schools.

This consistent drift from French- to English-medium education has been of considerable concern to some. During the period 1991–95 a coalition of parties dominated by politicians with strong francophone sentiments was in power at the national level. However, while this government conducted a certain amount of grandstanding about this issue in parliamentary debate and changed signage in some government offices, few serious efforts were made to promote official equity in usage between English and French both as languages of education or as languages of government, as a way of counteracting the drift over the preceding years towards English. The ombudsman’s annual reports on multilingualism for the period 1995–97 placed special emphasis on the need to maintain official equality between the two languages, and some specific recommendations in this regard were proposed (Office of the Ombudsman, 1995, 1996, 1997).

However, the francophone-dominated government has since been replaced with a series of governments that have been dominated again by English-educated people, and the previous ombudsman has recently been succeeded by someone whose particular linguistic concerns at this stage are not known – except that he is himself English-educated, in contrast to the previous ombudsman – as no new annual reports on multilingualism have yet been presented.
suspicion is that for as long as governments are politically fluid, Vanuatu will remain dominated by anglophones, or where compromises between anglophones and francophones have to be made, there will be less direct pressure to maintain equity between English and French, with people being given greater freedom to make their own choices between the two languages, as advocated by Early (1999). Given the greater accessibility of tertiary education through the medium of English, as well as the dominance of anglophone capital in the economy of Port Vila, such a laissez-faire attitude will probably result in a further drift away from French.

Attitudes towards the use of languages other than the relevant metropolitan language in secondary school classrooms vary somewhat. Anne Naupa (personal communication) reports that there is far less acceptance of the use of any Bislama in class in French-medium schools than in English-medium schools. However, even in English-medium schools, there is variation from school to school as to the extent of acceptability of Bislama, with some schools prohibiting the language and others permitting it, though at the same time providing encouragement for the use of English. Even within the same school, different teachers follow different practices, with some teachers opting never to use Bislama in the classroom, while others supplement the English content with substantial amounts of discussion in Bislama.

Successful secondary students in Vanuatu can, of course, proceed to tertiary education. There are now increasingly varied opportunities available through the Port Vila (Emalus) campus of the University of the South Pacific (as well as the Luganville and Tanna university sub-centres), while substantial numbers of other students travel overseas to study at the University of the South Pacific campus in Suva in Fiji or at the Alafua campus in Samoa. Others attend the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby or the Papua New Guinea University of Technology in Lae, while smaller numbers attend universities or other tertiary institutions in Australia and New Zealand.

These institutions obviously all teach through the medium of English. French-medium tertiary education is available from the Université de la Nouvelle Calédonie in Nouméa, the Université Française de la Polynésie in Tahiti or at universities in metropolitan France. Very few Ni-Vanuatu actually achieve success in studies at these institutions, and most francophone university graduates have made the sometimes difficult switch to English as a medium of instruction and attended the same institutions favoured by their anglophone counterparts. However, it was reported in 1999 that a French-medium tertiary centre is to be established in Vanuatu under the auspices of the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie. Given the expense of running the anglophone University of the South Pacific, of which Vanuatu is a financially contributing member nation, it is difficult to imagine such an institution being viable in the long term given the very small potential clientele unless it receives substantial ongoing foreign – most likely French, or possibly Canadian – aid.

Although Bislama has no recognised role in the primary and secondary education systems of the country and students are often penalised for even speaking the language informally on school grounds, the same kinds of restrictions obviously do not apply when students begin their tertiary studies, as people are assumed to be entitled to make their own personal choices as to what
languages they speak. The Pacific Languages Unit of the University of the South Pacific was established in Vanuatu in 1983, and one of the objectives of this unit was to raise the status of Pacific languages in the eyes of the people who speak these languages.

One way of doing this was to offer a university credit course on, and in, Bislama. Doing this would serve to make people aware that the language has a clearly definable linguistic identity of its own. Moreover, offering a subject that was both taught and examined exclusively through the medium of Bislama would make people aware that serious academic study at tertiary level could be carried out through a language which, until not much more than twenty years earlier, was regarded largely as a language of poorly educated plantation workers.

Accordingly, in 1985, Pastor Bill Camden and Terry Crowley jointly taught such a course as an intensive summer school offering. This course attracted an enrolment of twenty students, many of whom were full-time students from the Suva campus picking up additional credits towards their degrees during their summer holidays. By 1987, this course had been developed as a complete externally taught course, which was made available to students as part of the Certificate in Pacific Language Studies that was offered by the University of the South Pacific.

The printed course materials consisted of a two-volume study guide (Kos Buk 1 (Course Book 1) and Kos Buk 2 (Course Book 2)) amounting to over 550 pages in total, a set of supplementary readings (Buk blong Ridim (Reader)) of about 140 pages, and a reference grammar of the language, written in Bislama itself. This was entitled Grama blong Bislama (Grammar of Bislama) and it ran to about 240 pages. The course covered four main areas, each of which dealt with a number of particular topics. The general breakdown of the course, then, was as follows:

1. The nature and history of Bislama as a language: pidgin and creole languages, pidgin and creole genesis, pre-plantation and plantation language contact involving Ni-Vanuatu, and other Pacific pidgins and creoles.
2. The current status and use of Bislama: constitutional and social position of Bislama, geographical and social varieties of Bislama, the question of standardisation.
3. The phonology and lexicon of Bislama: the nature of phonemic contrasts, phonological variation in the forms of words, principles and problems in Bislama spelling, adaptation of foreign words into Bislama phonology, ways of expanding the lexicon of Bislama.

The various topics in the first of the four parts of this course were chosen because it was felt that it was essential to give students an appreciation of both the special nature of Bislama as a pidgin/creole language, and at the same time, to make students aware that the language has the same kind of potential as any other language.

The second section was included in order to make students critically examine some of the attitudes they had acquired about Bislama through their primary and secondary education. The third section was designed to make people realise that
the incorporation of the new words into the lexicon is natural, but that people who do not speak English (or French) do not necessarily understand words borrowed from English (or French) on an *ad hoc* basis. This section of the course also aimed to make people aware that the kind of random spelling in Bislama that is so frequently found in the public domain is neither desirable nor helpful.

The final section of the course was included not because it was thought that students have a burning urge to learn about the internal structure of the Bislama noun phrase or other such technical aspects of the language, but because this is the kind of topic that students sometimes find difficult. Including difficult material in the course was not something that was done to satisfy any perverse needs on the part of the course coordinator, but to make students realise that the language itself has a complex (and clearly non-English) structure of its own, and that technically difficult material could be discussed through the medium of this one-time plantation language.

Apart from when the course was offered initially as a summer course, there have not been large enrolments. Under current arrangements in the Pacific Languages Unit, this course is no longer offered, as the original Certificate in Pacific Language Studies, of which this course was a component, is no longer available. However, the more recent full major in Pacific Vernacular Studies may well include a modified version of this course in the future (Lynch, personal communication).

There is also a strong case to be made for finding some place for incorporating Bislama into the formal education system as a subject at upper secondary level. Students at this level are the people who are most likely to be communicating in Bislama in its spoken – and, more importantly, written – form with the wider public. Given the lack of adherence to standardised spellings and norms of expression in the media and many other contexts in which Bislama is used, it could be argued that such skills could be passed on in a classroom context. The main issues that face users of Bislama are (1) the temptation to incorporate material on an *ad hoc* basis from English (and, much less frequently, French), which is an especially strong tendency in translation from English to Bislama; and (2) a lack of awareness of standardised spellings that have been agreed on, as reflected in the published dictionary (Crowley, 1995b) and the recently produced translation of the Bible.

The difficulty that students face in distinguishing between English and Bislama could be overcome by explicit instruction in Bislama spelling, translation and expression once they have acquired a high level of command of English at the upper secondary level. Such skills could be passed on as part of a general subject that might be called ‘CommunicationSkills’. Such a subject could provide regular exercises in translation into and out of Bislama, Bislama spelling, creative writing in Bislama, and the editing of previously written Bislama materials. However, there are other topics that might profitably be included, such as intercultural communication and public speaking.

**Objectives of language education**

The use of English or French as media of instruction is primarily instrumental in the sense that the languages are being taught so as to enable people to learn essential content material elsewhere in the curriculum, and to enable students to
proceed to the next level of education. Ni-Vanuatu by and large do not use these languages conversationally with each other outside of the educational context. This is firstly because the choice of English or French can often be seen as being politically divisive, especially when Bislama is readily available as a politically neutral language choice. Secondly, the proportion of the population which is sufficiently fluent in either language to carry out a successful conversation is relatively small.

It must be assumed, therefore, that the primary objective of teaching people English or French is to provide them with access to higher-level education in that language, and not to produce English- or French-speaking elites in the towns. At the same time, however, students’ ability in the metropolitan languages clearly has to be more than purely passive, as many upper secondary students end up being employed in situations where some kind of active command is called for in their dealings with expatriate workers or customers.

Although there is a dual-language education system in operation in Vanuatu, it should be pointed out that there is a requirement for upper secondary students in English- and French-medium schools to take the other language as a subject. That is, anglophone students must study some French, while francophone students must study some English up to Year 10. The thinking behind this policy is presumably that all people of a particular level of education should be at least able to read and understand (if not speak to some extent) the other metropolitan official language of the country, given that sometimes documents in just one language are in circulation.

I know nothing at all about what sorts of assessment procedures are in place for ensuring that these objectives are met. In fact, my strong suspicion is that the policy outlined in the preceding paragraph is only partly successful in any case. Given the way in which English-medium education has come to dominate in the education system of Vanuatu, francophones do not generally take a great deal of convincing that it is in their interests to learn some English, and substantial numbers become reasonably competent in the language. Anglophone secondary students, however, tend to be particularly resistant to the idea of learning French, and relatively few achieve any degree of fluency. 21

I am not aware of any discussion having been conducted in the country concerning the particular varieties of English and French that the education system of Vanuatu should aim to promote. Teachers of English and French at primary level are almost exclusively second language Ni-Vanuatu speakers of the languages, so the models that children are exposed to are certainly not native-speaker models by any stretch of the imagination. For the most part, children do not come into any significant contact with native speakers of English or French until secondary level, and it is really only in senior secondary schools where native speaker models are at all influential. By this stage, children will obviously have already acquired fairly fixed patterns of pronunciation, grammar and lexical usage from exposure over many years to non-native speaker models.

One interesting question that is worth considering at this point is the extent to which a distinct Vanuatu ‘dialect’ of English has emerged among English-educated Ni-Vanuatu, as well as the related question of whether a distinct local variety of French has emerged as well. In Papua New Guinea, a recognisable
Papua New Guinea set of idiomatic expressions, and even some phonological and grammatical norms, have emerged in English as the language has come to express a distinct Papua New Guinean identity among the educated élite (Smith, 1988). In Vanuatu however, English is so rarely used in its spoken form even among the best educated Ni-Vanuatu that it would be difficult to recognise any systematic features that one would want to ascribe to a Vanuatu dialect of English.

One related observation that is frequently made is that the French of French-educated Ni-Vanuatu much more closely approximates to the standard of spoken metropolitan French. Ni-Vanuatu who speak English, by way of contrast, are much more likely to carry some kind of local accent, and also, it has been argued, to speak with less fluency. Assuming that these observations are correct – and it must be recognised that these are for the most part purely impressionistic observations that have not been subject to rigorous empirical verification – the most commonly suspected explanation for this is to claim interference from Bislama in the case of English speakers.

However, this suggestion has never been proved, and it needs to be kept in mind that the pre-independence French education system much more strongly valued linguistic uniformity than was ever the case in the English-speaking world. It is noteworthy that dialect differentiation among the best educated speakers of French in France is almost non-existent, whereas it is quite unremarkable for well-educated speakers of English to have marked Australian, New Zealand or a variety of British or American accents (along with many others).

In any case, the pre-independence British education system was more closely adapted to the local situation than was ever the case with the more rigidly centralised French system. The French-medium education system in its overseas territories has also been described as being specifically aimed at producing évolués who would speak, act and think like metropolitan French people. This system was successful to the extent that French-educated Ni-Vanuatu today speak to each other in French in informal situations much more readily than English-educated Ni-Vanuatu speak to each other in English. I have on a number of occasions observed some well-educated francophone Ni-Vanuatu speaking to each other in French in local ‘kava bars’, while I do not remember ever having encountered the same kind of behaviour between anglophone Ni-Vanuatu.

Languages in the media

In a country such as Vanuatu where transport is difficult and electricity supplies are for the most part restricted to the two towns where fewer than 20% of Ni-Vanuatu live, the media are far less intrusive than is the case in many other countries. Newspapers are by and large only easily accessible to people in the towns, and television broadcasts are also similarly restricted in their reception. Radio is the only medium which reaches the entire population of the country across all language groups, and which crosses the urban-rural divide in society. Because the language choices and issues of public access, as well as historical developments, are somewhat different for each of these media, I will discuss each medium separately.
Radio

The first radio broadcasts in Vanuatu were in the 1960s. These programmes were beamed initially in English, French and Bislama from a government station. Bislama rapidly came to dominate the airwaves, with English and French being reduced to secondary status, simply because so few people understood English or French and so many understood Bislama.

In the early 1970s the amount of airtime over what was then known as Radio Vila was increased significantly, and the power of the transmitters was also boosted, enabling a much larger rural proportion of the population to receive the short-wave broadcasts. This period represented the run-up to independence, and the radio was used to disseminate competing political ideas. Bislama rapidly became the dominant medium for the expression of these ideas, due to its politically neutral position vis-à-vis English and French. After independence, the radio station was renamed Radio Vanuatu in recognition of the vital national function that was played by the radio in keeping people informed about recent developments. However, when Vanuatu became independent, the government retained direct control over the radio station, a fact which has prompted repeated, often quite justified, claims that the government of the day was using its power to restrict people’s access to competing interpretations of the day’s events.

Short wave radio broadcasts from Radio Vanuatu can be received all over the country, and even in rural areas where there is often little spare cash, one of the first things that people choose to buy when they have some money is a battery-operated radio. Many people are largely reliant on Bislama radio broadcasts for national and international news and reports of shipping movements, and people listen to the radio for the many public education programmes that are regularly broadcast. The radio also broadcasts paid ‘service messages’ every day, allowing people to pass personal messages over the radio where there is no access to telephones or teleradio.24 The plea eni man i harem mesej ya, plis pasem i go long X ‘anybody hearing this message should please convey it to X’ is regularly heard at the end of these messages, as it is recognised that somebody may have temporarily run out of money to buy new batteries, their radio may have broken down, or they may be otherwise prevented from hearing their message.

Radio Vanuatu broadcasts about 80% of the time in Bislama. The remaining time is devoted equally to programming in English and French. Much of the programming in metropolitan languages involves material rebroadcast from overseas stations, such as news programmes from Radio Australia or Radio France International, or old BBC panel games, and the intended audience appears to be expatriates living in the country, rather than Ni-Vanuatu. Very few locally produced programmes are broadcast in English or French.

Radio Vanuatu has never made any attempt to present programmes in any of the local languages. The lack of vernacular broadcasts has never been a public issue, as people presumably recognise that it would be impossible to broadcast in 80 languages over a single radio station (and that to establish 80 different radio stations would be completely impractical). There has only been one situation of which I am aware when vernaculars were used in broadcast radio, and this did not involve Radio Vanuatu. At the time that Vanuatu gained its independence in 1980, there was a short-lived rebellion based on the island of Espiritu Santo.
which involved a failed attempt to set up an independent state known as the Vemarana Republic. The main centre for this political resistance was the small settlement of Vanafo, which was located in the interior of Espiritu Santo. This community consisted of a significant number of settlers from other islands, and they attempted to communicate with their supporters and opponents at the time of the attempted insurrection by establishing a radio transmitter and broadcasting in Bislama, as well as in some of the main vernaculars of settlers in Luganville, such as Paamese.

The avoidance of vernaculars over Radio Vanuatu is not complete, however, as something of an exception is made for the broadcast of local music, whether this is recreational or religious in nature. Vernacular songs played over the radio can become popular nationwide even where all but a few percent of the population know the meaning of the words because they are sung in some local language. (People are sometimes known to come up with their own local vernacular words to a widely played song in an unfamiliar language. These words may be quite different in meaning to the words in the original song but they allow people from other islands to enjoy the song as well.)

The language in which an announcer is speaking will therefore not allow an accurate prediction to be made about the language of the songs that (s)he may broadcast. In a programme that is presented in Bislama, the music that is played may be in a variety of languages. The popular Wokbaot Rikwes (‘Mobile Request’) programme, for example, while presented in Bislama, plays songs in whatever language is chosen by the person being interviewed, whether that be Bislama, English, French, a local language, or possibly even Caribbean French Creole. Similarly, the presenter of an English-medium request programme may play some French songs, while French-speaking announcers frequently broadcast songs in English.

In the early 1990s, a second local radio station was established. Known as FM98, it broadcasts on the FM band, rather than the medium and short wave bands of Radio Vanuatu. This station can only be picked up close to main centres, and is obviously aimed at people who are wealthy enough to own stereo receiving equipment. The choice of programming, as well as language choices, on the FM station is quite different to what is broadcast over the AM and short wave frequencies. There is a greater emphasis on what appeals to a younger and more monied listening audience. Advertisements are more noticeable, and there is less attention paid to the public education aspects of broadcasting than we find on the AM and short wave service.

Significantly, the dominant languages of the FM service were originally English and French in pretty well equal quantities, with Ni-Vanuatu announcers attempting – often not terribly successfully – to imitate the non-stop patter of commercial radio announcers overseas. However, it appears that lately, there has been an increasing tendency to use Bislama. The FM station tends to avoid playing local vernacular songs, though the announcers seem to be happy to play Fijian and Tahitian hits. It seems that as long as a song is from overseas, it is considered suitably sophisticated to be played on the FM band, even though the numbers of speakers of Fijian and Tahitian living in Vanuatu are tiny.
Newspapers

When the first radio broadcasts were made in the 1960s, the French administration in Vanuatu was particularly keen to see its political influence extended to a greater proportion of the population. They set about establishing institutions of government in direct competition with the British in an attempt to drum up support. One of the strategies adopted by the French Residency to bring this about was to begin issuing a newsletter in 1961 entitled *Bulletin d’Information de la Résidence de France* (‘French Residency Information Bulletin’). This was initially written mainly in French, though it contained some material in Bislama.

This jockeying for influence between the two colonial powers coincided with—or perhaps even directly fostered—the development of a conscious political awareness among a number of English-educated Ni-Vanuatu who established the first political party in the condominium, the New Hebrides Cultural Association. This was followed shortly afterwards by the establishment of a competing movement that aimed to attract predominantly francophone support. This was the beginning of the anglophone-francophone divide in Vanuatu politics that has been a recurring theme up to the present.

These political organisations both produced newsletters to provide information primarily to the rapidly growing urban population (Van Trease, 1995: 21). The rural population was largely excluded, as it very often took too long for newsletters to reach outlying areas, by which time the news was often stale. The most influential of these newsletters was *New Hebrides Viewpoints* issued by the largely anglophone New Hebrides National Party (formerly the New Hebrides Cultural Association). Although the French government had been producing a newsletter since 1961, the British were much slower to act, and it was only in 1972 that they began issuing their own *British Newsletter*, in direct response to indigenous political groups which had begun producing their parties’ newsletters. So, by the early 1970s, there were British and French government newsletters, as well as a variety of newsletters issued by new political parties, all making use of Bislama, along with one of the two metropolitan languages, depending on whether the publishers saw themselves as anglophones or francophones.

Prior to the 1960s and early 1970s and this flurry of political activity conducted through these new media outlets, Bislama had been seen by Ni-Vanuatu largely as a language of rural plantation labourers. Those who made the choice to leave their villages to work on plantations were often seen as troublemakers, leaving to escape from village authorities. Since speakers of Bislama in earlier times were often seen as undesirable types, the language that they spoke continued to be associated with the same negative attitudes that had characterised it since it first spread around Vanuatu as a result of the Queensland plantation trade in the late 1800s. It was seen as a language that belonged nowhere, as exemplified by the description of the language by one person as *lanwis blong rod* ‘language of the road’, with uncomplimentary comparison being made with the expression *pikinini blong rod* ‘illegitimate child (“child of the road”’) (Charpentier, 1979: 133). With this description, Bislama was being described implicitly as a ‘bastard language’.

However, the development of an urban economy with the expansion of tourism and the establishment of a tax haven for international businesses led to the creation of more prestigious non-plantation jobs that required some formal
schooling. This, coupled with the rise of nationalist politics, saw Bislama move into domains that it had not previously occupied. It became the one and only language that could appeal to the entire urban population, whether educated or not, whether schooled in French or English, and whether manual labourers or skilled employees. Bislama changed very rapidly from being the language of those who some had thought to be enslaved in the past, to the language of those who sought to be free in the future.

When the French Residency issued its first newsletter in 1961, its writers had very little in the way of orthographic tradition in Bislama to fall back on, as Bislama had until then not been used in written form in public at all. One might have expected these francophone writers to adopt a set of gallicised spelling conventions followed by earlier francophone writers such as Père Pionnier. While there is certainly some evidence of gallicised spellings in their written materials, there is, in fact, much greater evidence of influence from English. However, there was also a clear attempt to spell words in some kind of a phonologically based rather than a purely anglocentric etymologically based spelling system. Since the inspiration from this cannot have come from any pre-existing tradition in Vanuatu, the writers of such materials were presumably taking as their major model either the spelling conventions widely followed in vernacular languages in Vanuatu, or the spelling system of Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, which was already fairly well established by that stage (though the extent to which people were aware of this in Vanuatu is not known).

The early colonial government newsletters evolved later into the British government’s *Tamtam* (‘drum’) and the French government’s *Nabanga* (‘banyan tree’). The choice of Bislama names for these newspapers rather than names in English and French reflected a move towards the expression of a greater local viewpoint, but the British newspaper continued to publish bilingually in English and Bislama, while the French newspaper published bilingually in French and Bislama. After independence, a single Vanuatu government weekly newspaper was established, and this continues to publish as *Vanuatu Weekly/Hebdomadaire*, with material in English, French and Bislama.

For the first few years of independence, this was the only regular newspaper. The content was fairly tightly controlled by whatever government held power – in much the same way that the radio has been under tight government control – and there have been regular complaints about a lack of press freedom. In the early 1980s, an independent newspaper was established but it did not last long, as the foreign editor was deported for publishing material that the government of the time disagreed with.

In 1994, the *Trading Post* began operation as a much more successful – and daring – privately owned newspaper. Its major news items and editorial comment are entirely in English. Letters to the editor are in English or Bislama, depending on the choice of the letter writer. There is also a popular gossip column entitled *Mi harem se . . . ’I hear that . . .’*, in which short items of gossip are printed either in English or very colloquial Bislama. Even items that are printed in English often have jocular interjections in the latest Bislama slang, and items in Bislama are sometimes sarcastically heavily laden with English when senior people are described as behaving in particularly crass ways, such as in the following (Trading Post 490, 16 October 1999):
Mi harem se wan senior secretary long diocese of Vanuatu we hem i directly involved wetem official matters to the bishop hem i givim pikinini long haos gel blong hem blong Torba.  

Otherwise, the only Bislama content in the Trading Post consists of items of local sports new on the back page, as well as a four page insert summarising recent world and local news stories on what is intended to be a weekly basis. However, late in 1999 the newspaper conducted a reader survey, and the wording of some of the questions suggests that the editor was considering providing more news coverage in Bislama if that was what readers said they wanted.

Another newspaper, known as Nasara (‘public discussion area’) was also established in 1998. This also appeared initially mostly in English and Bislama, though with a greater amount of regular Bislama content than we find in the Trading Post. More recently, there has also been some news in French as well. However, there were reports in late 1999 that this newspaper was about to lose its financial backing.

**Television**

Television broadcasting in Vanuatu only began in 1992 when TV blong Vanuatu (‘Television of Vanuatu’) was established. Given that the signal can only be received in the urban areas and a very restricted range of rural centres, and also given that the receiving equipment is much more expensive than radio sets, television broadcasts are clearly aimed primarily at a wealthier urban audience. There is very little local content broadcast over the television because of the cost involved in producing programmes, though there is a daily (on weekdays only) national news broadcast in Bislama, and short music clips of local bands performing in a range of languages: Bislama, local vernaculars, English or French. Other programming is organised to give equal emphasis to material in English and French, with all-English and all-French programming on every other day.

Satellite dishes have also sprouted up all over Vila. So far, those who have installed these dishes have largely been relatively wealthy expatriates and local Chinese business operators who prefer to have a wider range of programming than that offered by TV blong Vanuatu, as well as broadcasts 24 hours a day rather than the limited hours offered by the local station. Of course, such broadcasts are entirely in English, French, Mandarin or Cantonese, and the content is completely non-local.

Related to the question of broadcast television is the access that people in Vanuatu have to videocassette recorders. While television broadcasts cannot be received in most outer island locations, it is not uncommon for television screens to be used in rural areas to show videocassettes (and VCRs are very common in urban areas as well). Even where there is no main electricity supply, people often buy generators specifically so that they and their family and friends can watch programmes on video. Such showings are sometimes for educational or religious purposes, though local entrepreneurs often organise video evenings purely for people’s entertainment, for which a small entrance fee is charged, and video nights in rural areas often attract large audiences.

As might be expected, the amount of locally produced material that is seen on such occasions is extremely limited, with most people therefore watching videos
in English or French only, and there is no attempt to provide subtitling or dubbing in Bislama. However, people are often not able to clearly hear the sound when in a large audience in a venue that is typically not acoustically ideal (and with an electricity generator humming in the background). In fact, it is often not always necessary to be able to follow a great deal of the dialogue as the most popular shows are action movies with lots of fighting and shooting. Such movies allow people to make up their own story-line as they go, and I have even heard people producing their own imaginary, but entirely plausible, dialogue for the benefit of the friends with whom they are sharing the movie.

Advertising and public awareness

I have included advertising as a separate heading as this is worthy of discussion independently of the various media. Not surprisingly, vernaculars play no role in advertising in the country given the numbers of languages involved, so this discussion focuses on the relationship between Bislama, English and French in the context of advertising. Closely related to advertising is the promotion of public awareness on particular issues. While the two are similar in that broadcast media or written public notices and posters are used to present messages to the public, they differ in that advertisements aim to persuade people to purchase a product, while awareness programmes simply aim to educate people about public issues.

Public awareness broadcasts, newspaper items and posters are almost invariably presented in Bislama. Radio slots in the past have promoted issues as varied as road safety to children (Lukluk long lef, lukluk long raet, lukluk long lef bakegen ‘Look to the left, look to the right, and look to the left again’) and breast feeding over bottle feeding to mothers (Tata botel, titi hem i nambawan ‘Goodbye bottle, breasts are best’). Political campaigns are also conducted almost exclusively in Bislama when the audience is linguistically mixed, though candidates speaking to audiences within their own language area will normally campaign in the vernacular. There is also some limited public awareness that is conducted in rural areas through the medium of local languages. The Forestry Department, for example, has produced limited numbers of posters in some local languages promoting sensible forest management programmes.

Advertising on radio for commercial products and services makes much greater use of English and French, though Bislama is also used to some extent. Television advertising is similar to radio advertising, though advertisements in metropolitan languages are usually taken from overseas sources, mostly being advertisements in English from Australia, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Some locally produced television advertisements are made in Bislama. There is little advertising in French, and even on designated French broadcast days, advertisements still appear overwhelmingly in English.

There is a tendency for written advertisements to appear in a metropolitan language while advertising over the radio is more likely to be in Bislama. However, products that are primarily aimed at local buyers rather than also being aimed at the wealthier urban expatriate minority are more likely to be advertised in print in Bislama. The newspapers produce printed advertisements in English, French or Bislama, according to the choice of the advertiser. Most commercial advertisements are in English, though some are in French, while
public notices and lost-and-found advertisements can be found in all three languages, depending on the choice of the person who places the advertisement.

**Literary writing**

Finally, I propose to discuss briefly the linguistic choices that are encountered in creative writing produced by Ni-Vanuatu. Only a very small number of literary writers in the South Pacific have achieved any degree of international recognition, and this recognition has for the most part been achieved through the medium of a metropolitan language, such as Albert Wendt’s success with his novels relating to the experiences of Samoans.

In Vanuatu, I know of no novel that has been authored by any Ni-Vanuatu writer, in any language. Literary writing among Ni-Vanuatu has for the most part involved short poems in free verse, which appear in a wide range of published outlets, e.g. the local newspapers, school magazines, or collections of poems published either by the authors themselves or by the University of the South Pacific. It is generally more highly educated people who produce such works, and there is a strong tendency for people to write in either English or French. While it is certainly not unknown for people to compose poems in Bislama, I have never encountered any creatively written poetry in a local language.

However, it would not be fair to say that local languages are never used for creative written literary purposes, as young people frequently compose new songs to be sung by local ‘stringband’ groups in their local languages. Some such songs are composed exclusively in the local language and are intended purely for local consumption. However, some of the better organised musical groups put out cassettes and compact disks for a national market, with a mix of songs in the local language, Bislama and a metropolitan language, and sometimes with more than one language being used within a single number.

**Immigrant languages**

Vanuatu is a small country with few resources, which has not made it a target for immigrants. According to the 1989 census results, the non-citizen population constituted only 2.4% of the total. Most of this number was made up of people on temporary visas, either short-term tourists or employees on three-year renewable work contracts as civil servants. Some are also non-citizens operating businesses in the country, but they are present in the country only on the basis of renewable residence permits. Foreigners can only apply for citizenship after a period of ten years of uninterrupted residence. As successful applicants are required to relinquish any other passports that they hold, there are only very small numbers of expatriates who opt to take up Vanuatu citizenship and become permanent resident immigrants.

There is no special linguistic provision made for the several thousand long-term foreign residents in Vanuatu. Given the status of English and French in the country, it is common for such people to assume that a knowledge of either language will be sufficient to allow them to successfully carry out their duties, and very often this confidence is justified. It is extremely rare for any expatriate (except perhaps for the occasional missionary or a linguistic or anthropological
fieldworker) to learn anything of a local Vanuatu language other than perhaps a few common greetings.

It is much more common for expatriates to make an effort to learn Bislama – indeed, for some jobs such a knowledge is indispensable – but the government provides no training in the language. Some non-government organisations (e.g. Peace Corps or other volunteer agencies) and several of the diplomatic missions of foreign governments require new expatriate appointees to undergo training in Bislama and they regularly organise short introductory courses in the language. Other individuals usually have the opportunity to attend courses that are mounted from time to time by the University of the South Pacific’s Port Vila campus.

There have been some longer-term immigrant communities whose language is neither English nor French. There have been Vietnamese people resident in Vanuatu in small numbers since people were recruited initially as plantation labourers in the 1920s and 1930s. Most were eventually repatriated to Vietnam in the 1960s, but a small community remained in Vanuatu where they ended up running businesses in Port Vila and Luganville. By and large, the younger generations of Vietnamese have been incorporated into the local francophone education system and have become first-language French speakers.

There is also a small community of Chinese immigrants, again often running small businesses in towns. These people have generally gravitated towards the anglophone education system, resulting in a situation where Chinese and Vietnamese business people may need to make use of Bislama with each other as an intermediary language. By and large, the Chinese seem to maintain much closer contact with other overseas Chinese communities, and the local Chinese languages are maintained by the younger generation more than we find among the Vietnamese community.

There is no provision made for the maintenance of either of these Asian languages in the education system of Vanuatu, and this has never been seen as a public issue. In fact, neither community is ever likely to attempt to make an issue out of this, understanding full well that their very visible influence in the local economy makes them the occasional target for local resentment.

There have also been communities of Wallisians (from the French territory of Wallis and Futuna) and Gilbertese (from newly independent Kiribati, which was formerly part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands administered by Britain). While maintaining their respective vernaculars, the Wallisians have generally gravitated towards French as a language of education, while the i-Kiribati learned English. However, these communities are now much smaller than they used to be prior to independence. 

Language Policy and Planning

Language planning: *De facto* and *de jure*

Apart from the constitutional clauses relating to language that were presented in The Language Profile of Vanuatu, there is no legal reference to language planning of any kind in place in Vanuatu. There have been numerous calls from academics and language practitioners in the past for some kind of official activity in this area given the linguistic diversity of the nation and the kinds of measures...
that might be considered to both protect and foster that diversity (Lynch, 1979; Pacific Churches Research Centre & the University of the South Pacific, 1981; Crowley, 1984; Pacific Languages Unit, 1984; Crowley & Lynch, 1985; Crowley, 1989a; Thomas, 1990; Early, 1999), and the ombudsman has issued a series of reports on the need for some kind of language planning activity (Office of the Ombudsman, 1995, 1996, 1997). Although these suggestions and recommendations are not necessarily all along exactly the same lines, it is no exaggeration to state that to date nothing has ever followed from any of these suggestions in terms of legislation, or indeed any kind of government-sanctioned policy statements for implementation, with the exception of recent moves in the direction of setting up a programme of initial vernacular education (as mentioned in Language Spread).

The closest to any de jure language policy from government is what follows directly from what is contained in the constitution. The principal languages of education currently are English and French, while English, French and Bislama have a variety of official functions, with Bislama functioning as a kind of pseudo-national language to allow people to avoid making a politically divisive choice between English and French.

A recent survey conducted by myself of a randomly selected set of government offices and offices of government authorities shows that whatever the constitution implies about the constitutional equality of Bislama, English and French as official languages, there is considerable laxity in how this is applied in terms of signage and public notices. Offices that occupy former condominium (i.e. joint British and French) offices often retain the pre-1980 signs with no change, and these were often scrupulously bilingual in English and French.

The Post Office (or Hotel des Postes) is one such, where signs indicating the availability of stamps, where one can register one’s letters, or which postbox is for local and overseas mail are still in English and French, but not Bislama. However, more recently produced signs such as those on the post-independence doors, as well as the new public telephones and the new slot for missorted mail, are in English only. The only public use of written Bislama in the post office was a computer printout in three languages informing the public that post office staff will not open any post boxes for people who have forgotten their keys. In the Ministry of Education offices – which formerly housed the French Education Office – many more signs are in French only, as education prior to independence was a national rather than a condominium responsibility.

Completely new offices display a range of uses of the three official languages. In the Police Station, some signs are in English only, some in French only, and some are in Bislama only. In the municipal library, the signs on the front appear in all three languages in lettering of equal size, though the hours of opening are given in English and French but not Bislama. The sign at the front of the National Museum is in Bislama only, while the displays inside are described in all three languages. In the offices of the international airline Air Vanuatu and the domestic airline Vanair, most public signage is in English only, with some material appearing in both English and French, though largely ignoring Bislama.

Where Bislama appears in a public sign or notice in a government office, it tends not to be used to announce what something is; rather, it is more likely to be used to tell people what to do (or what not to do) while they are in that office.
Thus, Bislama is more likely to be used to tell people not to smoke, to remember to close the door, to walk and not run in case of fire, or not to leave rubbish behind. English and French, however, are more likely to be used to announce that a particular office is where the Department of Finance is located, or where the Director-General’s office is.

The extremely tenuous hold of Bislama as a genuine national language is illustrated by a recent incident about which it is not possible at this stage for legal reasons to provide specific details. It can be reported, however, that one government authority has been given notice by the Office of the Ombudsman (in a letter written only in English) that the authority was under investigation for having violated the provisions of the constitution by having advertised several positions only in Bislama. These were positions that were intended for Ni-Vanuatu, yet the Office of the Ombudsman was insisting that the positions should have been advertised either both in English or French, or in Bislama, English and French, but not in Bislama only.

Because of the constitutionally equal status of English and French, there is a government ‘Language Services’ department, whose duties are primarily to ensure that important official documents written in either English or French are made available in the other language. Despite the name, the Language Services Department has no role whatsoever relating to the status or use of the nation’s local languages, and while staff do carry out some translation between the metropolitan languages and Bislama, they make no attempt whatsoever to promote the establishment of a written standard for the language.29

The present status of the vernacular languages of Vanuatu has been of concern to many influential Ni-Vanuatu, and there has been considerable questioning of the appropriateness of the current exclusive emphasis on metropolitan languages in the education system. For example, at a national conference on language policy held in Vila in 1981, which was jointly sponsored by the University of the South Pacific, and the Pacific Churches Research Centre, the dominant theme was expressed as the need to:

redress the balance created during the colonial era in which the major emphasis had been given to encouraging the languages of the two metropolitan powers. (Pacific Churches Research Centre & University of the South Pacific, 1981: 4)

These kinds of issues have also been debated in parliament. In the meeting of 30 April 1982, for example, there was debate on the role of Bislama in schools. Practically all discussion was either in favour of using Bislama as a medium of instruction in schools, or a much greater use of vernaculars in schools, with just a few speakers arguing in favour of maintaining the status quo with English and French. There was no actual vote taken to determine future policy in this regard however, and subsequent policy decisions until the late 1990s indicated that there was no real political will to follow up these earlier expressions of opinion.

Use of Bislama as a medium of initial education is likely not to be accepted by most parents, and Charpentier (1999) even goes so far as to predict major public demonstrations if Bislama were to be adopted as a medium of instruction over vernaculars. Siegel (1996b) writes more encouragingly of the potential for Bislama as a language of formal education, but until public attitudes towards
the language change significantly, it is likely that the role of Bislama as a language of instruction will be primarily in the non-formal sector or in the area of adult literacy.

Vanuatu’s constitution provides for the establishment of a Council of Chiefs, known as the Malvatumauri, which has a responsibility to guide government policy in matters relating to Melanesian traditions in Vanuatu, and in land tenure. The Malvatumauri issued a document in 1983 stating the guidelines within which it operates, and this document includes a very firm commitment to the idea of including vernacular languages in the formal education system in Vanuatu (Paramount Chiefs Malvatumauri, 1983).

The first National Development Plan for the period 1982–86 stated that the government intended to set up a Vanuatu Education Commission, which would have the responsibility, among other things, for deciding which language (or languages) should be used at various stages of instruction (National Planning Office, 1982). However, that plan – as well as the subsequent five-year plan – passed, with no such commission being established.

Official attitudes towards language in the twenty years of Vanuatu’s independence have therefore largely involved some talk, but little action. To be a little kinder, it could be said that while there has been very little real de jure language planning activity conducted in Vanuatu, the de facto policy could perhaps be characterised as an extreme case of laissez-faire.

This official attitude perhaps reflects something of the traditional attitude towards languages. In highly multilingual Melanesian societies, people tend to have fairly pragmatic rather than strongly ideological views about the use of languages in the sense that the primary objective in using a language is to convey a meaning. In addition to these laissez-faire views about language planning, I see this attitude reflected in a very relaxed tolerance that people have towards the form of a message in a language. Messages communicated in Bislama will be accepted in practically any form, even if that form is quite deviant from normal grammatical patterns and lexical norms, as long as it can be understood.

In fact, even intelligibility of content is not always required, as politicians are apparently free to anglicise their Bislama randomly to rural audiences in a way that sometimes communicates nothing to their audience apart from the fact that politicians consider themselves far better educated in a metropolitan language than their constituents. The fact that suggestions that greater editorial control over the form of translations into Bislama should be exercised in the media have also repeatedly gone unheard is further evidence of the same kind of attitude. The willingness of speakers of local languages to accept stylistically odd, or even grammatically deviant, biblical translations (see above) can also be seen as an example of the same kind of attitude.

However, people’s pragmatism in this regard is often tested, and there is a real issue concerning the extent to which the kind of Bislama that is used publicly by well-educated Ni-Vanuatu to lesser educated people is actually correctly understood. Charpentier (1979: 394–5) cites the following letter to the editor of the New Hebrides News in 1978:

Plante taim me lisin long Pidgin News long Radio New Hebrides be sometime me no andastand gud from we olgeta radio man oli iusum plante
Perhaps through constant exposure to such vocabulary over twenty years, people appear to have become inured to such usage, and they seldom bother any more to complain. However, the issue has not gone away as shown by Masing’s (1992: 20–21) report of a more recent incident where a government minister on tour to a rural community gave a public speech which, to this well-educated observer, seemed impressive, yet the local reaction was negative.

Further investigation revealed that significant points in the minister’s speech were simply not understood at all when the taped version was played back to people. For instance, the minister at one point declared *Polisi olsem i adresem situesen blong yumi tedei* ‘Such a policy addresses our situation today’. However, local people simply did not understand this sentence at all, the reason being that *adresem* and *situesen* are lexical items that are probably never used by ordinary rural people (and it is possible that some people may not be entirely clear about the word *polisi* as well). If the minister had wanted to speak absolutely clearly to these people, he should possibly have said something like *Plan olsem ya i folem street laef we yumi stap long hem tedei* ‘Such a plan is in close accordance with the life that we are experiencing today’. This kind of creeping anglicisation in public achieves nothing except to constantly remind the rural public that they do not speak English well enough to become a community leader or a Radio Vanuatu announcer in Bislama.

This situation has arisen because although Bislama has been declared to be the national language, there has never been any coordinated attempt to provide speakers of the language with the kind of vocabulary which would enable it to be used for the wide range of functions to which it is regularly being put without people having to resort to *ad hoc* solutions. In any case, even if such steps were to be taken, there is no institutional framework in place for that kind of vocabulary to be disseminated, as Bislama has no place within the education system (Lynch, 1996). As a result of the situation in Vanuatu’s early colonial history, Bislama was a language that had no status among any of its users. As a result, speakers of Bislama undeniably face difficulties today. History has left Vanuatu with a national language that is not fully standardised in its written form, and which is lacking vocabulary when compared to the technical sphere in English and French, and when compared to local vernaculars in the sphere of local knowledge and culture.

By ‘unstandardised’, I mean that there is no generally accepted norm against which different individual and regional uses can be judged in formal and written uses of the language. That is to say, people often do not know what is considered to be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ when they are writing Bislama. Spellings also tend to vary randomly between ‘phonemic’ spellings and the ‘etymological’ spellings, which more closely resemble the spelling of the word in English (or French, if it is a word of French origin). For instance, a written text in Bislama may be found with
the word for ‘republic’ spelt in any of the following ways: ripablik, repablic, ripublic, republic, repablik, republique, repablique, republique (and this does not exhaust all possibilities). The banknotes in the national currency, the vatu, are marked as having been issued by the Central Bank blong Vanuatu and not, as we might have expected, the Sentrol Bang blong Vanuatu.

Also, when borrowed words are accepted into Bislama, speakers face a choice in some cases of two forms of the same word, one derived from English and the other derived from French. For instance, should a new word like ‘centimetre’ be expressed in Bislama as sentimita (based on its English form) or as sontimet (based on its French form), or perhaps as some kind of mixture of the two, e.g. sontimeta? Speakers do in fact alternate in these kinds of ways when faced with this situation, such as when writing for the newspaper, the Vanuatu Weekly/Hebdomadaire, for instance, or speaking over Radio Vanuatu (Ligo, 1981), or taking part in parliamentary debate, or making any kind of public speech at all in fact.

Something of a de facto standard for the spelling of Bislama has, in fact, emerged in recent years (Crowley, 1996a). Pastor Bill Camden was among the first to set about devising an orthography for the language in the early 1970s. His spellings were originally systematised in an unpublished spelling list that was distributed at the time among expatriates who were learning Bislama, and others who were interested in the religious translation work that he was involved in. Some of the early spellings that he adopted were different from those that are more widely followed today, such as the use of ai to represent the diphthong in Krais ‘Christ’ (which is spelt Kraes today), and the appearance of a vowel between the two consonants in bilong ‘of’ (which is written today as blong).

Camden’s initial spelling system was based on his own understanding of the phonological system of Bislama, and perhaps also in part on pre-existing orthographic conventions for mutually intelligible Tok Pisin (spoken in Papua New Guinea), where such spellings had for some time been relatively fixed. Not surprisingly, this first attempt to systematise spellings was subject to revision, and an editorial committee of people involved in Bible translation sat between 1974 and 1976 to determine a more generally acceptable spelling system. It was at that time that the spellings ai and au were changed to ae and ao respectively, largely to reflect the preference of Ni-Vanuatu on the committee who reportedly felt that these spellings were more appropriate to what they perceived to be the phonetic values of these diphthongs.

The manager of Maropa Bookshop, which was one of the main booksellers in Port Vila at the time, then asked Camden if he would produce a reference dictionary (Camden, personal communication). Accordingly, in 1977 he produced A Descriptive Dictionary: Bislama to English, which Maropa Bookshop then published and marketed. Although this book suffered from the unfortunate lack of an English-Bislama section, it filled a much needed gap and came to be widely used for the remainder of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s as a source of Bislama usage and spelling.

Since language was very much on everybody’s mind at the time that Vanuatu gained its independence in 1980, the Pacific Churches Research Centre and the University of the South Pacific in 1981 jointly convened a conference to discuss language policy in the country. This conference discussed a wide range of issues relating to the status of not just French and English, but also of vernacular
languages and Bislama. In his opening address, the then Prime Minister, Hon. Fr Walter Lini, focused his comments on the importance of:

\[\ldots\] developing Bislama as the main language of communication within the country. \ldots\) He assured the conference of the present government’s full support should appropriate recommendations regarding the development of Bislama emerge from the discussions. (Pacific Churches Research Centre and the University of the South Pacific, 1981: 4)

The conference was valuable in that it allowed influential Ni-Vanuatu to voice their attitudes to Bislama and the question of standardisation publicly. Some opinions reflected the kinds of colonial attitudes of English speakers in the pre-independence era. Tor (1981) expressed the doubt that Bislama was a real language at all, in the following words: ‘So far, the language (if I may call it so) has not been standardised.’ Other comments related to the lack of teaching materials and the lack of technical vocabulary in Bislama, which would prevent its wider use in the formal education system (Liliu, 1981; Tor, 1981). The lack of standardisation in Bislama spelling was repeatedly seen as a stumbling block in securing any wider range of functions for the language. In the end, the conference did not resolve any substantive issues relating to the development of a standardised orthography for Bislama. However, participants did call for the government to establish a permanent commission that should report regularly on the use and development of the languages of Vanuatu in the life of the country.

Despite a general feeling at that conference that standardisation of Bislama orthography was desirable, no specific resolutions were passed as to what should represent the standard, since it was felt that this was an area that would require further linguistic research. However, since the commission that the conference called for was never established, no formal mechanism was ever established for following through on this suggestion at an official level.

While parliamentarians, government officials and foreign academics and advisers were discussing the status of Bislama and the issue of standardisation, ordinary people continued to write the language. Although the spellings in the translations of the gospels, along with the subsequent hymnals and also Camden’s dictionary, had a significant impact on how some people wrote the language, these spellings were certainly not immediately adopted by everybody. Charpentier (1979: 168–92) documents the widespread variability in spellings that rapidly developed in secular written materials as an increasing amount of material in Bislama was published in the run-up to independence, and also in the aftermath of independence.

Given the lack of any official support for the spellings used by the churches, Camden’s original spellings were further fine-tuned for use in biblical translated materials under the auspices of the Kokonas Baebol Translesen (‘Coconut Bible Translation’) team in Luganville. Although this group included representation from a variety of Christian denominations, as well as Ni-Vanuatu from a number of different islands, the influence of Camden’s earlier spellings was clearly obvious in the spelling list that was issued as Ling et al. (1984) under the title Fasin blong raetem Bislama (‘The Way to write Bislama’). Although this was not formally published, the Kokonas Bible translation team did make the list available to those who were interested.
The lack of public availability of the list meant that many people could not check their spellings against this latest set of authorised Kokonas spellings. Another problem for the secular writer was that this list contained an understandable concentration of spellings for words in the religious area (e.g. names of books of the Bible such as *Hibrus* ‘Hebrews’, *Habakuk* ‘Habakkuk’), while a substantial number of lower frequency non-religious words were completely lacking (e.g. *nalelep* ‘mud’, *nasiksik* ‘kind of bird’). There were also some spellings that had been publicised earlier which were altered by the Kokonas team, which most secular writers could not have known about. This led to a continuation of the situation of the 1970s and the 1980s in which ecclesiastical texts were published with systematic spellings, while spellings in secular texts ranged along a continuum between those set out in Camden (1977) and a much more *ad hoc* anglicised (and sometimes even gallicised) set of spellings.

While there was often random variation in the spelling of secular Bislama materials, they contained a number of spelling conventions that were becoming increasingly consistent, and these were sometimes at variance with spellings found in ecclesiastical materials. Around the time that the 1984 spelling list was circulated by the Kokonas Baebol team, it was becoming apparent that there was a possibility of two separate varieties of written Bislama emerging: an ecclesiastical Bislama on the one hand, and a secular Bislama on the other hand.

Some journalists with Radio Vanuatu at the time, after having taken a course in translation techniques at the University of the South Pacific, came to recognise the unnecessary difficulty of the task that they regularly faced in having to translate news bulletins from English into Bislama at short notice and with no set guidelines for translation. It was therefore decided that a *Komiti blong Bislama* (‘Bislama Committee’) should be established to assist them in this task. Sitting on this committee were people working with the Media Department (under which is subsumed both Radio Vanuatu and the official government newspaper *Vanuatu Weekly/Hebdomadaire*), Language Services (which provides official translations for a variety of government departments), as well as representatives of a variety of government and non-government organisations involved in providing the public access to developmental information, such as the Curriculum Development Unit and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Also sitting on the committee in an advisory capacity was a representative of the Pacific Languages Unit of the University of the South Pacific.

While the committee did not see standardisation of spelling as its primary objective, some decisions regarding spelling were unavoidable given that words needed to be written down in order for them to be disseminated to departments in government, as well as non-government organisations which might like to make use of these lists. The committee ended up endorsing a number of orthographic decisions that were in line with secular preference and which were at variance with the 1984 Kokonas spelling list. These included the following in particular:

1. That the glide *y* should be written as *i* immediately after a consonant, as in a word such as *giaman* ‘tell lies’. In ecclesiastical materials, the spelling *y* was being used, i.e. *gyaman*.
2. The postposed demonstrative ‘this, that’ should be exceptionally spelt *ia*,
rather than *ya* as in ecclesiastical materials (and in conformity with Camden’s earliest spelling).

The committee met fairly regularly between 1986 and 1988 and assembled a substantial body of terminological decisions, which were continually updated on computer and distributed to members of the committee. By 1988, however, committee members began to feel a sense of frustration because some of their office managers did not allow time for their staff to attend the monthly meetings, arguing that this was not a proper part of their job. In any case, their decisions bore no official weight and there was no way of enforcing (or even encouraging) compliance from the general public, except perhaps by example. In addition, the committee had no budget for secretarial staff or printing in order to disseminate its decisions more widely.

Because of these difficulties, the secretary of the committee in 1988 made a formal proposal to the Prime Minister’s Department (which was responsible for both Media Department and Language Services) that government should grant the committee the power to make official decisions in the area of the lexical development and in the standardisation of the spelling of Bislama. Receipt of this proposal was never acknowledged by the Prime Minister’s office, and there was certainly no decision taken to act on the recommendations.

In fact, despite my reference to the Prime Minister’s expression of support for the standardisation of written Bislama in 1981 (Pacific Churches Research Centre and the University of the South Pacific, 1981: 4), he appears to have undergone a rapid change of opinion because in the published summary of the 1982 debate on language in parliament, the Hon. Fr Walter Lini went on record as saying:

> . . . The only reason to teach Bislama in schools was to read it and write it. This would require standardisation, and would take the life out of it. If they wanted to make it a unifying factor they should not teach it. (Summarised Record of Proceedings, 1st ordinary session of 1982, Friday April 30)

Given this statement, the lack of success of the proposal from the *Komiti blong Bislama* should perhaps not have been too surprising.

By the late 1980s, Camden’s dictionary was out of print. Not only this, but it was considerably out of date in that much new vocabulary and many new expressions had entered the language in the intervening years of social and political development. Given the obvious need for some kind of dictionary of Bislama to be made available to the public, Crowley (1990b) published an updated dictionary, which also included an English-Bislama section that was lacking in Camden’s original dictionary.

This dictionary was compiled without any official and representative body to decide on orthographic issues, so it was explicitly stated that ‘this dictionary is not intended as a spelling reference manual’ (Crowley, 1990b: 29). Its main purpose, therefore, was to show the meanings and uses of Bislama words. However, since consistency is obviously necessary when writing a dictionary, some decisions had to be made where there was variability in the ways in which words were spelled. The strategy that was followed was basically to adopt the spellings in Ling *et al.* (1984) except in cases where popular usage seemed to be at variance with these recommendations. In particular, the dictionary reflected the
decisions made earlier by the *Komiti blong Bislama*. In cases of orthographic variation, etymological solutions were adopted, or solutions based on the preferences of younger and more educated people, as these were felt to be more likely to be the people actually writing the language for publication. Thus, spellings such as *fifti* ‘fifty’ and *giaman* ‘tell lies’ were favoured over the ecclesiastical preference for spellings such as *fefe* and *gyaman*.

As far as possible, however, the dictionary reflected as full a range as possible of pronunciations of words in Bislama. Thus, for example, a word such as *nabanga* ‘banyan’ was also entered with *napanga*, *nabangga*, *nambanga* and *nambangga* being variants of the same word. This meant that no attempt was made to specify which of these spellings should be regarded as ‘standard’.

In attempting to please everybody in this respect, the dictionary seems to have ended up pleasing nobody. Those who favoured the spellings in Ling *et al.* (1984) felt that the dictionary was likely to undermine the work in standardisation that they had already done. In desperation for a standard spelling, some secular organisations inputted the entries in Crowley (1990b) as a basis for a computer spell-check list since no other list was publicly available, although the original intention was that this kind of thing should not happen. It seems that despite any original disclaimers, people simply saw Crowley (1990b) as a dictionary and assumed that what it contained was automatically to be treated as a set of standard spellings.

However, when people tried to use Crowley (1990b) in this way, they found that in many cases it did not give the firm guidance that they wanted. Somebody wanting to know how to spell the word for ‘banyan’, for example, would find the dictionary of little help as it contained a whole array of spellings. Requests were subsequently made for firmer guidance to be given if any revised form of the dictionary were to be produced.

By 1995, stocks of Crowley (1990b) were completely exhausted. It was clear that a reprint of the original dictionary was out of question and that a new and more prescriptive edition would need to be produced to meet the expectations that people have of a dictionary. While a purely descriptive dictionary can be produced by just a single person, this is clearly not the case with a prescriptive dictionary, as this must meet some kind of community expectations. In 1995, Wilson Kaluat of the Summer Institute of Linguistics approached me about progress on the revised edition, asking me particularly about the extent of my flexibility on orthographic issues. It was his hope that some kind of unification could take place between the emerging secular and ecclesiastical standardised spellings.

If any progress was to be made in this area, it was clear that some kind of intermediary body would need to be established in order to facilitate discussion between proponents of one spelling over another. Fortunately, by this stage representatives of a number of non-governmental organisations had established the *Literacy Association of Vanuatu* as an umbrella body to coordinate policies and practices in the area of literacy, both secular and ecclesiastical. The question of Bislama orthography was clearly one that could legitimately come under the aegis of such a committee. In the absence of any appropriate governmental agency, this committee then became the arbiter in cases where there were differences about how particular words, or categories of words, should be spelled.
The committee included representatives from a variety of bodies. Included from the government were the Curriculum Development Unit and Media Services, as well as the Malvatumauri, i.e. the National Council of Chiefs. Secular non-government organisations included Nasonal Komuniti Development Trust, National Council of Women and the University of the South Pacific. Finally, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Kokonas Baebol translators were represented as religious organisations.

John Lynch from the University of the South Pacific was asked to chair an ad hoc committee of the association to deal with unification of spelling. His approach was to isolate those areas in which there had been lack of agreement and to seek to establish the extent to which particular spellings had most widespread support among committee members. Decisions were then transmitted to myself as compiler of the dictionary and to the Bislama Bible translators for adoption in the text of the Bible that was being prepared for publication to allow comment and reaction before a final decision was made. The result was the appearance of Crowley (1995b) as a published dictionary, and on the basis of this, a standardised spelling list has been distributed to those interested for use on computers.

**Literacy**

There is no legislation in place which relates to the promotion of literacy, and the only legal references to literacy of which I am aware are the constitutional provisions mentioned earlier which imply that English and French, as principal languages of education, should be regarded as the major languages of literacy in the country (more particularly in the wording found in the French text). Government policy, then, is geared towards the promotion of literacy in these two languages via the formal education system.

There has never been any comprehensive survey of the country to determine the extent of literacy, nor to determine which languages people are literate in. The 1999 national census was the first to include a question relating to literacy. It will be interesting to examine the results of this question when the published results appear, though there are some reasons for expressing some caution beforehand in interpreting these figures. The census question asked individuals if they were literate in ‘a local language’ (without asking which one), Bislama, English, French or ‘any other language’. Some enumerators allowed respondents to give a ‘yes’ answer to more than one of these possibilities, while other enumerators interpreted their instructions as allowing for only one possible choice.

Another obvious problem with a question that asks simply whether one can read and write in a particular language is the question of degrees of competence. I witnessed one respondent say that he could read and write in his vernacular ‘just a little bit’. Having independently witnessed this person attempting to read printed stories in the language, I do not think that this person was being unduly modest in his assessment of his own abilities, as he is far more literate in Bislama than he is in his own language, and quite possibly more literate in English than in his own language. However, the census form in this case will suggest equal degrees of literacy in all three languages.

Secular literacy in non-metropolitan languages is currently being actively promoted in Vanuatu in a number of different parts of the country and by a
variety of organisations. Siegel (1996a: 103–7) indicates that a number of secular non-governmental organisations (e.g. Nasonal Komuniti Developmen Trust, Foundation for the People of the South Pacific, Vanuatu National Council of Women, Vanuatu Preschools Association, Vanuatu Rural Development Training Centres Association) have been involved in the promotion of secular literacy either in local vernaculars or in Bislama among teenagers and adults, and sometimes also children, outside the context of the formal education system. A number of organisations with religious affiliations (e.g. the Anglican Church, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’i Faith, the Presbyterian Church and World Vision Vanuatu) have also promoted vernacular literacy or literacy in Bislama in different areas in the context of public education, typically in matters relating to public health, agriculture, women’s affairs and environmental issues.

As mentioned earlier, the Education Master Plan that is currently under development aims to foster vernacular literacy by teaching students around the country to read and write in their vernaculars for the first three years of their formal schooling in the local language.

Language planning agencies

There are no government agencies that can be referred to as language planning agencies in Vanuatu. Although the Ministry of Education and the Language Services Department operate in different areas of language activity, this mostly involves the relationship between English and French, as already described in. Other arms of government which are active in different sorts of ways in relation to language in Vanuatu are described below.

Vanuatu Cultural Centre

This is an institution which, in addition to administering the National Museum and the National Library, is responsible for making recommendations on cultural policy, as well as for implementing decisions in this area, including the approval of linguistic researchers from overseas universities.

The Cultural Centre has set up an extensive network of volunteer ‘field-workers’ based in their local communities, who take responsibility for recording information relating to important or endangered local knowledge. Much of this information is recorded in the local language, and it is then held on deposit in the archives of the Cultural Centre. These fieldworkers have also been encouraged to record traditional stories, along with culturally significant vocabulary in local languages. However, despite the fact that these activities have been going on for several decades now, much of the information that has been collected has been deposited in archives and Port Vila without being recirculated back into local communities in a form that is accessible to those communities.

On occasion, the Cultural Centre has entered into debates at the national level relating to language. As mentioned below, for example, the Cultural Centre responded to the 1996 ombudsman’s report on the observance of national multilingualism in Vanuatu by criticising the neglect in the report of issues relating to the nation’s vernaculars.

During the latter part of the 1990s, there has been a linguist attached temporarily to the Cultural Centre. The responsibilities attached to this position have
been to promote training in linguistics for the fieldworkers, to organise and archive materials with linguistic content (including oral tradition) that are housed by the Cultural Centre, record any useful linguistic information about any part of the country, and to contribute to public comment on language issues generally, especially with regard to local languages and Bislama.

Many of these duties could be characterised as ‘warehousing’ (or ‘museumising’) linguistic information. Given that there is strong community pressure for the recording and archiving of archaic and obsolete linguistic data, it is difficult to envisage any alternative options for a linguist associated with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. In fact, any linguist conducting research independently of the Cultural Centre typically faces strong normative pressure from local communities to record archaic and obsolete vocabulary (sometimes even to the exclusion of modern lexical innovations).

Office of the Ombudsman

In accordance with Article 62:3 of the constitution, the ombudsman began issuing annual reports on the observance of multilingualism in the country in 1995. (The 15-year delay between the initial promulgation of the constitution and the issuance of the first report was caused, in part, by the fact that for many years governments failed to make an appointment to the constitutionally required position of the ombudsman.)

The ombudsman’s second report in 1996 commented that the set of recommendations that were made in the 1995 report were just as valid a year later, but that while those recommendations were politely received by government, there was no move towards implementation (Office of the Ombudsman, 1996: 4). In particular, the ombudsman complained that no agency had been established to monitor the standard of written texts or to oversee the development of terminology. Additional recommendations were made in the 1997 report, including the following:

1. It was recommended that parliamentary minutes should be recorded in the language used in the member’s actual speech. While 95% of parliamentary statements are delivered in Bislama (Office of the Ombudsman, 1996: 13), the minutes are kept exclusively in English and French.

2. The ombudsman recommended that there should also be high level monitoring through a tertiary educational institution of trends in written and spoken Bislama, leading ultimately to the development of a standardised form of the language.

While some of the ombudsman’s recommendations have been positively viewed by academic observers, the reports have so far been a disappointment to many who have professional expertise and experience with the language situation in Vanuatu. Having chosen to interpret the constitutional requirement to report on ‘the observance of multilingualism’ primarily to mean ensuring the equal status of English and French, with some additional attention being paid to Bislama, there has been very little mention of the indigenous languages of the country. The content of the reports has been severely critiqued in print for their narrowness by Early (1999), as well as in an unpublished response to the 1996 report by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.
The University of the South Pacific is not a direct arm of the government of Vanuatu, though the government, along with a number of other regional governments, does have some say in the governance of the university through its ministerial member on the university council. The university is also not in any sense a language planning agency, though the Pacific Languages Unit of the university was established in Vanuatu in 1983. Its current mission statement incorporates the following aims:

1. to raise the awareness of Pacific Islanders about problems and issues relating to their own languages and other languages spoken in their countries;
2. to provide Pacific Islanders with the skills necessary to ensure the survival and development of their languages;
3. to teach university credit courses in and about Pacific languages; and
4. to conduct research into Pacific languages and the language situation in the region.

The Unit offers an undergraduate major in Pacific Language Studies, which includes individual courses on language issues in the Pacific, translation and dictionary-making, as well as other courses providing a more general linguistic background.

In line with this mission statement, the Pacific Languages Unit has acted in a variety of other ways to promote the development of the languages of the region, and in particular those of Vanuatu. A number of the academic staff of the unit over the years have been appointed because of their active involvement in the documentation of both Bislama and the local languages of Vanuatu (while other staff have been involved in documenting languages in other parts of the region that the university serves). Over the years, present and past Pacific Languages Unit staff such as John Lynch, Robert Early and Terry Crowley have produced comprehensive descriptions of a number of Vanuatu languages. The university has also encouraged the development of secular vernacular literatures by providing a publishing outlet for collections of vernacular stories in a number of languages (Viralalao, 1981; Carlot, 1983; Crowley & Mael, 1984; Tabi & Buli, 1985; Mabonlala, 1986; Luwi et al., 1988; Vira et al., 1997).

The Pacific Languages Unit has in the past sought to raise awareness about Bislama in particular. Because Bislama has not been taught as a subject – or often even been tolerated as a language of verbal interaction in classrooms in Vanuatu – it was decided that a tertiary course about Bislama which is taught in Bislama should be developed (Crowley, 1996b). However, in developing such course materials, the problem of the lack of a viable set of metalinguistic terminology in the language had to be faced. Given the kinds of linguistic concepts that were needed, it was necessary to develop a fairly extensive set of linguistic terminology from scratch.

In making such terminological decisions, the following general principles were followed:

1. If an existing Bislama term could easily be semantically extended to express a new meaning, then the first preference was to do this. In discussing word
classes, for example, the meaning of the word *kale* ‘wedge’ was extended to refer to the class of conjunctions, as these can be conceived of as ‘wedging’ a subordinate clause into a complex sentence. The extension of the meaning of the word *nem* ‘name’ to refer to nouns is based on the fact that we sometimes do the same kind of thing in English, when people refer to nouns as ‘naming words’.

(2) If a compound was based on pre-existing Bislama forms, and derived according to existing patterns of compounding, and is semantically fairly transparent, this solution was preferred to borrowing a new term. Thus, rather than borrowing the word *morpheme* as *mofim*, it was decided to refer to morphemes as *haf-toktok* ‘pieces of words’.

(3) If neither of these strategies produced a satisfactory solution, borrowings were used. Preference was given to borrowings that could be identifiable with both an English and a French source. Thus, *kreol* was adopted as the term for ‘creole’ as people educated in both English and French would be able to recognise the source word.

(4) In borrowing words from English or French, the preference was to choose the form that involved the least amount of phonological and orthographic ‘deformation’ from the original to produce a plausible-looking Bislama word. For instance, in seeking a word for ‘subject’, *sabjek* was chosen from English, as the source. If the French word *sujet* had been chosen as the source instead, the regular rules for dealing with borrowings from French into Bislama would have resulted in the form *sise*, which would probably have French-educated and English-educated people alike wondering as to its source.

The general principle was adopted that borrowing should be avoided unless all other options had been tried first. Given that the word *preposition* is found in English and *préposition* in French, it might seem natural that the best choice in Bislama would be to simply adopt the form *preposisen*. In fact, however, this term was avoided in favour of *hinsis*, which is a pre-existing word in Bislama, meaning ‘hinge’. Clearly, then, strategy (1) has over-ridden strategy (4) in this case. This is not an isolated case, as the examples in Table 4 illustrate other examples of the same kind of terminological decisions. Some of the kinds of compounds that were adopted in preference to words of English and French origin that could have been borrowed are also set out in Table 5.

While it may seem somewhat perverse to insist on the use of non-English and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bislama word</th>
<th>Original meaning</th>
<th>English word</th>
<th>French word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singaot</td>
<td>‘shout’</td>
<td>interjection</td>
<td>interjction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wok</td>
<td>‘work’</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>verbe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jenis</td>
<td>‘replacement’</td>
<td>pronoun</td>
<td>pronom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plante</td>
<td>‘many’</td>
<td>plural</td>
<td>pluriel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wan</td>
<td>‘one’</td>
<td>singular</td>
<td>singulier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poen</td>
<td>‘point’</td>
<td>demonstrative</td>
<td>démonstratif</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
non-French words, a justification of this kind of practice appears in the introduction to the published reference grammar of Bislama in terms of the need to make it clear that Bislama is not just a kind of broken English. Choosing a unique set of terminology to describe Bislama indicates to people that the language can be talked about in its own terms, without needing to refer to the grammatical categories of English or French (or even Latin).

In addition to these official (or semi-official) organisations, there is a number of non-government organisations which are involved in language planning-type activities. Each of these is discussed below.

**Literacy Association of Vanuatu**

This is a semi-formal collective that includes representatives from a number of government and non-government organisations involved in the promotion of literacy in the country. An *ad hoc* working committee on Bislama spelling was established in 1995 by the president of the association. Various individuals and organisations were asked to make submissions to the committee relating to the standardisation of Bislama spelling. These submissions were considered and the resulting recommendations were incorporated into the dictionary that was published by Crowley (1995b).

It was originally hoped that the decisions of this committee would ultimately be given some kind of official endorsement, though that has not happened as yet, nor does it show any signs of happening. In the meantime, those organisations represented on this coordinating body (i.e. the University of the South Pacific, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Bislama Baebol blong Vanuatu, Nasonal Komuniti Developmen Tras, Malvatumaori, Curriculum Development Unit, National Council of Women and Media Services) agreed to promote the adoption of a single standard spelling system for the language, which this dictionary aimed to facilitate, and the spellings in *Baebol long Bislama*, appearing in 1996, are basically in line with those of the published dictionary.\(^{35}\)

**Summer Institute of Linguistics**

The Summer Institute of Linguistics is an international linguistic research organisation that aims to translate the Bible into the lesser-known languages of the world. The organisation has been active in Vanuatu since 1982, operating locally under the auspices of the Vanuatu Christian Council. It posts highly trained

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### Table 5 Bislama grammatical terminology based on compounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bislama word</th>
<th>Constituent meanings</th>
<th>English word</th>
<th>French word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dabolem smolhaf</td>
<td>‘double-small-part’</td>
<td>partial reduplication</td>
<td>réduplication partielle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blislama-lanwis</td>
<td>‘Bislama-language’</td>
<td>pidgin</td>
<td>pidgin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wok-nating</td>
<td>‘work-plain’</td>
<td>intransitive verb</td>
<td>verbe intransitif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wok-samting</td>
<td>‘work-thing’</td>
<td>transitive verb</td>
<td>verbe transitif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fullblok saon</td>
<td>‘completely-blocked sound’</td>
<td>stop</td>
<td>plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nus saon</td>
<td>‘nose sound’</td>
<td>nasal</td>
<td>nasale</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
personnel to rural areas to learn and then to carry out descriptive research on individual vernaculars with a view to developing writing systems (or improving existing writing systems) for those languages, promoting literacy and translating the Bible (and associated reading materials). These projects are usually regarded as long-term projects, taking up to twenty years (or more) to complete.

In some countries, this organisation has come under some political suspicion because of an association with conservative regimes such as that of the repressive administration of the former Indonesian government in Irian Jaya, and some academic linguists (and anthropologists) share these suspicions. Rather than speaking out against repressive governments, the Summer Institute of Linguistics has generally publicly maintained a low profile, presumably in order to be allowed to continue its work.

Not surprisingly, there was some concern expressed about the possible involvement of the organisation in Vanuatu when it first proposed beginning operations in the early 1980s, though these concerns have usually been fairly low key. Perhaps because of the organisation’s vulnerability to such criticisms, it also maintains a fairly low profile publicly in Vanuatu, preferring to keep its activities visible at the local rather than national level. The ombudsman’s reports, for example, which were criticised by academics and other national institutions, appear to have been met with silence from the Summer Institute of Linguistics. However, the organisation has consistently worked with the full support and appreciation of its sponsoring body, the Vanuatu Christian Council, for the significant input that it has made in the development of written forms of vernaculars.

Regional and international influences

The language planning activities that were described in the preceding section are all intranational in the sense that they derive from the work of institutions that have been specifically set up to address issues relating to the situation within Vanuatu. At the same time, however, there is an element of international influence present with some of these institutions.

In particular, the University of the South Pacific is a regional institution which services the tertiary educational needs of twelve separate polities: Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Tokelau, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu. Although the Pacific Languages Unit is based in Vanuatu and its staff have often been appointed on the basis of their familiarity with the linguistic situation in the country, the university is constrained in its level of involvement within the country by its need to be seen to be servicing the linguistic needs of the other countries as well.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics is also an international organisation with members operating in a large number of multilingual countries. While the details of the organisation’s Vanuatu operations are largely left to the staff on the ground to implement locally, I have already mentioned the impact that the sometimes unfortunate choice in the past of political bedmates appears to have had on the organisation’s willingness or ability to speak out publicly in Vanuatu on important language issues. The fact that it is staffed largely by expatriates – though providing practical training to large numbers of local people in literacy work – also to some extent impairs the ability of the organisation to participate actively in national debate.
Regional and international influences on the linguistic situation in Vanuatu can also be found in some other areas involving organisations that have no formal presence in the country. Language policy in Vanuatu is no doubt influenced to some extent by events that take place – or which do not take place – in neighbouring Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. These are both Melanesian countries which have a very similar linguistic make-up to Vanuatu, and there are many parallels between all three countries in terms of language planning (or lack thereof).

In the 1980s, these three countries established what came to be known as the informal ‘Melanesian Spearhead Group’ of nations within the South Pacific. When this grouping was first established, there was some casual consideration of the possibility of actively promoting the development of Melanesian Pidgin throughout the three countries, though talk along these lines rapidly faded out, particularly as other Melanesian polities such as Fiji and New Caledonia came to be involved. Since Melanesian Pidgin is not spoken in either of these countries, the promotion of the language within this political grouping then ceased to be a viable issue.

Events in Papua New Guinea have more recently affected language policy in Vanuatu in another way. The current push for the development of initial vernacular education mentioned earlier follows a fact-finding visit conducted by staff from the Ministry of Education to Papua New Guinea in 1997, where a similar programme was already being implemented. This visit ultimately led to the adoption of the Education Master Plan referred to above. It is entirely possible that had Papua New Guinea not formally adopted such a change in educational policy, Vanuatu may well have stuck with the status quo by which English and French continued as the sole languages of education.

The Association de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (ACCT) is an international organisation which is similar in function to the Commonwealth of Nations, in that both represent groupings of politically, culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse nations that have in common a link through shared colonial history with the United Kingdom and France respectively, along with a shared linguistic inheritance from those two countries. Vanuatu is one of a very small number of polities – along with Canada – which belong to both the anglophone Commonwealth of Nations and the francophone ACCT. While the ACCT has no influence at all on national policy with regard to Bislama or any of the local vernaculars, membership of the organisation does act as a reminder to the Vanuatu government that both English and French have constitutionally equal status.

Such factors were perhaps a consideration in some aspects of the ombudsman’s 1996 report, which Early (1999) criticised as placing undue emphasis on the question of ensuring exact parity between English and French, while playing down (or ignoring) other important language issues in the country. Office of the Ombudsman (1996: 1) notes that a significant amount of work on the report to parliament on the observance of multilingualism in that year was carried out by a Canadian volunteer who had worked previously in Vanuatu’s Language Services Department. Given Canada’s national preoccupation with ensuring parity between English and French, and the neglect, in comparison, of its indige-
nous languages, this kind of bias in the published ombudsman’s report is perhaps not too surprising.

Language Maintenance and Prospects

Language transmission

Predictions have been made in print that large numbers of languages in the Pacific, including Vanuatu, have a grim future. Krauss, in Hale et al. (1992: 6) argues that as many as 50% of the languages spoken in the world today should be regarded as moribund. Mühlhäuser (1987: 6) argues with specific reference to the Pacific that:

contacts with outside colonial powers have had such a traumatic effect on the ecology of most Pacific speech communities that the languages have either changed very rapidly or disappeared altogether.

So severe are the structural changes to those languages that have survived, he argues, that:

. . . the grammatical adjustment that is encountered in most Pacific languages that have come under the influence of expatriate missions and education systems is hardly less serious than language death itself. (Mühlhäusler, 1987: 16)

Mühlhäusler seems to be arguing that those Pacific languages that have survived the colonial onslaught are little more than indigenous relexifications of European structural patterns, and that this structural invasion of vernacular speech patterns represents a very serious threat to a fair number of apparently functioning indigenous languages (Mühlhäusler, 1996).

Speaking of the linguistic situation in Oceania, Dixon (1991) attempts to indicate which specific languages of Oceania are under threat:

The tragic saga of language extinction which has swept across Australia is likely to extend into other parts of this region during the twenty-first century. An optimistic prediction is that of these c. 1,980 languages perhaps 200 will be spoken in AD 2200 (some linguists would prefer a figure of twenty or thirty). (Dixon, 1991: 230)

He states that every language with fewer than 10,000 speakers is at risk of extinction in the medium term (Dixon, 1991: 231). On current population figures, this covers all but one of the 80 actively spoken languages in Vanuatu. He also states that languages with less than 1000 speakers are ‘severely’ at risk. Based on the figures in Table 3, this would mean that only about 40 of the 80 actively spoken languages of Vanuatu are out of immediate danger.

There clearly has been some loss of languages in Vanuatu since initial contact with Europeans in the first half of the 19th century, and some other languages are clearly moribund today, as described in the following section. However, of those languages which are currently being actively passed on to a new generation of children who grow up monolingual in that language until they are exposed to languages of wider communication, it is much more difficult to
agree with suggestions that the languages should also be considered as mori-bund.

For one thing, it is obviously oversimplistic to take raw population figures on their own as evidence of language viability. What we need to pay attention to is not the number of speakers that a language has, but the range of contexts in which its speakers regularly make use of that language. The language of Aneityum in southern Vanuatu, for example, has only about 900 speakers. However, apart from a small settlement of people from neighbouring Futuna, where a different language is spoken, the local language is used by all generations of Aneityumese for practically all daily spoken functions, as well as some written functions. This language has far fewer speakers than the Māori language of New Zealand, which currently has tens of thousands of native speakers. However, intergenerational transmission of Māori has been the exception rather than the rule since the 1950s, with the result that native speakers of the language are rapidly increasing in average age.

Real threats in the future to the viability of small languages such as that of Aneityum can be envisaged, however. If scientific predictions about rising sea levels associated with global warming turn out to be correct, some coastal areas would become uninhabitable. Some communities may need to be relocated, and this may put some languages at risk, particularly if they have to move to another island. However, even relocation need not mean the end if a community is relocated as a community. For instance, there are about 500 people who originate from Maat village on Southeast Ambrym who relocated to land close to Port Vila in the 1950s, and they have maintained their language in their new location, and are successfully passing it on to the following generations.

Introduced diseases resulted in the loss of some languages in Vanuatu in the 19th century, and the same could happen again. The possible spread of HIV/AIDS, which is currently having a major demographic impact in parts of Africa, could also easily devastate small languages in a country such as Vanuatu. To date, however, Vanuatu is one of the few countries in the world which has not reported a single case of infection, though it is predicted that if it did establish a foothold, the epidemiological pattern could be expected to mirror that of Africa where the infection is spread primarily through heterosexual contact (as is also beginning to take place in Papua New Guinea).

While it is not difficult to see why people might be tempted to predict large-scale language shift in the not too distant future in Vanuatu, I would argue that we should exercise caution in generalising from what has already happened with Australian languages to this rather different situation. What is really needed to assess the future viability of languages in Vanuatu is demographic evidence, along with detailed studies of language use (and trends of usage) in individual speech communities. What I would like to do now is to examine in as much detail as possible the situation regarding language maintenance in Vanuatu, on the basis of questions relating to language in the 1989 census, as well as my own observations as to how languages are actually used in this multilingual nation.

In the personal questionnaire in the 1989 census in Vanuatu, there was one question that explicitly related to language ability, and this was worded as follows:
Wanem lanwis yu save, talem olgeta we yu save?\textsuperscript{38}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local language only</th>
<th>Bislama only</th>
<th>Eng or Fr only or other foreign lg</th>
<th>Bislama and English</th>
<th>Bislama and French</th>
<th>Bislama Eng and French</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banks/Torres</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santo/Malo</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambae/Maewo</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecost</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambrym</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paama</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepherds</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efate</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tafea</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total rural</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vila</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total urban</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanuatu</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The published report of this census tabulates the responses to this question according to local government and urban areas in Table B61 (reproduced as Table 6), while Table B62 (reproduced as Table 7) breaks the figures down according to age and sex.

I would argue on the basis of these figures that there is clearly no immediate prospect of large-scale language shift taking place in Vanuatu, despite the very small average size of individual languages. These figures indicate that 97.4\% of people over all age groups living in rural areas answered that they could speak a local language. At the same time, the figures suggest that total language security cannot necessarily be assured. Comparing both rural males and females across the three age groups tabulated, the proportion of vernacular speakers drops...
from 100% (or very nearly 100%) among the oldest age group, to one or two percentage points lower among the 15–59 year olds, and it drops by a further four or five percentage points among 6–14 year olds.

These kinds of differences are much more noticeable when age and sex groups are compared between rural and urban areas. While 98.1% of rural males between 15 and 59 speak a local language, as do 98.9% of rural females, the corresponding figures for urban males and females drop to 84.4% and 83.8% percent respectively. Among young urban girls, vernacular ability drops to 78.3%, while only 76.6% of urban boys speak a vernacular. These figures are much lower than the comparable figures for rural girls and boys, which are 94% and 93.9% respectively.

Although there is a noticeable drop in vernacular ability among all age groups and with both sexes in the urban centres, Vanuatu society is still overwhelmingly rural. The fact that over 80% of the total population lives in rural villages is without a doubt what ensures the continued maintenance of local vernaculars around the country. At the same time, however, the proportion of the population living in the towns has grown steadily since the figure of ten per cent reported in the

Table 7 Percentage of residents aged six years and over who could speak different languages, by age, sex and area of enumeration (Office of Statistics 1991:127)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Local lg</th>
<th>Bislama</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Other lg</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–14 yrs</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>15,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–59 yrs</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>27,954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+ yrs</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3,934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>47,403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–14 yrs</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>14,093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–59 yrs</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>28,383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+ yrs</td>
<td>99.6</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>3,091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>45,567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–14 yrs</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2,507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–59 yrs</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>8,336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+ yrs</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>11,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–14 yrs</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2,299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–59 yrs</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+ yrs</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>9,905</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
census of 1967. This had increased to 14.2% by 1979, and had reached 18.4% in 1989 (Office of Statistics, 1991: 21).

If this urbanising trend were to accelerate, or even be simply maintained, then perhaps we could expect there to be a gradual, but continual, decrease in the overall proportion of vernacular speakers in Vanuatu. One constraining factor against large-scale urbanisation is economic. With few resources in Vanuatu apart from what grows on the land and lives in the surrounding seas, it is difficult to imagine the kind of uncontrolled urbanisation in Vanuatu that we find in much of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

A continuing trend towards urbanisation would have the potential ultimately to put certain vernaculars at risk, especially those that are spoken in those areas providing the greatest input for urban immigration. Office of Statistics (1991:33) indicates that the local government areas contributing the greatest proportion of their population to urban drift are Paama (with an annual net out-migration rate of 4.41%) and the Shepherds (with an annual rate of 2.13%). These islands represent the only parts of the country where demographic projections point to a slight decline in population.

This has the potential to affect the future viability in the long term of two of Vanuatu’s 80 languages: Paamese and Namakir. The future of a number of smaller languages in other local government areas could also be threatened by urban drift if out-migration was concentrated in particular locations, rather than being uniform throughout the local government area. The Paama and Shepherds local government areas are to some extent special cases, however, as these are small and unusually densely populated islands. The resulting land shortages mean that subsistence agriculture cannot support the entire population. There is, as a result, strong pressure for young people to move to the towns in search of paid work.

At the same time that the proportion of vernacular speakers shows signs of dropping among younger people, especially in the towns, there is a significant increase in the proportion of young people claiming to speak Bislama. Only 67% of rural boys and 65.3% of rural girls answered that they could speak Bislama, while the corresponding figures for town-dwellers were 93.6% and 92% respectively. These figures may be interpreted as meaning that a shift from vernaculars in the direction of Bislama is currently in progress in Vanuatu.

The ability to speak Bislama in Vanuatu is, however, an age-graded phenomenon. This means that while significant numbers of rural youngsters did not report an ability to speak Bislama, they are destined to acquire this ability. The major difference between urban and rural patterns is simply that town dwellers learn their Bislama earlier than their rural counterparts, but just about everyone ends up speaking the language by their teenage years. An increase in the ability to speak Bislama on its own should in any case not automatically be interpreted as meaning that language shift is taking place, as it is logically possible for vernacular/Bislama bilingualism to be stable over an extended period of time. There are, after all, many well-established patterns of stable diglossic relationships between languages elsewhere in the world.

The first column in Table 7 sets out the proportions of people who can speak a local vernacular. The difference between these figures and 100% represents the proportion of the population that speaks no Melanesian vernacular. These
figures are set out in Table 8. These figures may look superficially disturbing for the long-term future of vernaculars in Vanuatu, especially given the 23.5% of urban boys and 21.7% of urban girls who speak no vernacular. However, of the urban population of Vanuatu, 10.1% of the total is of European, Asian and other Pacific Islander descent, and we would not expect these people to speak a local vernacular in any case. On the basis of the published population and percentages, there should be 3757 people above the age of six in urban centres who speak no Vanuatu vernacular, of whom 3378 should be Melanesians, which means that 17.8% of the total number of Melanesians in town speak no vernacular. Nationwide, however, only about five per cent of all Melanesians over the age of six speak no vernacular.

This compares favourably with figures compiled just before independence in a linguistic survey. In 1980, a survey of 750 individuals nationwide found that 7.5% of the total had learned Bislama and no vernacular as their first language, and that, as we might have expected, there were greater concentrations of first-language Bislama speakers in the urban rather than rural areas (Charpentier & Tryon, 1982: 151). The two sets of figures are not necessarily strictly comparable as Charpentier & Tryon gave no indication as to the age groups that they surveyed, though it certainly does not seem that the period 1980–89 saw any drastic increase in the proportion of first-language Bislama speakers at the national level.

More recently, a survey of urban youth conducted in the mid-1990s by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre revealed that 88.8% of the youth of Port Vila indicated that they know their vernacular well, even if only relatively small numbers use that language as their main language of communication in town (Charpentier, 1999). Interestingly, the figure of 11.2% of young Port Vila residents who must be presumed to be first-language speakers of Bislama is much lower than the corresponding figure of 23.4% which derives from the 1989 census. My suspicion is that the later survey is more likely to accurately reflect young people’s language abilities, and that the census figures were exaggerated by possible confusion between the question that was asked, ‘What languages can you speak?’ and the
question that people may have thought they were being asked, i.e. ‘What languages do you speak?’.

However, a shift from vernaculars to Bislama is, in fact, not the only possible interpretation of the census figures. Corresponding to the drop in vernacular ability, there is also an increase in the stated ability to speak English or French. Thus, while only 37.7% of rural boys and 36.6% of rural girls claimed to speak English, the corresponding figures for the towns are 48.3% and 50.6% respectively. Similarly, while only 19.6% of rural boys and 20.8% of rural girls claimed to speak French, the urban figures increased to 37.9% and 37.7% respectively. On the basis of these figures alone, it would be possible to argue that a shift away from vernaculars is instead taking place in the direction of English and French. (Equally possible, of course, is the interpretation that there is a shift in the direction of English/Bislama and French/Bislama bilingualism.)

One point that does not emerge from either the published census figures or surveys of language use in towns is the fact that there are some rural areas where Bislama has become the dominant medium of exchange. This should not necessarily be interpreted as meaning that local vernaculars in these rural areas are being abandoned in favour of Bislama, as the situations that I am referring to typically involve long-term settlers from other islands on plantations or in peri-urban areas. We therefore find Bislama being spoken to a significant extent in plantation or other mixed communities in areas such as Tisman on Malakula, Aore and parts of Malo, and in the village of Saama on North Efate, as well as the peri-urban areas of southern Efate and south-eastern Espiritu Santo. However, even in a long-established and mixed peri-urban community such as Blacksands near Port Vila, where Bislama is a major medium of exchange, there is still extensive use of a variety of different local languages.

Language shift is in fact not taking place in Vanuatu in the direction of either English or French either, but it is difficult to reach this conclusion solely on the basis of the census figures because of the way that the language question was formulated. Respondents were allowed no way of distinguishing levels of competence in different languages, as simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers were required. Having observed actual language use in Vanuatu, it is obvious to me that while many people can speak English and French, especially in the towns, they seldom actually do speak these languages, except in certain restricted contexts. Typically, people use English and French inside school classrooms (but they often speak Bislama or a local language in the playground, despite widespread school rules prohibiting this). English and French are often used when writing, often even when writing letters to close family members, or one’s own diary. People who have been to school will often say that they find it easier to read something written in English or French than in Bislama (as written Bislama is not taught in Vanuatu schools). Ni-Vanuatu working in service positions in town (e.g. in stores, restaurants) will also often use their knowledge of spoken English or French if they are serving somebody who is obviously from overseas.

The kinds of contexts just described involve only a relatively small proportion of verbal interactions in Vanuatu. Under normal circumstances, it would be very rare indeed to find one Ni-Vanuatu speaking to another Ni-Vanuatu in English or French. Speaking Bislama or a local vernacular is the norm among Ni-Vanuatu, to the point where Ni-Vanuatu who do use English or French with
each other are liable to be chastised because *oli mekem flas blong olgeta* ‘they are showing off’. Alternatively, people make use of metropolitan languages in order to joke with people. On Erromango, for example, I have *never* heard two Erromangans conduct a conversation in English. Although primary school children are required to use English at school, this rule is regularly flouted, and I have never heard of any children who do not immediately abandon English away from school, even with their own teachers. I know of one Erromangan who occasionally attempts to use English in a conversational way, but this is always greeted with howls of laughter, which is his desired effect anyway as he is very much a practical joker. For one Erromangan to speak English to another Erromangan is much the same as baring one’s bottom in public (which this particular character is also wont to do): it is hilarious precisely because it breaks all the accepted rules.

People who are very drunk in Vanuatu may sometimes lapse into English (or Bislama) but this is a manifestation of what ethnographers refer to as ‘wild man behaviour’ (Haiman, 1979: 40). This is a tolerated way of allowing males to let off steam, which may also include punching or kicking walls, knocking down banana plants, or causing fights. One is effectively less accountable for one’s behaviour afterwards because, in speaking English (or Bislama), one is not behaving as a member of one’s home community.

Thus, while the census figures may be contrived to make it look as if English and French represent threats to Vanuatu vernaculars, if there is a threatening language, then it is Bislama, and I do not view this threat as a serious one. However, there is one aspect of the linguistic demography of Vanuatu which is not recoverable in any way from either the published census figures or any surveys of language use in towns, and that involves the extent to which certain vernaculars may be acquiring additional speakers from other vernaculars, without actually threatening the language as a whole.

For instance, on the island of Epi there is one village where the Bierebo language is currently shifting to Lewo, which is another language spoken on the island (Early, 1994: 31). In all remaining Bierebo-speaking villages, the language appears to be stable, and there are no signs that outside this single village Lewo is likely to replace Bierebo. In yet other situations, a local language may be spreading into other areas, though only as a second language, with no sign that this introduced language will replace the original languages. For instance, Paamese is being spoken by increasing numbers of people from neighbouring northern Epi and south-eastern Amrym as a second language, while relatively few Paamese speakers ever learn the languages of the neighbouring islands.

Despite the evident vitality of most of the languages of Vanuatu, I would not want my claims to be taken as the basis for adopting a blasé attitude towards these communities. Linguistic ecologies are very delicate things, which can be very easily disturbed, often without the realisation of members of these communities until the change is irreversible. Urbanisation, immigration, emigration and education can all interact within the space of a single generation to cut the lines of linguistic transmission.

As Grace Molisa said at a conference organised around the theme *Pacific Languages: Directions for the Future* in Vila in 1984, people in Vanuatu have a very pragmatic approach to language, viewing languages simply as tools for commu-
This means that governments in Vanuatu see other areas as having higher priority than the maintenance of languages which do not appear to be under any particular threat. These are in fact pan-Melanesian attitudes, so we should not assume that there are no language problems in Melanesia, but that they may simply have not yet been recognised. Grace Molisa specifically commented: ‘It is rather like silent diseases – you do not know that you are sick until it is too late’ (Pacific Languages Unit, 1984:12). However, I would argue that the languages of Vanuatu are, for the most part, in a reasonably healthy state for the immediate and intermediate future, despite the alarmist predictions of Mühlhäusler and Dixon.

**Language death and language revival**

As I have already indicated, a number of languages have already become extinct in Vanuatu since initial contact with Europeans in the 19th century brought diseases to which local people had no immunity. Those 20 languages in Vanuatu which have become extinct, or which are currently moribund, are set out in Table 9.

**Table 9 Extinct and moribund languages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language name</th>
<th>Island</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aore</td>
<td>Santo</td>
<td>extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aveteian</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>extinct?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bieria</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iakanaga</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ianigi</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khatbol</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langalanga</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livara</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marakhus</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matanavat</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>extinct?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbwenelang</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasarian</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nāi</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navvien</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nisvai</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Litzlitz</td>
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<td>Surua Hole</td>
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<td>Orkon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revaliu</td>
<td>Epi</td>
<td>extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sörsőrian</td>
<td>Malakula</td>
<td>moribund</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Maewo</td>
<td>Maewo</td>
<td>extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ura</td>
<td>Erromango</td>
<td>moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utaha</td>
<td>Erromango</td>
<td>extinct</td>
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Populations in some parts of the country dropped dramatically over very short periods as a result of introduced diseases, and the original distribution of languages was sometimes seriously affected. On Erromango, for example, the population dropped from an estimated original 6000 to below 400 during the period 1850–1930. As a result of this massive demographic dislocation, the last speaker of the Utaha language died in 1954, and there is today just a handful of elderly speakers of Ura. It is possible that there were some other languages spoken on Erromango which became extinct even earlier, though in the absence of documented information on these linguistic varieties, it is impossible to know if these represented separate languages, or if they were simply regional variants of one of the other languages to which I have already referred (Crowley, 1997b).

Parts of Malakula have also undergone massive population loss, with some languages having again become extinct or moribund. An additional consideration on Malakula is that prior to European contact, there was a considerable population in the interior. Much of this population has dispersed to a variety of coastal locations, especially over the last few generations. This has resulted in some languages retaining only small and very widely dispersed populations within the ancestral language area, while significant numbers of speakers have now become linguistic minorities in a variety of coastal villages where quite different languages are spoken. While the total number of speakers of such languages may be reasonably high, the speech communities have effectively become discontiguous, possibly giving these languages threatened status within a couple of generations.

For example, the language of the Lendamboi area of the interior of southern Malakula was spoken by about 100 people in 1989 in their ancestral area, though a somewhat larger number of speakers of this language were living in a number of different villages along the western, southern and eastern coasts of the island. In some of these villages, Lendamboi speakers were in a majority, while in other cases, they had moved to a village where they represented a minority. Given that there are many pressures on the interior dwellers to move to the coast, unless speakers of this language can establish a clear identity in a new location, the language could easily be threatened, and some of the one-time neighbours of this language have already disappeared, or become moribund.

Language revival is not considered as a major issue in any of these cases. Some regret is typically expressed locally at the loss of a language, and one occasionally hears suggestions about how nice it would be if people could speak a moribund language more widely. However, there has never been any serious attempt at a community level to promote a language revival programme for any moribund or extinct Vanuatu language. It is therefore difficult to imagine any of those languages set out in Table 9 surviving for more than another generation.

It is interesting to note, however, that individual action can have some degree of success in delaying the eventual demise of some languages in this kind of situation. The Nαti language of Malakula was originally spoken in the area known as Wilemp in the interior of the south-western corner of the island until an influenza epidemic devastated the area in the 1920s causing massive depopulation. In the Nαti-speaking area, there were very few survivors of this epidemic. By the first
quarter of the 20th century, all that were left of the original speakers in their ancestral area were three old men and their immediate families (Crowley, 1998: 102–3).

One of the three died in the bush in his ancestral area, and his son now speaks another coastal language. Another died on the coast and his sons now speak another coastal language. However, the four sons of the third man still maintain an active speaking ability in *Na*
ti. All four brothers currently live close to each other in coastal villages and they use *Na*
ti amongst themselves. However, only one of the brothers has attempted to pass a knowledge of the language on to his own children. His wife grew up speaking a different language, but by exposure she has been able to learn *Na*
ti, and this is now what the family speaks at home. They have five children who can also understand *Na*
ti and they also speak it in the home, though in the village they speak the language of the rest of the children. However, unless these children grow up with the same commitment to maintaining *Na*
ti, and are as successful as their father in passing it on to their spouses when they grow up, and between them, also to their children, *Na*
ti clearly has a bleak future as a distinct linguistic tradition.

While some further language loss in Vanuatu is inevitable, it should be pointed out that in no case is any indigenous language in any obvious immediate danger of being replaced by Bislama or either of the metropolitan languages. Wherever language shift is under way, it is always some other local language that is the replacing language, and not one of the national lingua francas. For instance, Early (1994: 17) reports that the Bieria language of Epi is threatened with extinction, though the current generation of speakers is not moving to Bislama, and they are certainly not speaking English or French. The language that is replacing Bieria is Nakanamanga, which represents a recent immigrant intrusion to Epi from the Shepherd Islands to the south.

**Future directions**

I view the linguistic future of Vanuatu with a mixture of optimism and pessimism. I am optimistic that most of the 80 indigenous languages will continue to be actively passed on to future generations for a considerable time to come. While substantial language loss has taken place in some parts of Vanuatu, this happened for the most part in the 19th and early 20th centuries at a time when local populations were plummeting. Since the population stabilised and subsequently began a period of normal demographic increase after the 1920s, very few, if any, languages appear to have become unviable. Most languages today are actually gaining speakers as the population of Vanuatu grows at one of the higher annual rates of population increase in the world. If the Education Master Plan that is currently under consideration is successfully implemented, it is to be hoped that increasing numbers of younger people will become literate in their own languages, along with English, French and Bislama as at present.

Some of the smaller vernaculars of Vanuatu would certainly be vulnerable if there was a substantial increase in the extent of urban drift, if increased numbers of outsiders married into these communities, if there were major demographic devastation due to disease, or if communities were made discontiguous by degradation of the physical environment. In most cases, however, these represent worst-case scenarios rather than certainties. In any case, it must be remem-
bered that human beings are not giant pandas. Pandas are presumably unaware of their endangered status and so do not take steps in response to their situation, while human beings are able to make choices within a range of options that are available to them, and that includes which language (or languages) they are going to speak.

Given that numerous factors interrelate in a variety of complex ways in any linguistic ecology, it is of course extremely difficult, even impossible, to make absolutely certain predictions about what the future will hold for the languages of Vanuatu. Some have predicted the worst in terms of the loss of possibly all of the local languages, though those who have expressed the loudest views have almost without exception had no direct contact with any of these languages spoken within these local communities, and they are typically quite unaware of both the kinds of linguistic choices that are made in Vanuatu’s different societies, and of the kinds of attitudes that Ni-Vanuatu hold to their own languages, to Bislama, and to the two metropolitan languages.

Despite my guarded optimism, I do not want my words to be interpreted as meaning that the status quo should be allowed to prevail. I regard the almost complete lack of response from any government to repeated calls for action to actively support languages other than English or French since independence in 1980 with considerable concern. In 1984, in response to a workshop organised jointly by the University of the South Pacific and the Ministry of Education, and run by John Lynch (then of the University of Papua New Guinea), with the aim of producing a writing system and a set of introductory curriculum materials in the Whitesands language of Tanna, the Office of the Prime Minister at the time responded that the resulting recommendations for a pilot vernacular education project ‘be followed up in order to realise them soonest’.

This initial enthusiasm appears to have immediately been completely forgotten. Recent moves to incorporate local languages into the formal education system as part of the Education Master Plan offer some hope, but if this project is carried out hurriedly and without proper attention to detail and without appropriately trained staff – and such a scenario is not impossible to envisage – it is likely that local communities will be completely turned off any possibility for vernacular early education for some generations to come.

Another concern is that to date, very few Ni-Vanuatu have received the kind of training in linguistic issues at a sufficiently advanced level to allow the kind of debate that is needed at a national level to assist in the formulation of a national consensus about what is, or is not, desirable in terms of language policy. Ideally, this account of the language planning situation in Vanuatu should have been written by a Ni-Vanuatu who is involved in such activities. However, as this monograph has shown, language planning has had such a low priority in this highly diverse country that there is no centrally organised or publicly mandated and recognised language planning agency or language policy. Those language planning activities which do take place are so diffuse in terms of the institutions and range of activities involved that no Ni-Vanuatu have ever been encouraged to seek higher academic degrees in this area. For this reason, this account has been written by an outsider primarily as a reference document for other outsiders.
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Notes

1. The prefix *ni-* derives from a widely distributed preposition in local vernaculars that means ‘of’.
2. A traditional non-addictive narcotic that is now becoming trendy among westerners as a natural health product.
3. There is a more widely quoted figure of 105 languages (e.g. Tryon, 1976), though Lynch and Crowley (in press) argue that the evidence for such a high figure is at the moment somewhat inconclusive. In fact, the latter source cites 81 actively spoken languages on the apparently mistaken assumption that Litzlitz is still actively spoekn.
4. ‘The Republic shall protect the different local languages, which are part of the national heritage, and may declare one of them as a national language’ (The Constitution of Vanuatu, Article 3:2.).
5. Formerly, the Gilbert Islands, which were part of the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands.
6. ‘We, we, we are happy to say that
We, we, we are people of Vanuatu.’
7. While the war had little effect on the vernaculars of Vanuatu, it did have major cultural and political effects. In particular, Ni-Vanuatu for the first time saw African American troops performing duties that they had previously assumed could only be performed by Europeans, planting seeds of doubt about the legitimacy of colonial control in their own country by the British and the French. The seemingly unlimited resources of the Americans also led to the growth of the John Frum ‘cargo cult’ on Tanna, which is still active today. This movement is based on the idea that when a person known by this name returns, vast amounts of material wealth – which has until now been hoarded illicitly by Europeans – will come spewing forth from the local volcano.
8. By ‘relatively recent’, I mean since around 1300 AD, as the remaining languages of the country result from much earlier migrations.
9. The census questionnaires in the 1989 and 1999 censuses were distributed to enumerators in Bislama. In rural areas, where enumerators were generally chosen from local areas where they spoke the local language, the questions were typically administered through the vernacular. Where the enumerator did not speak the local language, the questions were normally asked in Bislama. With the very small – and predominantly urban – expatriate population, enumerators were presumably chosen for their ability to administer the census questions in English or French if the need arose.
10. The John Frum movement referred to in note 7 also involves syncretism between traditional spirituality, a millennial interpretation of Christianity and modern materialism.
11. In the Christian tradition, of course, the association of eggs with Easter is a direct continuation of very old fertility celebrations.
12. Many of these writing systems were imperfect in a variety of ways, and more recent work has sometimes involved improvements to these older spelling systems.
13. Located about halfway between Vanuatu and New Zealand, this is now politically part of Australia.
14. In fact, Mota-speaking graduates came from a number of islands in the south-eastern parts of the Solomon Islands as well.

15. At most, a sermon will be delivered in Erromangan on the basis of a few headings written on a sheet of paper, most likely in Bislama, possibly in English, but probably not in Erromangan.

16. Quite apart from the widely distributed *Nyu Laef* hymnals, 20,000 copies of the *Baebollong Bislama* were produced in 1996. That allows for an average of one Bislama Bible for every ten people in the country.

17. There is a regular Mass in English in town for a small number of anglophone Catholics, though a significant proportion of those attending are likely to be expatriates from Australia, New Zealand, other Pacific Islands or from further afield. For the most part, Ni-Vanuatu find it very difficult to conceive of an expatriate Catholic whose first language is anything but French.

18. The plan as it is currently formulated allows local communities either to adopt initial vernacular literacy or to retain the existing system that operates only through metropolitan languages. There is, however, an inherent difficulty with this kind of choice as the acceptance of universal eight years of primary education is tied to accepting initial vernacular literacy, which would be tantamount to having two ‘universal’ systems of education.

19. There are several ‘international’ schools, which cater predominantly for the children of expatriates, where Spanish and Japanese have reportedly been offered as electives.

20. In fact, even since before independence, the main francophone-dominated political grouping, known officially as *Union des Partis Modérés*, is generally referred to publicly (even by its own leaders) as UMP, which stands for the English title *Union of Moderate Parties*.

21. Another possible explanation for this is that francophones, automatically being speakers of Bislama, receive a substantive ‘leg-up’ to English because of the readily perceived similarities between English and Bislama as languages.

22. French speakers from Canada and other parts of the French-speaking world obviously do have characteristic accents, but the linguistic models in Vanuatu have been almost exclusively metropolitan French.

23. In fact, about the only times that one regularly encounters anglophone Ni-Vanuatu speaking to each other in English outside the classroom when there are no expatriates present is when under heavy influence of alcohol.

24. The increased density of the telephone network around the country, however, does seem to have brought about some reduction in the number of service messages broadcast over the radio.

25. ‘I hear that a senior secretary in the diocese of Vanuatu who is directly involved with official matters to the bishop has got his housekeeper from Torba pregnant.’

26. In the past, English and French programming has alternated every other day, or there has been an equal split between the two languages on each individual day.

27. It should be noted, however, that the kind of Bislama that typically appears in political messages is often heavily laden with English.

28. Despite the proximity of Fiji, there has never been any substantial flow of people of Indian origin to Vanuatu.

29. In fact, in the past, when staff in that department attempted to work with staff in other government departments to develop written norms and to develop terminology in Bislama – under the auspices of the *Komiti blong Bislama* (see below) – Language Services staff were dissuaded by their administrative superiors from attending meetings and were told that this was ‘not their job’.

30. ‘I often listen to the Bislama news on Radio New Hebrides but sometimes I do not understand properly because the readers use many English words which I do not know the meaning of. I am an educated person in town but I am concerned about our parents in the islands who I believe do not understand the Bislama news on the radio. I say this because recently one of our elders at home asked me about the meaning of the word ‘affectem’ which he had heard on the Bislama news on the radio.’

31. Alternatively, of course, people may be coming to understand more of such items than
was formerly the case either through constant exposure or through greater exposure to English in the formal education system.

32. For instance, Paramount Chiefs Malvatumauri (1983) spells the word repablik on the cover of this booklet.

33. This term derives from a widely used word in local languages meaning ‘stone’.

34. It is unclear whether this was due simply to political inertia, or if post-independence governments were reluctant to sanction an independent body which could monitor their activities. Since the appointment of the first ombudsmen, a long series of reports has been issued which are critical of the activities of many senior people in government.

35. Unfortunately, this association has been moribund since 1996.

36. The same criticism can also be levelled at the University of the South Pacific, though there is perhaps more of an acceptance that the tradition of academic freedom in a university context gives expatriate academics greater freedom to participate in public debate than non-academics.

37. When the Vanuatu government was headed by the anglophone Fr Walter Lini in the 1980s, he presented his formal speech on behalf of his nation to members of the association in Bislama, with interpretation provided into French.


39. The remaining Erromangan language is alive and well, with its speakers now experiencing normal demographic increase, and the language has about 1900 speakers.

40. These languages are lexically, phonologically and structurally similar to each other, making this kind of learning a viable proposition.

41. In fact, the number of Ni-Vanuatu with any tertiary qualifications in linguistics is no more than a handful.

References


Paramount Chiefs Malvatumauri (1983) Kastom Polisi Blong Malvatumauri, Nasonal Kaonsel


