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On borrowed time? The increase of Bislama loanwords in Bierebo

Peter Budd

1. Introduction

This paper examines the use of loanwords in Bierebo, an Oceanic language of Vanuatu, and asks to what extent this borrowing represents a threat to the language's survival. Bierebo has a total of around 900 speakers, a number which might lead one to presume that it is highly endangered. However it continues to be transmitted to children in the home, and it is not unusual for local vernaculars in island Melanesia to survive comfortably with similar numbers (see Crowley 1995; Lynch *et al* 2002). Nonetheless, many older Bierebo speakers bemoan the influx of borrowings from Bislama, the country's national language. They perceive this tendency to be increasing rapidly, and therefore posing a real threat to the ongoing use of Bierebo. This paper aims to scrutinise such views through both quantitative and qualitative analysis.¹ The structure is as follows: In §2 I present examples of frequently observed loanwords and provide an overview of Bislama borrowing in Bierebo. In §3 I examine the formal aspects of the borrowing and then in §4 I present the findings of a quantitative study of the incidence of Bislama borrowings in a sample of texts. In §5 I assess the significance of borrowing, discussing to what degree it should be considered as a step in the direction of a potential language shift, before offering concluding remarks in §6.

¹ This paper is partly inspired by Crowley's 2004 analysis of borrowing in the Syle language of Vanuatu and follows his methodological approach, as discussed below in §4; non-standard abbreviations used are: CL = possessive classifier; D = domestic/drinkable possession; E = edible possession; EX = exclusive of addressee; G = general possession; IN = inclusive of addressee; NOM = nominalisation; O = object; R = Realis; S = subject marker. The source of the example sentences is marked with a text code and any data without a code indicates a frequently observed, but unrecorded example.

1.1 General background

Vanuatu is an island country in the south Pacific, belonging to the region of Melanesia. Linguistically it is incredibly diverse with around 100 indigenous languages (many of them multi-dialectal) spoken by its population of 200,000. All of these languages belong to the Oceanic subgroup of the Austronesian family. Vanuatu's national language is Bislama, an English-lexifier creole, which has much in common with the more well-known Tok Pisin of Papua New Guinea (PNG). In addition, French and English are official languages of the country and are the only languages (in theory) which are used in education from primary school upwards.

Epi island has a population of approximately 5000 and Bierebo is one of its six indigenous languages. Of the 900 or so Bierebo speakers, the highest concentration is in the Bonkovio area on the west coast, from where most of the data discussed here were collected. Bonkovio village itself has a population of around 250 people but when combined with the settlements a kilometre or two to the south, the number rises to about 450.

The vast majority of Epi people are bilingual between their village language and Bislama, which is used as a lingua franca between people of different language communities, as well as being the medium of most church activities. Though not formally taught anywhere, all children acquire Bislama as a matter of course (see §5) and I encountered only one or two very elderly individuals who were reluctant to speak Bislama, but they certainly understood it. Many people have some knowledge of English or French through their primary and secondary education but there are no natural scenarios where one would hear local people conversing in either of these languages.

2. Borrowings in Bierebo

Borrowed Bislama vocabulary permeates the language of domestic life, agriculture and fishing, village administration and church activities, covering a whole range of introduced foodstuffs, household objects, practices, and technologies. The majority of the following forms, for example, were observed probably every day during field work.²

² Field work totalling nine months was carried out between 2005 and 2007, during which time I lived with a family in Bonkovio village.

Table 1: Frequently observed borrowings

<i>suka</i> ‘sugar’	<i>plet</i> ‘plate, bowl’
<i>ti</i> ‘tea’	<i>spun</i> ‘spoon’
<i>flaoa</i> ‘flour’	<i>klas</i> ‘cup/bowl’; also ‘mirror’, ‘glass’
<i>sol</i> ‘salt’	<i>sospen</i> ‘saucepan’
<i>rais</i> ‘rice’	<i>makokot</i> ‘cooking pot’ (< Fr. <i>ma cocotte</i>) ³
<i>mayoko</i> ‘manioc/cassava’	<i>mago</i> ‘mango’
<i>tin(fis)</i> ‘tinned fish’	<i>trausis</i> ‘shorts/trousers’
<i>plangket</i> ‘blanket’	<i>sot</i> ‘(T-)shirt’
<i>pilo</i> ‘pillow’	<i>tres</i> ‘dress’
<i>net</i> ‘mosquito net’	<i>sapat</i> ‘shoes’ (< Port. <i>sapato</i>)
<i>klosis / smol haos</i> ‘latrine’	<i>lait</i> ‘hurricane lantern’
<i>kichin</i> ‘kitchen’	<i>kolmen</i> ‘Coleman lantern’
<i>was</i> ‘wash (clothes)’	<i>masis</i> ‘matches’
<i>pesin</i> ‘washing bowl’	<i>paket</i> ‘bucket’
<i>tos</i> ‘torch’	<i>karsin</i> ‘kerosene’
<i>pateri</i> ‘battery’	<i>sikaret</i> ‘cigarette’
<i>mani</i> ‘money’	<i>selen</i> ‘10 Vatu’ (< shilling) ⁴

Other very frequently observed loans include numerals above five and terms associated with the Western calendar i.e. the days of the week and names of months, as well as the form *klok* used for telling the time. Vocabulary associated with the construction of non-traditional houses is generally borrowed too, e.g. *kapa* (< copper), ‘corrugated iron’, *simen* ‘cement’, *pos* ‘post’, *plasta*, *winda*, and *luva* (‘louvre’). Plenty of loanwords can also be found in the semantic fields related to subsistence farming, fishing, and small-scale cash cropping which make up the main economic activities, e.g. *puluk* ‘cow’, *nani* ‘goat’, *spet* ‘spade’, *net*, *huk* (n) ‘hook’, (v) ‘to fish (with hook and line)’, *string* ‘fishing line’, *pot* ‘boat’, *pensin* ‘petrol’ *masut* ‘diesel’.

³ *Ma cocotte* is a brand of heavy duty cookware.

⁴ Pre-independence Vanuatu (New Hebrides as was) used pounds and shillings. Use of the word *selen* persists in Bonkovoio, referring to 10 Vatu.

Village administration on Epi combines traditional and Western systems, with hereditary chiefs forming a *kaunsel*, and individuals elected to fixed-term positions of *cheaman*, *vais*, and *tresura*. Most people will sit on some kind of village *komiti* at one stage or another, and in the absence of a police force most local crimes are dealt with in a village *kot* ‘court’, in which the *kaunsel* acts as judge and jury and typically administers a *fain* as punishment. The church plays a hugely important role in village life, and its associated borrowed vocabulary includes *chioch*(*haos*), *pricha*, ‘preacher’, *skul* ‘worship’, *prei* ‘pray’, and the clerical ranks of *tikon* ‘deacon’, *elta* ‘elder’, and *pasta* ‘pastor’; the church fundraiser, the *pasa* (< bazaar) is a frequent village event.

These forms give an impression of the kinds of borrowings which occur, but there are of course many more - e.g. those associated with education, communications, transport, commerce, sports, audio and video technology - and new terms are constantly entering the language. Most of these examples are lexical items, and predominantly nouns (see §3 and §4 for further discussion). In most cases no alternative, indigenous terms exist. However, as will be shown below, Bislama borrowings do go beyond this level, entering the realm of so-called ‘unnecessary borrowing’ (Clark 2004) where native terms certainly do exist, but have been relegated or forgotten.

Most of the loanwords given above are obviously of English origin and it is impossible on purely formal grounds to determine whether they have come directly from English or alternatively whether they have entered Bierebo via Bislama, which has itself sourced most of its lexicon from English. The same applies to the much smaller number of loans of French origin, e.g. *leto* (< *l’auto*) ‘car, truck’, *lai* ‘garlic’ (< *l’ail*) *las* ‘ace’ (< *l’as*), *lasup* ‘soup’, *lapet* ‘wedding, celebration’ (< *la fête*).⁵ Given that all of the forms discussed occur widely in Bislama, and that contact between Bierebo and Bislama, past and present, is far greater than any contact with English or French, I will refer to all loans as Bislama borrowings even though it is feasible that historically some of the forms entered directly from the European languages.

⁵ The relatively small amount of French loans is surprising since, historically, the west coast of Epi has had a strong French influence, due mainly to the French planters in the area. Pre-independence (1980) local allegiances lay firmly with the Francophone Moderate Party, and a legacy of this is that the secondary school in Burumba and the primary school in Bonkovio are both French-medium.

3. Formal details of borrowing

I discuss aspects of phonology in 3.1 and then provide details of the morphosyntax of Bislama borrowings in 3.2 - 3.4, organised by word class. 'Unnecessary' borrowings are discussed in 3.5 and in 3.6 there is a brief description of alternative strategies to borrowing.

3.1 Phonological nativisation

There is little - if any - phonological modification made to Bislama words when they are borrowed into Bierebo. Many of the loanwords observed would likely have entered the language via Bislama speakers from other islands who had already modified the words according to the phonologies of their own native languages. For example, in Bierebo the pronunciation of the given name 'Charlie' is [ˈsələ], not [ˈtʃələ], despite the fact that Bierebo has the phoneme /tʃ/, which frequently occurs word-initially. The most likely explanation is that this Western name had become popular in other locations among speakers whose language did not have the phoneme /tʃ/ and it had therefore already been modified to /s/.

Indeed the same hypothesis is most likely true for other loans where voiced and unvoiced post-alveolar fricatives in the European donor language forms are neutralised to the voiceless alveolar fricative:

/ʒ/ → /s/	/soŋ.lu'wi/	'Jean-Louis'
	/sios/	'Georges'
/ʃ/ → /s/	/sipsip/	'sheep'
	/sem/	'Shem' (Christian name)

The example above of 'Jean-Louis' also shows how French nasalised vowels are modified to a sequence of vowel + velar nasal.

For an Oceanic language Bierebo has a relatively large phoneme inventory, but there is no glottal fricative /h/ and no labio-dental fricatives /v/ and /f/. Most speakers have no problem pronouncing these sounds and they are maintained in borrowings, e.g. [helpem] 'help', *fanis* 'fence' and *Vanuatu*. However, neutralisation of /f/ and /v/ as [f] or modification to [p] were also attested, as in *kuap* 'guava', *pren* 'friend', and [fotlo] for *Votlo* (village in south Epi).

The phonotactic constraint in Bierebo that disallows syllable-final consonant clusters is upheld in loanwords where epenthesis occurs to facilitate pronunciation, e.g. /sikis/ ‘six’ and /tʃe.mes/ ‘James’. This process could also very likely have taken place in the English-to-Bislama stage of borrowing since these pronunciations are common in most varieties of Bislama. More interesting is that syllable-initially there are greater possibilities in loanwords than in indigenous words. Bierebo has maximum clusters of CC, whereas in Bislama loans there are CCC clusters like /str/, /spr/ and /spl/ in *strap* ‘belt’, *string* ‘fishing line, string’ *stret* ‘straight, correct’, and *spre* ‘perfume’.⁶

3.2 Morphosyntax of borrowed nouns

Nouns are freely borrowed from Bislama but since there is little nominal morphology in Bierebo, morphological integration is minimal.

As is common for Oceanic languages, the semantic distinction between alienable and inalienable possession is reflected in two separate marking patterns for nouns: Inalienable or direct possession, which primarily covers kinterms and bodyparts, is marked by pronominal possessor suffixes, whilst alienable or indirect possession is marked by one of three relational classifiers that bears the possessor pronoun. Despite the occurrence of a number of borrowed kinterms, none of these receives suffixes, and instead the alienable or indirect strategy is employed, which uses a suffixed, general classifier:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1a) <i>Karma-gu</i>
father-1SG.POSS
‘My father’ | (b) <i>Kana-ng tata</i>
GCL-1SG.POSS father
‘My father’ |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|

Similarly, the one example I found of a borrowed bodypart term - *pol(h)et* ‘bald head’ - behaves in the same way, marked by indirect possession, as opposed to the indigenous root *purpwari-* ‘head’ which is suffixed:

⁶ Bislama also has a CCC cluster of /spl/ in words like *splitim* ‘split’ but I never observed this as a borrowing in Bierebo, which has several equivalent terms (see 4.1).

- (2) *Sowe na ø-je suta purpwari-nia*
 Rat TOP 3SG.S-R.see octopus head-3SG.POSS
 ‘The rat saw the octopus’ head’
- (3) *Nia ø-de-lele kana-m polhet*
 sun 3SG.S-R.strike-spoil GCL -2 SG.POSS bald.head
 ‘The sun was burning your bald head’

(B1_17)

Borrowings also freely occur with the other classifiers *sa-* (edible possession) and *mwa-* domestic / drinkable possession:

- (4) *Sa-da mit*
 ECL-1PLIN.POSS meat
 ‘Our meat’
- (5) *Mwa-ng ti*
 DCL-1SG.POSS tea
 ‘My tea’

Plurality is often implicit but may be overtly marked by postposing *lala* (formally identical to the third person plural independent pronoun) to the nominal head. This strategy is readily applied to borrowings, including compounds:

- (6) *man kwinslan lala*
 man Queensland PL
 ‘Queenslanders (Australians)’⁷

(B1_13)

So-called ‘hybrid borrowings’, in which indigenous forms and loanwords combine, are rarer, but the following compounds and phrasal nouns are attested:

⁷ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries many Epi islanders were taken to work on sugar cane plantations in Fiji and Queensland and today some speakers use ‘Australia’ and ‘Queensland’ interchangeably.

- (7) *previ kala*
breadfruit colour
'breadfruit variety'
- (8) *puru-klas*
tree-glass
'tree sp. ' ⁸
- (9) *konimra-n tos*
eyeball-3SG.POSS torch
'torch bulb'
- (10) *leto na wi*
truck of water
'WATER TRUCK' ⁹

3.3 Morphosyntax of borrowed verbs

Indigenous Bierebo verbs are marked for subject person and number by a prefix, and inflect for Realis/Irrealis by root-initial consonant alternation. However, for the most part, borrowed verbs and adjectives are treated quite differently. Instead they are accommodated in the language by postposing them to the copula *ve/pe* which bears these person/number and Realis/Irrealis inflections. This strategy is common to all of the languages of Epi (Early 2004) and also to Paamese, spoken on the neighbouring island of Paama (Crowley 2004).

⁸ Before the advent of cheap plastic snorkel masks, people would use the wood of this tree to carve frames, into which pieces of bottle glass were inserted to make diving goggles.

⁹ There are no water trucks on Epi but people jokingly refer to the passing of the water truck as a euphemism for the window of opportunity for a bucket shower in the evening before it becomes unpleasantly cold and dark.

(11) *Ko-ve* stop!
 2SGS-IRR.be stop
 ‘Stop!’

(12) *Me-pe* stat *ka* *me-memcha* *wowana* *lala*
 1PLEX.S-R.be start COMP 1PLEX.S-plant food PL
 ‘We start to plant the crops’

(MZ000005)

(13) *A-pe* chekem poi *lala*
 3PL.S-R.be check boy PL
 ‘They searched the boys’

(B1_13)

This copula construction is otherwise strictly reserved for nouns in equative and attributive clauses in the language.

The vast majority of borrowed verbs are single words, but two complex, phrasal borrowings are also attested, though both are treated as lexical units, as in Bislama:

kat rait - be allowed / have the right to do something

fesem hat taim - struggle, suffer (lit. face hard times)

(14) *Mara ko-pe* kat rait *na*
 NEG1 2SG.S-R.be have right of

ko-war *kon* *ϕ-vinimi* *Vanuatu*
 2SG.S-IRR.carry corn 3SG.S-IRR.come Vanuatu

‘You didn’t/don’t have the right to bring corn into Vanuatu’

(B1_13)

(15) *Me-pe* fesem.hat.taim - *yumwa-ena dupwa=ningi*
 1PLEX.S-R.be struggle work-NOM ANA=DEM
 ‘We were suffering - (with) that work.’

(MZ000010)

Just three verbs found to date (which likely represent examples of the earliest strata of borrowing), are more fully integrated, functioning as regular indigenous verbs without the need for a copula. They are: *smok* ‘smoke’ (intrans), *skul* ‘go to school/church, study, worship’, and *kukua* ‘cook (especially in a pot)’.¹⁰

(16) *Ko-smok?*
2SG.S-smoke
‘Do you smoke?’

(17) *Ne-vre-i* *nenua* *kin* *kirigas=nga*
1SG.S-IRR.say-about before 1SG small=just

ne-skul *Burumba*
1SG.S-study PLACE

‘I will talk about when I was little and I went to school in Burumba’

The verb *kukua* ‘cook’ also undergoes root-initial consonant mutation in the manner of regular indigenous verbs in order to mark Realis:

(18) *A-gukua=ia*
3PL.S-R.cook=3O
‘They cooked it’

Thus, rather than a gradual assimilation of borrowed verbs into the language’s morphosyntax, the opposite has occurred: the earliest borrowings have been fully integrated like indigenous forms whilst subsequent borrowings have entered a closed class of uninflecting verbs.

In line with this different treatment, borrowed verbs do not undergo nominalisation in Bierebo. The nominalisation process involves suffixing *-ena*

¹⁰ The indigenous terms for traditional cooking methods are: *ton* ‘bake, wrapped in leaves’, *visop* ‘boil, cook (often over embers)’ and *change* ‘roast over open flame’.

or *-iana* to the morphologically basic Irrealis verb root, but for borrowed verbs alternative constructions are used:

(19) *Wi na chele-iana*
 water of bathe-NOM
 ‘Bathing water’

(20) *Wi na mun-iana*
 water of drink-NOM
 ‘Drinking water’

(21) *Wi na a-ve* *was* *ka=nia*
 water of 3PL.S-R.be wash INS=3O

‘Water for washing clothes (lit. water they will do washing with it)’

I have found just one example where the borrowing of Bislama verbs could be deemed to have had an effect on Bierebo grammatical structure:¹¹ Bierebo colour terms are grammatically-speaking stative verbs, taking person-number subject prefixes. In contrast, *borrowed* colour terms are treated in the same way as the other verb and adjective loans, and are therefore preceded by the inflected copula:

(22) *a-malso*
 3PL.S-black
 ‘They’re black’

(23) *ϕ-pe* *plu*
 3SG.S.-R.be blue
 ‘It’s blue’

However, in the following example, the speaker (a 22 year old male) mixes the two structures, using a copula with the indigenous colour term *pilili* ‘red’, resulting in a construction which would generally be considered ungrammatical:

¹¹ The possibility of this being a performance error should not be ruled out, however.

- (24) *Ø-pe pilili ya purpwari-nia*
 3SG.S.-R.be red LOC head-3SG.POSS

‘It was red on his head’

(B1_09)

3.4 Borrowings in other word classes

As shown above, adjectives are often borrowed as stative verbs, but at least one adjective is attested as a pronominal modifier:

- (25) *olfala wanua ta navin yomarua*
 old village ART inland bush

‘An old village up in the bush’

(B2_05)

The adverbs *oltaim* ‘all the time’ and *olpaut* ‘everywhere’ are also attested, and borrowed discourse markers *ale* (< Fr. *allez*) and *oke* are very common, as is the case in many Vanuatu languages (Crowley 2004). One possible grammatical loan is the disjunctive conjunction *o* ‘or’. However, some speakers considered that this is a contraction of the Bierebo equivalent *apo* rather than a borrowing.

Another area in which borrowing occurs is a variant of the ‘excess’ construction. This construction uses the relativiser *ne* with nouns, adjectives, and verbs to express intensity or excess in the following patterns: N *ne* N expresses ‘(too) many Ns’ and A *ne* A or V/A *ne dupwa na* expresses intensity or excess of the situation described by the verb or adjective¹². Thus:

- (26) *Biara ne biara*
 land.crab REL land.crab

‘Loads of crabs’

¹² The form *dupwa* functions as an anaphoric marker as well as as a similative preposition ‘like’. When it occurs with the emphatic marker *na* I have usually translated it as ‘like this’ or ‘thus’

(27) *Bo ne bo*
 Good REL good
 ‘Really good’

(28) *Bo ne dupwa na*
 Good REL ANA EMPH
 ‘Really good’

Whether or not the whole construction is a calque of its Bislama equivalent is an unresolved question,¹³ but there is also a common variation on the last structure which substitutes *dupwa na* with the borrowed from *paua* ‘power’:

(29) *Ø-pe sain ne paua*
 3SG.S.R-be shine REL power
 ‘It was really gleaming’

(B1_17)

To summarise the picture presented so far, the phonological and morphological integration of Bislama borrowings is minimal. Only a handful of borrowed verbs inflect for person, number and realis/irrealis status, and deverbal nominalisation is unattested for loanwords. Whilst borrowed nominals can be compounded, there are none that take possessor affixes. There is no evidence of Bislama features influencing the phonology or morphology of Bierebo. The recorded occurrence of a copula verb with an indigenous stative verb is one possible example of how borrowings might be affecting Bierebo syntax.

In other Vanuatu languages, such as South Efate and Sye (languages spoken on islands to the south of Epi) there is arguably more grammatical interference. The use of a pre-verbal Bislama auxiliary *mas* ‘must’ has become common in both these languages. Also, in contrast to Bierebo, Early (2004: 59) reports de-verbal nominalisations involving borrowed verbs in the neighbouring Epi language, Lewo:

¹³ A direct parallel for this structure exists in Bislama using the relativiser *we*: *i gud we i gud* ‘really great’.

- (30) *Suri na-ve-rao-in-ena*
 Thing NOM.1-IRR.be-row-TR-NOM2
 ‘The thing being argued about’

It is probably not coincidental that nominalisations appear to be far more productive in general in Lewo than they are in Bierebo i.e. it would be more likely to see borrowings incorporated in commonly used structures than in rarer ones. This perhaps accounts for the use of *paua* ‘power’ in the Bierebo excess construction described above, since this is a very frequently heard construction, variants of which regularly punctuate everyday speech. Similarly, the presence of an existing, available slot for grammatical borrowing is probably significant. Bierebo grammar has no pre-verbal auxiliaries, whereas both South Efate and Sye do, making it more understandable that they have borrowed *mas* ‘must’ from its equivalent slot in Bislama.

3.5 ‘Unnecessary’ borrowing and borrowed core vocabulary

By and large, most of the examples given so far represent novel objects, concepts, and actions where the use of borrowings is to some extent understandable in terms of lexical need. What is more surprising is the use of Bislama loans in situations where indigenous terms exist, or would certainly have existed - what Clark (2004) refers to as ‘unnecessary’ borrowing. Cross-linguistically it is by no means uncommon for borrowing to occur when there is no apparent lexical need, and often other motivations can be identified (see e.g. Poplack *et al* 1988 and Treffers-Daller 1994 which both discuss the importance of behavioural norms and social networks in communities to account for lexical borrowings). However, given the small size, relative homogeneity and isolation of the Bierebo community (see §5), such explanatory models are much less applicable in this case and often it is impossible to provide any satisfactory reason for the use of particular Bislama loanwords. In some cases functional explanations certainly do exist: For instance, Bierebo numerals above five are complex forms, and the loanword *eleven* for example, is clearly easier to handle than *lualima-ban-takrana* (lit. ‘two fives add one’). Yet the use of other loanwords remains puzzling, such as items that might be considered ‘core’ vocabulary, which cross-linguistically is resistant to borrowing in language contact situations. Other items are so salient or commonplace in the local environment that it is equally surprising

(to me) that indigenous terms have fallen from use. Some examples are given below:

Table 2: 'Unnecessary' borrowings

Bislama loan word	Indigenous term	
Kinterms / people		
<i>tata</i>	<i>karma-na</i>	'father'
<i>mama</i>	<i>kanya-na</i>	'mother'
<i>tawian</i>	<i>(kamar)chase</i> ¹⁴	'brother-in-law'
<i>famle</i>	-	'family'
<i>nasara</i>	-	'clan group'
<i>man</i> ¹⁵	<i>taru</i>	'man, person'
<i>poi</i>	<i>(kirtiti na) yirmwene</i>	'boy'
<i>kel</i>	<i>(kirtiti na) t(i)ra</i>	'girl'
<i>fren/pren</i>	-	'friend'
Food		
<i>mit</i>	<i>sinpui</i>	'meat'
(Coastal) environment		
<i>menlan</i>	-	'mainland'
<i>ailan</i>	-	'island'
<i>pasis</i>	-	'passage' (in reef)
<i>poin</i>	-	'point, headland'
<i>wol</i>	-	'world'
<i>sak</i>	<i>piya</i>	'shark'
<i>stinger</i>	<i>vi</i>	'stingray'
<i>plufis</i>	-	'parrotfish'
<i>longmaot</i>	-	'needlefish, garfish'
<i>parel</i> ¹⁶	<i>valua</i>	'paddle'

¹⁴ See §3.6 below.

¹⁵ This only occurs in compounds referring to inhabitants of a particular place e.g. *man Pentekos lala* (man Pentecost.island PL) 'Pentecost people'.

4. Empirical evidence for increased borrowing

To measure the incidence of borrowings I looked at a sample of 30 Bierebo texts (all transcripts of audio recordings) which totalled almost 10,000 words. The texts are from 25 different consultants, five female and twenty male, whose ages ranged from 11 to over 70. Excluding placenames there were 392 tokens of borrowed words i.e. 4%. However, this figure in a way over-states the incidence of borrowings since, following the methodology used in Crowley (2004), multiple instances of the same token were all counted. In one text, for example, just two Bislama words accounted for twenty tokens. The obvious question which then arises is how significant this figure of 4% really is. One borrowed word in every twenty-five may seem high to some observers and low to others, and it clearly needs to be put into some kind of context.¹⁷

The only comparison readily available in the Vanuatu context is Crowley's (2004) analysis of Sye. From a similar sample (24 texts comprising almost 15,000 words) the incidence of borrowings in Sye was proportionately much lower at 2.76%, or one word in 35. How do these figures compare with borrowings in 'non-endangered' languages? As a very rough and ready comparison with French, I looked at transcripts of a series of short interviews conducted for a BBC language course¹⁸ and counted 30 English borrowings and three Japanese borrowings out of a total of 976 words i.e. 3.3%.¹⁹ Gentsch's (2004) study of three online German newspapers²⁰ found an overall figure of 1.5% English words, although written language is generally more conservative. Sharp's (2001) study of English words in Swedish spoken discourse (business meetings

¹⁶ In Bierebo the noun and verb meaning 'paddle' are identical as *valua*. The indigenous verb is always used but the Bislama noun is more common than the Bierebo equivalent.

¹⁷ Comparisons are of course notoriously difficult since there are so many variables - e.g. genre, subject matter, spoken vs written language etc - which can influence the incidence of borrowings.

¹⁸ Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/french/talk/transcripts/prog6.rtf>, accessed November 2010.

¹⁹ Half of the borrowings came in one interview discussing sports.

²⁰ The newspapers were Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Bild-Zeitung, and Muenchner Merkur.

and casual conversations) revealed an incidence of 2.5%. A corpus study of English borrowings in Icelandic (Svavasdottir 2004) revealed an overall incidence of 3.6%, though in personal conversations it was higher at 4.2%. On the face of it, therefore, it would seem that a figure of 4% of borrowings in Bierebo is not outrageously high, especially for a bilingual community.

4.1 Borrowing by word class

In the Bierebo sample 70% of Bislama borrowings are nominals (of which numerals account for 7.5%); verbs account for 76 tokens (19%); discourse linking words *ale* and *oke* account for 8%; and the remaining 3% is made up of adjectival and adverbial forms. The Sye figures are fairly similar: 67% for nouns, 16.5% verbs, and 16.5% for other minor word classes (Crowley 2004: 50).

Of the borrowed Bislama nominals in the Bierebo sample, the form *stori*, features regularly in narrative openings and closings, but it is the locational noun *taim* ‘time’ which is responsible for the highest proportion of the count. It occurs almost exclusively as a temporal subordinator rather than being used to refer to the abstract concept of time. As a subordinator it combines with the relativiser *ne* or with the topic/emphatic marker *na*, to mean ‘when’, (lit. at the time that’):

- (31) *taim ne me-pitove mo-buche nerove Santo*
 time REL 1PLEX.S-R.go.down 1PLEX.S-R.reach down Santo
 ‘...when we went down to Santo’

(MZ000010)

- (32) *taim ne ϕ -mudi ϕ -ban ϕ -memcha nerui...*
 time REL 3SG.S-take 3SG.S-R.go 3SG.S-plant now
 ‘when she took it away to plant now...’

(MZ000029)

This is a direct parallel of the Bislama *taem we* construction, and perhaps could be cited as an example of Bislama interference in Bierebo grammar. However, equally common as a temporal subordinator in Bierebo texts is the indigenous word *bong* ‘time’ in the same frame:

(33) *bong na a-pre wan tu tri*
 time TOP 3PL.S-R.say one two three
 ‘...when they said “one two three go!”’

(34) *bong na ø-m-la-yal kiritit dupwa=ni*
 time TOP 3SG.S-R-do-find child ANA=DEIC
 ‘...when he found this child’

(C2_13)

Interestingly, although all combinations of *taim/bong* + *na/ne* are attested, there does seem to be a preference for *bong na* and *taim ne* over *bong ne* and *taim na*. Rather than a straight substitution of *taim* for *bong*, speakers appear to be borrowing the Bislama lexical item from the construction *taem we* and then translating the relativiser into Bierebo. There is no evidence that the whole Bislama expression gets borrowed as a unit, however.

For the borrowed verbs, the most noteworthy finding is that there is a far higher number of intransitive forms - particularly stative verbs and verbs of cognition - than transitives. The proportion of 85% intransitives vs 15% transitives in borrowed verbs compares with an overall ratio of verbs in the sample which is much closer to 50-50.

Table 3: Borrowed verbs

Transitive			
<i>apaut</i>	‘concern, be about s.t.’		
<i>kat rait</i>	‘be allowed to do s.t.’		
<i>makem</i>	‘mark (out)’		
<i>mitim</i>	‘meet’		
<i>pentem</i>	‘paint’		
<i>winim</i>	‘defeat’		
Intransitive			
<i>aut</i>	‘leave, go out’	<i>skul</i>	‘go to school/church’
<i>chelas</i>	‘jealous’	<i>saranda</i>	‘surrender, give in’
<i>enemi</i>	‘(be) enemies’	<i>sat</i>	‘shut’
<i>fait</i>	‘fight, quarrel’	<i>spit</i>	‘race, speed’
<i>fesem hat taim</i>	‘struggle, face hard times’	<i>taiva</i>	‘skin dive’
<i>kamaot</i>	‘come out’	<i>tingting</i>	‘think’
<i>klin</i>	‘clean’	<i>tait</i>	‘bored, tired’
<i>let</i>	‘late’	<i>tiskas</i>	‘discuss’
<i>lus</i>	‘lose’	<i>traem</i>	‘try’
<i>open</i>	‘open’	<i>trae hat</i>	‘try hard’
<i>plak</i>	‘black’	<i>trong</i>	‘drunk’
<i>reti</i>	‘ready’	<i>wait</i>	‘white’
<i>rol</i>	‘roll’	<i>win</i>	‘win’
<i>sain</i>	‘shine’	<i>yelo</i>	‘yellow’

This preference for borrowing stative verbs in particular would seem to fit with a point Early (2004:62) makes regarding the use of the copula to accommodate Bislama verbs. He claims that since the copula construction is already used for stative and attributive expressions in Lewo (as is also the case for Bierebo), the ‘structural frame’ is already provided in the language. What the data above may confirm then, is that borrowed stative verbs and adjectives slot most naturally into this copula frame.

From the opposite perspective, the lower proportion of borrowed transitive verbs may be explained in part by the fact that Bierebo has a productive and creative strategy of verb serialisation, which in particular covers agentive, punctual, change-of-state actions. This linguistic resource appears to cope well with describing ‘novel’ actions, specific to recently introduced technologies. To illustrate, in the predominant serialisation pattern, the first verb expresses a manipulative action while the second expresses the resulting change of state:

- (35) *A-mwe-pini kelerigo dupwa=ni*
 3PL.S-R.hit-kill troll ANA=DEM
 ‘They killed the troll (beat it to death)’

(C2_13)

- (36) *Me-te-gono chora*
 1PLEX.S-IRR.strike-clean garden
 ‘We will clear a garden (using machetes)’

In this way, particular combinations of serialised verbs can be employed to describe actions associated with introduced technologies, such as ‘switch off’, ‘screw up’ and so on, which one might have expected to be expressed by borrowings:

kicho-ge ‘screw tight’ < ‘twist’ + ‘cover’
pwi-pini ‘switch off’ < ‘squeeze’ + ‘kill’
tu-gar ‘nail on’ < ‘bash’ + ‘fasten’
sue-ge ‘catch with a cast net/parachute net’ < ‘throw at’ + ‘cover’
vichul-lele ‘dazzle e.g. with torch’ < ‘light up’ + ‘spoil’

It must be significant that borrowed intransitive verbs like *open* and *klin* ‘clean’ are commonly heard (and both occur in the sample), yet I don’t recall ever observing their transitive counterparts in speech, and nor is there an instance of them in the corpus of recorded texts. Instead, various serialisations are used to describe the specific transitive senses of ‘open’ and ‘clean’.

Compare the following senses of ‘open’:

- (37) *Stoa* ϕ -*pe* *open*
 Store 3SG.S-R.be open
 ‘The store is/was open’
- (38) *Ne-te-dul* *tin*
 1SG.S-IRR.cut-puncture tin
 ‘I’ll open the tin (with a tin opener/knife)’
- (39) *Ko-la-nra* *pulutawa kuli* ϕ -*moluwe*
 2 SG.S-IRR.do-remove door dog 3sgS-go.out
 ‘Open/unbolt the door so that the dog can get out’

In the following excerpt, in addition to the serialisation *te-gono* ‘cut-clean’ shown above, two further serialised transitive verbs meaning ‘clean’ are illustrated: the generic *la-gono* ‘do-clean’, and *ya-gono* (‘brush, sweep’ lit. spear-clean) which contrast with the final borrowed intransitive:

- (40a) *Me-m-la-gono*, *me-m-ya-gono* *chora nerui*
 1PLEX.S-R-do-clean 1 PLEX.S-R -spear-clean garden now
 ‘We clean it, we sweep the garden clean now.’
- (b) *me-m-ya-gono* *yo, yo ne me-pre*
 1 PLEX.S-R -spear-clean place place REL 1 PLEX.S-R -say
 ‘We sweep the place, the place where we want to’
- (c) *me-memcha* *wowana y-ia nerui*
 1 PLEX.S-plant food LOC-3O now
 ‘plant crops (in it) now’
- (d) *me-m-ya-gono* ϕ -*pe* *klin* *dupwa* *na*
 1 PLEX.S-R -spear-clean 3SG.S-R.be clean thus EMPH
 ‘We sweep it clean. It’s clean like that.’

(MZ000005)

4.2 Borrowing by age group and genre

A common complaint among older speakers is that the knowledge of vernacular vocabulary is steadily fading and that there is an increasing reliance on Bislama borrowings by younger people. The statistics confirm that younger speakers do indeed use more loanwords and, not surprisingly, the oldest speakers are the most conservative. Five of the 28 texts included are from speakers aged 60 and above and these did indeed show the lowest amount of borrowing - just five words out of almost 1000 (0.5%). Yet three of the texts come from one 70 year old female speaker, and all of the texts were traditional *kastom* stories, which in theory would be less likely to include borrowings (see below).

In the sample speakers under forty use almost twice as many borrowings as those over forty, and yet, what is most striking is that when the age groups of under 25s and 25-40 are compared, the figures are identical in terms of the overall percentage of borrowings used, and all but identical in terms of the breakdown of the borrowings by word class:

Table 4: Lexical borrowing by age group

Speaker age	Overall % of borrowings	Nouns	Verbs	Discourse markers	Other
Under 25	4.93%	71%	20%	9%	0
25 - 40	4.93%	72%	18%	8%	2%
Over 40	2.88%	70%	20%	6%	4%

This would appear to suggest that rather than the ‘slippery slope’ scenario much cited by the older generation, there is in fact a plateau. It should also be noted that one twelve year old speaker used just three loanwords in the story he told, and one eighteen year old speaker contributed a text without using a single borrowing, something only otherwise attested by the elderly female speaker previously mentioned.

The texts in the sample were classified according to genre: narratives (factual accounts), *kastom* stories (traditional tales), and procedural texts. Predictably, the traditional stories and procedural texts featured fewer borrowings, though the sample does not include enough procedural texts for robust comparison. As shown below in Table 5, in the under 25 age group, speakers used less than half the amount of Bislama loanwords in *kastom* stories compared with factual narratives.

Table 5: Borrowings by genre

Text genre	Overall % of borrowings	Under 25s	25-40 yrs	Over 40s
Procedural	3.47%	-	-	3.47%
<i>kastom</i>	3.64%	3.04%	4.75%	2.21%
Narrative	5.32%	8.06%	6.70%	3.42%

Younger speakers may also be more ‘honest’ in their choice of language when recorded. The following sentence is the opening to a story told by a boy aged eleven who uses four Bislama forms in the first twelve words:

(41) *taim* na ne-joru ya *hos* na
time TOP 1SG.S-R.fall LOC horse EMPH

ø-pe *stat* na ya *santei* ta
3SG.S-R.be start EMPH LOC Sunday INDEF

‘The time I fell off the horse, it all started one Sunday.’

(MZ000022)

However, these same borrowings are attested in the speech of much older speakers, and with the exception of *taim* (see above), there are no obvious alternative indigenous forms. Many older speakers who were recorded were certainly more self-conscious about using borrowings and made concerted efforts to use ‘authentic’ language terms instead. In the following example the speaker catches himself using several borrowings and tries to make amends, by using *supario* instead of *manis* for ‘month’, and *lualima* and *okorolu* for ‘ten’ and ‘eight’. In the entire field work period I never once heard anyone use anything but the Bislama numerals for numbers above five, and whilst *supario* is used for ‘moon’ I have the strong impression *manis* was much more common for ‘month’.

(42) *Ø-ban* *ø-pe* *kasem* ka *ten* dupwa=ningi,
3SG.S-R.go 3 SG.S-R.be reach LOC ten thus=DEM

manis... *supario* [correction] *lualima* *ø* *supario* *okorolu* dupwa=ningi
month moon ten or moon eight thus=DEM

‘It can be as much as ten like this - ten months or eight months like this.’

(MZ000005)

This kind of language purism is evidently provoked by the presence of a microphone, and can be implicitly or explicitly encouraged by linguists (the present author included) who are keen to uncover indigenous language terms. Indeed, as Crowley (2004:45) observes, contrary to their purely descriptive ideals, many documentary linguists often indulge in a form of implicit prescriptivism in their lexicography work by omitting borrowed items and including often archaic, seldom heard indigenous forms instead.

5. The ‘threat’ of Bislama

There are of course important distinctions to be maintained, on the one hand between bilingualism and language shift, and on the other, between borrowing and code-switching, which is potentially a closer step towards language shift.²¹ Borrowing *per se* is not always a negative phenomenon and mustn’t be assumed to be part of the process of a language shift. Despite the overwhelmingly negative attitudes to borrowing in many endangered language situations, such conservatism is often misguided and unhelpful (see e.g. Dorian 1994 for discussion of the benefits of adding foreign lexical items to a language). In terms of the nature of the borrowing in Bierebo, even in the recorded examples where there is a very high incidence of loanwords, I think they should be considered lexical borrowings rather than code-switching, for the main reason that they consist of multiple individual items rather than strings of borrowed Bislama words and structures. At present, the effects of borrowing on the grammatical structure of Bierebo are negligible - if they even exist at all. In the Bonkovio area the situation therefore seems to be limited to increased lexical borrowing and bilingualism rather than language shift.

However, elsewhere on Epi language shifts to Bislama are under way and the potential is certainly there in Bonkovio too. It is my impression that it is not the gradual encroachment of Bislama into people’s lexicons that represents a threat to the use of Bierebo, but rather a more abrupt interruption of language transmission resulting in children growing up almost monolingually in Bislama. This would certainly not be without precedent - see e.g. Thomason (2001) on an equivalent scenario where Salish

²¹ This is not necessarily the case however, and code-switching can instead reflect speakers’ mastery of two codes in a stable bilingual setting.

intergenerational language transmission ceased while elder speakers used no borrowings in their speech. How the situation might come to occur in the Bierebo-speaking community is discussed below, prefaced by a brief summary of a debate in the literature on language maintenance in the Oceanic context.

In a response to predictions made by Mühlhäusler (1987) and Dixon (1991) of the imminent, widespread disappearance of minority languages - particularly those with very low speaker numbers - Crowley (1995) identified a number of points which, he claimed, have been, and will continue to be, significant in the enduring vitality of local languages in island Melanesia. They include: 'mainland vs island syndrome', whereby the physical and psychological separation of the ocean (regardless of distance) has tended to isolate island languages from pressures of language shift to a far greater extent than in mainland situations. In mainland PNG, for example, Crowley argues that the construction of paved highways erodes real and imagined barriers between urban and rural communities. Constraints on large-scale urbanisation in small island countries similarly protect traditional rural lifestyles. For example, Vanuatu has no natural resources currently worth exploiting, and therefore no labour-intensive heavy industry, and this places limits on the sustainability of large towns. Whilst the idea of life in the capital Port Vila holds many attractions for rural-based *ni*-Vanuatu, the high cost of living and lack of jobs means a great many people visit - sometimes for extended periods - but ultimately return to the safety of the island where they have land and therefore food. Finally, Crowley highlights two connected factors - economic development and the duration of outside contact. Paradoxically, those communities in island and coastal areas that have had prolonged European contact and thus benefited from greater economic development tend to have reached a relatively comfortable situation of bilingualism with dominant languages. By contrast, he argues, some less-developed, rural-based communities often feel a need to 'catch-up' culturally and economically, and, regrettably, the rejection of traditional language and culture form part of this catching-up process.

Some, but not all, of these observations are valid for the Bierebo-speaking communities and other Epi language groups. Certainly the relative isolation of the rural communities is significant. Movement and communication between the village and the outside world is limited for most people, who are predominantly subsistence farmers. There is no regular intra-island trade and selling produce off-island in the capital's main market is usually facilitated by

extended family or contacts living in the capital and does not necessarily require Bislama interaction.

As at 2007 one solar-powered telephone served a population of 450 people (there is no mains electricity anywhere on Epi), and small cargo ships stopped at Bonkovoio perhaps once a week or less. Radio Vanuatu broadcasts a series of programmes in Bislama, but the signal was weak and I didn't observe many people regularly tuning in. Much more popular than the radio were the increasingly frequent video shows whereby people rented a TV, DVD and generator (or used their own) and then charged villagers to watch films, most often in English. For what is an isolated, rural, self-sufficient, and largely homogeneous society then, the obvious questions are: how and where are children learning Bislama, and how would a shift occur?

The answers to the first question are quite straightforward. The sources of Bislama are: the home, kindergartens, church, schools, and the village in general. Bislama is increasingly acquired from non-Bierebo-speaking mothers who have married into the community, either from other villages on Epi, or from other islands. This can have powerful knock-on effects, since as I observed, some children raised by non-Bierebo speaking mothers happened to be the more dominant personalities in their peer groups and it wasn't uncommon to see groups of half a dozen or more young children following their lead and playing together in Bislama. These factors in particular create the potential for children to either not acquire Bierebo, or alternatively, to quickly abandon it.

In addition, the two private kindergartens in the Bonkovoio area are currently run by women originally from outside the community who speak mostly Bislama. This means that from the age of three, many children gain a high exposure to Bislama regardless of their home situation. On top of this, there are the weekly Sunday schools and church services conducted in Bislama.

There are two secondary schools on Epi, both of which are far enough away to mean that children from Bonkovoio, like most other pupils, attend as boarders. Whilst the secondary schools officially discourage Bislama, they unwittingly provide the most natural environment for its use by throwing together over a hundred children from different language communities who

require a lingua franca.²² The policy of only permitting English or French at school is hard to maintain outside the classroom when the natural choice is to use Bislama, a language in which pupils will generally all be fluent.

Even without a Bislama-speaking home environment or time spent in the kindergarten, children acquire Bislama through exposure to it in the village in various ways. For all its relative isolation, Bonkovio village is by no means a completely closed, homogeneous community. Besides the exogamous marriages there is a flow of visitors from other villages and other islands. Some pass through for a day or less, while others may stay for several years, as is the case for teachers and some church elders. During my time in Bonkovio there were four primary school teachers and two church elders who were either from other islands or in one case from a nearby village. None of them had the need or inclination to learn Bierebo. However, due to their prestige positions in part, but perhaps more to their status as salaried employees and consequent spending power, they generally exerted strong Bislama 'spheres of influence', often at the heart of weekend and evening social gatherings.

In this regard, Crowley's points about economic development and the depth of European contact do not ring true in the Epi context. Burumba village, located to the south of Bonkovio on the west coast, was the base for early missionary activity in the nineteenth century and later become an important area for copra plantations and home to one of the island's two secondary schools. Its wealth and infrastructure are far beyond that of Bonkovio village, which is generally regarded as something of an unhealthy backwater. However, rather than a situation of stable bilingualism developing in Burumba, the indigenous Baki language is in a rather parlous state. This must be due to the longer and more intensive presence of Bislama through the high number of outsiders in the community - planters, teachers, church officials, and, particularly, children from other language communities living and studying at the school.

²² To a much lesser extent the same applies for primary schools. Children in Bonkovio attend either the local French medium school (five minutes' walk away) or an English medium school further afield. In the latter case there are children from other language communities, which can also mean Bislama is used.

Bonkovio's comparative isolation²³ has undoubtedly protected its language to a large extent, but its poor economic development is also responsible for a situation which now invites greater Bislama influence. Ideally, kindergarten and primary school teachers, and church officials would all be local, Bierebo-speaking Bonkovio people. This would enable the use of Bierebo in these important language domains. However conventional wisdom holds that these positions require much higher levels of formal education than is possible for local people. There is currently no free education in Vanuatu, and it is simply not feasible for many parents to put their children through more than a couple of years of secondary education, particularly when there are such limited employment opportunities afterwards. In the meantime, these kinds of influential positions continue to be filled by outsiders from wealthier backgrounds, thus significantly increasing the presence of Bislama.

6. Conclusions

The picture that emerges from the analysis of borrowing in Bierebo is that, whilst there is a relatively high incidence of Bislama loanwords, when compared, for example with Sye, the nature of the borrowing in Bierebo makes it arguably more superficial. Borrowings are overwhelmingly limited to lexical items (mostly nouns), rather than grammatical function words. Loanwords do not become morphologically integrated in the language and there is only very marginal evidence of Bislama borrowing causing any structural changes in Bierebo grammar. Although the oldest speakers are more conservative in their use of borrowings, the empirical evidence shows that there is no difference between the age groups of under 25s and 25-40 year olds in the amount of loanwords they use, suggesting that the increase in use of borrowings is more stable than feared.

Crowley (2004:52) claimed that a major survey of borrowing in Pacific languages would probably be pointless, since he was confident that the results would tell the same story - a slight increase in borrowing by younger speakers, limited morphological or structural interference, and a predominance of borrowed nominals rather than verbs or function items. These predictions are broadly borne out by the Bierebo findings presented

²³ Many villagers perceive this isolation as unjust neglect by politicians and aid agencies.

here, but I would contend that there is in fact a good deal of value in conducting further analyses of this kind. The value is to be found not in the big picture, but in the details of how individual languages differ in terms of the specific items they borrow: Which areas of vocabulary? Which particular semantic domains? Which function items? Relating such information to details of language type and individual grammatical systems will permit predictions to be made, and provide valuable insights into the nature of borrowing cross-linguistically. Furthermore, comparison with other languages may reveal whether it is possible to quantify a 'saturation point' for borrowings in a language. In the Bonkovio variety of Bierebo, speakers under 40 years old used on average close to 5% Bislama words in the sample of their speech, though there are texts in which the figure rises to 13%. Nonetheless, even in these cases I would argue that the language is only superficially affected.

The future viability of Bierebo, like any minority language, rests with the younger generation and depends on successful intergenerational transmission. The study presented here supports the view that young people are using a higher proportion of borrowings, yet its almost exclusive restriction to lexical items is grounds for believing that any perceived threat in this regard is exaggerated. On the other hand, to suggest that the future of a language like Bierebo is totally secure would be complacent. There is a need for 'home-grown' kindergarten and school teachers, and greater efforts could be made to promote the use of Bierebo in the various church activities. Ultimately, however, survival will depend most on whether women from other villages and islands who marry into the community learn to speak Bierebo and raise their children as Bierebo speakers.

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