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# Community-oriented outcomes of language documentation in Melanesia

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights community-oriented outcomes of two separate language documentation projects in Melanesia: Bierebo, spoken on Epi, Vanuatu; and Kubokota, spoken on Ranongga, Solomons. Both languages have low speaker numbers and are threatened by national creoles, Bislama (Vanuatu) and Pijin (Solomons)<sup>1</sup>.

In both settings, populations live in remote locations in small villages (50-400 people) governed by chiefs. Subsistence farming, fishing, and some cashcropping make up the local economies. There are English medium schools on both islands, and Epi also has French medium schools; most younger people have some secondary education.

Little or no documentation had previously been done on either Bierebo or Kubokota prior to the present projects, but in each case neighbouring languages had been the subject of Bible translation work.

Various developments during the course of fieldwork might be considered community-oriented outcomes. It is often difficult to attribute these developments directly or solely to language documentation work and for this reason the term 'outcomes' is here understood as a cover term that can be subdivided as follows:

- **Direct** outcomes: initiatives led by the documenter oriented towards the community;
- **Indirect** outcomes: decisions made independent of, but influenced by the presence of the language documenter, including changes in community attitudes towards language;
- **Coincidental** outcomes: community-led initiatives perhaps related to language documentation work, but harder to judge whether influenced by the language documentation.

## 2. BIEREBO OUTCOMES

### 2.1. Background

Vanuatu is the most linguistically diverse country in the world per capita (100+ languages for <200,000 people). Bierebo is one of six North Central Vanuatu languages (all belonging to the Oceanic subgroup of the Austronesian family) spoken on Epi island. The majority of speakers live on Epi's west coast in villages

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are: 1 = first person, Bis = Bislama, Eng = English, INC = inclusive of addressee, PL = plural

that form a dialect chain; there is also a small community on the east coast. The total number of Bierebo speakers is less than 1000 (of a total island population of 5000). Vernacular language competence is falling. Bilingualism (with Bislama) is the norm due to Bislama's role as a lingua franca in inter-village and inter-island communication. There are even some younger monolingual Bislama speakers due to exogamous marriages whereby women from outside the Bierebo-speaking community do not learn the language and raise their children in Bislama.

### 2.2. *Direct initiatives led by documenter*

A number of activities and projects aimed at language revitalisation were undertaken during the course of fieldwork by Peter Budd. They include:

- Language documentation project talks (explanation and awareness);
- Formation of a Language Committee (to act as consultants and representatives to participate in decision-making processes);
- Orthography development (workshops and committee work);
- Bookmaking workshops;
- Production of printed Bierebo materials: lexicon, books, wordcards (collaboration with committee members and other consultants);
- Sustainable fund for language teaching in kindergartens (collaboration with chiefs, kindergarten committees and teachers).

In each case the initiative was led by the documenter but efforts were made to involve community members directly (in open workshops) or indirectly through representation (committee, chiefs etc). Community ownership and participation were guiding principles.

### 2.3. *Indirect outcomes*

#### 2.3.1. *Language purism: correcting the language*

The observer paradox is a reality in linguistic fieldwork: the act of documentation led chiefs and elders to question whether certain words/expressions were 'correct' and even to outlaw 'incorrect' language in everyday usage. One extreme example was the successful replacement of the existing leave-taking expression *tomono* with the newly coined *pongiana bo* which was instigated almost immediately after my arrival:

- (1) *to-mono*  
1PL.INC-lie  
'goodnight/goodbye' *lit. let's lie down (to sleep)*
- (2) *pongiana bo*  
night good  
'goodnight/goodbye'

*Tomono* was deemed incorrect/inappropriate since its literal meaning did not apply in most instances, particularly when it was used for ‘goodbye’. The replacement was modelled on existing Bierebo greetings (e.g. *chapo bo* ‘good morning’, *chupaye bo* ‘good day’) and was therefore deemed a natural progression, but it did not really solve the issue of appropriateness when used to mean goodbye.

2.3.2. *Language purism: replacing borrowings*

Chiefs also attempted to eliminate Bislama borrowings. New language terms were created by compounding, or existing terms were semantically extended to replace borrowings:

**Table 1**  
Bierebo lexical innovation to replace borrowings

<b>Old word (origin)</b>	<b>meaning</b>	<b>New word</b>	<b>derivation</b>
<i>os</i> (Eng/Bis)	horse	<i>yos</i>	<i>yos/myos</i> ‘speed, fly’
<i>taktak</i> (Eng/Bis)	duck	<i>chavalua</i>	<i>cha-valua</i> leg-paddle
<i>puluku</i> (Eng/Bis)	cow	<i>pursi</i>	<i>pursi</i> ‘horn’
<i>nani</i> (Eng/Bis)	goat	<i>pursi-chunion</i>	<i>pursi-chunion</i> horn-beard
<i>tawi</i> (Bis)	brother-in-law	<i>chase</i>	<i>cha-se</i> branch-nanggalat (tree species)*

\* A traditional taboo (no longer observed) prevented physical contact between in-laws. The *nanggalat* tree has poisonous stems and leaves that also cannot be touched.

2.4. *Coincidental community-led initiatives*

2.4.1. *Written village by-laws.*

The Council of Chiefs at my fieldsite recently (July 2007) produced a set of written village ‘by-laws’ in Bislama codifying rules and policies on a range of village issues primarily connected to land tenure. However it also included the following article on language:

*Atikel 30: Lanwis*

*Seksen 1*

*Lanwis blong wan vilij i soem aedentiti, kalja, mo tradisen blong manples. Vilij kaonsel i wantem luk se netiv o lokol lanwis i yus long homs, vilij, joj oltaem.*

*Seksen 2*

*Yumi mas enkarejem lanwis long nakamal, long ol jojes, mo long evri ples.*

‘Article 30: Language. Section. 1: A village’s language marks the identity, culture, and traditions of its people. The Village Council would like to see local languages used in homes, villages, and churches at all times.

Sect. 2. We must encourage the use of [local] language in the men’s meeting house, in all churches, and in all other areas.’  
(my translation).

#### *2.4.2. Spread of Bierebo into new domains (church, village meetings)*

Church services were previously conducted exclusively in Bislama (New Testament and hymn books only exist in Bislama and there are frequent visiting preachers from other villages or islands who do not speak Bierebo). On my most recent visit (July 2007) I noticed church services starting to incorporate some Bierebo with paraphrased sermons replacing or accompanying Bislama readings.

### *2.5. Evaluating outcomes*

#### *2.5.1. Indirect outcomes: Language purism*

The language ‘corrections’ were issued by the local chiefs and generally viewed as positive developments in the wider community. The effectiveness of the leave-taking replacement is in contrast to the other lexical innovations that have not been widely adopted. The success seems to have much to do with communicative context:

- Leave-taking as a Declarative Speech Act: it has a higher communicative function and a more prominent discourse position (finality) than individual lexical items, making it more easily suited to wholesale replacement.
- Nature of social structure: Small-scale, highly social community (often multiple speech act participants present in leave-taking situations) makes adoption and ‘policing’ more effective.

#### *2.5.2. Direct outcomes: literacy initiatives*

Literacy initiatives were very positively received but question marks persist over their success: from a technical perspective, the constraints of a phonemic orthography perhaps inhibit useability; a ‘shallower’ orthography closer to pronunciation may have been more appropriate. On a practical level the lack of meaningful domains for written language also constrains the growth of vernacular literacy.

Language teaching in kindergartens is the outcome which I know least about in terms of success as it was still at the planning stage at the time of my last visit. It has the potential to reverse the decline in language competence among young children. The benefit of vernacular language teaching in kindergartens is widely accepted and is among the concrete results witnessed in the Kubokota situation.

### 3. KUBOKOTA SETTING AND LANGUAGE SITUATION

Kubokota is a North-West Solomonian language of the Oceanic subgroup of the Austronesian family. Kubokota speakers (pop. 2,500) live on the north half of Ranongga Island. Luqa, a closely related language of similar population size, is spoken on the south half of the island and has a Bible translation programme headed by a Luqa native speaker, who has led several language-related initiatives aimed at both Kubokota and Luqa. Education is officially in English, but in practice is heavily facilitated by Solomon Islands Pijin. Older speakers are often only educated to primary level, in Roviana (a mission lingua franca), but high school up to Grade 10 is now available on the island, and some students also go away to complete their education beyond Grade 10. Most people speak or at least understand Luqa and Roviana; many also know Bilua (Papuan), Simbo and other local languages through intermarriage and trade. Pijin is now the main language of inter-group communication.

#### 3.1. *Community-led initiatives*

Prior to Mary Raymond's arrival on Ranongga, the New Testament was published in Luqa. This led to the native-speaking Luqa translator establishing the Kulu (Kubokota-Luqa) Language Institute for promotion of literacy and Bible translation in both languages on Ranongga. Most work to date has been for Luqa:

- Bible translation and hymn book (both also used in Kubokota-speaking communities)
- Luqa grammar workshops (also attended by Kubokota speakers)
- Linguistic purism debate, attempts to eliminate Pijin and Roviana borrowings (e.g. *lotu* 'worship (Pijin)' / 'fall' (Kubokota)). McDougall (2002) points out a contradiction between educated Ranongga people's extensive borrowing of English words to make themselves sound important, and the linguistic prescriptivism the same people try to promote.
- 'We have the Luqa languages – now we want Kubokota.' Kubokota speakers feel that Kubokota deserves the same attention given to Luqa, an attitude which made most people very receptive to the presence and activities of a linguist in the community.

The success of these initiatives is affected by leadership issues: Alpheaus Zobule, the Luqa Bible translator, is known and respected by people from both language groups, so Luqa initiatives have a strong and unambiguous leadership. Kubokota lacks such a leader, and people dispute the authority of the man who is nominally in charge of the (still embryonic) programme.

#### 3.2. *Direct initiatives led by documenter*

During the nine month period Raymond spent on Ranongga she initiated a number of small community-oriented projects. People saw these projects as the first concrete actions taken on behalf of Kubokota to help the language catch up with its more advanced neighbour, Luqa.

- Dictionary workshops: two workshops (to be followed by at least one more) were held to produce a dictionary of tree terms and collect information about the traditional uses of local trees. This project was particularly popular because Luqa does not have a dictionary. The writing down of terms that only the old men knew was regarded as a ‘discovery’ of new words.
- Story collection for book production (making audio recordings and collecting written texts, depending on the literacy skills and inclinations of contributors). The publication of a report on the work of the Kulu Institute produced a flurry of activity on this project, because Luqa was reported to have published far more stories than Kubokota.
- Alphabet book and literacy materials proposal put to the headmaster of Obobulu Primary School. A local artist produced illustrations for an alphabet book, and the primary school children participated in a competition to produce pictures for a story book.

These projects were welcomed in the community because of the context provided by the earlier community-led initiatives. None of the projects has yet produced any published results because a major earthquake and tsunami in April 2007 brought work on the documentation project to a halt.

### 3.3. *Indirect outcomes*

The most concrete outcomes of documentation work so far are the result neither of the initiatives of the Kulu Language Institute, nor of the direct initiatives of the language documenter, but are the independent activities of community members in response to both of these factors:

- Continued debate about linguistic purism. The dictionary workshops inadvertently provided a forum for this; for instance, there was heated debate about the synonyms *vivinei* (‘how to do something’ – a Roviana borrowing) and *vavakato* (‘story’). Some people also wrote stories which are almost manifestoes of linguistic ideology.
- Kindergarten literacy initiatives. Following Raymond’s alphabet book proposal to the headmaster, the kindergarten teachers made alphabet posters and started teaching Kubokota literacy on their own initiative (where previously they had taught only English). Kindergarten-age children generally have little or no Pijin or English, and being taught ‘A is for apple’ in English is virtually meaningless. Initial literacy teaching in Kubokota (‘A is for *aramane* (umbrella leaf)’ had a dramatic impact on children’s attitudes and learning progress. I was invited to help out in the kindergarten, and my discussions with the teachers led me to add a ‘teacher’s notes’ section to the draft alphabet book, with suggestions for activities.
- Teaching Kubokota literacy to primary school children. After the earthquake the school was closed, but UNICEF provided a tent for

recreational activities, and community volunteers took the opportunity to teach Kubokota literacy to the older children – possibly as a response to the earlier activities in the kindergarten (Luqa language initiatives never included child literacy).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Melanesia is characterised by small homogeneous language communities occupying a small geographical area. These factors mean that communication of ideas and coordination of language initiatives is easier than in larger, more dispersed communities. Other general observations that can be drawn from the Kubokota and Bierebo situations include:

- The success of language documentation initiatives depends very much on community support and attitudes. Particularly in community-led initiatives, strong and unambiguous leadership is also important.
- Heightened language purism is a common result of language documentation. Most prescriptivism seems to have very little impact on the way people actually speak, although the example of Bierebo leave-taking is an exception.
- Projects initiated by the documenter can be facilitated by existing and previous community activities and attitudes. There may be an ongoing interaction between ‘direct’ initiatives led by the documenter, and community-led responses. The introduction of vernacular literacy to the Kubokota kindergarten, and the language policy in the Bierebo by-laws are examples.
- Language or literacy teaching in kindergartens can be a particularly fruitful area for collaboration between the documenter and community members. It creates a meaningful domain for written language and the language materials produced. Language teaching at kindergarten level (as opposed to primary/secondary schools) has the advantage of being wholly owned by the community and is achievable by utilising existing structures and resources.

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