

Chapter 10

The Future of the Languages of Vanuatu and New Caledonia

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to focus on the possibility of the survival of the indigenous languages of the two Melanesian groups of islands, New Caledonia and Vanuatu. These two island groups have a fairly similar linguistic and cultural make up and even a similar colonial history. Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides, was a condominium of the English and French, while New Caledonia had, and continues to have, only the French as the colonial rulers.

All the indigenous languages of New Caledonia and Vanuatu belong to the Austronesian family of languages. New Caledonia is reported to have 40 languages: 2 extinct and 38 living languages. The largest language, Dehu, spoken on Lifu and Loyalty islands, has 15,000 speakers. Most languages in New Caledonia have fewer than 10,000 speakers. The smallest language, Arho, has 10 speakers and is reported to be near extinction. According to Lynch and Crowley (2001), there are altogether 106 indigenous languages spoken in Vanuatu, with 8 nearly extinct, 17 moribund and 81 considered as alive. The biggest language in Vanuatu is Lenakel, which boasts 11,500 speakers, and the smallest languages are Naman and Tape, which are reported to be spoken by 10–15 speakers on Malekula Island.

Vernacular Languages in Vanuatu

Language survival is handicapped by a combination of factors. First, the multiplicity of languages in Vanuatu handicaps survival. With 106 languages spoken by a population of much less than a million, Vanuatu could be regarded as one of the most linguistically diverse nations. Second, most of the languages are quite small in terms of the number of speakers. The geographical, social and economic isolation of Vanuatu and its islands once favoured the survival of these small languages. Now, the high mobility of the people, the cash economy, and inter-marriage has changed this. The third factor that may be viewed as a handicap for language

survival in Vanuatu is the closeness of these small languages. All the languages in Vanuatu belong to the Austronesian language family, share a lot in common, and are mostly mutually intelligible. Subconsciously, speakers of neighbouring languages can use them interchangeably. Fourth, the Melanesian languages play a lesser identificational role for the people than do the clan, the ancestral lands, and the cultural area.

The process of language loss in Vanuatu takes a number of paths:

- (1) There is a noticeable decline in the number of speakers of the indigenous languages of Vanuatu as a result of disease, colonisation and other extra-linguistic factors.
- (2) There is a high level of bilingualism in the local communities, with the people readily accepting other languages including Bislama (the pidgin language spoken and accepted nationwide).
- (3) The disappearance of the cultural elements that has been observed for other Melanesian countries such as Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands is now also common in Vanuatu and results in the reduction of esoteric vocabulary associated with ritual, taboo, kinship and ceremonial events.
- (4) There is an evident bias towards the majority languages spoken more widely since they fill the needs of everyday living.
- (5) Speakers of moribund languages become acculturated (in the anthropological sense of the term), and lose their ancestral culture.
- (6) The political leaders of Melanesian countries are often Westernised and less inclined to be concerned about the future of languages than their kinsmen are. They consider that only European languages are worthy of interest as they offer a future, particularly an economic future.

Vernacular Languages in New Caledonia

The vernacular languages in New Caledonia are shielded in two ways, geographically and socio-culturally. The former system of confining native peoples to reserves, while unacceptable in terms of the principles on which it was based, made it possible for the indigenous people to escape from the world of the Europeans and to be physically and culturally isolated from them. A syncretism between language and culture has continued to operate strongly: French and Western culture, on the one hand, and the vernacular languages and traditional culture, on the other, with limited interference between the two. This diglossic situation will persist as long as the present socio-economic conditions last, with no foreseeable end.

European Languages

Vanuatu

The two former colonial languages (English and French) theoretically have equal legal status in Vanuatu, even if they are not equal in reality. They have come to play a lesser role in the face of the increasing importance of Bislama. French is receding both quantitatively and qualitatively, but a mastery of English is becoming even rarer. While it might still be possible in urban areas to hear local people conversing in French among themselves, it is difficult to say what it will be like in the future. One thing that can be said with confidence is that the type of education system that the government continues to support will largely determine the country's future linguistic situation. Meanwhile, only pidgin (Bislama) continues to expand in usage.

New Caledonia

French, the language of government, of the towns, and the mother tongue of almost half the New Caledonian population, seems to have no competitor as a lingua franca at the national level. This is due to the strong colonial control the French have had over New Caledonia. The only language that has been officially permitted and used for education, governance, business and media has been French with other languages having little chance to weaken the strong French dominance.

Contact Languages

The absence of any culture specifically associated with pidgins means that, as soon as pidgins come into use, they are associated with semio-cultural fields normally reserved for other types of language (such as European or vernacular languages). When pidgins (Bislama in particular) come up against English, for example, a boomerang effect occurs. Far from harming English, they become anglicised and depidginised to the point of being, for instance, only Bislamaised English in certain technical fields. When they come up against local vernaculars, the forces move in the opposite direction, the pidgins become mixed with them, in all regions and in every facet of life, as a result of the impact of the media. As they are learned at a younger and younger age, these borrowings are certainly made, massively in certain semantic domains (numeracy, kinship etc). As Crowley (2000: 125) rightly observes, languages that today are undergoing a diminution of speakers as they move into other codes are not doing so to the benefit of European languages, nor generally to the benefit of pidgin languages. Rather, they are moving in the direction of the vernacular languages spoken by more dynamic communities. On the other hand,

Crowley (2000: 119) is too optimistic when he advances the notion that there exists a stable Bislama/vernacular diglossia. He argues that many other very old diglossic situations exist around the world (not involving pidgins, however), where the languages permit considerable intercomprehension to exist between very different cultures. In the case of diglossia, well-defined semio-cultural fields are reserved for each of the languages, thus affording partial protection to them both.

The Limits of Factors Impinging on Languages: The Weight of the Melanesian World

Vanuatu

Without doubt, few countries in the world have been the subject of so many recommendations and successive plans, emanating from religious, political and international organisations, as Vanuatu. The aim of these has been the survival or promotion of such and such a type of language, or the adapting of the country's structures to reflect its unique multilingual character.

During the 1960s, the British and French colonial administrations assumed responsibility for education, concentrating solely on their own national languages, so ensuring the increase in importance of Bislama, the only lingua franca possible between educated Anglophones and Francophones.

On the eve of independence and at the time the Constitution was being written, Charpentier and Tryon were called as experts by the Constitutional Consultative Committee. Largely taking into account their advice, all the languages of the country (106 indigenous languages, Bislama, and the two former colonial languages) were granted a status in the Constitution that ensures their future.

In 1981, a Vanuatu Planning Conference was organised by the Vanuatu section of the University of the South Pacific and the Vanuatu Council of Churches. The decision-makers of the time were brought together (i.e. representatives of the churches, the politicians and the administration). In spite of an impassioned speech by the Prime Minister in favour of Bislama as the official language, and final recommendations from the meeting following the same line, nothing was done.

In 1984, Port Vila was the site of a new conference, 'Pacific Languages: Directions for the Future'. Representatives from churches and universities from 20 Pacific countries recommended an increased use of vernacular languages and the generalised teaching of pidgin(s) throughout Melanesia, including New Caledonia. All of these recommendations remained wishful thinking, as no government implemented them.

Between 1997 and 2000 there was a new attempt to align the education

system with the multilingual character of the country and with the Constitution. A World Bank project, financed by Australia, France, Japan and New Zealand, was supposed to have as its outcome the creation of a small elite bilingual in English and French and the preservation of the vernacular languages through the vernacularisation of education. As a subject to be taught at secondary level, a standardised spelling system for Bislama was to have been gradually imposed. A loan of \$US3.7 million was made by the World Bank, but the new Vanuatu government abandoned the project partly through lack of conviction, because of an urgent need for cash to finance other budgetary requirements but, most of all, because they were incapable of setting up such an ambitious project. Later, in January 2002, a serious earthquake damaged numerous buildings and public works of art in the capital, Port Vila. The resulting need for funds for re-construction ensured that any major linguistic project would be put on hold for a very long time.

New Caledonia

A de facto diglossic situation exists in New Caledonia. French is the high and prestige language of government and of upward social movement, while the indigenous Kanak languages are the languages of the reserves and of traditional life. French and the Kanak languages are associated with different semio-cultural worlds. This limits the interference that generates loans such as those that come into being in all situations where one of the languages is more technologically advanced and, consequently, the Kanak languages in New Caledonia are not really endangered.

Attempts to change the situation inherited through the colonisation process have been made through education with attempts being made to shore up the vernacular languages. At the time of the political and social disturbances at the end of the 1980s, nationalists opened Kanak schools wherever they could. However, these schools were not linked together, they had no properly set-up infrastructure and, being linked to short-lived and sometimes violent uprisings, they were not supported by the authorities, and eventually disappeared.

Much less doctrinaire (but still engendering some ill-feeling) has been the teaching in vernacular languages carried out at both primary and university levels. However, rivalry between institutions such as the Kanak Cultural Centre and the University of New Caledonia has prevented a vernacular education programme being established. Divisions, rivalries intrinsic to Kanak society and to the Melanesian world in general, ensure the maintenance of the status quo, which largely accords, of course, with the choices made by the Europeans.

Conclusion

In Vanuatu, French will continue to decline over the next generation and will be replaced progressively by Bislama – a Bislama more and more influenced by English. Such a situation is very similar to that observed for the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, where Bislama's sister pidgin languages (Solomon Pidgin and Tok Pisin) are spoken (see Sumbuk in the present volume).

In New Caledonia, the present situation may well continue for several generations if France does not completely lose interest in this part of the world. In the longer term and viewed more globally, there are doubts about a continuing French cultural presence in the Pacific but, in the rapidly changing political and economic environment of the Asia-Pacific region, it is not certain that English will be the beneficiary.

References

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