

THE FRENCH LEGACY IN BISLAMA

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Languages are contagious. ... Loan words from a foreign language usually ride in on a wave of cultural diffusion (Bolinger 1968:90-91).

For most of this century, the British and the French jointly ruled Vanuatu — known as the New Hebrides before Independence in 1980 — as a condominium. Even before formal colonial rule, however, a form of Pacific Pidgin English was known and used by ni-Vanuatu (cf. Clark 1979). Now known as Bislama, the Vanuatu variety of Pacific Pidgin English has become the national language of the Republic.

Bislama is still very much an English-based pidgin/creole, and as such has close links with Tok Pisin and Solomon Islands Pijin. It also, however, contains some lexical items which are of French origin. This paper attempts to contribute to the social history of Bislama by examining those French loans. In particular, I will be concerned with investigating those semantic fields in which loans from French figure with some prominence. This project expands on Charpentier's (1979) similar study on this topic by expanding on his data and refining some of his categories.

1. DEFINING THE CORPUS

As with its sister dialects, Bislama — and, in particular, that variety of Bislama as spoken by urban ni-Vanuatu — is undergoing considerable lexical expansion. In such a situation, it is often difficult to determine whether a particular word or expression of foreign origin is actually *in* the language, or whether the speaker is clearly using a foreign word/expression in a Bislama sentence. To take an analogous example from Tok Pisin: if a UPNG student says

- (1) mi no bin handimin asainment bilong mi
 I haven't handed in my assignment

would we be justified in saying that handimin and asainment are part of the vocabulary of Tok Pisin, or are these words still clearly foreign words used in a Tok Pisin sentence? Are they, in other words, comparable to the nativised French loans *rôle* and *précis* in the English examples in (2), or are they still clearly marked as foreign, like *faute de mieux* or *acharnement* in (3)?¹

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- (2) a) ... where my chosen rôle was that of an embittered exile, ...
 b) That day, I made my last *précis* and handed over my schedules ...
- (3) a) ... which I obtained second-hand, *faute de mieux*, near Victoria, ...
 b) Karl had hitched their main halyards on to the windlass and was grinding at it in an *acharnement* of industry ...

To avoid this kind of problem, I have relied in this paper on published lexicographic sources only. Specifically, I have used as the major source Camden's (1977) dictionary, which contains some 3000 Bislama entries, though I have on occasions supplemented this with data from shorter lists in Guy (1974) and Charpentier (1979). Only Bislama forms of French origin actually listed in one or more of these sources have been considered in this paper, with the exception of four additional items from Crowley (1980).

There is, however, still a problem, which relates to how widespread a form is in Vanuatu. Take as an example the following entry from Camden (1977:85):

- (4) pomdeter: n. A potato in some areas. Syn. poteto.

My impression is that poteto (< English *potato*) is more widespread than pomdeter (< French *pomme de terre*). I have, however, counted pomdeter as a French loan and listed it in Section 2 of this paper. Without a fairly detailed survey of regional dialects of Bislama — and my personal experience is restricted to the southern islands and, to a lesser extent, Port Vila — it is difficult to make accurate statements on the general level of acceptability of a number of 'pomdeter-like' words.

There is also the problem of sourcing when the potential French source has an English cognate.² In some cases, phonological considerations will disambiguate the source: thus I suggest that *radyo radio* derives from French *radio* (= /radjo/) and not English *radio* (= /reidio/), mainly because of the quality of the first vowel. In other cases, the semantics has led to a French sourcing: e.g. *depo asylum* (for *mentally disturbed*) derives from French *dépôt*, which includes among its meanings *temporary prison*, *lock-up*, a meaning not expressed by English *depot*. In still other cases — e.g., *Frans France*, *French*, or *konyak cognac*, *brandy* — neither the phonology nor the semantics can really assist: I have listed all such words below along with words which are clearly of French origin, but have marked them with an asterisk.

2. FRENCH LOANS IN BISLAMA

Identifiable French loans in Bislama are presented in this section. I have arranged the loans into semantic fields to facilitate discussion in the next section.³

2.1 Terms to do with food and drink

The following French loans fall into the area of food, drink, cooking, etc.

(5)	BISLAMA		FRENCH	
	ariko	G	<i>string bean</i>	haricot
	avoka		<i>avocado pear</i>	avocat
	gato		<i>cake</i>	gâteau
	karasol ⁴		<i>soursop</i>	corossol custard-apple corossol hérissé soursop
	kokot		<i>heavy saucepan</i>	cocotte
	*konyak		<i>cognac, brandy</i>	cognac
	lae		<i>garlic</i>	l'ail
	?laman		<i>lemon, lime</i>	limon
	lasup		<i>soup</i>	la soupe
	ligim ⁵		<i>(European) vegetable (grown for sale)</i>	légume
	limonad		<i>lemonade</i>	limonade
	*obesin		<i>aubergine, egg-plant</i>	aubergine
	papae	G	<i>pawpaw, papaya</i>	papaye
	pima ⁶		<i>chilli</i>	piment
	pistas		<i>peanut, small nut of any type</i>	pistache
	pomdeter		<i>potato</i>	potomme de terre
	salad		<i>lettuce, green salad vegetable, salad</i>	salade
	sitrong	TC	<i>lemon</i>	citron
	sobe		<i>ice-cream</i>	sorbet
	susu/susut		<i>choko</i>	chouchoute
	tabak		<i>tobacco</i>	tabac
	tomat		<i>tomato</i>	tomate

konyak *cognac, brandy* and obesin *aubergine, egg-plant* clearly derive ultimately from French: although the question of whether French or English was the immediate source is not clear, I have decided to class them as French loans here, for reasons which will become clearer in the next section. tabak *tobacco* and tomat *tomato* are clearer, since there are also synonymous Bislama forms derived from English — tabaka and tomata.

The form laman *lemon, lime* causes greater problems. It may derive either from French *limon* (= /limɔ̃/) or English *lemon* (= /lemŋ/); in neither case, however, is the first vowel accounted for.

2.2 Terms to do with manual labour

A number of terms frequently used by mechanics, artisans, labourers, etc., have been borrowed from French and are listed below. (Terms with an exclusively maritime use are listed in 2.3).

(6)	BISLAMA		FRENCH	
	bramin		<i>crowbar</i>	barre à mine
	bulong		<i>a bolt</i>	boulon
	busi		<i>spark-plug</i>	bougie
	busing		<i>cork, plug, bung</i>	bouchon

dis		<i>clutch (of car)</i>	<i>disque (d'embrayage)</i>
kale		<i>a chock</i>	<i>caler</i>
kameong		<i>truck</i>	<i>camion</i>
kaoj		<i>washer (for pump,</i>	<i>caoutchouc</i>
		<i>light, tap)</i>	<i>india-rubber,</i>
kaojuk		<i>rubber, elastic</i>	<i>elastic band</i>
lakaryer	G	<i>quarry</i>	<i>la carrière</i>
lakol		<i>glue</i>	<i>la colle</i>
lapul		<i>light-globe</i>	<i>l'ampoule</i>
loto	OB	<i>car</i>	<i>l'auto</i>
manuvel		<i>starting-handle</i>	<i>manivelle</i>
masut		<i>distillate, diesel</i>	<i>mazout</i>
pyos/lapyos		<i>hoe, mattock, adze</i>	<i>(la) pioche</i>
simang	G	<i>cement</i>	<i>ciment</i>
sudarem		<i>weld, braze, solder</i>	<i>souder</i>
sude		<i>patch for tyre-tube</i>	

simang cement and *sudarem weld, braze, solder* both have cognate English-derived equivalents: *simen* and *soldem*. The term *busong cork, plug, bung* might well have been listed under the food-and-drink list in 2.1.

2.3 Maritime terms

Included in this list are terms for fish and marine life (some of which might also have been classified as food-and-drink terms), as well as terms used in sailing or fishing.

(7)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	<i>arier</i>	<i>go astern, reverse, retreat</i>	<i>arrière</i>
	<i>bondo</i>	<i>hulk, moored ship used to load and unload ocean-going vessels</i>	<i>ponton</i>
	<i>bonit</i>	<i>bonito, tuna</i>	<i>bonite</i>
	<i>karong</i>	<i>trevally</i>	<i>carangue</i>
	<i>kokeas</i>	<i>mussel</i>	<i>coquillage</i>
	<i>laflat</i>	<i>(landing-)barge</i>	<i>sea-shell</i>
	<i>los</i>	<i>groper</i>	<i>la plate punt, flat-bottomed fishing-boat</i>
			<i>loche</i>

2.4 Terms for clothing

The following French loans refer to items of apparel or adornment.

(8)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	<i>kalsong</i>	<i>(men's) briefs, underpants</i>	<i>caleçon</i>
	<i>kasi</i>	<i>bra</i>	<i>cassie k.o. basket</i>
	<i>kaskos</i>	<i>bra</i>	<i>cache-corset</i>

kilot	<i>ladies' briefs</i>	<i>culotte breeches</i>
klaket	<i>thongs</i>	<i>claquette</i>
pomad	<i>pomade, hair-oil</i>	<i>pommade</i>
sabat/savat	<i>sandals, thongs</i>	<i>savate</i>

2.5 Terms relating to sports, games and celebrations

A number of French loans fall into this fairly general semantic area.

(9)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	bonane	<i>New Year</i> <i>(celebrations)</i>	<i>bonne année</i> <i>Happy New Year</i>
*	futbol	<i>football (soccer)</i>	<i>football</i>
	kemes ⁷	<i>fair, bazaar, fete</i>	<i>kermesse</i>
	kitkit	<i>draw (football); be</i> <i>even, all square</i>	<i>quitte à quitte</i>
	lafet	<i>feast, festival</i>	<i>la fête</i>
	las	<i>ace (cards)</i>	<i>l'as</i>
	pik	<i>spades (cards)</i>	<i>pique</i>
*	sampyon	<i>champion, leader</i>	<i>champion</i>
	sampyonat	<i>championship</i>	<i>championnat</i>
*	sinema	<i>cinema</i>	<i>cinéma</i>

The terms *futbol* *football*, *sampyon* *champion, leader*, and *sinema* *cinema* could all conceivably derive from English (and *futbol* obviously originally does). Justifying the (immediate) French origin of *futbol*, Charpentier (1979:333) says that

*aux Nouvelles-Hébrides, ce sport (angl. soccer) est
traditionnellement dirigé par des Français; les Anglais
s'occupant de l'athlétisme.*

Given the association with both *futbol* and the clear French loan *sampyonat* *championship*, I suggest that *sampyon* be treated as coming from French. Charpentier also treats *sinema* as a French rather than an English loan for similar reasons as he derived *futbol* from French:

*A Port-Vila comme à Luganville deux cinémas existent, tous
sont gérés par des Français (1979:332).*

2.6 Religious terms

The following religious terms are of French origin

(10)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	lames	<i>Mass</i>	<i>la messe</i>
	le pap	<i>pope</i>	<i>le pape</i>
	lukaris	<i>eucharist</i>	<i>l'eucharistie</i>
	per	<i>father (=priest)</i>	<i>père</i>

2.7 Terms to do with French colonial administration

Most of the terms listed below are in the process of dying out, as the French colonial administration ceased to operate in 1980. They are included here partly for historical interest, and partly because some (e.g., *Frans* and *lekol*) are still in regular use.

(11)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	delegei	(French) District Agent	délégué
	depo	OB mental asylum	dépôt
	duan	the customs	douane
	frang	franc	franc
	* Frans	France, French	France
	lekol	(French) school	l'école
	mil	OB 1000-franc note	mille
	misyu	Monsieur (title)	monsieur
	nuvelsebrid	OB New Hebrides	Nouvelles-Hébrides
	sondam	(French) policeman	gendarme
	sontim	gold centime	centime

2.8 Names of people and places

A few names of peoples and places are of French origin.

(12)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	Kaledoni	New Caledonia	(Nouvelle) Calédonie
	kamarad	Vietnamese (address term)	camarade comrade
	* Kanal	Luganville (Santo)	canal
	Japon	Japan	Japon
	sinwa	Chinese, Vietnamese	chinois
	* Tongkin	OB Vietnam(ese)	Tonkin

2.9 Interjections, insults, etc.

A few very common interjections, along with a few swear-words or insulting terms, derive from French.

(13)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	ale	so, and so	allez go
	ebe	well, oh well	eh bien
	longkile	TC 'up yours!'	l'enculé
	me	but	mais
	píteng	TC prostitute	putain
	salo	TC swine, filthy beast	salaud
	saye	that's it, there it is	ça y est
	si	yes (to negative question or when answer 'no' is expected)	si

2.10 Unclassified terms

There remains a residue of terms which do not fall under any of the above classifications, and which do not admit of further sensible classification.

(14)	BISLAMA		FRENCH
	bebet		<i>bebête</i> (baby-talk for <i>bête animal</i>)
	bondi		<i>bandit, outlaw</i>
	glis		<i>glisser</i>
	kabine		<i>cabinet</i>
	* katon		<i>carton</i>
	* kilo		<i>kilo (gramme)</i>
	* kilometa		<i>kilomètre</i>
	* kompen		<i>(electoral) campagne</i>
	kurmang	G	<i>sucker (of plant)</i>
	* lita		<i>litre</i>
	* mita		<i>metre</i>
	mostik		<i>mosquito</i>
	piko ⁸		<i>plantation weed</i>
	* potmanto	OB	<i>suitcase</i>
	puriko ⁹		<i>zebra</i>
	radyo		<i>radio</i>
	rato		<i>radio</i>
	sontimita		<i>râteau rake</i>
	varisel		<i>centimètre</i>
			<i>varicelle</i>

A number of these words, particularly those representing 'weights and measures', could easily derive from English, but more probably derive from French. The first vowel of *kompen* *campaign* suggests a French origin (< /kãpaŋ/), though the second vowel suggests an English origin (< /kãmpain/). *mostik* *mosquito* and *sontimita* *centimetre* have the cognate English-derived equivalents *moskita* and *sentimita*.

3. DISCUSSION

It is clear from the data presented in Section 2 that the French language has had some influence on Bislama in certain semantic areas, and one might conclude — or at least propose — that ni-Vanuatu culture and society was specifically influenced by French culture and society in (at least) these areas.

French lexical influence in some of the lexical areas listed above admits of a logical explanation. The religious terms in (10), for example, are specifically associated with Roman Catholicism, and up until Independence at least virtually all Catholic priests in the country were French. Similarly, the colonial administrative terms in (11) refer largely to items, institutions or individuals within the French colonial government system — and this may also be the explanation for at least some of the names of people and places given in (12).

The interjections and insults given in (13) could also be seen as 'natural' borrowings. Interjections often become clichés, and as such are easily assimilated; insults, especially in a colonial or plantation situation, would

be heard fairly often. Both would have been identifiable in context from the perhaps unintelligible stream of 'normal' French.

There were a considerable number of French plantation owners, mechanics, artisans and ships' captains in government service and the private sector before Independence. The close association between these men and ni-Vanuatu labourers, mechanics, artisans and ships' crew, and the introduction of new items of technology, would go some way to explaining why a considerable number of Bislama terms in these areas (cf. (6) and (7) above) derive from French.

France has a worldwide reputation for food and for *haute couture*, and it is not all that surprising to find considerable French influence on Bislama in the area of food and drink (cf. (5)) and clothing (cf. (8)). Of particular interest in the former category are terms for 'quality' or gourmet foods (possibly not commonly used by the British or the Australians), such as *avocado*, *gato cake*, *lae garlic*, *obesin aubergine* and *pima chilli*; it is also not surprising to find that terms for food or items associated with food make up over 20% of the French lexical legacy in Bislama. In the category of clothing, attention should be drawn to the range of terms for underclothes (*kalsong*, *kasi*, *kaskos*, *kilot*). In this regard, one might agree with Charpentier (1979:331) in proposing a further explanation here:

Parfois la langue française a servi à exprimer des concepts connus en anglais, mais que les premiers missionnaires anglophones, très puritains, avaient volontairement omis.

As well as terms for underclothing, Charpentier hypothesises that nouns like *konyak cognac*, *brandy* and *busong cork* — '*seuls les Français buvaient du vin*' (1979:334) — also fall into the 'voluntarily omitted' group.

We are on less sure ground when we examine the terms in (9) for sports, games and celebrations. Some, like *kemes fair*, *bazaar*, *fete* and *bonane New Year celebrations* may refer to institutions with a particularly French flavour. Others, however, are less 'natural'. In card-playing, for example, only one named denomination derives from French (*las ace*) while the others come from English (*king*, *misis*, *jek*); similarly, only one suit has a name of French origin (*pik spades*), the other three (*hat*, *kalab*, *daeman*) coming from English. I have no explanation at this stage for these facts.

This leaves the unclassified items given in (14). While specific cases (e.g., the metric terms) are clearly exceptions, it is difficult in the majority of cases to find a natural explanation for the borrowing.

What I have shown so far is that most of the Bislama vocabulary which is of French origin admits of a fairly natural social or sociolinguistic explanation. What is also of interest, however, is the small size of the French component in Bislama: Camden's dictionary contains around 3000 Bislama entries, yet I have found only just over 100 French loans — about 3% of the total. One might have expected that, with French and English being politically 'equal', and with native French-speakers clearly outnumbering native English-speakers before Independence, influence from French on Bislama might well have been greater.

Obviously, much of the vocabulary of Bislama is cognate with forms in Tok Pisin and Solomons Pijin, and comes from an earlier era before France, and French, played an important role in the then New Hebrides. However, virtually all of the modern political and economic terminology in Bislama has come from English,

indicating that English, and not French, is the prestige lexical source language for Bislama. Whether this has to do with the political attitudes of the British and the French, or the attitudes to Bislama of different missions, or the attitudes towards the British and the French held by ni-Vanuatu, I am unable to say at this stage.

NOTES

¹The examples in (2) and (3) are taken from Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands*, first published in 1902; the loans in question are all italicised in the original.

²I use the term 'cognate' here merely to refer to a word which is related, either through genetic inheritance or through borrowing.

³The orthography follows Camden (1977), and the glosses are taken, or summarised, from there. The French source is not translated unless it varies somewhat from the meaning given for the Bislama form. Other abbreviations source forms not given by Camden: G = Guy (1974), TC = Crowley (1980). Forms marked OB by Camden refer to 'Old Bislama, not always used or known by young speakers' (1977:xvii).

⁴Charpentier gives this as korosol.

⁵Charpentier gives this as legim.

⁶Charpentier gives this as pimang.

⁷Charpentier gives this as kermes. He also includes it in the set of terms associated with the Catholic religion.

⁸There is another Bislama term piko, referring to a fresh-water fish which makes good eating, which Charpentier includes in his list of terms of French origin. I have been unable to locate the origin of this term.

⁹Charpentier is somewhat scathing about the appearance of this term in Camden's dictionary, and also terms like elefen, kamel, raeno, taega, etc. I must admit I am sympathetic to his view here.

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