

LANGUAGE PLANNING NEWSLETTER

Language Planning Issues in Vanuatu

By Donald M. Topping*

Like all of the other new Pacific Island nations, Vanuatu is attempting to govern itself within the conceptional framework of a European language, as required by the Constitution. Throughout the Pacific, the constitutions, legal systems, education, and, in many cases, the media are still dominated by the languages of the former colonial powers. What distinguishes Vanuatu from the other island groups, adding to their problems of self-governance, is the legacy of not one, but two colonial languages. The difficulties created by this linguistic schism go back to the earliest days of the condominium government, and have not abated in the slightest.

The divisiveness of the English-French dichotomy runs deep throughout the country, especially in the two competing education systems, each of which enrolls approximately 50% of the school population. Although the French didn't get involved in education in Vanuatu on a significant scale until the 1960's, and therefore began as the minority system, they caught up quickly in terms of numbers of students whose parents were attracted to the French schools because they were new and, more importantly, free. (Anglophone schools have always charged fees in Vanuatu.)

The linguistic division of the schools can be seen in virtually all other aspects of the society: broadcasting, newspapers, movies, churches, commerce, parliament, and the laws.

In addition to the English-French division, Vanuatu is further fragmented by 108 different indigenous languages for its 100,000 people. This ratio of languages to speakers is higher than for any other

nation in the world. Such linguistic diversity reflects a long tradition of separateness of the ni-Vanuatu (from Vanuatu).

Bridging all of these languages, European as well as indigenous, is Bislama, the Vanuatu dialect of Melanesian Pidgin, which is spoken by most ni-Vanuatu of school age and above. Born out of the necessity to communicate across linguistic boundaries, Bislama is a dynamic language that is developing rapidly to meet the growing communication needs of Vanuatu, both within the country and externally with the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

Because of its dynamic role and widespread use, Bislama shows considerable dialect variation (especially vocabulary) from one island to another, and especially between the urban (heavily anglicized) and rural areas. Those who are eager to make greater use of Bislama argue strongly for the standardization of usage, and especially of the spelling. They would also argue, perhaps naively, that the way to standardize is through an authoritative grammar and dictionary.

Although Bislama has served as the *lingua franca* of Vanuatu for several generations, it was never accepted as a viable language of communication by the governing powers. Its use, in fact, was discouraged, and in many cases — especially in schools — it was forbidden. The first meeting of the elected Representative Assembly in 1976 was dismissed abruptly by the Clerk (a Frenchman) because the members began to conduct discussions in Bislama.

The strong, and often emotional opposition to Bislama is based on the grounds that Bislama is nothing more than simplified broken English with no grammatical rules and a highly limited vocabulary, and therefore unsuitable for anything more than simple, rudimentary communication. Nothing could be further from the truth. Like all other human languages, Bislama has a very fixed and complex set of grammatical and phonological rules (see the

*The author is Director of the Social Science Research Institute and Professor of Linguistics at the University of Hawaii.

(Continued on page 2)

grammar of Bislama by Jean-Michel Charpentier). Furthermore, the vocabulary of Bislama is constantly being expanded, usually by borrowing English words, to meet the growing needs.

Proof of its adequacy as a medium of sophisticated communication is the translation of the *Bible*, and a recent week-long conference, where Bislama was the principle medium for papers and discussions that touched upon subjects covering politics, economics, law, education, and communication itself.

Most ni-Vanuatu, as well as others, see Bislama as the unifying linguistic force. Yet, neither the Constitution nor the independence agreements show that recognition. On the contrary, the Constitution, in its present form, guarantees continued divisiveness by mandating that, although Bislama is the National Language (on a par, perhaps, with the National Flower), it is not the language used where it counts: education and the law. According to the Constitution, French and English are the official languages to be used in these two important areas. Furthermore, French financial aid is directly tied to the maintenance of the French education system in Vanuatu.

This is the real problem that Vanuatu and all other Pacific Island nations must face. As long as education and law are conducted in the alien languages, then the systems will remain alien ones. Language shapes thought. The language used in the education and legal systems plays the crucial role in determining views of the world. It would appear, judging from the current language policies, that most of the new Pacific Island nations want to continue to inculcate European values and worldviews through their schools and legal systems. This is, in fact, what is happening.

Nonetheless, these issues are very much in the minds of the ni-Vanuatu so that "Language Planning and Policy in Vanuatu" was the subject of the four-and-a-half day conference held in the Mairie/Town Hall of Port Vila during the week of July 13, 1981.

Sitting in straight-backed chairs for sessions running from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the afternoon — with a two hour Vila-esque lunch break — thirty ni-Vanuatu delegates, and fourteen observers from five Pacific countries and one U. S. Territory engaged in serious discussions of one of Vanuatu's most urgent post-condominium problems: what to do about more than one hundred different indigenous languages, the legacy of two European language systems, and the rising tide of Bislama, a dialect of Melanesian pidgin, whose roots go back to the same plantation sources as do Tok Pisin and Solomon Islands Pidgin.

With simultaneous translation services provided by the South Pacific Bible Translators, the all-day sessions were conducted predominantly in Bislama, which was translated into English for the benefit of the overseas

observers. The use of Bislama as the primary language of the conference enabled full participation of the ni-Vanuatu delegates, several of whom do not speak any European language. Perhaps another very important point was made in the process: Bislama, a pidgin language, is an adequate language for conducting complex, and often abstract discussions involving education, law, the media, and politics.

In his opening address, Prime Minister Walter Lini, speaking in Bislama, stressed at the outset that he hoped the conference would look hard at "the role of Bislama in the development of this country as it strives for national unity." The PM also made clear his view that English and French had driven a wedge between ni-Vanuatu, and that "Bislama is drawing our people together", as well as providing communication linkages with the neighbors to the north (Solomons and PNG).

Strongly supporting the PM's views concerning the role of Bislama was Chief Willie Bongmatur, Chairman of the Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs. In addition, Chief Willie spoke frequently throughout the conference stressing the need for the children of Vanuatu to be thoroughly grounded in custom and in their own languages, even if this meant holding them back from school until age 7 or 8. The seven other custom chiefs, representing a cross-section of different islands, strongly backed Chief Willie's arguments for retaining custom, and the use of vernacular languages in the early primary school years as a means of developing a strong local identity among ni-Vanuatu.

Perhaps the strongest advocates for Bislama as a standardized national language on a par with English and French were the South Pacific Bible Translators, who recently issued a translation of the *Nyu Tesamen* in "standard" Bislama, and are currently engaged in a translation of the Old Testament to match the New in

Editor—Joan Rubin
Associate Editor—Björn H. Jernudd
Editorial Board
M. H. Abdulaziz
Joshua Fishman
Bertil Molde
Monsur Musa
Jiri Neustupný

Copies are available free of charge. Changes of address and requests to be placed on the mailing list should be addressed to:

Language Planning Newsletter
East-West Culture Learning Institute
East-West Center
Honolulu, Hawaii 96848 USA

All other correspondence should be addressed to the editor:
Dr. Joan Rubin
P. O. Box 143
Pinole, CA 94564
USA

spelling, vocabulary, and structure. When they were not in the booth providing excellent simultaneous translations, the Bible translators stressed the need for standardizing Bislama throughout the country, both spoken and written forms, so that it could be more widely used in print.

On the government side, representatives from broadcasting and information, the Ministry of Education, and the Attorney-General's office presented their current practices and positions as specified in the Constitution and in termination agreements. Although Bislama is recognized constitutionally as the national language, English and French are the official languages of education, law, and government correspondence, while broadcast time for international subject matter is nearly equally divided to allow for transmission in English, French, and Bislama. Problems of staffing and of time-consuming translations were cited as major problems.

At the end of the four and a half days of informed, and sometimes impassioned discussion, the delegates passed a series of resolutions to be passed on to the Vanuatu Government. The resolutions, written in Bislama, fall into three categories: education, law, and the media. They are summarized below:

Education:

1. As a general principle, there must be room for and recognition of vernacular, Bislama, and the metropolitan languages in the education system of Vanuatu.
2. a. Vernacular languages must be used as the medium of instruction in primary schools through Classes 1-3.
- b. Bislama will be introduced in primary schools beginning Class 4.
- c. Bislama should be used as the medium of instruction, Classes 4-6, with French and English introduced as subjects of study.
- d. French and/or English will be introduced and used as media of instruction in secondary schools with Bislama continued as a subject of study.
- e. Technical school should continue with Bislama as the medium of instruction through Classes 7 and 8.
- f. If these new language requirements necessitate extending the time period for primary school, this is something for the Ministry of Education to study.

Law:

1. All laws should be translated into Bislama.

(Continued on page 6)

IN PRESS — *Progress in Language Planning: International Perspectives* edited by Joshua A. Fishman and Juan Cobarrubias. New York: Mouton. 1982.

This forthcoming volume has the following table of contents:

Introduction

Juan Cobarrubias Language Planning: The State of the Art

Part One: *Decision Making in Language Planning*

Charles Ferguson Language Planning and Language Change

Juan Cobarrubias Ethical Issues in Status Planning
Shirley Brice Heath and Frederick Mandabach Esq. Language Status Decisions and the Law in the United States

Joshua A. Fishman Modeling Rationales in Corpus Planning: Modernity and Tradition in Images of "The Good Corpus"

Part Two: *Codification in Language Planning*

William Milan Contemporary Models of Standardized New World Spanish: Origin, Development and Use

Braj Kachru Models of New Englishes

Part Three: *Language Planning in North America*

William F. Mackey What Can Language Planners Learn from Canada's Experience with Status Planning?

Denise Daoust Blais Corpus and Status Language Planning in Quebec: A Look at Linguistic Legislation

Bernard Spolsky and Lorraine Boomer The Modernization of Navaho

Gary Keller What Can Language Planners Learn from the Hispanic Experience in the United States?

Part Four: *Implementation of Language Planning*

Einar Haugen The Implementation of Corpus Planning: Theory and Practice

Dayle Barnes The Implementation of Language Planning in China

Glyn Lewis The Implementation of Language Planning in the Soviet Union

Part Five: *Evaluation of Language Planning*

Joan Rubin Evaluation of Status Planning: What Has the Past Decade Accomplished?

Björn Jernudd Evaluation of Corpus Planning: What Has the Past Decade Accomplished?

Postscript

Joshua A. Fishman Progress in Language Planning: A Few Concluding Sentiments

(Continued on page 4)

Research and Development. 9.50 pounds plus postage. (Order from: Centre for Computational Linguistics, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, P.O. Box 88, Manchester M60, 1QD, England.) (CCL/UMIST Nr. 81/8)

Linguistic databanks containing the vocabulary and phraseology of special languages are established services in leading industrial countries providing tools for technical writers, translators, information scientists, standardization agencies and publishers. This study summarizes these developments and reports on a market survey on the basis of which user types and their needs were determined. Certain desirable characteristics of a linguistic databank are identified and the conditions are established under which such a new information tool could be realized in the U.K. An analysis of the responses of the market survey is appended and an extensive bibliography.

NOW AVAILABLE — *Selective Survey of Terminological Databanks in Western Europe, November 1980.* Report number 5643. British Library Research and Development. 7.50 pounds plus postage. (Order from: Centre for Computational Linguistics — as listed above). (CCL/UMIST 81/9)

The most recent comprehensive survey of linguistic/terminological databanks in Western Europe, with full descriptions of EUROCAUTOM, LEXIS, NORMATERM, TEAM, TERMDOK under the following headings! Users and Uses, Original and Size, Organization, Financial Support, Costing and Costs, Data, with tables and a full bibliography.

NOW AVAILABLE — *Model Specification of a Linguistic/Databank for the U.K.* Report number 5644. British Library Research and Development. 5.50 pounds plus postage. (Order from: Centre for Computational Linguistics — as listed above). CCL/UMIST 81/10.

A model of a multifunctional linguistic/terminological databank is developed based on substantial market research. Detailed specifications of user types and uses, organization, computational requirements, costs and data. Hardware and software requirements and user facilities such as search and output formats are proposed.

NOW AVAILABLE — *Angewandte Soziolinguistik (Applied Sociolinguistics)* edited by Matthias Hartig. 1981. Published by Gunter Narr Verlag (Postfach 2567, D 7400 Tübingen 1, Federal Republic of Germany. 38DM.

This volume contains four articles of especial interest for language planners:

- Albert Valdman Language Standardization in Diglossic Context: The Case of Haitian Creole
- Raphael Nir Acceptability and Normativism in the Use of a Revived Language
- Jonathan Pool The Economics of Artificial Languages: Thoughts on the Problem of Cost Minimization
- Peter H. Nelde Problems of Multilingualism in Eastern Belgium

Language Planning Issues in Vanuatu
(Continued from page 3)

2. In case of dispute of interpretation, Bislama will be the definitive version.
3. Translators for court cases must be provided when requested.
4. Parliamentarians should strive to improve their Bislama by expunging Anglicisms from their vocabulary.

Media:

1. French and English radio news should be restricted to once per evening each, with perhaps more in expatriate centers such as Vila, Luganville and Santo.
2. All educational programs in English and French should be translated into Bislama.
3. Radio translators should be given opportunity for training in translation techniques, and should be encouraged to strive for a standard Bislama.

Additional resolutions called for government support of linguistic studies of the vernacular languages, the establishment of a joint committee between Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu to study the development of Melanesian Pidgin as a regional language, to support a monolingual Bislama dictionary project, and to establish a National Language Commission which would report directly to the Prime Minister.

In spite of the obvious gravity of the problems caused by the legacy of the two metropolitan languages, no solutions were proposed at the Conference. Nowhere in the resolutions was the problem even mentioned. Like the gray winter clouds of Vila, the big question was constantly hovering, and was apparently dealt with in the same way, with everybody wishing that the clouds, as well as the big question, would simply go away.