

Bislama i bigwan nao: Understanding how a lingua franca becomes the family language in communities that have different languages to offer

Keywords: Vanuatu, Dynamics of Multilingualism, Post-Colonial Setting

Vanuatu is justly famous for its linguistic and cultural diversity. On Malakula, Vanuatu's second biggest island, where up to 42 language varieties are attested (François et al. 2015), children typically grow up in a multi-lingual environment, ranging from 1 to 8 languages (mean 2.6, Cristia et al. 2023). From a young age, they are exposed to numerous Indigenous languages, the lingua franca Bislama, as well as English or French, depending on school attendance. Linguistic exogamy at marriage is also common, such that individual and community level multilingualism are the norm rather than the exception. In the post-colonial period (since 1980), Bislama, an English-lexified Creole, has grown continuously, raising concerns that it is becoming a threat to Vanuatu's linguistic diversity.

Using a mixed methodology approach, we collected detailed quantitative data from 115 participants (63 female, mean age = 43) on language, demography and attitudes to linguistic changes in three remote villages (two speech communities) in South-West Malakula. We combine this with 56 language portraits (a qualitative elicitation method suitable for multilingual contexts) with children, a sample of naturalistic day-long recordings of children under 3 years old, as well as 7 months of participant observation. We report on the increasing impact of Bislama on family communication, describing both the language ecologies of children and changes occurring within the life cycle of a family as well as across generations of the same family (grand-parents via parents to (grand-)children).

Our research speaks to questions about how children grow up in multi-lingual contexts, and how communication strategies themselves change linguistic landscapes. While children are often seen as future language-bearers, it is not solely up to them whether a language is successfully transmitted or not. Our research contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics behind language "take over".

Relevance for Thematic Session: "Managing linguistic diversity. Social factors and constraints in the transmission of multilingualism"

Our contribution will address many of the Thematic Session's topics. With our innovative methodologies and a multidisciplinary approach that combines language acquisition and sociolinguistics with anthropology, demography and cultural evolution we contribute novel lines of research among non-WEIRD populations who are underrepresented in scholarship on multilingualism.

References

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(455 words)