

# Safeguarding endangered Languages

## Vanuatu - A case-study

Presented at the UNESCO/UNU 2008 conference on globalization and languages: Building on our Rich Heritage in Tokyo, Japan  
27 - 28 August 2008

Hannah Vari-Bogiri  
Pacific Languages Unit  
University of the South Pacific

### **Background**

Vanuatu, a small island nation of around 80 islands, located in the South West Pacific is highly multilingual and multicultural. With over a hundred indigenous languages spoken among a population of over two hundred thousand, it is considered as a country with high linguistic density per capita. While these indigenous languages have an important role at the local community level, Bislama, the English-based lexifier pidgin functions as the lingua franca and national language of the country because of its unifying force. English, French and Bislama function as the three official languages while only English and French remain the principal languages of education in the country. All these different languages are protected under the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu.

### **Decline**

With time, these languages undergo changes as a result of contact with different facets of globalization such as social, cultural, religious, economical and political changes. During the process of these interactions, some of these languages increase their status to the detriment of others. According to statistics<sup>1</sup> based on languages known, out of the 106 known indigenous languages of Vanuatu, only 81 are still active, while 17 are considered moribund, and eight are already extinct. Moreover, only thirteen of these languages are considered big with over 5,000 speakers, while the rest are in their hundreds or less. Most of these local languages have a small speaking population, yet continued to be active for a long time due to their remoteness from outside influence, resulting from the geographical nature of the country. However, because of the smallness and vulnerability of the country, once the country opened up to processes of westernization with unstoppable forces that drive the desire for economic development, the scenario began to change. Today researchers continue to identify undocumented languages that are on the verge of extinction.

### **Causes**

Languages in Vanuatu continue to be endangered because of various reasons at different points in time such as death due to inter-tribal war and introduced diseases and epidemics; discriminating policies; deliberate lack of inter-generational transmission by parents and language shift.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Vanuatu witnessed depopulation due to introduced diseases and epidemics due to contact with foreigners as well as deaths due to inter-tribal wars which reduced numbers of language speakers as they died or relocated. Today, languages die with the death of the last speakers as people shift to other languages.

Policy discrimination is another contributing factor which has directly or indirectly contributed to language shift to languages of powerful culture at the expense of indigenous languages which are thought to be marginalized. Formal literacy was first introduced by the missionaries in indigenous languages for the purpose of propagating the Christian teachings, but as a result of the colonization of Vanuatu by England

---

<sup>1</sup> Lynch, J & Crowley, T (2001). Languages of Vanuatu. A new survey and bibliography

and France, the colonial policy promoted both colonial languages of English and French as the languages of education. Due to the multilingual situation of the country, the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu continued to promote these two languages by giving them constitutional status as the 'principal languages of education'. This type of policy has contributed to elevating the status of English and French while leaving the indigenous languages lagging behind in the way they are used in formal literacy and to convey information to the general public.

The paradigm shift from traditional and natural way of learning to the formal and artificial way of learning through formal education also resulted in the shift to these two colonial languages for their powerful cultures and wider social and economic benefits. Some of the indigenous languages cease to exist as a result of the destruction or loss of the various traditional systems or eco-systems that provide the appropriate environment for the survival of language usage that reflect those systems. For example the introduction of Christianity is an example of a catalyst for this type of change in Vanuatu.

Lack of inter-generational transmission is another contributing factor to language decline whereby parents deliberately fail to transmit their language and traditional knowledge to the next generation, resulting in language shift.

In a multilingual country like Vanuatu, language shift is a common phenomenon and it occurs at three levels: Natives shift from their indigenous languages to the two colonial languages-English and French for their powerful cultures through formal education and formal employment.

Secondly, shift from indigenous languages to Bislama, the national language, is very common as a result of inter-island marriages, urbanization, and cash employment.

Finally, shift from one indigenous language to another is also a common occurrence where some of these indigenous languages become killer of smaller languages because their status have been elevated by early missionisation and Biblical translations and as a lingua franca within certain linguistic communities.

#### **Effort in place and their constraints**

After independence in 1980 sees more awareness and political will to address this important issue as these indigenous languages and cultures are seen as national assets. A change from a discriminating policy to a more favorable one in the form of legislative Acts, the vernacular education policy and national language policy (draft) not only advocate for the protection of multilingualism but also for the preservation, promotion and revitalization of indigenous languages and traditional knowledge at home through inter-generational transmission, at the community level as well as through the formal education system.

The Education Act of 2001<sup>2</sup> and the subsequent vernacular education policy is the government's first positive step through this policy directive to actively implement the provisions of the Constitution to promote the use of the vernacular education in the formal education system, particularly from early childhood to primary level. It is also a way in which the government is officially rectifying the previous discriminating policy which only promotes the colonial languages in the formal education system to a more favorable one which promotes multilingualism. However, considering the multilingual state of Vanuatu, the progress of the implementation of this policy is hindered by lack of capacity building, lack of awareness and community support, lack of financial commitment from the government, and lack of literature material in the vernacular that are contextually relevant to the culture of Vanuatu to successfully implement the policy.

The establishment of various institutions and statutory bodies reflect the Vanuatu's government's commitment to this mission.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Education Act No. 21 of 2001

The establishment of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the national museum by the Vanuatu government reflects its commitment to document, preserve and promote its traditional knowledge and indigenous languages through this mechanism. Vanuatu Cultural Centre and national museum today, with the help from the government and other donor agencies, contributes immensely towards this cause through community fieldworkers, traditional school, mini and national arts festivals through which different language communities showcase and promote different aspects of their culture. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre also functions as the clearing house or central bureau for documented literature and audio-visual materials on various cultural and linguistic aspects of Vanuatu. However, lack of linguists to work with the community fieldworkers to help them document their language and research is one of the constraints faced.

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre also functions as the secretariat for the National Language Council, legally established in 2005, which is responsible for putting together the national language policy<sup>3</sup> draft. This policy (draft) advocates for the preservation, promotion of multilingualism, encouraging multilingual and multicultural dialogue in advocating English and French for their role in the international community, Bislama, the national language for its role as a national identity, the indigenous languages for their role in reflecting one's local identity, immigrant languages due to diplomatic reasons and sign language for the deaf. This language policy strongly advocates the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages at home through inter-generational transmissions by family, within the community as well as through the formal education system.

The National Council of Chiefs, representing the traditional governing system, has a constitutional mandate to make recommendations for the preservation and promotion of Vanuatu languages and cultures. How they are addressing this issue is not directly with languages, but indirectly through the preservation of the traditional systems through which language functions. They work to ensure the preservation of the traditional systems and the natural habitat and eco-systems as a means to the preservation of languages occur at the community level. As they believe that language reflects these systems, practices and habitats, once these systems cease to exist, the language associated with these also ceases to exist.

The Ombudsman has a constitutional mandate to ensure linguistic rights prevail and to present an annual report to the National Parliament on an annual basis.

The National Tourism office also encourages the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages and cultures through the promotion of eco-tourism, cultural villages, and other tourist related events based on cultural calendar. These are examples of how the local people are encouraged to incorporate the preservation and promotion of traditional knowledge and language into modern economy.

The Environment Unit also encourages the preservation of bio-diversity and linguistic ecology associated with the different aspects of bio-diversity are preserved through the 20,000 ha of the Vathe Conservation area. It is a way in which sustainability of the eco-system, preservation of language associated with the natural eco-systems are incorporated into modern economy. Traditional ways of marine and terrestrial resource management are also encouraged by the environmental unit.

The national government has gone further to declare 2007 and 2008 as the 'Years of Traditional Economy' for a myriad of reasons. In a way, it is revisiting the provisions of the Constitution to preserve and promote our linguistic and cultural diversity. It is also a way in which the government is officially acknowledging the work done by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to help preserve and promote its indigenous languages and cultures. Equally important, is its acknowledgement of the sustainability of the traditional ways of living that have sustained the livelihood of the natives for many generations, which continue to sustain the lives of 80% of its rural population, and which continue to complement modern economy today. Through this declaration, the Ni-Vanuatu people are encouraged to continue with their traditional ways of living using traditional knowledge that promote social security, food security and good sustainable living. In addition, through these

---

<sup>3</sup> Vanuatu National Language Policy (Fifth Draft) 2005.

practices, language and culture associated with these practices continue to survive. A positive result from this is where people are able to pay in-kind for social services provided by the government at the provincial levels. This system is working in Vanuatu today where government services such as school fees are being paid in kind - with farm animals, agricultural produce, and artifacts.

### **Conclusion**

Although the traditional systems, ways of life and languages of Vanuatu are adversely affected by the different facets of globalization, Vanuatu has realized this and has already begun putting some mechanisms in place to address this issue. Realizing that language change is inevitable as a response to social and cultural changes, it has set up mechanisms in place and favorable policies which promotes multilingualism, ensuring harmonious co-existence of all diverse languages in the country as they all have their roles at different levels within the society. However, to ensure a successful implementation of vernacular education policy, it is paramount that preparations in terms of proper awareness programs take place at the community level because implementation of such policies will inevitably involve the participation of the community. Furthermore, such a policy has proven counter-productive in a multilingual country because of lack of advice and financial commitment. To ensure its success, a lot of commitment is needed at the top level in terms of advice, financial support, guidance, continual assessment and revision. In addition, cooperation with the policy-makers, the implementers and the community level is also an important pre-requisite.