

The exceptional linguistic density of Vanuatu

Alexandre François, Michael Franjieh, Sébastien Lacrampe, Stefan Schnell

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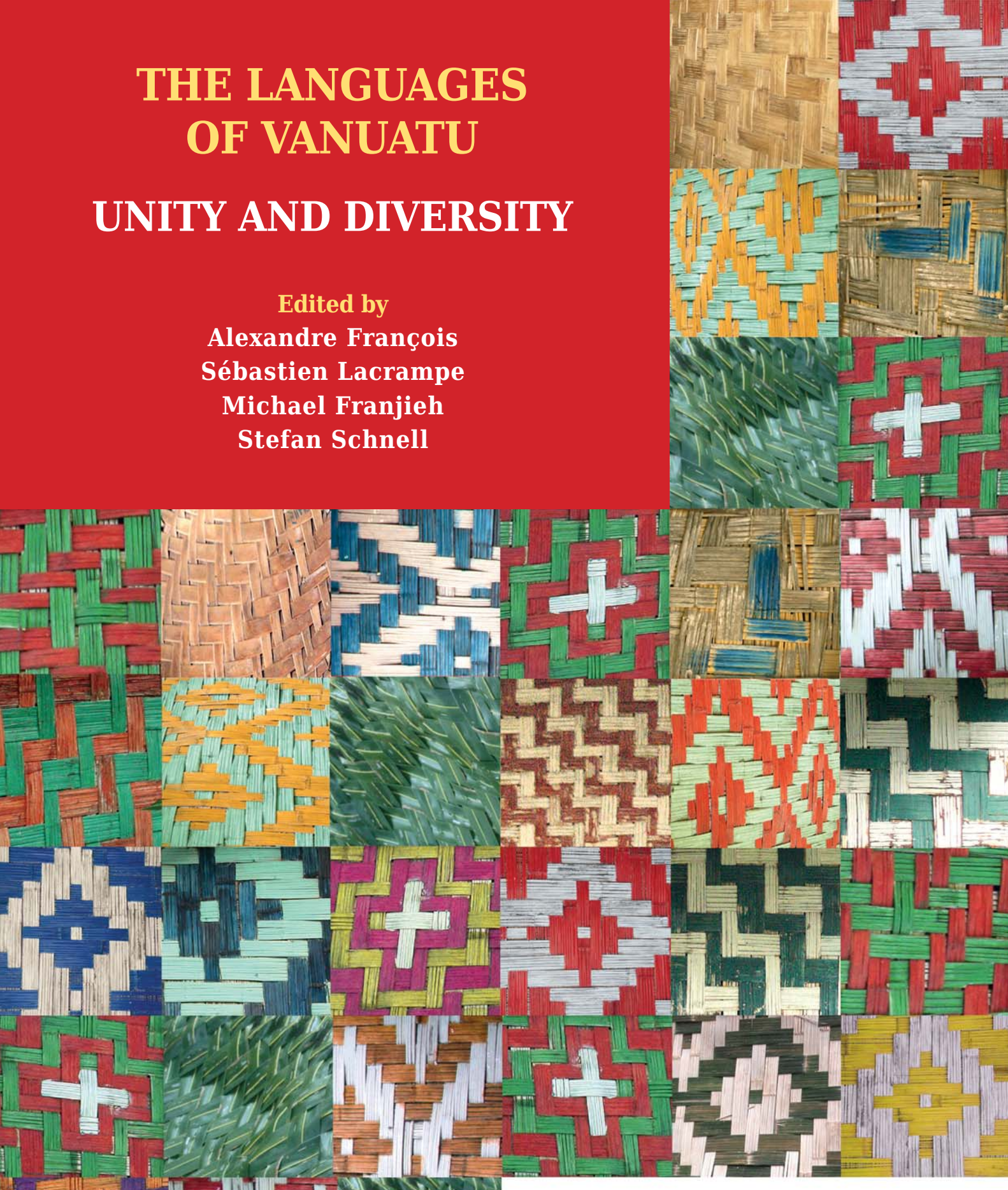


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THE LANGUAGES OF VANUATU

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

Edited by
Alexandre François
Sébastien Lacrampe
Michael Franjieh
Stefan Schnell



Asia-Pacific Linguistics
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Studies in the Languages of Island Melanesia

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The languages of Vanuatu: Unity and diversity

edited by

Alexandre François; Sébastien Lacrampe; Michael Franjieh; Stefan Schnell

With an estimated 138 different indigenous languages, Vanuatu is the country with the highest linguistic density in the world. While they all belong to the Oceanic family, these languages have evolved in three millennia, from what was once a unified dialect network, to the mosaic of different languages that we know today. In this respect, Vanuatu constitutes a valuable laboratory for exploring the ways in which linguistic diversity can emerge out of former unity.

This volume represents the first collective book dedicated solely to the languages of this archipelago, and to the various forms taken by their diversity. Its ten chapters cover a wide range of topics, including verbal aspect, valency, possessive structures, numerals, space systems, oral history and narratives. *The languages of Vanuatu: Unity and Diversity* provides new insights onto the many facets of Vanuatu's rich linguistic landscape.

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College of Asia and the Pacific
The Australian National University

The languages of Vanuatu
Unity and diversity

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The exceptional linguistic density of Vanuatu

Introduction to the volume

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Abstract

The Republic of Vanuatu, a small archipelago of island Melanesia, is home to 138 distinct Oceanic languages, for which we provide here a new list and map. This updated figure, obtained by combining earlier sources and more recent information from experts, makes Vanuatu the country with the highest language density in the world, whether compared to its land surface, or to its population. This modern density is not due to genealogical diversity, but reflects three millennia of *in situ* diversification from a single ancestor, Proto Oceanic. This historical process took the form of multiple linguistic innovations that spread across the dialect continuum in entangled patterns, bringing about the mosaic we know today. Vanuatu's linguistic diversity is now increasingly threatened by the spread of the national language, Bislama. The various chapters in this volume describe and discuss some of the cultural and linguistic features that make Vanuatu such a diverse archipelago.

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1 Studying the languages of Vanuatu

The present publication constitutes the first edited volume specifically dedicated to the languages of Vanuatu. With as many as 138 distinct languages [§2.1], this archipelago of the South Pacific still keeps many treasures hidden; yet the last two decades have seen a steady increase in the number of scholars dedicated to the exploration of these languages.

During the twentieth century, the languages of what was then known as the Condominium of the New Hebrides were initially documented by a handful of missionaries and early scholars, including Robert Codrington (1830–1922), Daniel MacDonald (1846–1927), Sidney Ray

(1858–1939), Arthur Capell (1902–86). The 1970s saw renewed scholarship in the domain with the publication, in 1976, of Darrell Tryon's *New Hebrides Languages*, a compendium of basic vocabulary lists in 179 distinct linguistic varieties (whether languages or dialects). About the same period, other scholars undertook the description of several languages – e.g. John Lynch in Tanna; Jean-Michel Charpentier in South Malakula; Terry Crowley in Paama; Ross Clark on Polynesian outliers. As the New Hebrides became independent in 1980 under the name *Vanuatu*, linguists would also increasingly pay attention not only to its many vernacular languages, but also to Bislama, the new country's national language [§3.3].

The early years of independence were followed by a moratorium on research, from 1985 to 1994 (Taylor & Thieberger 2011:xxviii). In 1995, encouraged by Ralph Regenvanu the new director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, the country opened up to foreign academics again. Many people were then aware of the useful role linguists could play in documenting the linguistic wealth of the archipelago, while its many languages were still being actively spoken. The following two decades have seen a sustained effort to describe and document the languages of Vanuatu, by an ever-increasing number of linguists. Many regions of Vanuatu, little explored until recently, are now being better known, improving our collective knowledge of Oceanic languages.

In November 2011, Alex François and Sébastien Lacrampe, then both attached to the Australian National University, organised the first *International Workshop on the Languages of Vanuatu*. On this occasion, as many as twenty-eight linguists were brought together – a testimony to the momentum currently enjoyed by academic scholarship in the domain. During this 2011 workshop, the idea of a joint publication specifically focusing on Vanuatu languages was first launched. Shortly thereafter, the online series *Studies in the Languages of Island Melanesia* was founded, as a venue for book-length academic manuscripts in the domain, based on the principles of peer-reviewing and of free and open access. Today, we are happy to publish this volume, the fruit of these joint efforts by a team of enthusiastic scholars. The purpose of the present chapter is to serve as an introduction to the book, by presenting the impressive linguistic density of this small archipelago of the Pacific.

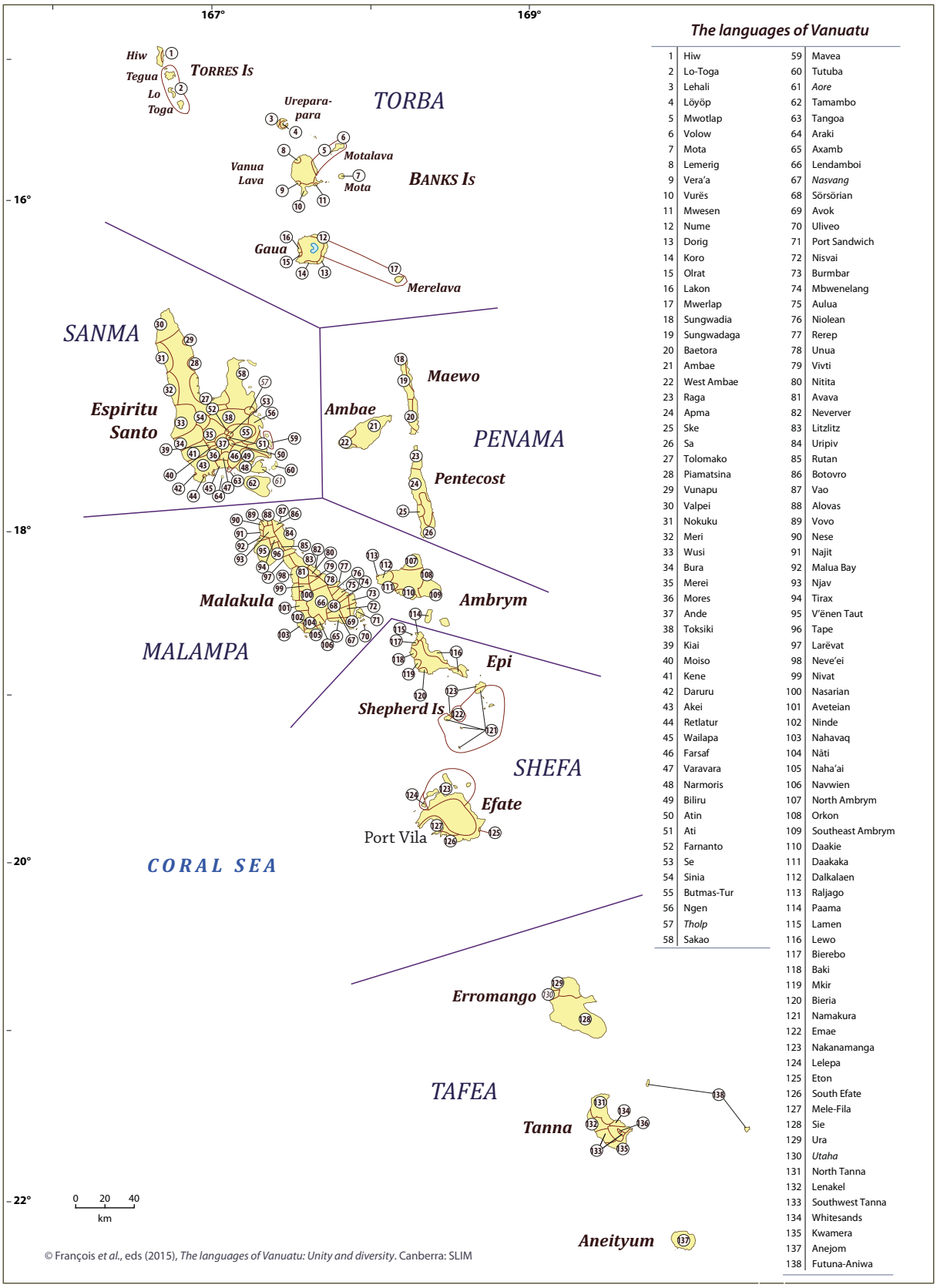
2 The languages of Vanuatu

The Republic of Vanuatu is home to 80 inhabited islands, and to a population of 243,000 (2009 census, see VNSO 2009).[1] The country's three official languages – Bislama [§3.3], French and English – were all introduced during European colonisation. Yet the archipelago is also home to a wealth of vernacular languages which were inherited from pre-colonial times, and are still spoken to this day. Altogether, the country counts 138 distinct vernacular languages – according to a new assessment we are proposing today. Adding the *lingua franca* Bislama brings to 139 the total of languages indigenous to Vanuatu.

Figure 1 provides a new reference map of Vanuatu's 138 languages (map created in March 2015 by Alexandre François and Benjamin Touati). As a complement to the map, the list of all known languages for the country will be given in *Table 2*, in the appendix.

[1] The homepage of VNSO (http://www.vnso.gov.vu) provides a "live" counter of the population of Vanuatu, revealing how rapidly it grows. As of 26 May 2015, the total number was 278,456.

Figure 1 — A reference map of Vanuatu's 138 vernacular languages



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The languages of Vanuatu

1	Hiw	59	Mavea
2	Lo-Toga	60	Tutuba
3	Lehali	61	*Aore*
4	Löyöp	62	Tamambo
5	Mwotlap	63	Tangoa
6	Volow	64	Araki
7	Mota	65	Axamb
8	Lemerig	66	Lendamboi
9	Vera'a	67	*Nasvang*
10	Vurës	68	Sörsörian
11	Mwesen	69	Avok
12	Nume	70	Uliveo
13	Dorig	71	Port Sandwich
14	Koro	72	Nisvai
15	Olrat	73	Burmbar
16	Lakon	74	Mbwenelang
17	Mwerlap	75	Aulua
18	Sungwadia	76	Niolean
19	Sungwadaga	77	Rerep
20	Baetora	78	Unua
21	Ambae	79	Vivti
22	West Ambae	80	Nitita
23	Raga	81	Avava
24	Apma	82	Neverver
25	Ske	83	Litzlitz
26	Sa	84	Uripiv
27	Tolomako	85	Rutan
28	Piamatsina	86	Botovro
29	Vunapu	87	Vao
30	Valpei	88	Alovas
31	Nokuku	89	Vovo
32	Meri	90	Nese
33	Wusi	91	Najit
34	Bura	92	Malua Bay
35	Merei	93	Njav
36	Mores	94	Tirax
37	Ande	95	V'ënen Taut
38	Toksiki	96	Tape
39	Kiai	97	Larëvat
40	Moiso	98	Neve'ei
41	Kene	99	Nivat
42	Daruru	100	Nasarian
43	Akei	101	Aveteian
44	Retlatur	102	Ninde
45	Wailapa	103	Nahavaq
46	Farsaf	104	Näti
47	Varavara	105	Naha'ai
48	Narmoris	106	Navwien
49	Biliru	107	North Ambrym
50	Atin	108	Orkon
51	Ati	109	Southeast Ambrym
52	Farnanto	110	Daakie
53	Se	111	Daakaka
54	Sinia	112	Dalkalaen
55	Butmas-Tur	113	Raljago
56	Ngen	114	Paama
57	*Tholp*	115	Lamen
58	Sakao	116	Lewo
		117	Bierebo
		118	Baki
		119	Mkir
		120	Bieria
		121	Namakura
		122	Emae
		123	Nakanamanga
		124	Lelepa
		125	Eton
		126	South Efate
		127	Mele-Fila
		128	Sie
		129	Ura
		130	*Utaha*
		131	North Tanna
		132	Lenakel
		133	Southwest Tanna
		134	Whitesands
		135	Kwamera
		137	Anejom
		138	Futuna-Aniwa

Both the table and the map incorporate knowledge from earlier sources (especially Tryon 1976, 1996a, 2010; Lynch & Crowley 2001; plus studies targeted at individual areas), and were cross-checked with primary data provided by field experts.[2]

2.1 Counting languages

2.1.1 Methodological issues

As is often the case in such linguistic landscapes, it is difficult to assess when two local speech traditions, or "communalects" (to use the useful term coined by Pawley & Sayaba 1971), constitute separate languages, as opposed to dialects of a single "language". The criterion of mutual intelligibility is often mentioned (e.g. Tryon 2010:286), but is notoriously difficult to assess with certainty: in the case of close languages, the notion of intelligibility is a gradient one, largely dependent on social and subjective perceptions. While this criterion remains essential to the assessment, it must be adjusted based on more controllable criteria – as we will see below.

Tryon (1976) chose to avoid this difficulty by using as his sole criterion the rates of lexical cognacy in his lists of basic vocabulary: communalects sharing more than 81 percent of basic lexicon should be considered dialects of a single language. Later, Lynch & Crowley (2001:3) used the same wordlists and the same method, yet decided to lower the threshold to 70 percent of shared lexicon. This new arbitrary figure resulted in lumping together a number of languages which Tryon had previously distinguished. While the lexicostatistical method has the advantage of being measurable, it rests on a threshold which is but an arbitrary convention. Furthermore, it looks exclusively at rates of lexical cognacy in a short list of about 200 terms, and disregards the various other linguistic criteria which could otherwise inform our judgment, and might possibly lead to different conclusions.

To take one example, the languages called *Lehali* and *Löyöp* (#3 and 4 on the map) have a basic-lexicon cognacy rating of 77.6% (Tryon 1976:95): this results in Lynch & Crowley (2001:38) classifying them as two dialects of a single language, which they call *Ureparapara*. And indeed, being relatively close languages, there is a reasonable degree of mutual intelligibility between them (roughly comparable to Spanish and Portuguese); this proximity is reinforced by longstanding traditions of intermarriage and bilingualism. However, lumping Lehali and Löyöp together as one single language solely based on lexicostatistics would fail to acknowledge the many differences between the two systems, whether in their phonologies (François 2011a:194, 198), their personal pronouns (François 2009:178), their space systems (François, this volume), and so on. Historically, Lehali shares innovations with Lo-Toga [#2] to its west, while Löyöp really subgroups with Mwotlap [#5] to its east (François 2014:183). In sum, even though they do share some vocabulary and are partly intelligible to each other, Lehali and Löyöp clearly constitute two distinct languages[3] – a view which happens to be confirmed by the social perceptions of the speakers themselves. Of course, an approach purely based on lexicostatistics may be justifiable when the only data available are basic

[2] We wish to thank Kilu von Prince, Ken Nehrbass, Liz Pearce, Benjamin Touati – and especially John Lynch and Ross Clark, for providing data and insights on their areas of expertise.

[3] This conclusion is reflected in our map and list, where Lehali and Löyöp were counted as separate.

vocabulary lists; but careful examination, whenever possible, should incorporate other dimensions, including phonology or grammar.

Sometimes, by contrast, local perceptions have to be overridden by the informed judgment of the linguist outsider. For instance, in the southern half of the Torres group, islanders insist that *Lo* and *Toga* constitute separate languages, each spoken on the island of the same name; that statement will sometimes be backed by an example or two, where word forms differ – like the 1sg possessive, which is [minɔ] in Lo and [minɛ] in Toga. However, closer investigation reveals that Lo and Toga can only be distinguished by a handful of such shibboleths, and are perfectly identical in all other respects. In such cases, it is justified to consider these two communalects as simply local varieties of a single language (called *Lo–Toga*), in spite of the popular perceptions that tend to count a separate "language" for each island.[4] This problem is particularly relevant in cases of dialect continua, which abound in Vanuatu – especially on Ambae, Pentecost (see Schneider & Gray, this volume), Santo, Efate, Tanna.

As we elaborated the list and map of Vanuatu languages, we thus relied, whenever possible, upon the informed judgment of expert linguists, and their view of how distinct each communalect was from its neighbours. Such an in-depth investigation can only be carried out by scholars who have patiently accumulated knowledge upon entire areas. The more is known about Vanuatu languages in the future, the more it will be possible to refine our judgments on these matters.

2.1.2 About the total number of languages

These methodological issues partly explain the fluctuation observed, in the scientific literature, with respect to the total number of languages in Vanuatu.

Tryon (1976) first identified 179 communalects – corresponding to his 179 basic-lexicon wordlists. Then, by merging together close varieties based on a lexicostatistical criterion, he arrived at the final number of **105** distinct languages for the whole country (1976:87).

Lynch & Crowley (2001), using a lower lexicostatistical threshold, often treated as dialects what Tryon had considered separate languages. But while this approach tended to decrease the total number for the country, their volume also documented a number of previously unacknowledged languages, most of them moribund, especially from Malakula.[5] As a result, the total figure given by Lynch & Crowley (2001:4) ends up being quite similar to Tryon's 1976 assessment, with **106** languages — including 8 extinct, 17 "moribund", and 81 "living languages still actively spoken".

After his 1976 study, Darrell Tryon revised his own estimate, and would regularly cite a higher total of **113** languages for Vanuatu (Tryon 1996a, 2006); this number of 113 has been the most frequently cited by scholars in the last decades. In 2009 however, the same Darrell

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[4] Obviously, another way to interpret speakers' statements is to point out that the term used locally to designate each local variety is not meant to be translated as *language* (as opposed to *dialect*), but simply refers to what we would otherwise call *lect* or *communalect*. In that sense, speakers are of course correct in assigning two separate lects (*vavetēme*) to the islands of Lo and Toga.

[5] This reassessment of Malakula languages resulted mostly from fieldwork undertaken in 1999-2001 by Terry Crowley, whose findings were also to be reported in his four posthumous grammars (Crowley 2006*a*, *b*, *c*, *d*).

Tryon circulated among colleagues an unpublished map that listed as many as **125** languages. The increase in number was mostly due to his more recent survey of Espiritu Santo, which he published separately as Tryon (2010).

Our estimate of **138** languages is thus, to date, the highest number ever proposed for Vanuatu. This high number may be explained in two ways. First, it reflects our propension to count as distinct languages those communalects that are locally identified as separate, and confirmed by a linguist expert to form a system of their own [§2.1.1]. The second reason for our high number is that it brings together knowledge accumulated by several experts over the last decades: it incorporates the surveys of Malakula by Terry Crowley and John Lynch, but also those of Santo by Tryon (2010) and by Ross Clark (pers. comm.); those by François (2011a, 2012) in the Torres and Banks Is; those by von Prince (2015) on Ambrym, etc. In each case, in-depth exploration has revealed the existence of more languages than were previously thought — albeit, most of the time, languages on the verge of extinction.

2.1.3 Living, moribund and extinct languages

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th saw a sudden downturn in the archipelago's demography, due to the spread of new diseases, combined with a depopulation due to forced labour (Crowley 1997; François 2012). These tragic episodes made numerous languages and dialects suddenly vulnerable, and often resulted in their extinction. Here is what the Anglican missionary and anthropologist Robert Codrington wrote in 1885 about the island of Vanua Lava in the Banks islands:[6]

> "On the island itself, each of the districts or groups of villages has its own dialect, viz. *Pak*, Lusa, Sasar, Leon, *Vatrat*, *Vuras* (Avreas), *Mosina*, *Lomrig*, Nawono, Alo Teqel, Qatpe, *Tolav*, and Qe'i. Some of these are, no doubt, very much alike, but the natives themselves thought them different; and between, for example, Pak and Mosina the difference is considerable. The dialect of Nawono, Port Patteson, is lost, the labour trade having destroyed the population, at one time considerable." (Codrington 1885:331)

Codrington cites as many as thirteen communalects for the sole island of Vanua Lava, where only four languages are spoken today – including the moribund Mwesen and Lemerig. This gives an idea of the drastic language loss which must have occurred since the end of the 19th century.

In many areas of Vanuatu, people still remember the names of former communalects, which have gone extinct during the last few generations. Quite often though, they recollect little more than the mere existence of those speech traditions, and too little information can be gathered to assess whether these were languages of their own, or mere local variants of existing languages. Such cases were not counted in the table or the map.

In a few cases, however, it has been possible to collect some data on a moribund language before it stopped being used – at least enough to assess its status. Three languages are in this situation: they are included in *Table 2* (#57, 61, 130), and shown in italics on the map. As a result, the total number of languages currently spoken in Vanuatu is closer to 135.

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[6] In this citation, I italicise the names of communalects whose existence is still remembered, and underline those which are still alive today. Note the correspondences of language names: *Lomrig* = Lemerig (#8 on our map), *Vatrat* = Vera'a (#9), *Vuras* = Vurës (#10), *Mosina* = Mwesen (#11).

In fact, it is difficult to say for sure how many languages, among the 138 of Vanuatu, are still alive. The reason is that many languages were already in the verge of extinction when they were discovered: they were only spoken, or rather remembered, by a handful of people, sometimes less than 10 or 15 individuals, usually of very old age. Lynch & Crowley (2001) counted 17 of these "moribund" languages, and our own inventory includes 18 [§2.2]. When such languages were discovered 15 years ago, it is difficult to know with certainty whether they should be counted today, or not, among the living languages of Vanuatu.

2.2 Language demography and vitality

While a few languages have speakers numbering in the thousands, the majority are spoken by smaller communities. Based on *Table 2* (p.18 sqq.), *Figure 2* gives an overview of Vanuatu's 138 vernacular languages, ranked by size of their speaker communities.[7] The three most spoken languages in the country are Uripiv (#84), Nakanamanga (#123), and Lenakel (#132) – with 9,000; 9,500; and 11,500 speakers respectively.

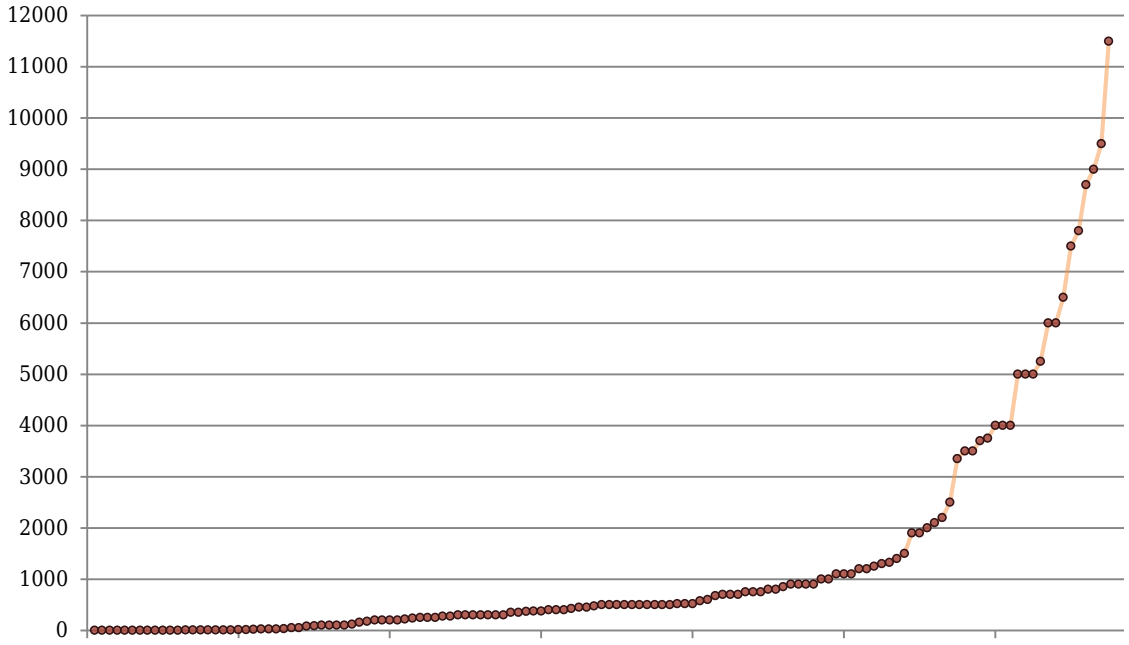


Figure 2 — The languages of Vanuatu, ranked by number of speakers (each dot is a language)

Figure 3 groups languages by categories of size: for example, the second column states that 13 languages are spoken by a group of between 16 and 100 speakers. The first bar counts moribund languages, spoken today by less than 15 speakers — not counting the four that are already extinct. The number of these moribund languages (18, about 13% of the total) shows how much of Vanuatu's linguistic diversity has already started to erode in the last few generations.

[7] Vanuatu's official census does include some data on languages, yet it does so by contrasting "Bislama" with a generic category "local language" (see *Table 1* p.17), without specifying which vernacular language is involved. As a result, the statistics on speaker numbers for individual languages can only be assessed by linguists in the field, sometimes in conditions that only allow them to provide rough estimates.

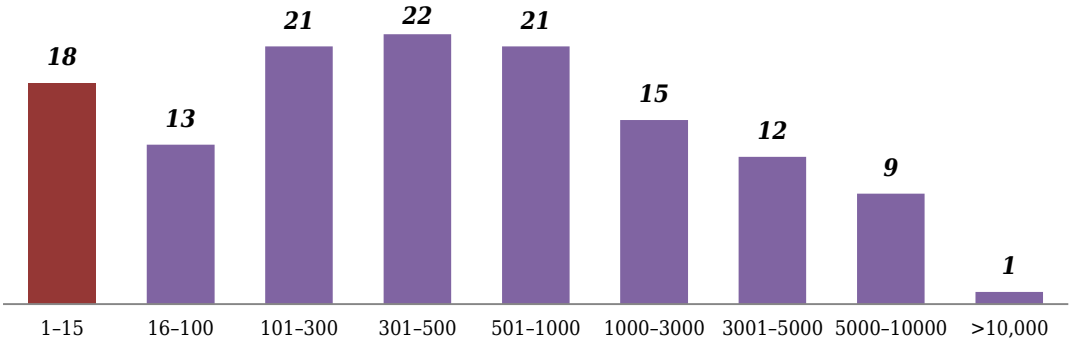


Figure 3 — The size of speech communities in Vanuatu (in number of speakers)

Languages with less than 15 speakers are clearly doomed to become extinct in the years to come: they are the descendants of earlier language communities that were once thriving, yet have receded drastically in the last generations under the pressure of other languages. That said, one should be cautious before painting too dark a picture of Vanuatu's languages, just based on demographics. While a few hundred speakers is definitely a low number by world's standards, it doesn't necessarily entail a language's fragility. Evidently, the language ecology of traditional Vanuatu was always built around language communities that would typically have the size of one or two villages with no more than a few hundred members, and still be in their full strength (François 2012). Most of Vanuatu's languages are in fact still healthy today, because – except for the moribund ones – they are still transmitted to children. In this regard, they are safe from immediate endangerment (Crowley 1995, 2000).

2.3 An exceptional density

With a total land area of 12,189 sq km, Vanuatu has an average of 88 sq km per language: this is presumably the densest linguistic landscape in the world. By way of comparison, the geographical density of languages in Papua New Guinea – another Melanesian country renowned for its linguistic wealth – has been estimated to be of one language every 900 sq km (Pereltsvaig 2012:167). The author considered the latter density rate to be "unparalleled elsewhere", a statement obviously contradicted by the Vanuatu data.

Another way to assess a country's linguistic density is by referring to its demography. Compared to its current population of 243,000 inhabitants (VNSO 2009), the figure of 138 languages entails an average of 1760 speakers per language. Again, this constitutes the world's highest density in number of languages *per capita* (Crowley 2000).

In fact, the numbers are even more extreme if one remembers what the country's population used to be during last century. We mentioned already the drastic depopulation which affected the whole archipelago at the turn of the 20th century [§2.1.3]. The first census of the then New Hebrides was carried out in 1967, and counted a total population of 77,988 (Tryon 1996b:1374) – that is, 3.1 times smaller than it has become today.[8] The 138 languages

[8] By 1967, the country's population had already begun to bounce back from its lowest point, which Vienne (1984:63) situates around 1940 (at least for the north). Language density was then at its peak.

we count today in Vanuatu had to live through that demographic bottleneck of last century. At that point, the average size of a language community in Vanuatu was thus as low as 565 speakers per language – a world record for sure.

The extreme density of Vanuatu is consistent with general attitudes observed throughout Melanesia in general (Pawley 1981, Unseth & Landweer 2012), whether regarding linguistic or cultural diversity. While all communities share a cultural background typical of Pacific societies in general, they also like to emphasise the many details that differ among them: this may be differences in food items and recipes, rules of marriage and kinship, artistic practices, oral literature, and so on. A conspicuous example is the diversity of musical traditions: musical instruments, poetic genres, dances, melodies and rhythms, form a variegated mosaic across the whole Vanuatu archipelago (François & Stern 2013). This taste for diversity results in each island, or even each village, having its own recognisable identity, distinct from its immediate neighbours.

3 The linguistic history of Vanuatu

By contrast with a country like Papua New Guinea, the impressive linguistic density of modern Vanuatu is not caused by deep-level genetic diversity. Indeed, all its languages belong to the same family: Oceanic, the eastern branch of the Austronesian phylum.

Among them, three languages (Emae, Mele–Fila, Futuna–Aniwa) are Polynesian outliers – that is, members of the Polynesian subfamily of Oceanic that are spoken west of their Tonga–Samoa homeland (Clark 1994); they likely arrived in the country during the last millennium. As for the non-Polynesian languages of Vanuatu, they historically developed *in situ* from the speech of the archipelago's first settlers. Archaeological evidence suggests that these early settlers were bearers of the cultural complex known as *Lapita* (Kirch 1997; Bedford 2003), who reached the shores of Vanuatu around 3100–3000 BP (Bedford *et al.* 2006; Bedford & Spriggs 2008). The language spoken by these early Lapita settlers is generally understood to be Proto Oceanic, the language ancestral to all Oceanic languages of the Pacific (Pawley & Green 1984; Pawley 2007).

3.1 Internal subgrouping hypotheses

There have been attempts to subgroup Vanuatu languages — apart from the Polynesian ones, that is. If conceived under the tree model, such subgrouping takes the form of intermediate nodes cascading down from Proto Oceanic to modern languages. Essentially, two proposals have been made in the literature.[9] The first hypothesis was developed by Clark (1985:219; 2009), and separates two subgroups: *South Vanuatu* vs. *North–Central Vanuatu*, the latter in turn splitting into North vs. Central Vanuatu.[10]

An alternative hypothesis was formulated by Lynch (2000a). He proposed to group Vanuatu and New Caledonia together, under a node called *Southern Oceanic* (see also Lynch & Ozanne-Rivierre 2001, François 2011b). The latter would split into *North Vanuatu* vs. all

[9] See Clark (2009:3–9) for a review of earlier proposals.

[10] On our map, *SV* includes the ten languages numbered #128 to 137. As for *NCV*, it encompasses all other languages apart from the three Polynesian ones (122, 127, 138).

the rest (called *Nuclear Southern Oceanic*); and this southern group would, in turn, include *Central Vanuatu* languages on one hand, and *Southern Melanesian* on the other — itself the parent of *South Vanuatu + New Caledonia*. Lynch's ideas were summarised by Ross *et al.* (2008:8) in their overview of recent Oceanic subgrouping hypotheses, in the form of *Figure 4* (see also Lynch *et al.* 2002:113).

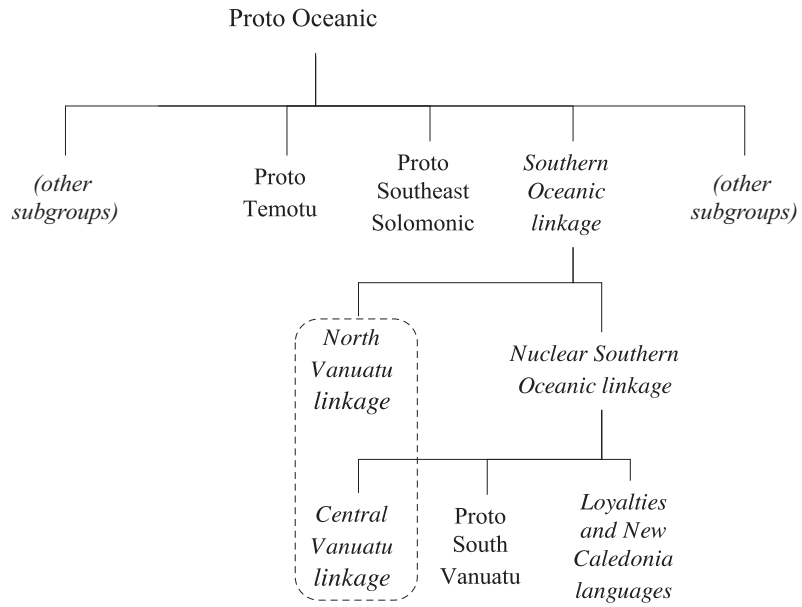


Figure 4 — A possible tree for the Oceanic family, showing the distribution of Vanuatu languages across three separate subgroups (Ross *et al*. 2008:8, citing Lynch 2000a)

One notable feature of *Figure 4* is the dotted line that circles around *North Vanuatu* and *Central Vanuatu*: it reflects the many innovations which these two "dialect networks" shared together as they were "reintegrated" together (Ross *et al.* 2008:10). Such cases of reintegration are clearly problematic for the tree model (see Pawley 2012): how can two subgroups share innovations together, when they do not fall under the same node? Does the dotted line also represent relations of genealogy, in the same way as the genetic ties ordinarily represented on a tree? If so, we would be here faced with a case of *intersecting subgroups*, as CV would belong to a *CV–SV*(–Caled.) subgroup on one side, and to an *NV–CV* subgroup on the other side. Yet the concept of "intersecting subgroups" is at odds with an orthodox view of a family tree: under a strict approach, only one of the intersecting sets of shared innovations can be seen as genuinely genealogical in nature, while the other set would have to be ignored somehow, e.g. by deciding that it reflects "language contact". A problem with such a reasoning is that it forces us to arbitrarily dismiss a large number of relevant data, mostly to salvage the central assumption of the tree model – namely, that genealogical subgroups should not be allowed to crosscut.

3.2 A non-cladistic view of language genealogy in Vanuatu

A solution to this conundrum can be achieved quite simply, by realising that the demands inherent to the tree model are in fact illegitimate: the ban against intersecting subgroups is merely an artefact of that model, and corresponds to nothing in the real history of languages (see Heggarty *et al.* 2010). In a dialect chain or continuum, it is common for innovations to

form entangled patterns, and for genealogical subgroups to intersect – a pattern which trees are unable to capture (François 2014). The history of Oceanic languages is thus better represented using a non-cladistic method, i.e. not based on the tree analogy.

Some authors have described the frequent crosscutting of isoglosses among Vanuatu languages. Clark (1985) spoke of "groups, chains, clusters and waves". Tryon (1976:55, 80; 1996) proposed a "classification" of Vanuatu languages in the form of intersecting clusters. Such an approach is encapsulated in the concept of *linkage*, proposed by Ross (1988, 1997): a *linkage* is a set of related languages whose internal genealogy cannot be represented by a tree, because it arose through an accumulation of intersecting innovations (see Lynch *et al*. 2002:92). In *Figure 4* above, several subgroups were already labelled *linkages*. As a whole, Vanuatu is best understood as a "linkage of linkages", that is, a vast dialect chain composed of smaller chains. This non-cladistic view of language genealogy is illustrated in *Figure 5*.

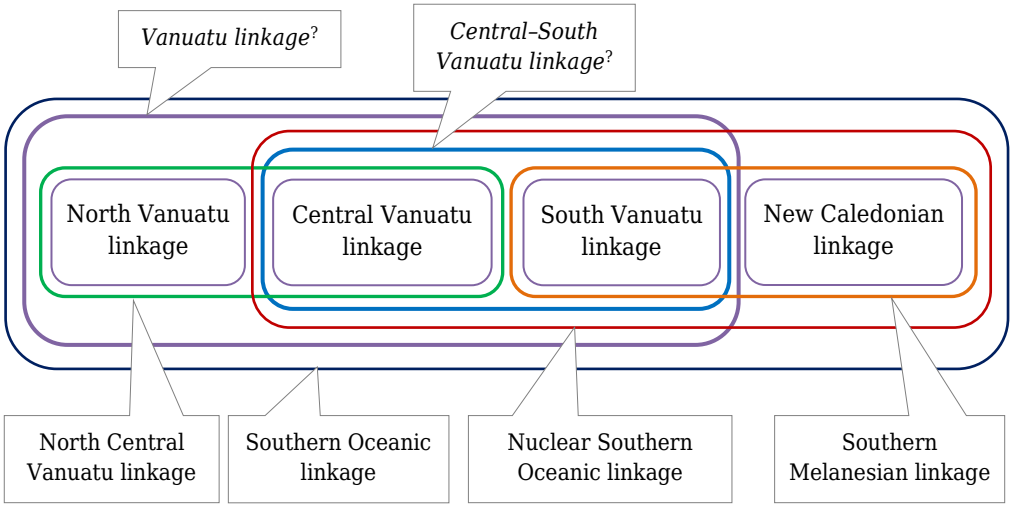


Figure 5 — A possible non-cladistic genealogical diagram of the Southern Oceanic linkage

In *Figure 5*, labels in plain characters refer to subgroups which have been already proposed in the literature; those in italics are linkages which have never been proposed, but could possibly be shown to exist, based on patterns of shared innovations. The figure mostly aims to illustrate how genealogical subgroups, identified using the Comparative method, can be represented in a non-tree fashion, in a way consistent with the concept of *linkage*. As for claiming the factual accuracy of this particular diagram, this could only be done by demonstrating that each linkage is supported by at least one individual isogloss; such an endeavour would be useful, but goes beyond the scope of this chapter.[11]

An exploration inside the diagram's smaller units (e.g. the "North Vanuatu linkage") would, again, reveal the same chain-like structure at all levels of observation, in a recursive way – all the way down to individual languages. Such a non-cladistic approach is demonstrably the key to some problems encountered in subgrouping studies. For example, the South Efate language has been sometimes subgrouped with *(North-)Central Vanuatu* (Lynch 2000b,

[11] For a rigorous, quantitative method based on the concept of linkage, see the presentation of *Historical Glottometry* in François (2014) and Kalyan & François (f/c).

2004), and sometimes with *South Vanuatu* (cf. Lynch 2001), due to conflicting evidence in favour of either hypothesis. While unsolvable in a tree-based model, this conundrum is solved by considering that South Efate simply belongs to these two genealogical subgroups simultaneously, and lies at their intersection.[12]

In sum, the linguistic diversity observed today in Vanuatu results from three millennia of diversification from what was once a single language spoken across a vast social network – in a way similar to the fragmentation of Latin into a multitude of Romance languages and dialects. During the centuries following its initial settlement, Vanuatu formed a vast dialect continuum in which communalects remained in constant contact through trade, interisland marriage and other forms of alliances. Every time a linguistic innovation emerged somewhere in the network, it would diffuse to a more or less extended portion of the network. The isogloss it defined was sometimes limited to just a village, sometimes to several islands, and sometimes swept through even larger territories as it expanded across entire archipelagoes. Rather than yielding neat subgroups, this wave-like process of diversification naturally resulted in a map of constantly intersecting isoglosses. The modern outcome is an entangled web of linguistic linkages: a long chain where languages get gradually different as one travels across the territory.

3.3 The modern pressure of Bislama

Vanuatu's linguistic diversity has shown remarkable resilience as it lived through the 19th and 20th centuries, with limited damage. Some languages have gone extinct, but many have survived to this day.

So far, the country’s traditional social ecology has mostly resisted the global pressure towards linguistic levelling, typical of the modern world. However, times are changing fast, and the Republic of Vanuatu is undergoing rapid urbanisation – a corollary of which is the decline of its linguistic diversity. The urban centres, Port Vila and Luganville, constitute a new setting, where internal immigrants quickly abandon their vernacular languages, and shift to the country's national language, Bislama (Vandeputte-Tavo 2014). This English-based pidgin/creole[13] has been adopted since the beginning of the 20th century as the country's *lingua franca* (Tryon & Charpentier 2004), and became Vanuatu's national language upon its independence in 1980.

Even though French and English, the colonial languages, are still officially the languages of instruction, the pressure to abandon Vanuatu’s vernacular languages really comes from Bislama, and its solid association with modern life. Based on raw statistics from the 2009 census, François (2012:104) calculated that only 63.2 percent of the national population declared using a heritage language at home – compared to 33.7 percent who favour Bislama. This figure, incidentally, represents a dramatic ten-point drop from the 73.1 percent which had been recorded just ten years earlier. The results of that study are reproduced in

[12] Thieberger (this volume) contributes to this reflection, by pointing out the longstanding social links of the South Efate community with Erromango to its south.

[13] The term “pidgincreole” proposed by Bakker (2008:138) suits well the status of Bislama.

Table 1.[14] The comparison of figures from 1999 and 2009 goes a long way in highlighting the growing influence of Bislama, and the speedy erosion of the country's linguistic diversity.

Table 1 — Main language used at home, by regional province: percentages comparing 1999 and 2009 census data

	1999			**2009**		
Province (N to S)	Local language	Bislama	other	Local language	Bislama	other
TORBA	90.6	8.3	1.1	85.6	13.8	0.6
SANMA	60.1	36.2	3.7	51.1	46.5	2.4
→ incl. Luganville	23.8	67.2	9.0	14.0	81.9	4.1
PENAMA	94.1	5.3	0.6	91.8	7.6	0.6
MALAMPA	83.0	16.0	1.0	74.4	24.8	0.8
SHEFA	50.4	39.2	10.4	39.7	53.4	6.9
→ incl. Port Vila	31.2	52.4	16.4	22.4	67.8	9.8
TAFEA	95.6	3.6	0.8	91.2	8.0	0.8
National, rural	**85.3**	13.3	1.4	**77.1**	21.7	1.2
National, urban	29.3	**56.4**	14.3	20.5	**70.9**	8.6
National	***73.1***	23.3	3.6	***63.2***	33.7	3.1

4 Presentation of the volume

The linguistic landscape of Vanuatu is thus one in which all the languages share a common ancestor, yet have gone through three millennia of steady diversification from that ancestor. As a result, its languages and cultures show a complex blend of *unity* and *diversity*. Whether we look at phonology or morphosyntax, semantics or pragmatics, oral traditions or social practices, the typical observation combines some features which are shared (almost) everywhere in the country – whether due to their common inheritance, or to later convergence – and other features which were only developed in one particular area.

The present volume, titled ***The languages of Vanuatu: Unity and diversity***, brings together nine case studies of Vanuatu languages and cultures. Each chapter will mention facts which are common throughout the country, but will also concentrate on patterns peculiar to one specific area, or even to a single language. The chapters will follow a cline: from strictly grammatical topics, to studies where languages are analysed in light of their social environment – and finally, to topics of a more ethnographic nature, discussing oral traditions.

The first chapter, by **Elizabeth Pearce**, examines aspect marking in Unua, a language of Malakula (#78 on the map). In this chapter, the author takes a formal approach to account for the position and scope of a number of Unua markers, whose function is to encode various values of event boundedness (perfect, perfective, terminative, result). The Unua data is compared to Mandarin Chinese; and while these two languages are unrelated and typologi-

[14] The table includes detailed statistics for each province, the location of which is shown on our map (*Figure 1* p.7).

cally dissimilar in many ways, they both relie on similar strategies to encode certain aspects. The author then discusses how these strategies fit the *hierarchy of functional projections* (Cinque 1999) – a hypothesis whereby sentential constituents follow an underlying ordering. Pearce shows that both Unua and Mandarin Chinese conform to Cinque's hierarchy, yet with some necessary terminological adjustments.

Pete Budd investigates the structural and multi-functional properties of the form *ka* in Bierebo (Epi island, #117). A reflex of POc **akin[i]*, this morpheme *ka* shows variable structural distributions associated with various functions: it occurs as the head of instrumental PPs, as an oblique marker in so-called 'pseudo-transitive' constructions, and as an applicative suffix deriving transitive from intransitive verbs. Budd demonstrates how these variable properties are structural, and functionally related to each other. The preposition *ka* is also involved in the typologically rare construction of 'instrumental shift' where the instrumental NP appears in a frontal position for the purpose of foregrounding the instrument participant.

Looking at Sakao in northern Espiritu Santo (#58), **Benjamin Touati** examines a prefix whose phonological form copies the vowel of the radical, and which he calls "the initial vowel copy": e.g. *a̲-ra* 'pig', *ɛ̲-rɛmrɛm* 'thought'. This vowel copy is a morpheme, whose grammatical functions recall those of articles in neighbouring languages. While it is occasionally found on verbs, it is mostly prefixed on nouns – or at least, on *common nouns*, as opposed to personal nouns which go unprefixed. Touati shows that the copying prefix's contribution is to provide their host with a number of syntactic functions which they cannot access otherwise.

The difference between common and personal nouns in Oceanic is also a key to **Michael Franjieh**'s chapter on North Ambrym (#107). In possessive phrases of the type ⟨Possessed Possessor⟩, the possessed noun takes a construct suffix *-n* when the possessor nominal is a common noun, yet it is absent when the possessor is a personal noun. Franjieh argues that the construct suffix developed from the POc 3SG possessor suffix, and shows that it also appears in three other construction types: bound prepositional, verbal prepositional, and verbal constructions. In these constructions, the construct suffix also marks objects which, similarly to possessors, are also common nouns. Franjieh concludes by arguing that this construct suffix replaced the original POc object markers that occurred in verbal prepositional and verbal constructions.

Moving across the Selwyn Strait from North Ambrym to South Pentecost, **Murray Garde** investigates variation within the different numeral systems of Sa (#26). He argues that the selection of a numeral system is influenced by the social and cultural differences between speech community members. On the one hand, adherents to the *Kastom* ideology, and to the traditional cosmology, use a compound system that combines an imperfect decimal counting system, a vestigial decimal system, and a third paradigm reserved to monetary use. On the other hand, followers of Christianity and of Western habits, or *skulan*, make use of a more simple numeral system similar to those found in other Central Vanuatu languages: a combination of an imperfect decimal system with Bislama borrowings.

The relationship between languages and their environment also plays a key role in the chapter by **Alexandre François**, a study of the space systems used in the Torres and Banks Islands (#1–17 on the map). The 17 languages spoken there share a paradigm of space directionals, encoding such meanings as 'up', 'down', 'in', 'out', 'across', etc.; and everywhere, these basic spatial meanings are mapped onto the landscape to encode geocentric directions

such as ‘southeast’, ‘inland’, ‘oceanwards’, among others. Yet crucially, this mapping shows considerable cross-linguistic diversity, with as many as ten different systems attested in the region. After describing these ten systems synchronically, François proposes a unified theory to reconstruct their historical development, from what was initially a single ancestral system.

Cindy Schneider and Andrew Gray present a detailed outline of phonotactic, lexical, and morphosyntactic differences between the dialects of the Apma language (#24) spoken on Pentecost island. The authors argue that this kind of language variation deserves to be the object of detailed language documentation; they discuss how such findings can be incorporated into language description, which to date often focusses on the purely systemic aspects of a single variety, neglecting the systematic variation observed between dialects.

The last two chapters of our volume look at the traditions of verbal art and oral literature which are still lively today in the archipelago. **Dorothy Jauncey** describes the art of story-telling in Tamambo (#62), on Malo island. She documents four different genres of oral narratives: histories of ancestors; stories of supernatural characters; etiological tales, telling about the origin of certain aspects of the natural world; and stories from the mythical times. For each genre, a complete story is presented in bilingual format, and provided with an analysis of their form as well as their contents. Through her analysis of Tamambo oral narratives, Jauncey draws links between the *rules* they follow and the *roles* they play in the construction of the community’s identity and morals.

Finally, **Nick Thieberger** examines a small corpus of texts from the oral tradition of South Efate (#126), highlighting links with Erromango, the next island to the south. The stories cited by the author strongly suggest sustained contact between South Efate and Erromango people. This observation, incidentally, aligns with the most recent subgrouping hypotheses regarding South Efate and southern Vanuatu (Lynch 2001, 2004).

Obviously, the topics tackled in this collection of studies are but a drop in the ocean, compared to the wealth of subjects that could be inspired by the languages and cultures of Vanuatu. Yet they already provide a valuable overview of the country’s linguistic diversity, with a geographical coverage ranging from the far north to the southern islands. They also discuss a large array of issues, ranging from morphology and syntax to pragmatics, dialectology, folkloristics and oral history. Altogether, this volume gives a fair idea of the research currently undertaken by the community of linguists working on Vanuatu; it will hopefully inspire more research projects in the years and decades to come.

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6 Appendix: A new list of Vanuatu languages

The table below provides information an updated list of Vanuatu languages. The sources and principles followed to establish this list were presented in Section 2.

For each language listed in *Table 2*, the first column indicates its number on our map (*Figure 1* p.3). The second column indicates the language name as recommended by experts, often based on the preferences of the local speaker community. The third column lists the alternative names that are also used to refer to the same language, either by the community or by the scientific literature. This is followed by the latest assessment on the number of speakers, based on recent information from experts whenever possible; otherwise, we are reproducing the figures cited in published sources (mostly Lynch & Crowley 2001). Then come the language's ISO 639-3 code when it exists, and the region or island where the language is spoken.

As stated earlier (fn.7 p.7), individual figures for language size should be understood as tentative. Given the rapid growth of Vanuatu's population, it is likely that numbers assessed many years ago have since increased – at least for those languages whose vitality is stable. Conversely, figures given long ago for moribund languages may have to be decreased. Such issues could only be solved, ideally, by incorporating into the regular national census a specific survey about language proficiency, carried out by linguistically trained investigators, capable of identifying individual vernaculars.

Table 2 — Data on the 138 vernacular languages of Vanuatu

MAP	LANGUAGE	OTHER NAMES	SPKRS	ISO	REGION
1	Hiw	Hiu	280	hiw	Torres Islands (Hiw)
2	Lo-Toga	Loh, Toga	580	lht	Torres Islands (Lo, Toga, Tegua)
3	Lehali		200	tql	Banks Islands (Ureparapara)
4	Löyöp	Lehalurup	240	urr	Banks Islands (Ureparapara)
5	Mwotlap	Motlav	2100	mlv	Banks Islands (Motalava)
6	Volow	Valuwa	1	mlv	Banks Islands (Motalava)
7	Mota		750	mtt	Banks Islands (Mota)
8	Lemerig	Sasar	2	lrz	Banks Islands (Vanua Lava)
9	Vera'a	Vatrata	500	vra	Banks Islands (Vanua Lava)
10	Vurës	Vureas, Mosina	2000	msn	Banks Islands (Vanua Lava)
11	Mwesen	Mosina	10	msn	Banks Islands (Vanua Lava)
12	Nume	Tarasag	700	tgs	Banks Islands (Gaua)
13	Dorig	Wetamut	300	wwo	Banks Islands (Gaua)
14	Koro		250	krf	Banks Islands (Gaua)
15	Olrat		3	olr	Banks Islands (Gaua)
16	Lakon	Lakona; Vurē	800	lkn	Banks Islands (Gaua)
17	Mwerlap	Merlav	1100	mrm	Banks Islands (Merelava)
18	Sungwadia	Marino; North Maewo	500	mrb	Maewo
19	Sungwadaga	Central Maewo	1400	mwo	Maewo
20	Baetora	South Maewo, Sungaloge	1330	btr	Maewo
21	Ambae	Lolovoli; Aoba	5000	omb	Ambae

MAP	LANGUAGE	OTHER NAMES	SPKRS	ISO	REGION
22	West Ambae	Duidui	8700	nnd	Ambae
23	Raga	Hano	6500	lml	Pentecost
24	Apma		7800	app	Pentecost
25	Ske	Seke	300	ske	Pentecost
26	Sa	Saa	3900	sax	Pentecost
27	Tolomako	Bigbay	900	tlm	Espiritu Santo
28	Piamatsina		250	ptr	Espiritu Santo
29	Vunapu		380	vnp	Espiritu Santo
30	Valpei		300	vlp	Espiritu Santo
31	Nokuku		250	nkk	Espiritu Santo
32	Meri	Tasmate, Oa	300	tmt	Espiritu Santo
33	Wusi	Kula	350	wsi	Espiritu Santo
34	Bura		300		Espiritu Santo
35	Merei	Tiale, Lametin	400	lmb, mnl	Espiritu Santo
36	Mores	Ko	200	mrp	Espiritu Santo
37	Ande	Morouas	500		Espiritu Santo
38	Toksiki	Soisoru, Roria	200	rga	Espiritu Santo
39	Kiai	Fortsenal	450	frt	Espiritu Santo
40	Moiso		100		Espiritu Santo
41	Kene		300		Espiritu Santo
42	Daruru		100		Espiritu Santo
43	Akei	Tasiriki	4000	tsr	Espiritu Santo
44	Retlatur		100		Espiritu Santo
45	Wailapa	Ale	500	wlr	Espiritu Santo
46	Farsaf	Narango, Nambel	400	nrg	Espiritu Santo
47	Varavara	Amblong, Aje	300	alm	Espiritu Santo
48	Narmoris		220	plb	Espiritu Santo
49	Biliru	Tambotalo	3	tls	Espiritu Santo
50	Atin		120		Espiritu Santo
51	Ati	Polonombauk, Meris	85		Espiritu Santo
52	Farnanto		100		Espiritu Santo
53	Se	Fanafo	20		Espiritu Santo
54	Sinia	Navut	520	nsw	Espiritu Santo
55	Butmas-Tur	Ati, Farafi	520	bnr	Espiritu Santo
56	Ngen	Shark Bay	450	ssv	Espiritu Santo, Litaro
57	Tholp	Nethalp	0		Espiritu Santo
58	Sakao	Hog Harbour, Nkep	4000	sku	Espiritu Santo
59	Mavea	Maŭea, Mafea	34	mkv	Espiritu Santo, Mavea
60	Tutuba		500	tmi	Espiritu Santo, Tutuba
61	Aore		0	aor	Espiritu Santo, Aore
62	Tamambo	Malo, Tamabo	4000	mla	Espiritu Santo, Malo
63	Tangoa	Movono	370	tgp	Espiritu Santo, Tangoa
64	Araki		8	akr	Espiritu Santo, Araki

MAP	LANGUAGE	OTHER NAMES	SPKRS	ISO	REGION
65	Axamb	Ahamb	750	ahb	Malekula
66	Lendamboi	Small Nambas, Letemboi	800	nms	Malekula
67	Nasvang		275		Malekula
68	Sörsörian		3		Malekula
69	Avok		500		Malekula, Avok
70	Uliveo	Maskelynes	1100	klv	Malekula, Maskelynes
71	Port Sandwich	Lamap	1200	psw	Malekula
72	Nisvai	Vetbon	200		Malekula
73	Burmbar	Banam Bay, Vartavo	900	vrt	Malekula
74	Mbwenelang		<10		Malekula
75	Aulua		750	aul	Malekula
76	Niolean	Repanbitip	90	rpn	Malekula
77	Rerep	Pangkumu, Tisman	380	pgk	Malekula
78	Unua	Onua	520	onu	Malekula
79	Vivti		<5		Malekula
80	Nitita		<5		Malekula
81	Avava	Katbol, Navava; Bangsa’	700	tmb	Malekula
82	Neverver	Lingarak, Nevwervwer	1250	lgk	Malekula
83	Litzlitz	Naman	15	lzl	Malekula
84	Uripiv	Uripiv-Wala-Rano-Atchin, Northeast Malakula	9000	upv	Malekula, Atchin, Uripiv
85	Rutan		?		Malekula
86	Botovro	Mpotovoro	430	mvt	Malekula
87	Vao		1900	vao	Malekula, Vao
88	Alovas		?		Malekula
89	Vovo		475		Malekula
90	Nese	Matanvat	160		Malekula
91	Najit		<5		Malekula
92	Malua Bay	Middle Nambas	500	mll	Malekula
93	Njav		10		Malekula
94	Tirax	Mae, Dirak	1000	mme	Malekula
95	V’ënen Taut	Big Nambas	3350	nmb	Malekula
96	Tape	Maragus	15	mrs	Malekula
97	Larëvat	Laravat, Larevat	680	lrv	Malekula
98	Neve’ei	Vinmavis	500	vnm	Malekula
99	Nivat		<10		Malekula
100	Nasarian		5	nvh	Malekula
101	Aveteian	Dixon Reef	50	dix	Malekula
102	Ninde	Labo	1100	mwi	Malekula
103	Nahavaq	South West Bay, Siesip	700	sns	Malekula
104	Nāti		25		Malekula
105	Naha’ai	Malvaxal, Malfaxal	600	mlx	Malekula
106	Navwien		5		Malekula
107	North Ambrym		5250	mmg	Ambrym

MAP	LANGUAGE	OTHER NAMES	SPKRS	ISO	REGION
108	Orkon	Fanbak	30		Ambrym
109	Southeast Ambrym		3700	tvk	Ambrym
110	Daakie	Port-Vato	1300	ptv	Ambrym
111	Daakaka	South Ambrym, Baiap	1200	bpa	Ambrym
112	Dalkalaen		1000		Ambrym
113	Raljago	West Ambrym, Lonwolwol	<10	crc	Ambrym
114	Paama	Paamese	6000	paa	Paama
115	Lamen	Lamenu, Varmali	850	lmu	Epi, Lamen
116	Lewo	Varsu	2200	lww	Epi
117	Bierebo	Bonkovia-yevali	900	bnk	Epi
118	Baki	Burumba, Paki	350	bki	Epi
119	Mkir	Maii	180	mmm	Epi
120	Bieria	Bieri, Vovo, Wowo	25	brj	Epi
121	Namakura	Makura, Namakir	3750	nmk	Efate, Shepherds (Tongoa, Tongariki)
122	Emae	Makatea	400	mmw	Shepherd Is (Emae)
123	Nakanamanga		9500	llp	Efate, Shepherd Is (Nguna, Tongoa)
124	Lelepa	Havannah Harbour	400	lpa	Efate, Lelepa
125	Eton		500	etn	Efate
126	South Efate	Erakor	6000	erk	Efate
127	Mele-Fila	Ifira-Mele	3500	mxe	Efate, Mele, Ifira
128	Sie	Se, Sie, Erromanga	1900	erg	Erromango
129	Ura		6	uur	Erromango
130	Utaha		0	iff	Erromango
131	North Tanna		5000	tnn	Tanna
132	Lenakel	Netvaar	11500	tnl	Tanna
133	Southwest Tanna	Nawal	5000	nwi	Tanna
134	Whitesands	Narak	7500	tnp	Tanna
135	Kwamera	Nafe, Nife	3500	tnk	Tanna
137	Anejom̃	Aneityum	900	aty	Aneityum
138	Futuna-Aniwa	West Futuna	1500	fut	Futuna, Aniwa