

The Multitude of Multilingualism in Vanuatu

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Vanuatu is the most linguistically diverse place on earth (Posth et al. 2018), with more than 125 languages spoken (François et al. 2015) across a population of less than 300,000. As a result of this intense diversity, each of the 65 inhabited islands of Vanuatu hosts its own unique linguistic environment in which varying degrees of multilingualism are found. From islands such as Emae that are home to very few languages, to heavily linguistically populated islands like Malekula (with over 100 linguistic varieties), multilingualism is overwhelmingly present in Vanuatu. These different linguistic situations and the multilingualism that has developed within them are the result of a multitude of overlapping socio-cultural and socio-political histories, including: practices of linguistic exogamy, trading of valued goods (e.g. mats, pigs), exchanging of women through marriage, environmental pressures (e.g. volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, landslides), chiefly migrations, and post-settlement migrations from other areas of Oceania (e.g. the Polynesian Outlier migrations).

This paper identifies and describes three case studies of small-scale multilingualism in Vanuatu, based on first-hand data and observations collected by the authors since 2016. In central Malekula, due primarily to linguistic exogamy and children learning the language of both parents, as many as seven languages are spoken in a given household. In Maewo, multilingualism is exhibited to a lesser extent, with individuals speaking at least one other language. This is due in part to a system of matrilineal clan membership (Hume 1985), in which one clan can be made up of speakers of multiple languages. In the village of Makatu on Emae, the majority of the population speaks exactly three local languages – the indigenous language of that village, Fakamae, as well as two other languages, Nakanamanga and Namakir, spoken on neighboring islands and in nearby villages. This situation is due to centuries of interaction between neighboring islands, as well as multiple waves of migration and settlement due to local environmental pressures (for example, the Kuwae eruption of 1450AD (Clark 1996)), re-colonisation of the region by Efate chiefs (Guiart 1973), and the arrival of the Polynesians (Feinberg and Scaglione 2012, among others).

The three examples - Maewo island, central Malekula, and Makatu village on Emae island - are used here to highlight diversity of multilingualism found in Vanuatu and to explore how their differing linguistic environments and histories have contributed to their varying degrees of multilingualism. Through descriptive analysis of these different small-scale multilingual environments, this paper offers a multifold example of multilingualism in Vanuatu. Furthermore, in discussing the socio-cultural and socio-political motivations for multilingualism, this paper contributes to research on *why* and *how* small-scale multilingualism can develop.

References

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