

Teachers' understandings of the role of translation in vernacular language maintenance in Malekula: some early thoughts

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1. Introduction

Existing research concerning literacy in the Pacific indicates three key considerations: (1) Traditional print literacy levels are low (Toumu'a 2016), (2) the development of culturally and linguistically relevant quality print resources is a key approach to raising these levels (Toumu'a 2016); and (3) the development of such resources can also contribute to maintenance of local knowledge (Paviour-Smith 2005).

Studies of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) have also indicated that their inclusion in formal school curricula is an important aspect of the maintenance of this knowledge (McCarter & Gavin 2011). Paviour-Smith (2005) has worked with a community in the Aulua locale of Malekula to standardise orthography and develop materials in local languages with 26 villagers. Along the way he and his colleagues discovered the importance of paying attention to local discourse models. Thus, understanding the forms of local storytelling and the literacy practices surrounding these stories is an important first step in creating effective print resources using vernacular languages and containing TEK which aim to raise the print literacy levels in Malekula communities.

In 2012, a National Language Policy was endorsed in Vanuatu, accommodating the vernacular languages of Vanuatu within the formal education system for the first time in the nation's history (Ministry of Education 2012). To enact the new National Language Policy, the Ministry of Education developed a plan to create vernacular resources for around half of Vanuatu's 100+ languages. To support this process, linguists were approached, including one of the authors (Julie Barbour) who has been working with communities in Malekula, Vanuatu for the last 15 years (see e.g. Barbour 2010; 2012; 2013; 2015). In 2015, Julie facilitated the first regional workshop on Malekula Island to translate Year 1 reading materials into seven local languages with Nicola assisting. Nicola's research interest since 2007 in picturebooks which use more than one language (Daly 2007; 2008; 2016) and Julie's knowledge of local languages in Malekula through her own research, and the supervision of research students, have led to the development of the project introduced in this article documenting local literacy and storytelling practices in Malekula.

2. Setting

The setting for this work was in a Ministry of Education Building in Norsup on the island of Malekula in the Malampa Province of Vanuatu. Malampa is an administrative region including the islands of Malekula, Ambrym and Paama. Malekula is the second largest island in Vanuatu, and is known as the most linguistically diverse of all the islands, with more than 30 distinct languages (Lynch & Crowley 2001). In November 2017, a group of four postgraduate linguistics students and the two authors arrived to work with 14 teachers from around Malekula. Our main focus was to support local teachers to translate the Year 2 and 3 reading materials produced by the Ministry of Education in English into seven local languages: Lamap (spoken in southeast Malekula), Mae (spoken in east Malekula), Maskelynes (spoken on small islands south of Malekula), Ninde (spoken in the southwest of Malekula), Tirax (spoken in north central Malekula); Uripiv (spoken on the northeast coast of Malekula) and V'ënen Taut (spoken in northwest Malekula).

Map 1. Malekula Island showing locations of languages included in Ministry of Education vernacular education project, along with Unua, the language studied by Elizabeth Pearce.



3. Data collection progress

While the translation work was progressing, the 14 Malekula teachers present were invited to speak with Nicola using a semi-structured interview format regarding the place of storytelling in their communities, and to express their views on the importance of translating children's reading materials into local languages (see questions in the Appendix). There were nine volunteers: four men and five women, with at least one volunteer for each of the seven languages represented in the Year 2 and 3 Reader translation workshop. A local translator was present during the interviews, which were conducted in English. While most of the nine interviewees were proficient in English, some were more fluent in French and some translation was required using Bislama, a dialect of Melanesian Pidgin and the local *lingua franca*. These interviews lasted from between 15 and 30 minutes, and were recorded using Quicktime, and then transcribed by a transcriber with local knowledge. These transcriptions are currently with the participants for checking before analysis takes place.

4. Early thoughts

While the details of the interview transcriptions are yet to be confirmed by the nine Malekula teacher participants, the tenor of the interviews without exception indicated a strong awareness of the importance of literacy materials translated into vernacular languages. Vernacular language materials were positioned as being relevant both to the success of school children and to the maintenance of local languages. Participants commonly refer back to their own experiences of learning to read for the first time in a completely unknown language. The policy until 2015 had been for education to be delivered in the medium of either English or French. The teachers' early experiences of literacy were therefore in a foreign language, and they recalled how difficult that was.

We look forward to unpacking the detailed nuances of these transcripts to help us understand more about traditional literacy and storytelling practices. We believe that the analysis of ideas and comments made by the nine volunteers concerning the place of storytelling in a range of Malekula communities will be invaluable during the development of future literacy materials using local languages. Much like Toumu'a (2016), who argues for culturally and linguistically relevant literacy resources to be developed in the Pacific region more generally, we believe that the more aligned literacy materials can be with the discourse practices around oral storytelling in the communities, the more effective these materials will be.

We are honoured to be able to offer this brief introduction to our project to mark the retirement of our colleague (JB and ND) and former lecturer (ND), Liz Pearce, whose own work on the language of Unua in Vanuatu continues to be an important resource for us and our research students.

Appendix: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Can you tell me about storytelling in your community?
 - a. When are stories told?
 - b. How are they told? (books, song, dance?)
 - c. How do people in your community learn to tell stories in these different ways?
 - d. Who tells them? (adults/children?)
 - e. What are the stories about?
 - f. Are there stories which belong to your community?
 - g. Are any of these stories written down?
2. Can you tell me about other times when stories are told? (prompts: in ceremonies? Singing? In dance? In church?)
 - a. How do people in your community learn to use language in these ways?
 - b. When is dance/singing/ceremonies done?
 - c. How do community members learn ceremonies/songs/dances?
 - d. Can anyone learn ceremonies/songs/dances?
 - e. When people make mistakes, what happens?
 - f. What stories do ceremonies/songs/dances tell?
3. Do any of the reading materials used in schools tell any of the stories or knowledge from your community? If so, which ones and what stories/knowledge?
4. How do the stories in the reading materials relate to the lives of the children in your communities?
5. How do you feel about the translation of the school reading materials into local languages?
 - a. What do you see as the advantages of having reading materials in local languages for the students? The teachers? The community?
 - b. What are the disadvantages of having reading materials in local languages for the students? The teachers? The community?
6. How does the community feel about the translation of the school reading materials into local languages?
7. How has the process of translating the reading materials into local languages been for you?
 - a. What have been the challenges?
 - b. What have you learned?

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