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## What's in a name? Case-studies of applied language maintenance and revitalisation from Vanuatu

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines three social development projects from the Republic of Vanuatu—the most linguistically diverse nation (on a per capita basis) in the world—that each seek to promote, support, and maintain vernacular languages. Vernacular or mother languages are widely recognised as crucial to the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, as well as the continuance of biocultural diversity. Amidst substantive socio-cultural and economic change, linguistic diversity is shrinking. The locally embedded rationales behind the value of vernacular language usage in Vanuatu both echo and extend the most commonly listed attributes of vernacular language usage. In addition to nourishing cultural identity and expression, enhancing education outcomes and supporting human-environment well-being, the practitioners and participants involved in these three programs viewed vernacular language as not just a vehicle but a form of social capital itself that positively informs social order. These relatively low cost, home-grown approaches to local language maintenance, are an innovative and promising model for combating language shifts in Vanuatu, and perhaps elsewhere in Melanesia. They also raise interesting questions about who ultimately gets to define what does and does not constitute ‘social capital’, ‘governance’ and ‘cultural heritage’.

## **Introduction**

Is vernacular language a vehicle for or an example of intangible cultural heritage? Similarly, is language a component or just a medium of social capital? Vernacular language usage is commonly linked to identity, cultural expression, improved education outcomes, human-environment well-being, and more. Drawing on three case-studies of applied language maintenance from Vanuatu, this paper examines local efforts to combat language shift through a home-grown approach that focuses on, among other things, vernacular kinship terms. The locally embedded rationales associated with the role and importance of vernacular languages in these cases both echoes and extends the more commonly cited benefits of maintaining linguistic diversity, in the process raising interesting questions about who ultimately gets to define what does and does not constitute ‘social capital’, ‘governance’, and ‘cultural heritage’.

## **Why does linguistic diversity matter?**

Vernacular language and/or mother tongue (hereafter ‘local languages’) are regarded as valuable for a number of reasons. The most common rationale associated with the value of local language competence is that they:

- Reaffirm cultural identity;
- Revitalise and maintain indigenous ways of knowing and doing;
- Facilitate better childhood learning outcomes (e.g. foster cognitive & intellectual development); and,
- Linguistic diversity is linked to biodiversity (and thus a component of human-environment well-being and resilience).

Except for the proposed links between multi- or bilingualism and cognitive development (which is debated and beyond our scope, e.g. Bühmann & Trudell 2008; Diaz & Kenji 1980) these points can be subsumed under the mantle of tangible and intangible heritage.

The United Nations (UN) has recognised the importance of local languages since establishing *International Mother Language Day* (IMLD) in 2000. According to the United Nations:

Languages are the most powerful instruments of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage. All moves to promote the dissemination of mother tongues will serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education but also to develop fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue. (United Nations, 2018)

Local languages are recognised as a crucial medium for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. In 2002 and 2003, while the draft of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention* was being prepared<sup>1</sup>, the issue of language was extensively discussed. There were stakeholders in favour of the inclusion of language in and of itself under the definition of intangible cultural heritage, but it was ultimately decided to only include language within Article 2(2) on 'oral traditions and expressions' and highlight that language is a '**vehicle** of the intangible cultural heritage'—that is, one of the domains in which the intangible cultural heritage is manifested and sustained. As a result, safeguarding languages *per se* was not formally included in the Convention (Smeets 2004, pp. 162-163). So whilst language is acknowledged as crucial to intangible cultural heritage, most notably under the *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* (UNESCO 2006), it was decided that language as such could not be proclaimed a 'masterpiece' as this was incompatible with the principle of the equality of all human languages (Smeets 2004, p. 159).

The UN have further situated linguistic diversity as part of sustainable development, in particular in realising targets 4.6 and 4.7 of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) on education.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, a growing body of literature emphasises the linkages between linguistic (and cultural) diversity and natural diversity. Nettle and Romaine (2000), for example, see the extinction of languages as part of the larger scenario of worldwide ecosystem collapse, highlighting that the regions of the world with the highest linguistic diversity corresponds with areas of the world that have the greatest biodiversity (2000, p. 43). The argument here is that:

The preservation of a language in its fullest sense ultimately entails the maintenance of the group who speaks it, and therefore the arguments in favour of doing something to reverse language death are ultimately about preserving cultures and habitats [...] Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger. When languages lose their speakers, they die. Extinctions in general, whether of languages or species, are part of a more general pattern of human activities contributing to radical alterations in our ecosystem. (Romaine 2007, p. 127)

In the Pacific, a suite of literature documenting and promoting 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge' (TEK) or 'Local Ecological Knowledge' (LEK) has underscored the linkages between language and biocultural practices. Examples include *kastom kalanda* (seasonal horticultural practices that use the 'signs of nature' such as the flowering of a particular tree to mark planting times), *kaikai blong hangri* (ecological knowledge that supports disaster preparedness) and 'traditional' resource management practices (e.g. *tabu eria* [taboo areas]) (e.g. Hickey 2009; Hviding 2005). These locally specific ways-of-knowing and doing enhance human-environment well-being and resilience (Subramanian & Pisupati (eds) 2010), yet are dependent on local language competence.

## Vanuatu: The linguistic context

Melanesia is renowned for its cultural, linguistic and bio-natural diversity. New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji make-up just 0.14% of the total world population yet contain one-quarter of the world's total languages (over 1,000) (Dutton 2006). The Republic of Vanuatu—which is the focus of this paper—is an exemplar of this cultural and linguistic richness. The measure of distinct languages spoken in Vanuatu varies in the literature<sup>3</sup>, mainly due to methodological issues, but all estimates are over 100 and the most recent analysis counts 138 languages (François et al. 2015). Whilst Papua New Guinea has over 800 languages, in terms of demographic<sup>4</sup> and geographical density,<sup>5</sup> Vanuatu is the most linguistically diverse country in the world.

Three further languages need to be added to the linguistic landscape of Vanuatu: English, French and Bislama, which at Independence in 1980 became the country's three official languages. 'Bislama' is the national Pidgin/Creole *lingua franca* that developed in the 1800s as a medium of communication between ni-Vanuatu and Europeans and between ni-Vanuatu from different language groups (Crowley 1990). Its pertinent to note that whilst Bislama is a 'real' language, has value and is structurally Austronesian and essentially Melanesian, 90 percent of its lexicon is based on English (Crowley 1990, p. 110). Thus, its vocabulary—whilst dynamic and growing—is small and vague, lacking the detail and contextual specificity of local languages. In biocultural terms, Bislama does not carry the requisite detail to teach someone how to identify or prepare medicinal plants, provide knowledge about fish behaviour, *kastom kalanda* or *kaikai blong hangri*. Similarly, and as discussed briefly below, much of the complex cultural and social relations articulated through vernaculars are not present in Bislama, and so cannot be fully enacted. The main languages of education are English and French; however, a new national language policy now states that '...in the first two years of school, Bislama or a local vernacular can be used while either French or English is introduced by the second semester of Year 3' (MOET 2012, n.p.).

As with measures of the amount of distinct languages, evaluation methodologies also vary for the number of extinct, moribund and endangered languages. Lynch and Crowley (2001) count 8 extinct and 17 moribund languages (moribund meaning they are 'near death' as they are spoken or remembered by only a handful of people). The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) consider 2 languages extinct, 10 as moribund and 44 as 'in trouble' (Simons et al. 2018). François et al. (2015) consider 4 languages extinct and 18 moribund (2015, p. 7). Although there are a few languages spoken by more than a thousand people, the majority are small language communities, with around 43 languages spoken by fewer than 500 people.

Although a few hundred speakers are small by global standards, this does not necessarily signal language fragility or loss; socio-historically, the language ecology in Vanuatu was built around small language communities of typically no more than a few hundred speakers (François et al. 2015). Moreover, linguistic diversity in Vanuatu has displayed considerable resilience, with only a few languages going extinct (2 to 8, depending on whose analysis one draws on).

Nevertheless, things are changing and 17 to 18 languages are currently moribund (beyond salvaging) whilst a significant number are considered endangered.<sup>6</sup> The drivers of language shift are numerous and symptomatic of social, cultural, economic and political factors. Linguists commonly cite bilingualism, urbanisation and urban drift, industrialisation, demographic factors (e.g. size and median age of speakers), government policy and the prestige level of a language as key influences that accelerate language shift (e.g. Cavallaaro & Serwe 2010; Kulick 1992). Many older ni-Vanuatu are deeply concerned about the future of their vernacular, often identifying Bislama as the key culprit behind language shift. Nevertheless, numerous scholars have argued that Vanuatu's linguistic diversity was not under threat from Bislama. For example, Crowley (2000) suggested that language shifts had generally been from one vernacular to another rather than to Bislama, whilst others have argued that 'code mixing'—switching between Bislama and the vernacular—had not seriously undermining the vernacular (e.g. Lindstrom 2007, pp. 21-22).

Regardless, recent evidence suggests that linguistic levelling is underway, with language usage in some locales shifting to a monolingual speech ecology dominated by Bislama. This is most evident in urban areas but is also notable in some rural locales. François et al. (2015) cite 2009 national census data that shows that only 63.3 percent of people declared using a heritage language at home, compared to 33.7 percent who favoured Bislama. This represents a ten percentage drop from the previous census undertaken ten years earlier (François et al. 2015, p. 12). When including the urban centres of Luganville and Port Vila in provincial figures, the rise of Bislama as the main language used in the home increases to 81.9 percent (Luganville) and 67.8 percent for Port Vila (François et al. 2015, p. 13).

## **Combating language shifts**

There is a growing literature devoted to combating language shifts. One of the most well-known is Fishman's (1991, 2001) 'reversing language shift' (RLS) plan of action. The details of RLS are beyond this paper's scope, but in gloss Fishman argues that one of the most frequent errors made by activists is to attempt to prop-up a language 'from the top down'. He concludes that securing intergenerational transmission at home is generally the first move before proceeding to higher level actions, such as schools, media, government, etc. (e.g. Romaine 2007).

The specifics of Melanesia support this argument; whilst government (especially education policy) and media—in addition to documentation efforts such as Bible translations and dictionaries—are important attributes in redressing language shift, the sheer number and small size of language communities in Melanesia (and especially Vanuatu) make these 'top down', 'higher level' approaches impractical. For example, despite the Vanuatu government's new pro-active language policy which encourages children to be taught in the vernacular in the first few years of primary school, a number of substantive barriers remain. First, one survey identified that 12% of teachers do not know their vernacular (Early 2015). Second, the sheer linguistic diversity of some locales pose challenges. For instance, in South West Bay, Malekula, there is a different language every 5 miles and at least three different language communities represented at the primary school. This issue is compounded in urban areas where many more language communities are represented. Other issues include the fact that many languages in Vanuatu are yet to be properly documented and do not have an established orthography for writing and reading. As with Bible translation efforts, such documentation practices are time intensive and expensive.

In sum, formal education is an important component of maintaining local languages but ultimately it is through use in the home and community—through use—that the future of linguistic diversity in Vanuatu can be sustained. Below, we examine three home-grown attempts to promote vernacular language use and also discuss the local rationales behind the importance of local language. This echoes and extends the attributes noted above.

## **CULTURAL REVITALISATION AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE**

### **Case Study One: Mewun *Kastom Skul***

The Mewun *kastom skul* [literally custom school] is located in the mountainous rim of South West Bay (SWB), Malekula; the second largest, third most populated and most linguistically diverse island in the country. The *skul* was begun by a Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VKS)<sup>7</sup> *felwoka* based in Lawa (McCarter et al. 2014). Built in 2009 but not operational until 2012, the *skul* was first and foremost concerned with promoting the use of Ninde over Bislama. The region covered by the SWB Area Council of Chiefs encompasses six active language groups (Charpentier 1982), a few more if migrants are included. Two languages are already extinct (Crowley 1998) and another two are moribund (one has only a single speaker). Elders in the area have been increasingly concerned about language shift, especially Ninde to Bislama. Ninde has been identified as 'endangered' (Vari-Bogiri 2002, p. 7). A cultural census of every household in the Ninde-speaking portion of the Bay suggested that 63 percent of households use an amalgam of Ninde and Bislama; 27 percent primarily Ninde; and 8 percent Bislama

only ( $n=158$  households) (Love 2016, p. 227). When asked why they used Bislama rather than Ninde, people often replied 'why not'?

Whilst combating language shifts was a key rationale of the *kastom skul*, the underlying objectives extended well beyond fears of language 'loss' alone to encompass cultural renewal more widely. There were also classes ran on *kastom kalenda*, *kastom medicine*, *kastom* resource management [e.g. *tabu eria*], *kastom kavenans* [governance], local weavings, *kastom singsing* [customary singing] and *kastom plei-plei* [customary games], how to carve and play a *tam tam* [customary wooden gong] and promoting the raising of tusked boars and *Nalawan* grading.

Part of the impetus behind the *skul* was the fact that the VKS *felwoka* [fieldworker] who established it had previously used teaching books developed and printed by the VKS in the local government school. These books promoted vernacular language use and touch-upon many of the topics noted above (especially bio-cultural linkages). However, the *felwoka* was forced to stop using the texts after some parents complained that the focus on *kastom* was anti-Christian. This harks back to what has been called the *tu-dak* [too-dark] phenomena in Vanuatu, where the pre-European past is viewed as 'un-godly' relative to the coming of the '*laet*' [light = Gospel] (Regenvanu 2005, p. 40). The *skul*, in part, was a move to redress this; to mainstream *kastom* as a legitimate body of knowledge and have *kastom* practice, or discussions about *kastom*, remain voluntary. Ultimately, the *skul* ceased to function altogether in 2014 due to disputes over land and because a significant number of the *skul* executive committee had joined a Christian denomination other than the primary 'mother Church' of the area (Presbyterianism).

Of particular interest are the rationales used to highlight the importance of local language. In addition to nourishing identity, demonstrating connection to land, and promoting wider cultural practices, a recurrent point was that Ninde was essential to sustaining *respek* [respect] and facilitating social order. A key platform of this was revitalising '*kastom fasin blong singoat ol famili*', which refers to using vernacular kinship terms, rather than Bislama words such as *unkle*, *aunti*, *sista*, etc., to refer to family. This was, independently, also a key rationale and focus of the other two case-studies.

### **Case Study Two: Vanuatu *Kastom* Governance Partnership**

The Vanuatu *Kastom* Governance Partnership (VKGP) operated from 2005-2012 and was a research and practice-based partnership between Australia's International Development Agency (AusAID), The University of Queensland (UQ) and the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs (MNCC).<sup>8</sup> Ten ni-Vanuatu facilitators', supported by a local researcher and management team, were drawn from throughout Vanuatu and included chiefs, three women, a young male and a Church elder. The project supported week-long workshops or '*storians*' across different parts of the country, attended by community leaders (chiefs, church, women and youth) and supported through action learning and action research components (see Westoby & Brown 2007).

Addressing the societal problems characteristic of contemporary life became a particular focus for a number of the ni-Vanuatu facilitators. About mid-way through the partnership some of the VKGP facilitators put forward the idea that a positive link exists between local language(s) and broader social cooperation and order. This led to the development of a session-module called 'language, family and relationships' (hereafter L&R). The session took the form of a presentation followed by group-work, group presentations and a facilitated discussion. Group-work consisted of people constructing a 'language matrix' and 'relationship web' where the vernacular names of societal roles, relationships and responsibilities were elicited and discussed. People were also asked to reflect on if, where, how and why, language and customary forms of social relations had or had not changed. Several other sessions were developed that also drew on the vernacular, namely: '*kastom* values and identity', 'landmarks and ground' and 'women's place in *kastom*'.

As evidenced by post-*storian* evaluations, the L&R module was extremely popular. Participants came away with a renewed appreciation for their vernacular and widely supported the assumption that it has greater power and capacity to support cooperation and respect—in effect greater civic utility—than introduced languages. Following the *storians*, some participants conducted voluntarily outreach activities in their own communities to raise awareness about the importance of using local language in the home. This was especially pronounced in Port Vila and the islands of Malekula and Santo. In several instances, participants built *kastom skuls* or a *nakamal* (a traditional ‘house’) to conduct classes and help facilitate language maintenance and cultural revitalisation activities.

Several of the facilitators also undertook voluntary work to further promote the L&R approach. Daniel Lukai established ‘Namakura Week’—now an annual event—in his home community of Seaside Tongoa (Port Vila). The aim of Namakura Week is to nourish links between urban emigrants and their home island (Tongoa), promote ‘traditional’ art, music and food, and highlight the importance of maintaining Namakura as a first language. Daniel compiled a children’s book in Namakura and also organized information awareness campaigns (in Seaside and further afield through a national radio program), including one about the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*. Daniel foreground *kastom* ideals such as ‘respect’ and grounded them in cases of specific kin relations using the vernacular to promote child welfare without referring to ‘rights’ as such. Additionally, two other VKGP facilitators—Roselyn Tor and Miriam Bule—also undertook voluntarily outreach work in Port Vila, running L&R sessions in Churches and highlighting the analogous links between *kastom* and Christian values and foregrounding the civic utility of the vernacular (MNCC/UQ 2012). The rationale in both cases was to root people in a more nurturing social space, to recognize and draw on local strengths and reflect on socio-economic change in an honest but constructive manner. After the VKGP ended, the L&R approach was eventually reinvigorated in Santo under the leadership of the Anglican Church.

### **Case Study Three: Anglican Church Language and Relationships program**

The late Bishop James Ligo of the Diocese of Vanuatu and New Caledonia, Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM) attended one of the VKGP *storian*’s in Santo and was particularly taken by the L&R session. He subsequently requested assistance in conducting L&R sessions around Santo (the second most linguistically diverse island in Vanuatu). After successfully gaining some funds from The Christensen Fund, the L&R project, supported by a partnership (first) with The University of Queensland and then RMIT University, began in 2015, with the current project cycle winding-up in October, 2018.

To commence, two of the original VKGP facilitators conducted some training with ACOM staff, after which a small team of three men and two women undertook *storians* based on the L&R approach in various places around Santo. These consist of multi-day and half-and-one day *storians* in rural and urban locales. Some *storians* have been community-based, others more targeted (e.g. with school children and teachers, elders, youth, and Church representatives). Thus far, the *storians* have reached over 500 people, representing over 20 language groups. The session remains firmly rooted in the L&R approach first developed in the VKGP, but has also expanded to include some further components, such as reference to the preamble of the Constitution (which few people are aware of) and which talks about ‘cherishing our ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity’. Other aspects include talking about the meaning of the national flag and national anthem. There is also a dedicated sub-discussion on *kastom kalenda*, which offers guidance on subsistence farming and fishing and seasonal cycles.

At the request of some participants and ACOM staff, the project also recently conducted a week-long workshop with a group of Sunday school teachers and adult literacy teachers. Each group drafted a curriculum based on the L&R approach. These have since been finalised and are now in use. Moreover, a ‘follow-up’ system has been developed where a project member visits households and communities after each *storian*. This has resulted in less *storians* being conducted than initially planned, but has increased the impact of the *storians* in terms of behaviour change. Tailored tasks are set that involve participants conducting mini-home L&R *storians* with nuclear and extended family members, as well as other ‘homework’ research activities. Lastly, at the request of participants, a Facebook page has been created.



## What's in a name? The value and power of language

The thread that ties these case-studies together, to quote the ACOM project 'awareness flyer', is the shared objective to 'protect, promote and use' local languages through a facilitated discussion (or *storian*). According to the flyer (and explained below), the *storian* seeks to support increased appreciation for:

- the value of language;
- the power of language;
- the significance of language to identity; and,
- the fundamental role of language in informing respect.

A recurrent motif is the view that local languages are socially and materially generative; that is, they have power. This argument takes numerous forms. One is that using 'proper' kinship terms, as well as 'proper' terms for *kastom* authority (instead of the generic term Chief [*Jifj*]), can better secure peaceful social relations. Both assumptions are based on the belief that the vernacular can '*holdem taet respek*' [keep respect strong] in a way that Bislama cannot. As argued by one of the VKGP facilitators:

...the customary fashion of naming social relations instructs a person how to interrelate with people and what to do, where you can go and cannot go. This helps keep respect alive. (Daniel Lukai, VKGP facilitator, translated from Bislama)

Here, language is deemed to be a carriage of not just social meaning (identity, education, value) but also order, because it identifies the roles and responsibilities associated with kin (or leadership) relationships. Thus, for instance, *Nemlun* [MBs (mother's brother) nephew] means 'feather fall down' in Ninde, which references part of the initiation process associated with circumcision (where MB plays an important role) and so carries great symbolic and, for many, embodied significance. The importance of MB is evident throughout Vanuatu. In Mota language, TORBA Province, MB is called Tata [lit. 'teacher'], whilst in the neighbouring Gaua language it is Maruk ['compass']. In Namakura, MB is called *Lolo* (which also means 'look') and is described by the vernacular phrase *namtan bwilawm*, which means 'he is the eye of your mother'. MB, as well as Mother's Sister (MS), have a duty to impart knowledge to their 'nephews' or 'nieces'. MB is particularly important in dispute resolution contexts and plays an important role at life-cycle events (i.e. circumcision and marriage). Similarly, MS gives important advice on child rearing, among other things, to her 'nieces'. One of MB's roles is to protect his niece against domestic violence. These roles and responsibilities are said to be where the foundation of 'respect' is located. The social protection associated with the maintenance of these relationships goes beyond individuals to positively inform not just the household but the wider community. In the words of one man, re-vitalising the vernacular naming of social relations is part of the processes of building respect because it assists in ensuring that local conflict resolution processes are not impersonalised or contracted-out to village councils or police—'family' should be the 'court of first instance'. Using generic Bislama equivalents like *ankle* or *aunti* are not as '*hevi*' [heavy or meaningful] because they are not as morally instructive or as symbolically laden. In this view, then, language is not merely a medium of social capital but an integral component of it.

It ought to be noted that anthropologists and socio-linguists have long suggested that language not only reflects but enables social structures and values (e.g. Bourdieu 1986; Labov 1966; Lindstrom 1990); informs the formation and maintenance of social networks (Gal 1979), shapes social relations and power differentials (Gal 2012), and is integral to conflict resolution processes (e.g. White and Gegeo-Watson [eds] 1990). Indeed, as Leach (1982) noted, kinship has 'very little to do with biology' but rather refers to:

... a pattern of named relationships which link together the individual members of a social system in a network. The naming is crucial, for not only does this make it possible to contrast one kind of relationship with another, it also allows the group as a collectively to determine what the 'proper' behavioural concomitants of the relationship should be. (Leach 1982, p. 107)

Leach's argument resonates with those associated with the L&R approach, where '*kastom fasin blong singoat ol familil*' is used as a starting point to talk about language through, first, reflecting on socio-economic change and then building an awareness of, and appreciation for, local traditions and practices as part of those dynamics of change, in a way designed to support cultural vitality and social resilience. *Kastom kalanda* (custom calendar) and the significance of vernacular to ecological well-being and environmental change are also part of these discussions. Biocultural linkages between language and human-environmental wellbeing are hard to ignore. For example, in the Ninde speaking part of South West Bay, the flowering of a particular tree [called *nuisumbal* in Ninde] marks the time for brushing gardens and planting yams. If it is unseasonably dry or wet, the tree does not flower, nor will flowering occur, until conditions are optimal. The few older people who still plant using this *kastom kalanda* method have a superior yam crop to the majority who do not use this method (Love 2016).

Interestingly, however, it is working with language terms for kin relations that repeatedly attract the most interest; much more than *kastom kalenda* or other examples that demonstrate biocultural linkages. There seems to be something about associating language with family and national identity (the Constitution, flag, the national anthem) that finds local traction in a way that other discussions of language maintenance have not. Linking local language with social relations and social order might be said to be an example of what has been called 'language policing' or 'verbal hygiene' (Cameron 1995) in which identity politics are mobilised, fixed and policed through a form of 'language ideologies' (e.g. Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). Yet in the biocultural realm, the relationship between vernacular and societal wellbeing reminds us that valuing language is not simply a residuum of identity politics alone—it has real world utility. There is a danger of working with kin terms, particularly when linked with discussions of the Constitution and other national references, being hijacked by aggressive identity politics. However, in practice, especially during the VKGP phase, this approach to language provide a safe and constructive means to discuss difficult and contentious topics, such as 'rights' and 'gender equality' (as Danial did with his discussion of Child Rights) (Brown 2018).

Importantly, whilst not without tensions, the L&R approach does not uncritically reify or freeze *kastom* as some ahistorical, concrete suite of practices or values. Rather, it operates from a position of critical appreciation that uses the vernacular and socially idealized frames of relations (*kastom*) as a means to think about social inclusion and order in a different register. This has been productive in an instrumental sense, through providing a conducive environment for undertaking difficult conversations, as well as opening-up spaces for better conceptualizing how social order and well-being is, and is not, being sustained in practice. Lastly, it is noteworthy that neither practitioners nor participants viewed these activities as 'education' but rather saw them as tools of development and governance. Language is understood in these approaches as not simply a medium but a form of social capital itself. This raises significant questions about when and how development 'subjects' get a say in defining what constitutes 'social capital', 'development' or 'cultural heritage' in the first place.

## Conclusion

The maintenance of a language is typically measured by: a) The status of the language as indicated by attitudes towards it; b) The size of the group who uses the language and their distribution; and c) The extent to which the language enjoys institutional support. One of the key rationales behind the L&R approach—and echoed by participants—is that people often take their vernacular for granted; many people use Bislama or another local language not so much for prestige (or identity politics) but because they have simply not thought about the practical and socio-emotional value of local languages. When the merits of local language are presented by ni-Vanuatuan in a conversational, small group setting, linked to multi-linguistic and multi-cultural national (not just micro-ethnic) identities, and supported by structured follow-up, people seem to come away culturally nourished and enthused about their vernacular and the value of their life worlds. With so much of the content of the social world increasingly filled by words, practice and things from 'elsewhere', valuing language is also a way to value yourself; to focus on who you are, what you have and your own, collective creativity. Whilst not without

its challenges, we believe that this relatively low cost, home-grown approach to local language maintenance is an innovative and promising model for combating language shifts in Vanuatu, and perhaps elsewhere in Melanesia.

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## Endnotes

- 1 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference on 17 October 2003 and entered force in 29th of April, 2006. As of September 2018, 178 states have ratified, approved or accepted the convention (see UNESCO 2018).
- 2 SDG 4.6 concerns the attainment of 'Universal youth literacy', whilst SDG 4.7 refers to 'Education for sustainable development and global citizenship'.
- 3 Tyron (1976) arrived at the figure of 105; Lynch & Crowley (2001) identified 106; whilst Tyron (2006) later revised his initial estimate higher to 113 languages. The Sumner Institute of Linguistics (SIL) use Tyron's figure of 113 (Simons *et al.* 2018).
- 4 With a population of approximately 280,000 people, whether it is 106, 113 or 138 languages, Vanuatu has the highest density of languages *per capita* in the world (Crowley 2000).
- 5 With a total land area of 12,189 sq km, Vanuatu has an average 88 sq km per language, whereas Papua New Guinea, by comparison, has an estimated language every 900 sq km) (François, *et al.* 2015: 8).
- 6 The 13 language languages with less than a hundred speakers—if not also some of the 21 languages with between 101-300 speakers—are considered endangered.
- 7 The VKS—*Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta* [Vanuatu Cultural Centre]—aims to 'promote, protect and preserve the different aspects of the culture of Vanuatu'. The VKS has a number of island-based ni-Vanuatu *felwoka* [fieldworkers] who undertake research on a wide number of topics (language, custom, history, material culture etc.) and frequently assist foreign researchers (Thieberger and Taylor (eds) 2013).
- 8 The MNCC is a constitutionally recognised body tasked with safe-guarding *kastom* in Vanuatu. Established at Independence, the National Council is an umbrella organization made-up of representatives from twenty Island Councils of Chiefs and two urban-based Town Councils of Chiefs (Port Vila and Luganville).