

Bislama: Orthographic Attitudinal Evolution

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Introduction¹

Bislama is the constitutionally declared national language in Vanuatu, and, alongside English and French, it is one of the three official languages of the republic. Bislama, together with Pijin in Solomon Islands and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, are dialects of Melanesian Pidgin, which are to a large extent mutually intelligible, despite the existence of some lexical, phonological and structural differences between them. There is also some local variation within each of the three major varieties.

A national language is meant to symbolise a nation's linguistic identity. The fact that Vanuatu intends itself to be seen to some extent as a Bislama-speaking nation rather than an English- or French-speaking nation is suggested by the fact that its coinage is inscribed monolingually in Bislama. The motto of the republic on the coat of arms is in Bislama (*Long God yumi stanap* 'In God we stand'), and the national anthem is only ever sung in Bislama (*Yumi, yumi, yumi i glad blong talem se; yumi, yumi, yumi i man blong Vanuatu...* 'We, we, we are pleased to say that; we, we, we are people of Vanuatu ...').

However, Bislama is something of a pseudo-national language in the sense that there are deep-seated contradictory attitudes toward the language (Lynch 1996). While it is on the one hand valued as a symbol of national unity and national identity, it is on the other hand still tainted with its sometimes sordid colonial history. While Bislama is no longer the language of the enslaved but the language of the free,² its origin as a language of indentured labourers and its obvious lexical relationship to English have left many of its speakers with a lingering suspicion that it is simply a kind of broken English.

While these attitudes are no longer as severe as they were even thirty years ago, they are still present, and they are manifested in the way that the language is written today. This paper examines the historical development of conventions for writing Bislama within an evolving socio-political context and an evolving set of attitudes to the language since it first began developing on the sandalwood stations of southern Vanuatu in the 1840s.

¹ Many thanks to John Lynch and Jeff Siegel for providing comments to an earlier draft of this paper. Special thanks are due to Dorothy Dewar for very detailed historical information relating to developments since the 1960s. Final responsibility for all comments is, of course, my own.

² I owe this apt wording to Grace Molisa.

There is also an anonymous guide to Bislama entitled *Apprenons le bichlamar: Petit lexique français-bichlamar de conversation courante*, which was apparently produced initially by the French Residency in the 1960s (though the volume itself is not dated). This is also written in a French-based spelling system.³ Like all of the earlier sources to which I have already referred, this was clearly not intended for Ni-Vanuatu consumption. For example, it provides detailed instructions for French-speaking household heads to instruct their Ni-Vanuatu domestic staff as follows:

Anonymous (undated) Modern spelling

<i>You clinem glass.</i>	<i>Yu klinim glas.</i>	Nettoie les vitres. 'Clean the windows'
<i>You wassem flo.</i>	<i>Yu wasem floa.</i>	Lave le plancher. 'Wash the floor.'
<i>You sarew windo.</i>	<i>Yu sarew windo.</i>	Ferme la fenêtre. 'Close the window.'
<i>You ovenem do.</i>	<i>Yu openem doa.</i>	Ouvre la porte. 'Open the door.'
<i>You hangem closs.</i>	<i>Yu hangem klos.</i>	Etend le linge. 'Hang out the washing.'
<i>You ayanem closs.</i>	<i>Yu aenem klos.</i>	Repasse le linge. 'Iron the clothes.'
<i>Wok i finis.</i>	<i>Wok i finis.</i>	Le travail est fini. 'The work is done.'

These gallicised spellings are, on the whole, better than the more widespread anglicised spellings from the same times in that they provide a great deal more information about the phonetic form of Bislama words. However, each of these sources probably represented individual solutions to the problem of how to write the language, rather than any general movement towards the standardisation of Bislama with French-based spellings. Thus, the forms *biaen* 'afterwards' and *olgeta* 'they (plural)' were written variably as follows in the three sources:

Pionnier (1913)	Schmidt (1957)	Anonymous (undated)
<i>biaïne</i>	<i>bi-hainnde</i>	<i>bihain</i>
<i>olguita</i>	<i>aule guéta</i>	<i>ôl getta</i>

One might have expected francophone Europeans to have accorded Bislama greater legitimacy as a language in its own right. French-speakers in recent times, for example, have been more likely to speak better Bislama than English-speakers, presumably because they appear to have approached it as a separate language rather than treating it as a form of broken English. However, francophone writers in the past have overtly expressed fairly negative views about the language. The following are fairly representative: "mauvais

³ Despite the almost offensively colonial nature of the content of this volume, someone has seen fit to reissue it for sale in the last few years. There is still no indication of the authorship, date of original or subsequent publication, or of the publisher in the later version.

negative views about the language. The following are fairly representative: "mauvais anglais" (Parquet 1872:57), "tout à fait fantaisiste" (Lemire 1878:160), "cette étrange langue" (Tailleur 1954:294).

Non-European writers of Bislama to the 1960s

We have almost no published information about how Ni-Vanuatu have written the language until relatively recently. The complete lack of such information may lead one to suspect that Ni-Vanuatu never wrote in the language at all. Dorothy Dewar (p.c.) informs me that, certainly by the 1950s and 1960s, anybody who was educated in English for the most part did attempt to write in English rather than Bislama.

However, missionaries throughout Vanuatu taught vernacular literacy from an early stage, and it is difficult to imagine that Ni-Vanuatu would have never attempted to transfer these skills to writing in Bislama in order to communicate with people who did not speak their own language, especially when only a small number of people at the time would have been competent in English. The fact that such transfers did take place is suggested by the following letter in Bislama written in 1880:

Okotopa 17.1880

Misi kamesi Arelu Jou no kamu ruki mi Mi no ruki iou Jou ruku Mai Poti i ko Mae tete Vakaromala mi raiki i tiripi Ausi parogi iou i rukauti Mai Poti mo nomea kaikai mi angikele nau Poti mani i kivi iou Jamu Vari koti iou kivi tamu te pako paraogi mi i penesi nomoa te Pako Oleraiti. Ta Mataso.⁴ (cited in Mühlhäusler 1986:140)

Although this was written by a Rarotongan missionary in Vanuatu to his mission superior, it is easy to imagine that Ni-Vanuatu mission staff may have also sent similarly functional notes asking to be picked up or delivered by boat, or for food or other sorts of deliveries to be made. I would be surprised if there are no other examples of written Bislama filed away in mission archives dating from around the same period.

⁴ A re-spelling of this in modern orthography and with punctuation, along with a translation, is provided below:

Oktoba 17 1880. Misi Comins, arelu. Yu no kam luk mi. Mi no luk yu. Yu luk mae bot i go Mae tedei. Vakaromala, mi laek i slip haos blong yu, i lukaot mae bot. Ni nomo kaekae, mi hanggri nao. Bot man Mae i giv yu yam. Verigud yu giv sam tabako blong mi. I finis, nomo tabako. Olraet. Ta, Mataso. 'October 17 1880. Mister Comins, how are you. You have not come to see me. I have not seen you. You see, my boat went to Mae today. I want Vakaromala to sleep at your house, he is looking after my boat. I have no more food, I am hungry now. The boatman at Mae will give you yams. You should give me some tobacco. It is finished, there is no more tobacco. Alright. Thank you, Mataso.'

Mühlhäusler (1995:258-59) indicates that there is a sizable corpus of unpublished letters in Tok Pisin dating back to 1914. Melanesians apparently viewed writing letters as achieving the same goals as handing over cash for purchases. The content of most of these written messages was accordingly requests for goods or services, as in the letter cited above.

While representing essentially the same kinds of structures and lexicon that we find in contemporary published sources written by Europeans for consumption by other Europeans, the Rarotongan's letter is clearly radically different in its orthography from that which we find in either English or French sources for the next seventy years or so. The only instance of an English orthographic convention that we can find here is the spelling of the word 'you' as *iou*, rather than *iu* (or *yu*) as we might have expected. Otherwise, the Rarotongan has clearly written words either according to the spelling system of his own Rarotongan language, or according to the widely known conventions for spelling Samoan and Tongan, in which the velar nasal was represented as *g*. We therefore find spellings such as *parogi* for modern *blong* 'of'.

I suspect that if we eventually do uncover substantial records of Ni-Vanuatu writing to each other in late nineteenth century Bislama, we are likely to find spellings similar to those of this Rarotongan. It is unlikely that Ni-Vanuatu would have used spellings similar to those alluded to in contemporary anglophone or francophone sources. Although the missionaries stressed the importance of literacy, this was for the most part taught through the medium of the local vernaculars. Very few Ni-Vanuatu would, therefore, have been sufficiently familiar with English for English orthographic principles to interfere with the way that they might have written Bislama.

Bislama in the lead-up to independence: 1960s and 1970s

The 1960s began to see major changes in the political evolution of what was then a jointly administered Anglo-French Condominium (Van Trease 1995:14-20). The French, in particular, were keen to see their political influence extended. They set about establishing institutions of government in direct competition with the British in an attempt to drum up support. Given that education had until this time been primarily the responsibility of mission organisations – with the majority of Ni-Vanuatu claiming allegiance to a variety of (anglophone) Protestant denominations rather than the (francophone) Catholics – the colonial language with which the greater number of people were familiar was English.

This prompted the French to fund a rapid expansion of French-medium primary schools, and often in places where there were already in existence English-medium schools. The French Residency also issued a newsletter in 1961 entitled *Bulletin d'information de la Résidence de France*. This was initially written mainly in French, though it contained some material in Bislama. The mid 1960s also saw the first radio

broadcasts – initially in English, French and Bislama – from a government station (Dorothy Dewar, p.c.). Bislama rapidly came to dominate the airwaves, with English and French being reduced to secondary status.

This jockeying for influence between the two colonial powers coincided with – or perhaps even resulted in – the development of a conscious political awareness among a number of English-educated Ni-Vanuatu who established the first political party in the condominium, the New Hebrides Cultural Association. This was followed shortly afterwards by the establishment of a competing movement which aimed to attract predominantly francophone support.

These political organisations produced newsletters to provide information to the rapidly growing urban population (Van Trease 1995:21). The most influential of these was *New Hebrides Viewpoints* issued by the New Hebrides National Party (formerly the New Hebrides Cultural Association). Although the French government had been producing a newsletter since 1961, the British were much slower to act, and it was only in 1972 that they began issuing the *British newsletter*, in direct response to indigenous political groups which began producing their parties' newsletters.

In the early 1970s, the amount of air time over what was then known as *Radio Vila* was increased significantly. The power of the transmitters was also boosted, enabling a much larger proportion of the population to receive broadcasts. Thus, competing political ideas were widely disseminated via both print and radio. Bislama rapidly became the dominant medium for the expression of these ideas, due to its politically neutral position.

Prior to the 1960s, Bislama was seen by Ni-Vanuatu largely as a language of rural plantation labourers. Those who made the choice to leave their villages to work on plantations were often seen as trouble-makers, leaving to escape from village authorities. Since the speakers of Bislama were seen as undesirable types, the language that they spoke continued to be associated with the same negative attitudes that had characterised it since it first spread around Vanuatu as a result of the Queensland plantation trade in the late 1800s.

However, the development of an urban economy with more prestigious non-plantation jobs that required some formal schooling, coupled with the rise of nationalist politics, saw Bislama move into domains that it had not previously occupied. It became the one and only language that could appeal to the entire urban population, whether educated or not, and whether schooled in French or English. Bislama began to change from being the language of those who some thought to be enslaved, to the language of those who sought to be free.

When the French Residency issued its first newsletter in 1961, its writers had very little in the way of orthographic tradition in Bislama to fall back on. One might have expected these francophone writers to adopt the same kinds of gallicised conventions followed by earlier francophone writers such as Pionnier and Schmidt. While there is

some evidence of gallicised spellings in their written materials, there is, in fact, much greater evidence of influence from English, as shown in the following extract from an early edition of the first newsletter, cited by Charpentier (1979:390-91):

Frans Capman more British Capman two falla em i mekem one law nowia i tabou long olgeta fresh meat blong pig long Australia em i came long New Hebrides bicose i gat very bad sick long pig long Australia, Man em i brekem law em i go long court olseme em i save catchem £50 fine. Tin meat long pig long Australia em i save came long New Hebrides.

Of the sixty-eight words in this short extract, the spelling conventions are roughly as follows:⁵

Purely English (e.g. <i>Australia</i> for <i>Ostrelia</i>)	33.8%
Purely French (e.g. <i>tabou</i> for <i>tabu</i>)	2.9%
Partly French (e.g. <i>olseme</i> for <i>olsem</i>)	4.4%
Ambiguous between English and modern Bislama (e.g. <i>go</i> , <i>long</i> , <i>tin</i>)	20.6%
Neither English nor French (e.g. <i>Frans</i> , <i>olgeta</i> , <i>blong</i> , <i>capman</i>)	38.2%

While there is a considerable amount of dependence upon English spelling conventions in this example of early modern written Bislama, there was also clearly an attempt for the first time to spell words in some kind of a phonologically based rather than an etymologically based spelling system, as shown by spellings such as *capman* instead of *government*, *mekem* instead of *makem*, and *gat* instead of *got*. The inspiration from this cannot have come from any pre-existing tradition in Vanuatu. Presumably the writers of such materials were taking as their major model either the spelling conventions widely followed in vernacular languages in Vanuatu, or the spelling system of Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, which was already fairly well established by that stage (though the extent to which people were aware of this in Vanuatu is not known).

As I have already indicated, the British were much slower to produce a newsletter. Charpentier (1979:392-93) cites the following extract from their newsletter during its first year of operation in 1972:

Residen Komisna blong Britis emi mekem wan spesel trip long plen i go long Tanna long 27 Janware blong lukluk trabol we harken "Carlotta" i mekem. Long trip ia tu i kat nambatu Frans Gavman mo samfala hae man long ofis blong tufala.

The contrast between the two extracts over a period of just over a decade is dramatic. Hardly surprisingly, there is no evidence of gallicised spellings whatsoever. Rather more surprising, however, is the almost complete lack of evidence of anglicised spellings. The

⁵ These percentages have been rounded so they do not total exactly 100%.

words in this extract are spelt in some kind of original way in a manner that was clearly intended to reflect the pronunciation of the words rather than their etymological sources.

A change of heart from the missionaries: The influence of Pastor Bill Camden in the 1970s

In order to account for this development, we need to examine developments outside the realm of party politics in the intervening period. Prior to the 1960s, the attitude of the various mission organisations was that Bislama was not suitable as a language to use for evangelical purposes (Camden, p.c.). The widespread association between Bislama and trouble-makers meant that the language was apparently not one that allowed the appropriate depth of emotional appeal to Ni-Vanuatu. Charpentier (1979:133) refers to descriptions of Bislama by some Ni-Vanuatu in the early 1970s as *lanwis blong rod* 'bastard language', or as a language without a place of belonging.

At around the same time that Bislama became a language of serious political debate and Anglo-French competition, the missions were beginning to take the language seriously as an evangelical medium. The translation of parts of the New Testament into Bislama was commenced in 1967, and the four gospels were circulating in print – at least in parts of Santo – shortly before the formation of the first of the political parties (Dorothy Dewar, p.c.). In 1971 the four gospels were finalised in Bislama as *Gud Nyus bilong Jisas Krai*s, and the Acts of the Apostles was published as *Ol Wok blong ol Aposol* in 1974.

These publications were widely distributed around the country at around the same time that radio broadcasting in Bislama became more generally accessible. This combination of circumstances resulted in a major change in attitude to Bislama, not just in the urban areas, but around the whole country. For the first time, Bislama was being written systematically according to orthographic decisions arrived at on the basis of linguistic considerations, rather than merely mirroring the spelling conventions of English or French.

Pastor Bill Camden's involvement in Vanuatu did not begin with him intending to translate the gospels into Bislama, or develop a writing system for the language. He arrived in Vanuatu in 1957 as a district missionary in South Santo. He learned the language of Tangoa for local use, as well as Bislama, which he used in his missionary capacity over a larger area. According to Dorothy Dewar (p.c.), Camden initially also used Bislama as an intermediary language for facilitating translation into Tangoan. Suggestions from other mission staff that he should consider using these Bislama working texts for more general use were met with initial lack of enthusiasm from him because of the lack of an acceptable orthography at the time.

However, a representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society encouraged him to persevere, and he was supported and assisted in his activities by a number of other like-minded expatriates in the mission field from a variety of Protestant churches, such as Laurie Dewar, Dorothy Dewar, Keith Ludgater, David Gould and Neil Whimp. Fr. Walter Lini and Pastor Fred Timakata – both of whom were to become senior political leaders in the post-independence era – were among a number of Ni-Vanuatu at the time who were also involved in this task.

Camden set about devising an orthography for Bislama. This was then systematised in an unpublished spelling list that was distributed among expatriates learning Bislama, and others who were interested in the translation work that he was involved in. This work was entitled *Dictionary – English to Bislama*, and although it was not dated, Dorothy Dewar (p.c.) indicates that it was produced around 1972. Some of the early spellings adopted by Camden were different from those that are widely followed today, such as the use of *ai* to represent the diphthong in *Krais* ‘Christ’ (which is spelt *Kraes* today), and the appearance of a vowel between the two consonants in *bilong* ‘of’ (which is written today as *blong*).

Camden’s initial orthography was based on his own understanding of the phonological system of Bislama, and perhaps also in part by pre-existing orthographic conventions for Tok Pisin, in which such spellings had for some time been fixed. Siegel (1985) describes the development of a standardised spelling in Tok Pisin, where developments predated those for Bislama by well over a decade. However, Camden clearly did not simply copy Tok Pisin conventions *in toto* for Bislama, as the gospels were spelt with an etymological distinction between final voiced and voiceless stops in pairs such as *dog* ‘dog’ and *dok* ‘warehouse (<*dock*)’. This distinction corresponds more to etymological source in English rather than phonological reality in Bislama. There were also some differences in the spelling of high vowels and glides between Camden’s spelling of Bislama and established spellings in Tok Pisin. Thus, Bislama *Gud nyus* ‘good news’ corresponded to the Tok Pisin spelling *Gutnius*.

Not surprisingly, the first attempt to systematise spellings was subject to revision. Tryon (1979:75-76) indicates that some objected that the Bislama in these gospels was unrepresentative of at least some people’s speech. Dorothy Dewar (p.c.) reports that an editorial committee of people involved in Bible translation sat between 1974 and 1976 to determine a more generally acceptable spelling system. It was at that time that the spellings *ai* and *au* were changed to *ae* and *ao* respectively. This was largely at the instigation of Ni-Vanuatu on the committee. They reportedly felt that these spellings were more appropriate, as the phonetic values of these diphthongs in Bislama were closer to their vernacular diphthongs *ae* and *ao*, than to their *ai* and *au*.⁶ It is these spellings

⁶ Some linguists, e.g. Tryon (1987:10), claim that the decision to write *ae* and *ao* rather than *ai* and *au* was to avoid the possibility of French-educated Ni-Vanuatu reading *ai* as *e*, and

that we find faithfully reflected in the early editions of the *British newsletter*, and which appeared in subsequently produced translations of books of the New Testament and hymnals which appeared (and were widely distributed) in the latter part of the 1970s.

Bislama was being increasingly written in the 1970s for a variety of purposes. New businesses were established in Vila and larger numbers of English-speaking expatriates came to work in Vila as tourism and offshore banking developed as major industries. There was a demand for a dictionary of Bislama that would serve both as a publicly available model for people to follow in spelling Bislama words, and for foreigners wanting to learn the language.

The first dictionary of Bislama to become available publicly was Jacques Guy's *Handbook of Bichelamar/Manuel de bichelamar*, which appeared in 1974. His dictionary showed some potential in that its text was written in both English and French, and it contained a grammatical introduction to Bislama in both languages. However, this volume suffered from several major inadequacies (Lynch 1975). Firstly, the grammatical analysis was expressed in terminology that even professional linguists find strange, and which many laypersons would find impossible to understand. Secondly, the dictionary itself was very short, giving only the most commonly used words. Finally, it contained a number of orthographic conventions for which there were no precedents in Vanuatu. This included the somewhat perverse use of an inverted version of the symbol ¶ to represent segments that alternate between *f*, *p* and *b*.⁷

The lack of a serious dictionary prompted the manager of Maropa Bookshop – which was one of the main booksellers in Vila at the time – to ask Bill Camden if he would produce such a dictionary (Camden, p.c.). Accordingly, in 1977 he wrote *A descriptive dictionary: Bislama to English*, which Maropa Bookshop then published and marketed. Although this book suffered from the unfortunate lack of an English-Bislama section (as well as the lack of French equivalents to Bislama words), it filled a much needed gap and came to be widely used for the remainder of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s as a source of Bislama usage and spelling as it was much more comprehensive and user-friendly than Guy's earlier volume.

The debate about Bislama and the accession to independence

Vanuatu gained its political independence from Britain and France in 1980 amidst a combination of confusion, violence and idealism. Language issues had been a major part

auas o. While the choice in favour of *ae* and *ao* certainly has this advantage, my own sources did not suggest this as a primary consideration at the time.

⁷ However, Dorothy Dewar (p.c.) informs me that personal contact between Guy and Camden was possibly responsible for Camden's abandonment of the spelling *bilong* in favour of *blong* 'of' and *ia* in favour of *ya* 'this/that'.

of the pre-independence debate, centring around the future status of English and French. The compromise reached was that Bislama would be declared as the national language, while Bislama, English and French would be co-equal official languages, and English and French alone would be declared as co-equal "principal languages of education".

Since language was very much on everybody's mind at the time, the Pacific Churches Research Centre and the University of the South Pacific in 1981 jointly convened a conference to discuss language policy in the country. This conference discussed a wide range of issues relating to the status of not just French and English, but also of vernacular languages and Bislama. In his opening address, the then Prime Minister, Hon. Fr. Walter Lini, focused his comments on the importance of:

...developing Bislama as the main language of communication within the country...He assured the conference of the present government's full support should appropriate recommendations regarding the development of Bislama emerge from the discussions. (Anonymous 1981:4)

The conference was valuable in that it allowed influential Ni-Vanuatu to publicly voice their attitudes to Bislama and the question of standardisation. Some opinions reflected the kinds of colonial attitudes of English-speakers in the pre-independence era. Tor (1981) expressed the doubt that Bislama was a real language at all, in the following words: "So far, the language (if I may call it so) has not been standardised." Other comments related to the lack of teaching materials and the lack of technical vocabulary in Bislama, which would prevent its wider use in the formal education system (Liliu 1981, Tor 1981). The lack of standardisation in Bislama spelling was repeatedly seen as a stumbling block in securing any wider range of functions for the language.

In the end, the conference did not resolve any substantive issues relating to the development of a standardised orthography for Bislama (Anonymous 1981:7). However, participants did call for the government to establish a permanent commission that should report regularly on the use and development of the languages of Vanuatu in the life of the country (Anonymous 1981:15).

Despite a general feeling at the conference that standardisation of the orthography was desirable, no specific resolutions were passed as to what should represent the standard, since it was felt that this was an area that would require further research by linguists (Anonymous 1981:7). However, since the commission that the conference called for was never established, no formal mechanism was ever established for following through on this suggestion at an official level.

Another source of information about attitudes toward Bislama from Ni-Vanuatu opinion-makers comes from the *Summarised record of proceedings* of parliament of April 30 1982. In general debate, the Hon. Gerard Leymang moved that the status of Bislama in schools should be debated, citing the value of Bislama as an expression of Melanesian

values as the reason for raising the issue. A number of members spoke in favour of giving Bislama some kind of role in the formal education system, while others thought that greater emphasis should be placed on local vernaculars.

Several members expressed the view that while Bislama remained unstandardised, it could not be regarded as a "real" language. This lack of standardisation in spelling and vocabulary, it was claimed, was causing real communication problems in the country. Others conceded the problem of a lack of standardisation, though they argued that something could, and should, be done about it, given sufficient time and funding.

It was pointed out several times in the debate that there was a need for a dictionary of Bislama that people could have access to around Vanuatu. Given that this debate took place after the appearance of both Camden (1977) and Guy (1974), it would appear that these members of parliament were unaware of the existence of these dictionaries. Alternatively, members of parliament may have been aware of these books but did not regard them as "real" dictionaries.

I offer this suggestion because I was once asked by one Ni-Vanuatu in the late 1980s if I knew of the existence of a dictionary of the language. When I mentioned Camden (1977), it was pointed out that what was being sought was a "real" dictionary. For a dictionary to be regarded as real, it would need to provide definitions of Bislama words in Bislama itself, or, if it were written bilingually, then it would need to provide definitions in Bislama for a usefully large number of more difficult words in English and French, rather than just a list of equivalents for everyday words (which many people would know in any case).

The fact that language issues in newly independent Vanuatu were given serious consideration is suggested by the fact that the government of the time pushed for, and gained approval for, the establishment of the Pacific Languages Unit as part of the academic establishment of the University of the South Pacific in 1983, alongside the already established Extension Centre. Although this was intended from the outset to serve all of the countries of the university's extensive region, it was established in Vanuatu in recognition of the contribution that it might make to meeting that country's unique set of linguistic needs.

By 1983, however, the government of Vanuatu had more important things on its mind than standardisation in Bislama spelling. The attempted rebellions on Espiritu Santo and Tanna having been put down, it was time to work towards establishing a sense of unity. There were educational and health systems to unify, and an economy to rebuild.

By this time, therefore, the language debate was beginning to subside. In any case, despite his earlier involvement in the process of Bible translation, the Prime Minister himself appeared to have done an about-face from his 1981 statement supporting any

moves for standardisation in Bislama. In the 1982 debate in parliament, the Hon. Fr. Walter Lini went on record as follows:

...The only reason to teach Bislama in schools was to read it and write it. This would require standardisation, and would take the life out of it. If they wanted to make it a unifying factor they should not teach it. (*Summarised Record of Proceedings*, 1st ordinary session of 1982, Friday April 30)

Given such views, it seems likely that any formal proposal for official orthographic standardisation would have been regarded unfavourably after 1982.

Some of the outpouring of opinions about Bislama in the early 1980s were linguistically quite well-informed, others less so. Some reflected colonially inspired opinions about the nature of the language (with some, as I have already indicated, even questioning its existence as a separate language at all). The following views were expressed in an official Ministry of Education report in 1981, by an expatriate:

This repugnance for introducing pidgin into education is founded on the difficulties of dealing in Bislama with technical questions and of secondary pupils learning English who are hampered by Bislama. From the grammatical point of view, one can only approve of this prudent approach. The deficiencies of the language are not phonological: Bislama has developed a quite acceptable system of oppositions. Nor are the difficulties lexical: borrowing from the English language is easy. Its weakness is mainly of a syntactic nature. It was a language of minimal communication in the time of the sandalwood cutters and the "natives" concerned. It destroys the architecture of phraseology, multiplies points of support between syntactical unities, and redundancies. The whole system of particles is reduced to one single preposition, with a variant to mark the possessive case.

If we admit that the language of education has an influence on mental development and the formation of concepts, we must recognize the morass into which we enter through this syntactic weakness. The real languages of culture are the local languages. The best tools for access to the modern world and to useful concepts in technological exchanges are the European languages. (Fasquel 1981:10)

This discussion about Bislama contains so many wild inaccuracies that it would be difficult to know where to begin to criticise it. Any conclusions based on such ignorance would necessarily have been fundamentally flawed. While I am not particularly concerned at this point about the attitudes of expatriates to Bislama, it is entirely possible that these kinds of flawed arguments may well have had some serious impact on attitudes towards Bislama among opinion-making Ni-Vanuatu.⁸

⁸ There are still expatriates in Vanuatu who harbour extremely negative attitudes towards Bislama, though these are concentrated in the private sector. One hotel manager commented to

The divergence between ecclesiastical and secular Bislama

While parliamentarians, government officials and foreign advisers discussed the status of Bislama, ordinary people continued to write the language. Although the spellings in the translations of the gospels – along with the subsequent hymnals and also Camden's dictionary – had a significant impact on how people wrote the language, these spellings were certainly not immediately adopted by everybody. Charpentier (1979:168-92) documents the widespread variability in spellings which rapidly developed in secular written materials as an increasing amount of material in Bislama was published in the run-up to independence, and also in the aftermath of independence.

The promising orthographic start in the *British Newsletter* rapidly faltered, and widespread random anglicisation in spelling became the norm in materials written by English-educated Ni-Vanuatu. One can only speculate as to why this was so, but I suspect that once the novelty of writing in Bislama wore off, people tired of making the special effort involved, especially as there was no standard reference dictionary available against which people could check their spellings. The progeny of the original French Residency newsletter continued to make use of occasional gallicised spellings alternating with anglicisms, as well as *ad hoc* orthographic approaches. No secular newsletter or newspaper has, as far as I know, ever attempted to editorially enforce a set of standard spellings for materials written in Bislama. Even if some writers attempted to make use of the spelling conventions set out in Camden's dictionary, it is clear that they did not systematically check their spellings against the spellings of all individual words in the dictionary.

This kind of variability in published Bislama was reflected in the way that ordinary Ni-Vanuatu wrote the language, whether for public or purely private purposes. Charpentier (1979:394-95) cites the following letter to the editor of the *New Hebrides News* in 1978:

Plante taim me lisiin long Pidgin News long Radio New Hebrides be sometime me no andastand gud from we olgeta radio man oli iusum plante English words we mi no save mining blong olgeta. Me man sikul me stap long town, be me wori from olgeta papa mo mama blong yumi long island, we mi bilif oli no save andastand Pidgin News long radio. Me talem toktok ia from we i no long taim, i kat wan olfala blong yumi long island emi askem mi from mining blong word "affectem" we emi harem long Pidgin news long radio.

me recently upon learning that I had recently published a dictionary of Bislama as follows: "So you're one of those people promoting that ridiculous language. I know that the tourists love it, but Vanuatu needs a language that is not going to hold back its development." Fortunately such linguistically ill-informed colonial dinosaurs have little or no contact with policy-makers in Vanuatu (and one suspects that their social contacts with Ni-Vanuatu in general are predominantly of the employer-employee type).

The writer of this extract was in part following orthographic conventions promoted in Camden (1977), though it also included a number of spellings that derive exclusively from English – e.g. *sometime, me, English* – or which represent a mixture of English and Bislama conventions, e.g. *andastand, wori*. There were also a number of spellings which follow neither English spellings nor spellings promoted by Camden and which were, therefore, purely *ad hoc* attempts to represent words, e.g. *taim* for *taem*, *iusum* for *yusum*, *kat* for *gat*, *emi* for *em i*.

Given the lack of any official support for (or opposition to) the spellings used by the churches, Bill Camden's original spellings were further fine-tuned for use in biblical translated material under the auspices of the *Kokonas Baebol Translesen* team in Santo. Although this group included representation from a variety of Christian denominations, as well as Ni-Vanuatu from a number of different islands, the influence of Bill Camden's earlier spellings was clearly obvious in the spelling list that was issued as Ling *et al* (1984) under the title *Fasin blong raetem Bislama*. Although this was not formally published, the Kokonas Baebol team did make the list available to those who were interested.

The lack of public availability of the list meant that many people could not check their spellings against this latest set of authorised Kokonas Baebol spellings. Another problem for the secular writer was that this list contained an understandable concentration of spellings for words in the religious area (e.g. *Hibrus, Habakuk*), while a substantial number of lower frequency non-religious words were completely lacking (e.g. *naleplep, nasiksik*). There were also some spellings that had been altered by the Kokonas Baebol team, which the secular writer would not have known about.

This situation was further complicated by the fact that some spellings in Ling *et al* (1984) were subsequently changed by the Kokonas Baebol team. According to Dorothy Dewar (p.c.), Ling *et al* (1984) was never intended to be the final word in Bislama spelling, and there was a process of gradual change as a result of internal consultation between members of the translation team. These changes were incorporated on the in-house computer spell-check which few other people had access to. This meant that even with the Bislama that was written by the churches, there was no single spelling, as "the standard" was an evolving one. We therefore find evidence of orthographic change in various sources of ecclesiastical spellings as follows:⁹

⁹ The absence of forms under particular headings means that this form was not included in that particular source.

(Camden, n.d.)	Biblical translations (1974)	Camden (1977)	Ling <i>et al</i> (1984)	
<i>insaid</i>	<i>insaid</i>	<i>insaed</i>	<i>insaed</i>	'inside'
<i>lait</i>	<i>lait</i>	<i>laet</i>	<i>laet</i>	'light'
<i>en</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>hem</i>	<i>hem</i>	'(s)he/it'
<i>haean</i>	<i>haean</i>	<i>aeen</i>	<i>aeen</i>	'iron'
<i>haeanem</i>	–	<i>aeenem</i>	<i>aeenem</i>	'to iron'
<i>Ju</i>	–	<i>Jyu</i>	<i>Jyu</i>	'Jew'
<i>bisnis</i>	<i>bisnis</i>	<i>bisnes</i>	<i>bisnes</i>	'business'
<i>Janware</i>	–	<i>Janewari</i>	<i>Jenuware</i>	'January'
<i>ia</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>ya</i>	'this/that'
<i>langwis</i>	<i>lanwis</i>	<i>lanwis</i>	<i>lanwis</i>	'language'
<i>larkin</i>	–	<i>larken</i>	<i>lariken</i>	'larrikin'
<i>lisid</i>	–	<i>lesed</i>	<i>lesed</i>	'lizard'
<i>reses</i>	<i>reses</i>	<i>resis</i>	<i>resis</i>	'race'
–	–	<i>aluminium</i>	<i>aluminium</i>	'aluminium'
<i>ananit</i>	<i>ananit</i>	<i>ananit</i>	<i>aninit</i>	'underneath'
–	–	<i>bokseng</i>	<i>boksing</i>	'boxing'
–	–	<i>diksonari</i>	<i>deksonari</i>	'dictionary'

This led to a continuation of the situation of the 1970s and the 1980s in which ecclesiastical texts were published with systematic spellings, while spellings in secular texts ranged along a continuum between those set out in Camden (1977) and a much more *ad hoc* anglicised (and sometimes even gallicised) set of spellings. It was this kind of confusion to which members of parliament were referring in their 1982 debate, as discussed above.

While there was often random variation in the spelling of secular Bislama materials, they contained a number of spelling conventions that were becoming increasingly consistent, and these were sometimes at variance with spellings found in ecclesiastical materials. Around the time that the 1984 spelling list was circulated by the Kokonas Baebol team, it was becoming apparent that there was a possibility of two separate varieties of written Bislama emerging: an ecclesiastical Bislama on the one hand, and a secular Bislama on the other hand.

Although the different spelling conventions received little explicit public discussion, one forum in which these issues were raised was a University of the South Pacific summer course entitled *Introdaksen long Stadi blong Bislama*, which was jointly taught by Bill Camden and myself in 1985, shortly after the 1984 spelling list came out. As

part of the work for the course, students were asked to each take a ten-page section of Ling *et al* (1984) and to critique the spellings included in that particular section.

While accepting most of the spellings, many of the students expressed reservations about some sets of orthographic representations, usually on points relating to the difference between the emerging secular and ecclesiastical spelling traditions. While these objections made good sense to other students in the group, when they were presented to Bill Camden, the students found that he rejected their criticisms as invalid because he said that they were too much influenced by English as their language of education, as well as being speakers of urban rather than rural Bislama. It almost seemed as if writers of secular and ecclesiastical Bislama were operating from two quite different starting points on the issue of orthography, which did not allow either side to accept the reasoning behind the opinions of the other side.

Jonas Cullwick and Harold Obed, two journalists with Radio Vanuatu, after having taken a course in translation techniques at the University of the South Pacific, came to realise the unnecessary difficulty of the task that they regularly faced in having to translate news bulletins from English into Bislama at short notice and with no set guidelines for translation. It was therefore decided that a *Komiti blong Bislama* should be established to assist them in this task. Sitting on this committee were people working with the Media Department (under which is subsumed both *Radio Vanuatu* and the official government newspaper *Vanuatu Weekly/Hebdomadaire*), Language Services (which provides official translations for a variety of government departments), as well as representatives of a variety of government and non-government organisations involved in providing the public access to developmental information, such as the Curriculum Development Unit and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Also sitting on the committee in an advisory capacity was a representative of the Pacific Languages Unit of the University of the South Pacific.

While the committee did not see standardisation of spelling as its primary objective, some decisions regarding spelling were unavoidable given that words needed to be written down in order for them to be disseminated to departments in government, as well as non-government organisations which might like to make use of these lists. The committee ended up endorsing a number of orthographic decisions that were in line with secular preference and at variance with the 1984 spelling list. These included the following in particular:

- (i) That the glide *y* should be written as *i* immediately after a consonant, as in a word such as *giaman*. In ecclesiastical materials, the spelling *y* was being used, i.e. *gyaman*.
- (ii) The postposed demonstrative should be exceptionally spelt *ia*, rather than *ya* as in ecclesiastical materials (and in conformity with Bill Camden's earliest spelling).

The committee met fairly regularly between 1986 and 1988 and assembled a substantial body of terminological decisions, which were continually updated on computer and distributed to members of the committee. By 1988, however, committee members began to feel a sense of frustration because some of their superiors did not allow time for their staff to attend the monthly meetings, arguing that this was not a proper part of their job. In any case, their decisions bore no official weight and there was no way of enforcing (or even encouraging) compliance from the general public. In addition, the committee had no budget for secretarial staff or printing in order to disseminate its decisions more widely.

Because of these difficulties, the secretary of the committee in 1988 made a formal proposal to the Prime Minister's Department (which was responsible for both Media Department and Language Services) that government should grant the committee the power to make official decisions in the area of the lexical development and in the standardisation of the spelling of Bislama.

Receipt of this proposal was never acknowledged by the Prime Minister's office, and there was certainly no decision taken to act on the recommendations. Given the statement on public record from the Prime Minister in 1982 about his lack of support for standardisation in Bislama, the lack of success of the proposal should perhaps not have been too surprising.

This inaction on the part of government simply left the *status quo* in place. The *Komiti blong Bislama* lapsed through lack of continued motivation. Secular written Bislama continued to vary between a very vaguely defined set of orthographic norms and random fluctuations in the direction of anglicised (and, to a lesser extent, gallicised) spellings. The evolving ecclesiastical conventions continued to be applied, though largely only to religious materials.

Descriptive and prescriptive dictionaries in the post-independence era

By the late 1980s, Camden's dictionary was out of print. Not only this, but it was considerably out of date in that much new vocabulary and many new expressions had entered the language in the intervening years of social and political development (Crowley 1990b:360-68). As has also already been pointed out, some of the more recent orthographic decisions taken by the Kokonas Baebol team also superseded some of the spellings in Camden (1977).

Given the obvious need for some kind of dictionary of Bislama to be made available to the public, I took on the task of producing such a volume. This was published as Crowley (1990a). This aimed to provide updated information on the vocabulary of

Bislama, as well as providing an English-Bislama section that was lacking in Camden's original dictionary.

In writing this dictionary, I was conscious of the lack of any official and representative body to decide on an orthography. I therefore explicitly stated that "this dictionary is not intended as a spelling reference manual" (Crowley 1990a:29). Its main purpose, therefore, was to show the meanings and uses of Bislama words. However, since consistency is obviously necessary when writing a dictionary, some decisions had to be made where there was variability in the ways in which words were spelled.

My strategy was to follow the spellings in Ling *et al* (1984) except in cases where popular usage seemed to be at variance with these recommendations. In particular, the dictionary reflected the decisions made earlier by the *Komiti blong Bislama*. In cases of orthographic variation, I also opted for etymological solutions, or solutions based on the preferences of younger and more educated people, as I felt that these were more likely to be the people actually writing the language for publication. Thus, I favoured spellings such as *fifti* 'fifty' and *giaman* 'tell lies' over the ecclesiastical preference for spellings such as *fefte* and *gyaman*.

As far as possible, however, I tried to let the dictionary reflect as full a range as possible of pronunciations of words in Bislama. Thus, for example, a word such as *nabanga* 'banyan' was also entered with *napanga*, *nabangga*, *nambanga* and *nambangga* being variants of the same word. This meant that I did not attempt to specify which of these spellings should be regarded as "standard".

In attempting to please everybody in this respect, the dictionary seems to have ended up pleasing nobody. Those who favoured the spellings in Ling *et al* (1984) felt that the dictionary was likely to undermine the work in standardisation that they had already done. In desperation for a standard spelling, some secular organisations inputted the entries in Crowley (1990a) as a basis for a computer spell-check list since no other list was publicly available, although my original intentions were that this kind of thing should not happen. It seems that despite my disclaimers, people simply saw Crowley (1990a) as a dictionary and assumed that what it contained was automatically to be treated as a set of standard spellings.

However, when people tried to use Crowley (1990a) in this way, they found that in many cases it did not give the firm guidance that they wanted. Somebody wanting to know how to spell the word for 'banyan', for example, would find the dictionary of little help as it contained a whole array of spellings. I was subsequently asked to consider providing firmer guidance if any revised form of the dictionary were to be produced.

By 1995, stocks of Crowley (1990a) were completely exhausted. It was clear that a reprint of the original dictionary was out of question. Not only did the original contain some errors of content and several unfortunate choices of layout, but I had also assembled

quite a large amount of additional data for inclusion. It was also clear that any future edition would need to be more prescriptive in nature if it was to meet the expectations that people have of a dictionary.

While a purely descriptive dictionary can be produced by just a single person, this is clearly not the case with a prescriptive dictionary, as this must meet some kind of community expectations. In 1995, Wilson Kaluat of the Summer Institute of Linguistics approached me about progress on the revised edition, asking me particularly about the extent of my flexibility on orthographic issues. It was his hope that some kind of unification could take place between the emerging secular and ecclesiastical standardised spellings.

If any progress was to be made in this area, it was clear that some kind of intermediary body would need to be established in order to facilitate discussion between proponents of one spelling over another. Fortunately, by this stage representatives of a number of non-governmental organisations had established the *Literacy Association of Vanuatu* as an umbrella body to coordinate policies and practices in the area of literacy, both secular and ecclesiastical. The question of Bislama orthography was clearly one that could legitimately come under the aegis of such a committee. In the absence of any appropriate governmental agency, this committee then became the arbiter in cases where there were differences about how particular words, or categories of words, should be spelled.

The committee included representatives from a variety of bodies. From the government were the Curriculum Development Unit and Media Services, as well as the Malvatumaori, i.e. the National Council of Chiefs. Secular non-government organisations included Nasonal Komuniti Development Trust,¹⁰ National Council of Women and the University of the South Pacific. Finally, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Kokonas Baebol translators were represented as religious organisations.

John Lynch from the University of the South Pacific was asked to chair an *ad hoc* committee of the association to deal with unification of spelling. His approach was to isolate those areas in which there had been lack of agreement and to seek to establish the extent to which particular spellings had most widespread support among committee members. Decisions were then transmitted to myself as compiler of the dictionary and to the Bislama Bible translators for adoption in the text of the Bible that was being prepared for publication to allow comment and reaction before a final decision was made.

At the time that the final text of Crowley (1995) was being prepared, I was facing a deadline with my publisher. The Kokonas Baebol team were also in the final stages of

¹⁰ The spelling of NKDT on its brochures is as I have just presented it. This is a good example of how Bislama and English spelling conventions are mixed in secular written Bislama.

preparing the text of the new translation of the entire Bible into Bislama, in which it had been agreed that these new unified spelling conventions would be implemented. Because both publications were under pressure of time, it was not possible to resolve every single difference between the two, though agreement has probably been achieved on how to spell about 99.5% of the lexicon.

It would probably be rather boring – and it might open up old wounds! – to list separately the various kinds of compromises that were made in the preparation of Crowley (1995). However, some of the more urban variants of Crowley (1990a) have now been designated as non-standard in the new dictionary, which closely reflects the kinds of spellings for many words that had already been endorsed in the Kokonas Baebol list. At the same time, some spellings originally favoured by the Kokonas Baebol team that were regarded as archaic or rare were substituted with spellings that were closer to those of Crowley (1990a). It was also agreed that word boundaries should more closely reflect the patterns that are more widely used in secular writings, thus abandoning long forms such as *luksavegud* ‘recognise properly’ in favour of *luksave gud*.

The future?

It would be naive to think that even with the adoption of a single spelling system in the most recent translation of the Bible and in Crowley (1995), a standardised spelling will sweep the country and be accepted by all.¹¹ The tradition of random anglicisation and gallicisation is too well-established for me to believe that it will immediately “go away”, at least in the immediate future.

Ideally, what would be needed for a standardised spelling system to take hold is the inclusion of Bislama literacy as an essential component of the education system of Vanuatu. Even if we were to continue to completely ignore calls for Bislama to be used as an official medium of instruction in schools in Vanuatu, there is no reason why it could not be incorporated as a subject of study, in which students would learn – among other things – how to systematically write the language.

Teachers in Vanuatu often argue that their students’ knowledge of Bislama interferes with their acquisition of English. It is open to debate just how valid these arguments are, but one thing that seems to be beyond doubt is that students’ acquisition of English damages their performance in Bislama. Many rural people complain about the fact that the Bislama of their better-educated countrymen and countrywomen is no longer “real”

¹¹ In fact, since the appearance of Crowley (1995), Dorothy Dewar has informed me that many sequences of verb followed by adverbial will not be separated in the Bible translation after all. Thus, the agreed on spelling of *Hem i holem strong man ya* ‘(S)he held the man tightly’ will appear in the Bible instead as *Hem i holemstrong man ya*.

Bislama, but a jumbled and only semi-intelligible mixture of Bislama and English.¹² Incorporating Bislama into the curriculum would also enable teachers to teach students how to clearly distinguish between the two languages. The result would hopefully be not only better English, but better Bislama from students coming from schools in Vanuatu.

However, given current attitudes in Vanuatu, I do not see much prospect of Bislama being incorporated into the formal curriculum in any capacity. Lynch (1996) points out that despite the status of Bislama as the sole national language and one of three official languages, it is specifically excluded from most formal educational contexts, with students often being punished for using it during school hours. Ministry staff alone are not responsible for this, as teachers and parents alike harbour suspicions that Bislama has negative educational effects on children. Attitudes are changing, but probably not rapidly enough for there to be any prospect of change in the immediate future.

The only viable option under present circumstances is for a standardised spelling to emerge by "osmosis", on the basis of a good example provided in written materials that are widely read by the public. Dorothy Dewar (p.c.) reports that as soon as the first evangelical texts were published in the 1970s, people rapidly adopted many of the orthographic principles that were used in these materials. For a fully standardised spelling to emerge, it would be necessary for not only the ecclesiastical literature and the dictionary to agree in spelling, but that government and non-government agencies should exercise the kind of consistent care that is needed to use the same spellings.

It will be interesting to see if the writers of various newspapers, newsletters and public notices are prepared to offer Ni-Vanuatu a single written standard, or if they are simply going to take the easy way out and continue to produce *ad hoc* spellings, which will continue to vary wildly and widely. For people to write Bislama according to a single orthographic pattern would mean that people actually have to *care* enough to be prepared to make the effort. The question is: do they?

It should be obvious from this paper is that questions of orthography design and standardisation in Bislama were almost completely dominated by expatriates in the colonial era, and even in the immediate aftermath of independence. In more recent years, however, Ni-Vanuatu themselves have come to play dominant roles in the evolving national culture of literacy, which has come to supplement traditional oracy.

In the light of these observations, it is particularly sad to find that there are still expatriates who would like to argue that Ni-Vanuatu should not concern themselves with such issues, and that expatriates who are involved in such matters are guilty of colonial manipulation. Mühlhäusler (1995:263), for example, even goes to the extent of saying that such expatriates are deliberately setting out to change the *ordre naturel* of

¹² The letter cited in Charpentier (1979:394-95), to which I referred above, reflects this attitude.

Melanesian society. If I were a Ni-Vanuatu who has been actively involved in the standardisation of Bislama over the past decade and a half, I would be concerned at the potential for such a statement to be interpreted as implying that Melanesian societies did not, and should not change. Such ideas unfortunately hark back to anthropologically discredited notions such as the "noble savage".

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