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SQUIB

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John Lynch
UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC
johnlynch123@gmail.com

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UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC
johnlynch123@gmail.com

While words of Melanesian origin in Bislama generally receive penultimate stress according to the predominant patterns of stress assignment found in the languages of Vanuatu, one definable set of words shows a sub-regularity: trisyllables with a heavy final syllable are stressed on the initial syllable, not the penult. This squib sets out the data, disposes of some possible explanations, but is not able to come up with a satisfactory explanation.

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Bislama, the national language of Vanuatu, began as a variety of Melanesian Pidgin and is rapidly developing as a creole. In its earlier stages, its phonology was susceptible to influence from the first languages of its speakers.[2] There are over one hundred of these, and although they are all related, there is considerable variation in phoneme inventories, phonotactic possibilities, and suprasegmental patterning. On top of this, there was influence not only from the main lexifier language, English, but also from a second major international colonial and post-colonial language, French. Patterns of stress assignment in Bislama reflect this history.

In this paper, I will be looking specifically at the vocabulary of Bislama that derives from indigenous languages. Stress assignment in these lexical items generally appears to follow the most common pattern of stress assignment in indigenous languages, with primary stress on the penult. However, there is one phonologically definable set of words that exhibits a quite different pattern of stress assignment, which does not seem to be attributable to "first language interference": trisyllables whose penult is light and whose final syllable is heavy take initial stress. I will attempt to suggest reasons why this rather unusual pattern might have developed.

2. SOME PRELIMINARIES

2.1 The Bislama lexicon

Crowley (1990:110) gave the following figures for the origins of Bislama lexical items:[3]

(1)	English-derived	84–90%
	French-derived	6–12%
	Melanesian-derived	3.75%
	Other	0.25%

[1] I am grateful to Julie Barbour, Robert Early, Elizabeth Pearce, Hans Schmidt and Nick Thieberger for providing data on various languages and/or discussion of various issues relating to the topic, and to two anonymous referees whose comments have helped keep me on the straight and narrow. I alone am responsible for any errors or misinterpretations.

[2] Note the following from Guy (1974:4), for example: "[T]he pronunciation of Bichelamar [the French spelling of Bislama] varies from island to island and sometimes even within the same island."

[3] Given the way the language has developed in the past quarter-century, the Melanesian component may well now be slightly smaller than what is shown in (1).

The variable figures for English and French reflect the fact that a number of words are indeterminate in origin: words like *kilo* 'kilo', *bang* 'bank', *sigaret* 'cigarette', *futbol* 'football', or *adres* 'address' could equally derive from English or French.

The Melanesian component is diverse in origin. There are (or were), after all, around one hundred languages spoken in Vanuatu. Crowley's study of this part of the lexicon (1990:145–78, see especially the map on p.169) suggests major input from languages of two areas—north Efate and the Shepherd Islands, and the Ambae–Maewo–Pentecost area—with restricted input from the Banks, Santo, and Malakula, and negligible input from languages spoken in other areas. Most of the languages that have had major input are phonologically conservative (in the sense that they have not undergone drastic phonological changes from Proto-Oceanic): open syllables predominate, and consonant clustering is minimal. These features have carried over into Bislama.

The orthography I use follows Crowley's (2003) dictionary. The main features to note are that *ng* represents the velar nasal /ŋ/ (and thus the cluster /ŋg/ is represented by *ngg*), and that *ae* and *ao* represent the diphthongs /ai/ and /au/.

2.2 Previous studies on Bislama stress

In describing the allocation of stress, I distinguish between two kinds of syllables—light and heavy:[4]

- a light syllable (abbreviated L) is an open syllable with a single vowel, not a diphthong, as in every syllable in *kava* /ˈka.va/ 'kava', *natora* /na.ˈto.ra/ 'heartwood of tree', or *banana* /ba.ˈna.na/ 'banana';
- a heavy syllable (H) consists either of a single vowel with a following consonant, as in the final syllable of *malok* /ˈma.lok/ 'drink kava' or *palamen* /ˈpa.la.men/ 'parliament', or else a diphthong, as in the final syllable of *natalae* /ˈna.ta.lai/ 'clam' or *alao* /a.ˈlau/ 'allowed, permitted'.

I will use the abbreviation S to mean a syllable whose weight is irrelevant to the current discussion.

I generally follow Crowley's analysis of Bislama stress (see below), which proposes that the assignment of stress depends in large part on the historical origin of the lexical item concerned. This came as a reaction to attempts by previous analysts—notably Guy (1974) and Camden (1977)—to impose a single stress rule or unified set of stress rules on the whole Bislama lexicon.

Guy's rules (1974:6) were as follows:

(a) Monosyllabic "tool-words" are unstressed but other monosyllabic words receive stress.
(b) Disyllabic transitive verbs (ending in *-Vm*) are stressed on the first syllable.
(c) "Words of more than two syllables have most often only their first and last syllables stressed": thus *ólketá* 'all', *túvalá* 'both'.
(d) "Otherwise, the stress falls evenly on every syllable of the word": thus *kálá* 'colour', *nákátámból* 'dragon plum: *Dracontomelon* sp.)'.

While rules (a) and (b) are correct, they only apply to a fairly small proportion of the lexicon. Rules (c) and (d) are incorrect, as will be shown in this paper. This is due in no small part to the fact that the examples Guy gave are themselves incorrect: the forms listed above in (c) and (d) should actually be *kála*, *nàkatámbol*, *olgéta*, and *túfala*.[5] (See Lynch 1975 for a review of Guy 1974.)

Camden (1977:xiv–xv) made a more considered statement, but there are two major problems: one is that he does not give any examples to illustrate his rules; and the other is that (it seems to me) he overcomplicates the issue in trying to describe all aspects of stress allocation under a single, highly complex, and idiosyncratic rule. Note for example the following:

> For three syllable words, there are ninety-six different syllable patterns, of which sixty-four patterns, representing the majority of three syllable words, carry stress on the second syllable. Words of the remaining thirty-two syllable patterns carry primary stress on the final syllable, and secondary stress on the first syllable. This second group of words is made up of (a) all words with the final syllable of

[4] I will use ˈ to mark primary stress and ˌ secondary stress, except in quotations, where acute and grave accents fill these roles

[5] A reviewer points out that Guy's rules may well have been correct for a particular place and time. His data were collected in the 1970s, in Santo, and *may* represent a variety spoken then and there. He does not, however, claim to be describing only one communalist or dialect of Bislama but, by default of any specific statement, Bislama in general, and as general statements these rules do not work.

> the form consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) except those structured VC.VC.CVC, CCV.CCVC.CVC and CCCV.CCCVC.CVC, together with all words in which both the second and third syllables are structured consonant-vowel-consonant, (b) all words with the final syllable of the form consonant-consonant-vowel (CCV) except those structured V.CVC.CCV, (c) all words with the final syllable of the form consonant-consonant-vowel-consonant (CCVC) and (d) all words structured V.CV.VC, CVC.V.VC, or CCVC.V.CV (Camden 1977:xiv–xv).

Because he gives no examples, it is difficult to see what kinds of words belong to the group with primary stress on the ultima. Many, probably, are words of French origin (see below), but the tortuous combinations of syllable types presented shows no discernible pattern. In any case, the "rule" ignores trisyllables with initial stress, like *nakamal* /ˈnakamal/ 'meeting-house' or *tawian* /ˈtawian/ 'in-law', which form the subject matter of this paper.[6]

Crowley (2004:21–22) recognized that a single rule or set or sub-rules, however complex and contorted, would not account for the position of stress in Bislama: "the position of stress within a word in Bislama is not predictable … [although] I am not aware of any pair of words that differ in meaning solely in the position of stress" (2004:21). Rather, "it makes sense to subdivide the vocabulary of Bislama into words deriving from different languages, treating words of English, French, and Melanesian origin separately" (2004:22).

In suggesting that different sections of the lexicon should be treated differently as far as stress assignment is concerned, Crowley noted that this explains, for example, why many (though by no means all) words of French origin have final stress—for example, *lakaskad* /ˌlakasˈkad/ 'waterfall', *limonad* /ˌlimoˈnad/ 'soft drink', *arier* /arˈier ~ aˈrier / 'reverse', *lafet* /laˈfet/ 'party'—while words of English origin tend to retain English stress patterns: *palemen* /ˈpalemen/'parliament', *haebiskis* /haiˈbiskis/ 'hibiscus', *demonstresen* /ˌdemonˈstresen/ 'demonstration'.

As far as words of Melanesian origin are concerned, it is worth quoting Crowley at some length:

> Words originating from local vernaculars behave overwhelmingly according to the pattern that we find in local languages whereby stress is systematically applied to the second-last syllable. This would therefore account for the position of stress in words such as *nabángga* 'banyan' and *nakatámbol* 'dragon plum' … Following widespread patterns in local languages, a diphthong in a final closed syllable is also stressed in Bislama, as in *namaláos* '[k.o. tree] *Garuga floribunda*'. … The generalizations just presented represent strong tendencies in Bislama rather than exceptionless rules, and some forms originating from local languages exhibit stress patterns that vary from these. We sometimes find that the initial syllable is stressed, for example *námarae* 'eel', *nákamal* 'meeting house' … These irregularities are unlikely to derive from divergent patterns in the substrate languages. (Crowley 2004:22).

This paper is largely concerned with these "irregularities".

2.3 On stress in Vanuatu vernaculars

Crowley suggests that stress patterns derive from the language(s) that contributed the lexical items concerned: English stress patterns for words from English, French patterns for words from French, etc. So it is necessary to very briefly look at vernacular stress patterns as well.

Lynch (2000) established that the stress pattern of Proto-Oceanic (POC) was one in which primary stress fell on the penult if the ultima was light, but on the ultima if it was heavy: thus *ˈmʷata 'snake', but *maˈnuk 'bird'. This pattern does occur in Vanuatu, but it is not the most frequent.

Birchfield and Pearce (to appear) discuss the difficulties in deciding on stress placement in Unua, and in so doing presented a bit of a survey of stress patterns in Vanuatu languages more generally. This discussion was preceded by the following "warning":

> Phonological stress or prominence is notoriously difficult both to define and analyse cross-linguistically. Stress is neither as concrete nor definitively measurable as many other phonological features because prominence only exists relative to surrounding words or syllables having less prominence (Himmelmann and Ladd 2008:248). Furthermore, the significance of any individual indicator of stress in relation to any other can vary from language to language (Birchfield and Pearce (2020).

[6] Camden's faulty analysis of stress was used by Gordon (2005) in his theoretical account of onset-driven stress. (Gordon, of course, was not aware of its incorrectness.)

We can illustrate this with the following discussion on stress or prominence in Nafsan (a.k.a. South Efate). Billington et al (2020) note that

> previous work on Nafsan includes some impressions of non-contrastive stress, or lexical prominence, but without a consensus on where, or whether, there is consistent stress placement within a word. Suggested patterns include both final stress and initial stress, with some lexically-specified differences (2020:2831) … [but that] the results presented here accord with impressions of final prominence in Nafsan reported in some sources (2020:2839).

Birchfield and Pearce's survey, plus a brief examination of quite a number of published and unpublished descriptions of Vanuatu languages, yields the following patterns of primary stress assignment in Vanuatu languages.[7] (These will be referred to in the text that follows as Pattern I, Pattern II, and so on.)

I. By far the most common pattern is one where primary stress occurs on the penult, irrespective of syllable weight; secondary stress occurs on alternating syllables to the left of the primary stress. This is found in all major subgroups.
II. Primary stress is final if the final syllable is heavy, but penultimate if the final syllable is light: Tamambo, Abma, Avava, Futuna-Aniwa.
III. Primary stress is largely word-final: Mwotlap, Sakao, Namakir, Nafsan
IV. Primary stress is assigned to the antepenultimate syllable: Paamese,[8] Nakanamanga,[9] Ifira-Mele.
V. The assignment of stress is based on vowel sonority: Maskelynes.
VI. There is no lexically based pattern of stress placement: Nahavaq, Daakaka, plus Unua with penultimate phrasal stress.

3. TRISYLLABLES OF MELANESIAN ORIGIN

3.1 The data

Despite Crowley stating that stress in trisyllables of Melanesian origin (henceforth just "trisyllables") involves "irregularities", there *does* seem to be an underlying pattern to stress placement in these words, though one aspect of this pattern seems to be counter-intuitive. I will explain what I mean by that after presenting the data.[10]

But first where do my data come from? I have been speaking Bislama, and interacting with Bislama speakers, for the last fifty years. For the last thirty (almost), I have been living in Port Vila, the national capital, where the dominant language is Bislama and where regional variations are overshadowed by a developing national acrolect. More Bislama than English is spoken in my own household. Though I have not systematically undertaken sociolinguistic surveys of Bislama phonological structures, I have a large amount of participant observatory data, and base this squib on those data.

Let me start, very briefly, with disyllables. Disyllables receive penultimate (i.e., in this case, initial) stress. The weight of the final syllable is irrelevant to the placement of stress: (2a) shows a final light syllable, (2b) a final heavy syllable. (The weight of the initial syllable is also irrelevant: the first three examples in each column have light initial syllables, the last two heavy initial syllables.)

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[7] All of these patterns have occasional exceptions in most languages. When I say that stress is, say, penultimate in Language X, I mean that it is *largely* penultimate, but that there are a few cases (either phonologically defined or lexical exceptions) where it is unpredictably final or antepenultimate.

[8] Without going into unnecessary detail, stress in Paamese is phonologically distinctive on the surface (Crowley 1982:19), but is predictably antepenultimate at an "underlying level of analysis" (1982:26).

[9] Clark (2009:50) says that, in Nakanamanga (= Nguna), "stress is antepenultimate where possible, penultimate on words of two syllables. Schütz (1969) prefers to interpret this in terms of standard intonation patterns."

[10] Note that the vast majority of Bislama words derived from local languages are nouns, representing items of flora and fauna, cultural concepts, and so on, that often have no simple equivalent in English. Very many of these nouns begin with *na*: in the languages from which they have been borrowed, *na* is a reflex of the POC common article *na, which has often fused with the following root as a single word. However, this initial *na* has no article function (or any other function) in Bislama; it is simply the first two phonemes of the noun.

(2) a. SL#

ˈabu	‘grandparent’
ˈpima	’chilli’
ˈmala	‘common hawk’
ˈnaeli	‘sea worm, palolo worm’
ˈnaora	‘crayfish, lobster’

b. SH#

ˈmakas	‘remains, residue’
ˈtuluk	‘k.o. pudding’
ˈmalok	‘drink kava’
ˈnandao	‘native lychee’
ˈnambut	‘deaf-mute’

Words of four or more syllables follow a similar pattern, with primary stress regularly on the penult, whether the ultima is light (3a) or heavy (3b) (though there are few cases of the latter). With most speakers, there is secondary stress two syllables further to the left; the notation S^{3+} means “three or more syllables, whose weight is irrelevant”.

(3) a. S^{3+}L#

ˌnakaˈvika	‘Malay apple: *Syzygium* sp.’
ˌnabangˈgura	‘a tree: *Calophyllum* sp.’
ˌnataˈvoa	‘sea almond: *Terminalia* sp.’
naˌpiriˈpiri	‘sea hearse tree: *Hernandia* sp.’

b. S^{3+}H#

ˌnakaˈtambol	‘dragon plum: *Dracontomelon*’
ˌnambaˈlasen	‘jaw’

All of this reflects Pattern I, the most common stress assignment pattern among Vanuatu languages: penultimate, irrespective of syllable weight.

Now we come to trisyllables. When the final syllable is light, stress is penultimate, whether the penult is light (4a) or heavy (4b):[11]

(4) a. SLL#

naˈmele	‘cycad’
naˈsara	‘dance-ground, public area’
naˈsiko	‘kingfisher: *Halcyon* sp.’
naˈwita	‘octopus’
naˈrara	‘coral tree: *Erythrina indica*’

b. SHL#

naˈbangga	‘banyan: *Ficus* sp.’
naˈmambe	‘Tahitian chestnut’
naˈmanggi	‘grade-taking ceremony’
naˈwimba	‘k.o. pigeon: *Ducula pacifica*’
niˈdingro[12]	‘perfume tree: *Cananga* sp.’

This is true also when the final syllable is open and contains a rising diphthong (5a), or consists of two high vowels (5b):

(5) a.

nangˈgaria	‘ti plant: *Cordyline* sp.’
naˈtalie	‘a tree: *Terminalia catappa*’
naˈvenue	‘a tree: *Macaranga* sp.’

b. naˈmariu ‘wattle: *Acacia spirorbis*’

One reviewer raises the question as to whether the penults in forms like those in (5) are light or heavy, and does this have any effect on any statement of stress assignment? For example, is *namariu* in (5b) syllabified /na.ma.rị̯u/ with a light penult and a heavy onset to the final syllable, or /na.mar.i̯u/ with a closed and thus heavy penult? I think there is some variation here among speakers. But I think also that the question does not affect the analysis. If the penult is light, these forms behave like those in (4a), except the final has a heavy onset—but onsets, unlike codas, do not normally affect stress placement. If the penult is heavy, then these forms resemble those in (4b). Either way, stress is regularly and quite predictably placed in the penult.

When the final two syllables are heavy and are the result of historical reduplication in the donor language(s) (marked here by =), stress is also penultimate:

[11] Forms like many of those in (4b) would have come from languages that have prenasalized voiced stop phonemes, and syllabification in those languages would have been /na.ma.ᵐbe/, /na.ma.ᵑgi/, and so on. In Bislama, though, the prenasalized stops have been reanalysed as heterosyllabic nasal + stop clusters: /na.mam.be/, /na.maŋ.gi/.

[12] Possibly more commonly *nandingori*.

(6) SH=H#

liˈsefsef	‘bush sprite’
naˈtongtong	‘mangrove’
naˈlumlum	‘moss’
naˈlaslas	‘a shrub: *Polyscias* sp.’
naˈlaklak	‘Vanuatu white-eye: *Zosterops* sp.’
naˈsiksik	‘fantail: *Rhipidura* sp.’

So far, there is nothing remarkable: stress is penultimate, following the predominant Vanuatu vernacular pattern. However, when the penult is light and the final is heavy, primary stress falls, quite unexpectedly, on the *initial* syllable; the weight of that initial syllable is not relevant. With many speakers, the final syllable receives secondary stress.

(7) SLH#

ˈnakamal	or sometimes	ˈnakaˌmal	‘meeting-house’
ˈnalalas		ˈnalaˌlas	‘a shrub: *Polyscias scutellaria*’
ˈnamalao		ˈnamaˌlao	‘megapode: *Megapodius freycinet*’
ˈnamalas		ˈnamaˌlas	‘leftover food’
ˈnamarae		ˈnamaˌrae	‘eel’
ˈnamatal		ˈnamaˌtal	‘puzzle tree: *Kleinhovia hospita*’
ˈnambilak		ˈnambiˌlak	‘banded rail: *Rallus philippensis*’
ˈnambuton		ˈnambuˌton	‘navel’
ˈnanggalat		ˈnanggaˌlat	‘devil nettle: *Dendrocnide* spp.’
ˈnatalae		ˈnataˌlae	‘clam’
ˈnatamap		ˈnataˌmap	‘castrated boar or bull’

Though Crowley spoke of “irregularities,” in fact we seem to be dealing with a regular, though unexpected, pattern, which I summarize in Table 1.

TABLE 1. RELATION BETWEEN FINAL TWO SYLLABLES AND ASSIGNMENT OF STRESS IN TRISYLLABLES

		FINAL SYLLABLE		
		LIGHT	HEAVY	
PENULTIMATE SYLLABLE	LIGHT	penultimate	initial	**ASSIGNMENT OF STRESS**
	HEAVY	penultimate	penultimate	

The nature of these differing patterns is nicely represented in the following:

- the variant names for the bush or shrub *Polyscias scutellaria*: *nalaslas* /naˈlaslas/, with penultimate stress as in (6), and *nalalas* /ˈnalalas ~ ˈnalaˌlas /, with initial stress as in (6);
- the variant names for the tree *Pterocarpus indicus*: *nananara* /ˌnanaˈnara/, with penultimate stress as in (3a), and *nananar* /ˈnananar/, with initial stress as in (7);
- there are also the near-minimal pairs *namala* /naˈmala/ ‘common hawk’, following the pattern in (4), with *namalao* /ˈnamalao ~ ˈnamaˌlao/) ‘megapode: *Megapodius freycinet*’, as in (7).

3.2 Discussion

The pattern of stress assignment described immediately above and illustrated in (7) seems decidedly counter-intuitive: given that CV.CV.CV receives regular penultimate stress, we might expect that CV.CV.CVC (or CV.CV.CVV) would either also receive penultimate stress (Pattern I), or else would see stress fall on the heavy final syllable (Pattern II). Instead, the primary stress shifts to the *left*.

The obvious suggestion to propose as an explanation of this stress pattern would be that it derives from the Melanesian language(s) from which Bislama took the words. Unfortunately, this will not work. There are a few languages that show antepenultimate stress (Pattern IV), but this applies to the large bulk of their vocabulary, and not just to trisyllables of a particular shape. Why would Bislama

have taken *only* words of the form #SLH# from Nakanamanga, say, retaining antepenultimate stress, but all other words from some other language(s) with penultimate stress? And even of they did, the forms don't always match. Compare the following (Nakanamanga forms from Clark 2009):

(8)	**Bislama**	**Nakanamanga**	
	ˈnalalas	naˈlalaso	'a shrub: *Polyscias scutellaria*'
	ˈnamalao	ˈmalau	'megapode: *Megapodius freycinet*'
	ˈnamalas	ˈmalasi	'leftover food'
	ˈnamarae	ˈmarae	'eel'
	ˈnamatal	ˈnamatal	'puzzle tree: *Kleinhovia hospita*'
	ˈnambilak	ˈpʷilake	'banded rail: *Rallus philippensis*'
	ˈnambuton	ˈnapito, ˈnaputo	'navel'

Only one form matches the Bislama equivalents phoneme for phoneme: *namatal*. I suspect it is a loan, given that Nakanamanga usually has open final syllables. I have belaboured this point somewhat to show how even the likeliest of sources for this pattern doesn't fit the facts.

Clearly, then, there must be some phonological process taking place that has precipitated this unusual stress pattern. A couple of trisyllabic forms which at first sight seem to be exceptions to the patterns discussed thus far may help shed light on what is occurring here. Unfortunately, I can only find one example of each type:

- One is *namalaos* 'a tree: *Garuga floribunda*', which is regularly stressed on the final syllable: /ˌnamaˈlaos/.
- The other is *nakaemas* 'sorcery', a form where the final two syllables are heavy and are not the result of historical reduplication (see.(6) above). Both /naˈkaemas/, with penultimate stress, and also /ˌnakaeˈmas/, with final primary stress and initial secondary stress, are common pronunciations.

Both of these show a tendency towards Pattern II: stress on final syllable, if it is heavy—*namalaos* because the final syllable is "super-heavy" (i.e., contains a diphthong *and* is closed by a consonant), and *nakaemas* because there are two consecutive heavy syllables. (Why the reduplicated forms in (6) do not fit this pattern is something that needs to be addressed at some stage, but it does seem to me that reduplication is a factor.)

These two forms suggest that there may thus have been a tendency towards final stress in certain circumstances which I cannot as yet describe, but which involved final heavy syllables, contrary to the more pervasive penultimate stress regime. If that was the case, forms like those in (7) might well have received final stress of some sort, since they end in a heavy syllable; and if they did receive final stress, the fact that a syllable two to the left was also stressed is not controversial, being "typically Oceanic". What do need to be explained, though, are the following:

- Why did the final syllable in words like these receive secondary stress, and not primary? Why, in other words, was primary stress assigned to the initial syllable?
- If the heavy final syllable attracted stress, as with *nakaemas* and *namalaos*, why are the historically reduplicated CVC forms like those in (6) stressed on the penult and not the final syllable?

These are questions that I cannot answer at this stage.

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