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## **Traces of globalised discourses within and around spaces for multilingualism: Prospects for education policy change in Vanuatu**

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### **Abstract**

This paper<sup>1</sup> examines the way language-in-education policymaking in Vanuatu has dealt with multilingualism at three points in the nation's short history: in 1980, as the country gained its independence from Britain and France; in 1999, during a period of intense change across government departments following the Comprehensive Reform Programme; and in 2010, as Vanuatu looked back on thirty years of independence. At each of these points in time, analysis of key policy texts reveals traces of globalised discourses of, respectively, the rejection of colonialism, the effectiveness of mother tongue education, and plurilingualism.

Each of these discourses might appear to open up space for multilingual education and yet the outcome appears to be the same on each occasion, as the former colonial languages continue to dominate. This paper examines the wider contexts within which these three episodes in Vanuatu's language-in-education policy chronicle were situated. Analysis of the socio-economic and historico-political contexts within which each policy text was produced

reveals that the legacy of the dual colonial period remains a barrier in the way of an education system that is appropriate in and for multilingual Vanuatu.

**Keywords:** Multilingual education, Postcolonial Education, Language Policy, Medium-of-Instruction, Globalised discourses, Vanuatu

## **Introduction**

Vanuatu gained its independence from Britain and France in 1980. Prior to this date, the archipelago had been administered jointly as the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides. As a result, a dual-medium education system was established in which some schools taught through English, while others used French. This system was retained at independence, and parents continue to choose which language to educate their children in, with many opting to enrol some children in each stream of the system.

Outside school, neither English nor French is widely spoken. Vanuatu is a linguistically diverse island group, with 106 vernaculars listed by the Ethnologue. With a total population of less than 250,000, no vernacular is spoken by more than 11,500 people, and there are an estimated 66 languages spoken by fewer than 1,000. However, the majority of these vernaculars are considered to be vibrant languages, continuing to be passed on to successive generations (Crowley, 2004; Siegel, 1997b). Also spoken is Bislama, a variety of the English-based Melanesian Pidgin, which functions as a lingua franca throughout the country and is constitutionally recognised as the sole national language and one of the three official languages alongside English and French.

This paper addresses the extent to which Bislama and the vernaculars feature in language-in-education policy in Vanuatu. Heugh (2011, pp.105-6) refers to the “baffling

phenomenon” of the continued use of education programmes in postcolonial contexts that “have succeeded only in providing successful formal education for a small percentage of children, [and] yet ... continue to be used as if they could offer lasting educational success for the majority.” The common factor that Heugh argues against is the use of what is essentially a foreign language for the majority of children, and often their teachers, and this is the situation experienced in Vanuatu. The educational model followed in Vanuatu can best be described as a dual submersion model, given that some children are expected to learn exclusively through English while their siblings do the same in French.

This paper discusses three different globalised discourses that can be identified within national policymaking texts at three specific moments of Vanuatu’s history. Although these discourses could be considered to challenge the current model of education in Vanuatu, it will be demonstrated that the outcome for multilingual education appears to be the same on each occasion, as the two former colonial languages continue to dominate. Analysis of the immediate socio-economic and historico-political contexts within which each policy text was produced reveals that the legacy of the dual colonial period remains a barrier in the way of an education system that is appropriate in and for multilingual Vanuatu, demonstrating the contradictory discourses, goals and realities at play within the policy debates.

## **Framework**

This paper reports on one part of a larger investigation into potential spaces for the incorporation of multiple linguistic resources within Vanuatu’s education system (Willans, 2014). The study shares a commitment with others working in a range of comparable contexts (e.g. Chimbutane, 2011 in Mozambique; Heugh, 2010 in Ethiopia; Taylor-Leech, 2013 in Timor-Leste; Troolin, 2013 in Papua New Guinea) to understanding the way policy

debates surrounding multilingual education are shaped by tensions between different discourses. It takes as a starting point the fluidity, complexity and processual nature of language policy, and the need to understand the situated and historical context within which policy comes into being (McCarty, 2011). The overall framework of the study is thus Ethnography of Language Policy (Hornberger & Johnson, 2011; Johnson, 2009), incorporating ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and text analysis. Attention in this particular paper is focused on the last element, examining excerpts from three official policy texts in which traces of globalised discourses can be identified that appear to open up ideological and implementational space (Hornberger, 2005; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2011) for more familiar languages to be used in education. These are the national constitution, which came into effect in 1980, as Vanuatu gained independence from Britain and France; the Education Master Plan, written in 1999, in response to the Asian Development Bank sponsored Comprehensive Reform Programme; and the final report of the Education Language Policy team, commissioned in 2009 to reform the language policy of the national education system. However, these texts are examined not as multilingual education *policies*, but as windows into the complexity of policy *processes*, as they enable an understanding of the contexts within which discussions about multilingual education have taken place and statements have been made.

Through this approach, a historical dimension can be incorporated in the analysis (cf. Blommaert, 2005, p.37), as the words of the immediate texts are analysed with reference to interdiscursive links beyond them, and to the institutional, socio-economic and historico-political contexts in which the texts were produced (Wodak, 2008, p.13). Although the paper presents the three policy moments chronologically, it goes beyond a diachronic analysis of a single language policy, attempting “to unravel the complex social and political agendas that underlie” the different decisions reached at each point in time (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004,

p.viii). Following approaches to language policy that consider that discourse both “influences and is influenced by wider socio-historical and socio-political processes” (Chimbutane, 2011, p.6), it examines how different globalised discourses, each with their own histories, interact within Vanuatu’s policy chronicle.

Following this approach, the three main sections of this paper examine three different globalised discourses. On each occasion, it is suggested that ideological and implementational space appears to have been opened up for additional linguistic resources to be incorporated within education. However, other data is then used to consider why this space has not been utilised, revealing alternative forces that have served to maintain the status quo.

### **The first language-in-education policy of Vanuatu (1980)**

The first globalised discourse is the rejection of colonialism, traces of which can be identified in national texts from the period surrounding 30<sup>th</sup> July 1980, when Vanuatu gained its independence from Britain and France. The Vanua’aku Pati<sup>ii</sup>, the political party that would go on to lead the new nation, was influenced by events and experiences from beyond the islands’ shores that fed into their growing frustration with the colonial regime. Fr. Walter Lini who would become Vanuatu’s first prime minister, spent three years of the late 1960s in Auckland, where he became increasingly dissatisfied with the Western style of education (Lini, 1980, p.15). He was a founding member of the Western Pacific Students’ Association which provided a forum for discussion and political consciousness-raising amongst Pacific islanders. Similar groups of students came together at the University of Papua New Guinea and the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, enabling further mobilisation of an anti-colonial discourse.

By the late 1970s, the Vanua’aku Pati’s leaders were therefore exposed to the pro-independence sentiments of movements within countries of the region that had gained

independence before them. They were influenced by contemporary discourses of decolonisation such as “the Pacific Way”, attributed to Fiji’s prime minister in 1970 although, according to Lawson (2010), only transformed into a postcolonial discourse by others such as Crocombe (1976); and “the Melanesian Way”, popularised by the Papua New Guinean philosopher, Narokobi (1980). According to Rousseau (2004, p.62), the policies of the Vanua’aku Pati were also influenced by movements further afield, including African socialism within Tanzania in particular. Other global influences in the period are likely to have included Orientalism and Négritude, contributing alternative and oppositional discourses to those of colonialism.

Extract 1, taken from the Preamble to the Constitution, reveals the influence of this anti-colonial discourse:

**Extract 1**

WE the people of Vanuatu,  
PROUD of our struggle for freedom,  
DETERMINED to safeguard the achievements of this struggle,  
CHERISHING our ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity,  
MINDFUL at the same time of our common destiny,  
HEREBY proclaim the establishment of the united and free Republic of Vanuatu  
founded on traditional Melanesian values, faith in God, and Christian principles,  
AND for this purpose give ourselves this Constitution.

(Republic of Vanuatu, 1980, capitalisation original)

This short text is characteristic of declarations of independence in a number of ways: it constructs a common nation through the unifying category of ‘We the people of Vanuatu’,

the use of first person plural pronouns, and the depiction of a “common destiny”; it draws on the lexis of struggle and freedom throughout; and it states the commitment to “cherish” and “safeguard” the linguistic and cultural diversity, and the values on which the new nation is considered to be founded. There is a clear commitment to forge a new nation that breaks away from its colonial past.

This commitment opened up ideological space for the consideration of alternatives to the dual submersion education system inherited from the Condominium. The maintenance of two former colonial languages was first challenged in 1977, when the Vanua’aku Pati announced that education would be provided solely through the medium of English after independence (Van Trease, 1995, p.54). This was driven in part by the cost implications of taking over the running of the Francophone system that had been financed at great expense by the French government, as well as the Anglophone system. However, the streets filled for a demonstration in support of ‘Francophonie’ by Francophone teachers, students and their parents (MacClancy, 2002, p.140), and the Francophone-educated members of the party defected to set up an opposition party (Garae, 2011). The change was never followed through. Two years later, members of the different political parties met to negotiate the new Constitution. The minutes of these meetings (Republic of Vanuatu, 2009) reveal that space was, again, opened up for alternatives to the status quo, through frank discussions about the tension constructed here between “Melanesian” or “New Hebridean” values and “Western” or “international” values.

In the meeting of 18 April 1979, Lini questioned the whole principle of a Constitution:

### **Extract 2**

Was it to be built on Melanesian values, he asked – he felt this would be difficult given the Western origins of Constitutions. The imposition of Western standards in a Constitution, he pursued, would not maintain the New Hebridean soul and spirit in

existence. W. Lini felt that a Constitution was being prepared simply to satisfy France and Britain. The danger of preparing a Constitution to satisfy France and Britain was that, once the New Hebrides tried to alter it after their independence to suit their needs and culture, they would find themselves already trapped in international, rather than New Hebridean, practices. He concluded by feeling that the Committee was confused by the need on the one hand, to satisfy international requirements and, on the other hand, New Hebridean values and culture (Republic of Vanuatu, 2009, pp.29-30).

Lini was clearly very aware of the continuing influence of the colonial powers, and appeared to be opening up space to forge a truly Melanesian or New Hebridean identity for the new nation. This space was not utilised for discussion of language-in-education policy, however. Throughout the minutes of the meetings, it is interesting to note that the expatriate advisors made several references to language policy decisions set out in the constitutions of other countries, including the need for the Ombudsman to monitor the situation regarding English/French 'bilingualism' (Republic of Vanuatu, 2009, p.24), and the need for multilingual states to include de jure language policy provisions (ibid., p.26). However, at no point was any discussion made of *education* policies elsewhere that had incorporated languages other than those of the former colonisers.

During the period in question, the educational use of indigenous languages was common throughout 'Anglophone Africa', at least during early primary school, since British colonial policy had encouraged this practice (Bamgbose, 2004, p.2). Some countries had increased this usage, such as Tanzania which extended Kiswahili-medium education from four to seven years shortly after independence (Brock-Utne, 2005). Meanwhile, the new socialist governments of a number of former French colonies such as Burkina Faso and Guinea, in which colonial policy had prohibited the educational use of African languages, also



implemented a policy shift away from French-medium towards the use of these languages (Bangbose, 2004, p.5). These policy changes and experiments were well-documented by the time Vanuatu approached its independence (e.g. Bangbose, 1983). However, they were mentioned neither by the advisors in their summaries of international practice, nor by the Vanua'aku Pati, who Rousseau (2004) reports were influenced by African socialist movements. Closer to home, there was also significant academic interest at that time in language policy, including the potential for vernacular education, in neighbouring Papua New Guinea (Litteral, 1999) that was never mentioned in the constitutional discussions in Vanuatu.

It is also surprising that no call was made for the use of the vernaculars, even in the early stages of education, given that this was not a novel idea in Melanesia. The use of these languages had been widespread in much of the education carried out by the missions, and many of those in the Constitutional Committee had initially been educated in schools that still continued this practice (Lini, 1980; Regenvanu, 2004). Similarly, given the links between Bislama and nationalism that grew through the struggles for independence (Miles, 1998, p.61), it is surprising that there was no attempt to incorporate this language into the new national education system. Instead, the only concern appeared to be the maintenance of 'bilingualism' in English and French, as revealed by a lengthy discussion on this topic during the meeting of 17 April 1979 (Republic of Vanuatu, 2009, p.26).

It appears that, despite the apparent influence of a widespread discourse that rejected the colonial status quo, there were too many other concerns that simply overrode any discussion of an alternative to the dual submersion model inherited from the British and French. For example, while Francophone education had been provided for free by the French government, this was no longer possible after independence, so fees were introduced in line with those that Anglophones had always paid (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1980). For the same reason,

many of the smaller Francophone schools that had been built by the French in the years immediately preceding independence were closed, and Francophones understandably felt that they were discriminated against (Premdas & Steeves, 1995).

The resultant spirit of competition between those involved in the two streams of education (dubbed by Miles, 1998, p.45 as the “condocolonial battlefield”) made it difficult to interrogate the effectiveness of education within either stream. The need for political stability within the early years of independent rule meant that the first government could not risk appearing to undermine the status of either English or French in Vanuatu, particularly in the aftermath of their earlier attempt to cut out Francophone education altogether. It appeared difficult to visualise an alternative to the status quo inherited from the colonial period, and thus the potential for multilingual education was simply not explored.

The provisions that were eventually included within the Constitution were as follows:

### **Extract 3**

- (1) The national language of the Republic of Vanuatu is Bislama. The official languages are Bislama, English and French. The principal languages of education are English and French.
- (2) The Republic of Vanuatu shall protect the different local languages which are part of the national heritage, and may declare one of them as a national language.

(Republic of Vanuatu, 1980, Article 3)

The role that Bislama had played in uniting Anglophones and Francophones was acknowledged through its establishment as the national language and co-official language, and a provision was included for the vernaculars to be protected. However, only English and French were included with reference to education. The exclusion of other languages was to a certain extent mitigated by the choice of the term “principal languages”, which perhaps left

space for other languages alongside them. However, there was no apparent commitment to make use of any such space, and the provisions have continued to be interpreted as requiring the exclusive use of English and French (Lynch, 1996; Willans, 2014).

### **The Vernacular Language Policy (1999)**

The second globalised discourse is the effectiveness of mother tongue education, incorporated very explicitly in the Vernacular Language Education policy within the Education Master Plan (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999). This Master Plan was developed during a period of intense reform across government departments, as an outcome of the Asian Development Bank sponsored structural adjustment package of the 1997 Comprehensive Reform Programme (CRP) (Gay, 2004). As a result, the policies set out within the Master Plan are influenced by guiding principles for the provision of effective education that had not been evident in Ministry of Education policy texts prior to this date. For example, the plan is structured according to the goals of access, relevance, quality, equity, language policy, partnerships, management and sustainability, indexing the influence of international donor priorities and discourses on policymaking within Vanuatu.

The principle of the Vernacular Language Education policy was that education would begin through the medium of the vernacular, before a transition to English or French after two to three years. This is therefore an example of an early-exit transitional model of bilingual education, although complicated by the transition to either of two different former colonial languages. The policy was justified as follows:

#### **Extract 4**

International experience has begun to place an increasingly strong emphasis on the child beginning his or her formal education in the mother tongue. ... [The] arguments

supporting the use of vernacular-language education are of three main types – pedagogical, cultural, and financial. Taken separately, each is convincing. Taken together, they provide an almost overwhelming argument in favor of adopting a new system. (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.69)

The globalised discourse of the effectiveness of mother tongue education, with its most influential origins generally traced to UNESCO's (1953) position paper, was clearly incorporated into the new national policy, marking a departure from the Ministry of Education's previous stance on the issue. Extract 4 refers to "international experience" and, by summarising the arguments within "three main types", it suggests the synthesis of a large body of research. The justifications, in terms of "pedagogical, cultural, and financial" arguments are integrated to present a very strong, reason-based foundation for the policy to teach through the media of the vernacular languages in early primary education. The Master Plan includes several other reformulations of the same arguments throughout the 30-page appendix that provides detail on the policy, and makes specific reference to the programme implemented in Papua New Guinea as a model for Vanuatu.

Extract 5 refers, once again, to a wide range of international experience, as well as a number of factors from the national context that are said to enhance the potential for success of the policy.

#### **Extract 5**

Our belief that the proposal can work in Vanuatu is based on experience from other countries, the many experiments already taking place in Vanuatu, the experience of many of Vanuatu's present leaders (who first became literate in their vernacular languages and only then learned English or French), and the ground swell of popular support the

measure is likely to engender. Experience from other countries also indicates that becoming literate in one's mother tongue leads to better, faster, and deeper acquisition of a foreign language. (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.18)

Consistent reference is made to the experiential evidence on which the policy is based, but the certainty with which these justifications are put forward is in stark contrast to the lack of such discussion in the policies of the 1980s and early 1990s. It was also noted in the previous section of this paper that no members of the Constitutional Committee appeared to raise the fact that they had acquired initial literacy through a vernacular, and yet this argument is now inserted as a self-evident justification for the policy. In short, the Master Plan puts forward a coherent and consistent argument that leaves little room for doubt that the government fully backs the policy, and wholly intends to implement it, based on a wide range of justifications.

The proposal appears to represent a radical shift in policy. The key education documents and national development plans of the preceding period (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1980; Vanuatu Ministry of Education Youth & Sports, 1983; Vanuatu National Planning & Statistics Office, 1988, 1992; Vanuatu National Planning Office, 1982) made no mention of the use of the vernaculars or Bislama, except for with reference to "practical activities where it is necessary to have assistance from local craftsmen and specialists" and "areas concerned with custom ... and with traditional and artistic activities" (Vanuatu Ministry of Education Youth & Sports, 1983). However, the Master Plan does not explain what has led to this change of direction.

In fact, it asserts that "for years, many ni-Vanuatu have been aware of the importance of educating a child through a language which he or she understands" (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.73). Reference is made to a South Pacific Commission sponsored study in

1951 that supported the principle of teaching through the vernaculars throughout the region. Reference is also made to recommendations in favour of this principle at each of the Vanuatu Language Planning Conference of 1981; the “Pacific Languages: Directions for the Future” conference, hosted by the University of the South Pacific in 1984; and a meeting of education stakeholders from throughout the region held in Vanuatu in 1986. The authors of the Master Plan obviously take seriously and are keen to celebrate the resolutions of these conferences, which were strongly in favour of the use of vernaculars in education (see also Liddicoat, 1990, on the Vernacular Languages in South Pacific Education conference of 1988, also hosted by Vanuatu). The reason that these resolutions had had no effect on the commitments within national education policymaking until this point is left unexplained, and it must be assumed that the incorporation of the discourse of the effectiveness of mother tongue education at this time results from international influence on national policy in general, following the CRP.

However, despite the globalised rhetoric in support of the Vernacular Language Education policy, which opened up clear ideological and implementational space for languages other than English and French, this space was never utilised. A lack of implementational support for the policy, in terms of the mapping of the needs and existing resources within communities, materials development, teacher training and teacher supervision, led to hasty and ineffective piloting (Nako, 2004). This resulted in a *lack of* evidence in favour of multilingual education in the government’s eyes, which is likely to have closed down ideological space to interrogate and pursue other approaches that might have been implemented more successfully (although see Stahl, 2004, for indications of more successful programmes initiated and supported by SIL).

However, it is not clear that the national government was ever fully committed to the policy, given its other priorities within the system-wide reform, which may well have closed

down the implementational space available for innovation. For example, the Master Plan states the intention to expand the basic education cycle to eight years, having achieved near universal access to six years (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.6), but Extract 6 makes clear that this change comes at a price:

#### **Extract 6**

The projections demonstrate that Vanuatu will be unable to afford ten years of basic education for all, even if there are no improvements in education quality. ... They demonstrate further that eight years of basic education for all will be possible only if certain cost-savings measures are introduced and if the expansion of the system beyond basic education (i.e., Grade 9 and above) is severely restricted. (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.6)

Commitments to extending the number of years of basic education for all children was a clear response to the global EFA agenda (UNESCO, 1990), but this put constraints on the nature of the education to which children can have increased access. The government was unable to consider measures to improve the quality of education, which might have included a major language policy reform. Indeed, a key justification for the Vernacular Language Education policy was actually that it would be a “major source of savings”, based on the experience of other countries in which similar initiatives had led to higher attendance rates, and lower repetition and dropout rates (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.70). Given that the Master Plan was produced in response to the CRP, it is unsurprising that a new policy became framed by a discourse of cost-efficiency. The innovation was set out as a rational solution to a problem of cost, thus being attractive to the donor community, but without necessarily addressing the complexity of policy implementation (see also Siegel, 1997a,

p.212, for a similar critique of the Papua New Guinea government's commitment to vernacular education, driven principally by the need to expand access to education).

At the same time, discussions of multilingualism in Vanuatu in the 1990s must be understood with reference to the politico-linguistic context of the decade, in which there was a resurgence of Francophone representation in the political sphere. The elections of 1991 had seen the end of an era dominated by the Anglophone-oriented Vanua'aku Pati, and heralded the start of a period that would see (and continues to see) coalitions of increasing numbers of parties. The first coalition government of the 1990s brought together traditional Anglophone and Francophone interests, described as “a government of Anglo-French accommodation” (Premdas & Steeves, 1995, p.225). In practical terms, Francophones became well-represented in the cabinet and the civil service, and French-speaking advisors were increasingly recruited. Other efforts were made to raise the status of French within the country in relation to English. For example, in the Ombudsman's (1996) “second special report on the observance of multilingualism”, the need to “preserve” multilingualism was actually made principally with reference to preserving French (Early, 1999).

Although the Master Plan provides clear support for vernacular-medium education, it also calls strongly for “bilingualism” in English and French, and these two goals are linked together in the text. International evidence is once again cited to argue that “vernacular-language instruction at the beginning of basic education may be the single most important thing which Vanuatu can do to improve the standards of spoken and written English and French in the country” (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.69). Although this argument does not, in itself, close down space for the vernaculars and Bislama to be used, it becomes clear that these languages are valued only until a transition can be made to English and French, and it is the focus on “bilingualism” in these languages (Extract 7) that is more problematic:



### **Extract 7**

Bilingualism in Use of International Languages. There is also virtually unanimous support among ni-Vanuatu for continuing to use both English and French as international languages and media of instruction. This support goes well beyond the wish to preserve the letter of the law as set forth in the Constitution. We believe that our bilingual society in two international languages makes us unique in the Pacific, and almost all of us, from parents in the village to Parliamentarians, perceive cultural and economic reasons for keeping both languages. We share a vision of a bilingual society where all secondary-school graduates will be bilingual and where the need for translation would have decreased dramatically because virtually everyone will be able to understand everyone else, whichever language is being used. As parents, we hope that our children would be fluent in both. For financial and logistical reasons, we intend to continue with the dual system for the time being, with efforts being made to improve the teaching of French at the upper levels of the Anglophone system, and vice versa. In the long run, however, as ever-larger numbers of people become fluent in both languages and bilingual teachers become available, we intend to move towards a bilingual system. (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.19)

As in Extract 1, this extract constructs ni-Vanuatu as a united group, through the use of first person plural pronouns, and various phrases such as “unanimous”, “almost all of us” and “share”. However, it recontextualises the dual colonial legacy that had previously been framed in a negative way, presenting Vanuatu as “unique” (presumably in a good way) in its use of both English and French. This legacy is then instrumentalised through an argument of double opportunity (Willans, 2014) to argue that ni-Vanuatu gain double the economic

advantages associated with such languages by having access to both English and French. This strong rhetoric in favour of “bilingualism” eclipses the arguments put forward for the incorporation of the vernaculars.

The Master Plan clearly made a strong rhetorical commitment to the incorporation of a greater number of languages in education. However, very little appeared to be done to actually implement the policy and, five years later, little had been achieved (Nako, 2004). It is true that the logistical implications of providing early education in a very large number of languages were off-putting (despite evidence from Papua New Guinea that this can be done (Klaus, 2003)), but it is not clear that the government was ever truly committed to finding ways forward. Its priorities at the end of the 1990s were in meeting the objectives set out by the CRP in order to improve the efficiency of the education system, and ultimately to contribute to economic growth. In addition, the policy coincided with the commitment to the achievement of universal primary education, through the global EFA agenda, which at the time was about to be revisited at the World Education Forum in Dakar (UNESCO, 2000). Finally, following a decade of Anglophone-dominated politics, there was a resurgence of support for French within Vanuatu, and this appears to have eclipsed concerns for other languages. The national government was in a very difficult position in 1999. It was still dealing with the logistical difficulties left behind by the joint colonial period, while increasingly having to orient towards global development priorities. Although the Master Plan was unequivocal about the need to implement initial education through the medium of more familiar languages, there just did not seem to be space amongst the other government priorities for this to happen.

### **A new education language policy proposal (2010)**

The third globalised discourse is plurilingualism. This discourse formed the basis of a new education language policy proposal in 2010, thirty years after independence. This was put forward by a policymaking group established by the government following a national education summit in 2006, and led by a French technical advisor. Ethnographic fieldwork for the main study on which this paper is based was conducted during 2011, at which time the discussions surrounding this policy proposal were still ongoing. This section of the paper therefore draws on data from interviews and informal conversations held both at the Ministry of Education and at two rural secondary schools, in order to contextualise the environment within which language policy was being debated at this time.

The proposal put forward by the team was for the two streams of education to be combined into a common system in which all children would begin with vernacular-medium instruction, before gradually transitioning to bilingual instruction in the two former colonial languages (Education Language Policy Team, 2010b). The report presented a complex matrix of staggered transitions for each subject from the vernacular to the first former colonial language, followed by a second transition to the other former colonial language for many subjects. However, the decision as to which former colonial language would be introduced first was never made, and the language policy is still under review with alternatives being considered.

The proposal to incorporate the vernaculars, English and French (with Bislama included briefly as a subject) is stated to be based on the notion of “plurilingual education”. According to the report, “only a plurilingual education can satisfy the requirements of global and national participation and the specific needs of communities separated from cultural and linguistic point of view” (sic) (Education Language Policy Team, 2010b, p.9). This builds on the principles set out in the team’s preliminary report of 2009:

### **Extract 8**

Training in languages should be viewed holistically and thus cover all the languages traditionally spoken in Vanuatu (mother tongues, vehicular languages), the languages of long-established minorities and foreign languages. The purpose of language training is to develop individual potential within a general context of plurilingualism – a concept we prefer to bilingualism because it is closer to language reality in Vanuatu. (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.2)

Current usage of the term ‘plurilingual education’ is generally attributed to the Council of Europe (e.g. Council of Europe, 2001). The concept “has as its core the idea that European citizens in the twenty-first century must have at their disposal a varying and shifting repertoire of language practices to fulfil different purposes” (García, 2009, p.54). A fundamental aspect of the concept is that speakers will have varying degrees of proficiency in the different languages within their repertoires, depending on the range of purposes and contexts, and the principles set out in Extract 8 fall in line with this.

An electronic search of the fifteen key education plans and strategies published by the Ministry of Education in the period from 1997 to 2009, in addition to the National Education Act (Republic of Vanuatu, 2001) and the National Language Policy (Vanuatu National Language Council, 2006), returns no instance of the term ‘plurilingualism’, and it appears that the Education Language Policy team report is the first record of its usage in Vanuatu policymaking. Once again, traces of a new, globalised discourse that suggests the opening up of space for multiple languages within education can be seen within a national policy text, framing the policy as both democratic and oriented to the needs of individual learners.

However, once again, it appears unlikely that the outcome for multilingual education will be any different, as there is little evidence of any impact of this discourse beyond its

manifestations within an official policy text. One principle of ‘plurilingual education’ is that “a holistic and coherent approach” to language education will be taken (Council of Europe, 2007, p.8), in order to “promote an integrated competence and a consciousness of learners’ existing repertoires and of their potential to develop and adapt those repertoires to changing circumstances” (ibid., p.41). It is suggested here that Vanuatu’s proposals for a new education language policy focus particularly on the further development of additional linguistic resources, at the expense of those that already exist in learners’ repertoires. The resurgence of support for French, documented in the previous section, has been consolidated in the argument that both English and French are essential languages for all ni-Vanuatu, leading language policies to focus on these languages above all others.

Interviewees argued that knowledge of both English and French would bring additional advantages both for individuals and for the development of the country as a whole. For example, when asked whether it was necessary for individual ni-Vanuatu to know both languages, the Director of Basic Education replied:

Wan i naf. Be taem yu gat tufala tugeta hem i wan advantage.<sup>iii</sup>

(One is enough. But when you have both together it’s an advantage.)

The former Minister of Education referred to this advantage as an “asset” for the country as a whole:

Ating se hem i wan asset blong (. ) um yu gat wan sitisen o wan person we hem i save yusum both lanwis? Taem yu mekem comparaison wetem sam kaontri we oli olsem Vanuatu. Olsem uh Mauritius o Canada o ol international organisation. Vanuatu i no kasem level yet we ol kaontri oli stap long hem but hem i save go from hemia sapos asset ia i stap. Hem i quality blong wan man i save yusum lanwis monitor/em tu lanwis. Two international language.

(I think it's an asset to (.) um you have a citizen or a person who can use both languages? When you compare with some countries like Vanuatu. Like uh Mauritius or Canada or international organisations. Vanuatu hasn't reached that level yet that these countries are at but it can get there if it has this asset. It's the quality of an individual to be able to use or monitor two languages. Two international languages.)

This drive for both English and French by Ministry officials was mirrored within the discourse of teachers, students and parents at the two rural schools at which fieldwork was conducted. Many parents still chose to enrol some children in each medium, in order to ensure their families had access to the opportunities associated with both languages, while teachers and students alike argued that it was necessary for individuals to master both. The 2009 census indicates that 76% of Vanuatu's population lives in rural areas, where neither English nor French is widely used, but the argument continues to be made that *both* these languages are essential for all (Willans, 2014).

The resultant desire to incorporate at least three languages in education has led to the division of the timetable into separate blocks to enable each to be used as media of instruction at different times, within a conceptualisation of multilingualism that Banda (2009, following Heugh, 2003) would refer to as "multiple monolingualisms". Inevitably, the more familiar languages are allocated less time, since it is considered necessary to spend as much as time as possible learning the languages that are less familiar, and we see the two former colonial languages dominate. This is far from a plurilingual framework that purports to integrate the learning of languages within a holistic approach (Council of Europe, 2007; Education Language Policy Team, 2009), but is akin to a double transitional model in which one

language is replaced by another after a few years, before a second transition a few years later (see Willans, 2013, for a detailed critique of this particular policy proposal).

Once again, it appears that the incorporation of a globalised discourse that supports the use of a greater number of languages is driven by the perceived need to address a different issue – in this instance, the imbalance between English and French. The proposal that had initially been set out by the Education Language Policy team (2009) made this clear. Three different options were put forward for public consultation, referred to by Early (2009, p.5) as a “false choice”, since each stipulated that the vernacular would be used first, followed by a transition to French and, later, a transition to English in some subjects. This order was justified by the following:

**Extract 9**

It is evident that plurilingualism requires a particular sequence in the introduction of the languages taught; with a wide consensus, all the Ni-Vanuatu people we have met are unanimous to state that: the first learning during kindergarten period enables the child to extend the social scope of the use of his (her) mother tongue and build up cognitive faculties by verbalising in that tongue with the help of the school; then French comes before English as medium of instruction. (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.5)

It is not explained how the “consensus” of the ni-Vanuatu public was gathered, since this preliminary report was issued prior to the public consultations. Indeed, the results of these consultations later revealed that none of the options was actually accepted in its original form (Education Language Policy Team, 2010a). Furthermore, no explanation is given for the “particular sequence” of languages that is presented as “evident”. The globalised discourse of plurilingualism, which would suggest the opening up of space for multiple languages to be

incorporated, appears to be used in part to justify a prior agenda to bolster the teaching of French in Vanuatu. Although the final report (Education Language Policy Team, 2010b) then leaves open the question of whether English or French will be prioritised, the agenda to support French is still indicated. The section titled ‘Development of multilingualism and the significance of plurilingualism’, which serves as a preface to the policy proposals, sets out the argument that enrolments in the Francophone education system have declined since independence (p.15). It makes reference to the Ombudsman’s (1996) report outlined above, implying the need to redress the balance between the two streams, and arguing that those educated within the Francophone stream are disadvantaged on leaving school due to a lack of further opportunities. Before even outlining the proposals for the incorporation of multiple languages, an agenda to revitalise French is therefore set out. Although ‘plurilingualism’ is explained in terms that make sense in Vanuatu, this approach does not open up space for relevant linguistic resources to be incorporated, since the desire for the resources of one particular language appears to be driving the policy.

As the country looked back on thirty years of independence, prospects for multilingual education remained relatively unchanged. The use of all of Vanuatu’s languages was incorporated into the new education language policy proposal, but within an orientation that prioritised English/French ‘bilingualism’ rather than pluri/multilingualism. Despite the space that appeared to be opened up for multiple linguistic resources through the globalised discourse of plurilingualism, it seems that this discourse was being utilised with intent to increase the amount of French spoken within the country, as Vanuatu continued to deal with its dual colonial legacy.

## **Conclusion**



Throughout the few decades of Vanuatu's existence as an independent country, official policy has been to teach almost exclusively through the medium of either English or French. This article has discussed three particular moments at which space may appear to have opened up for the resources of additional languages to be incorporated, demonstrated through argumentation that draws on a number of globalised discourses. However, at each of these three policy moments, official language-in-education policy has remained relatively unchanged, with the maintenance of a dual submersion system in either English or French. These two former colonial languages continue to be highly desired and, if anything, their status within the education system has increased with time, as it has become considered that 'bilingualism' in English and French is essential. Despite the rhetoric to move beyond the dual submersion model, the desire for both English and French appears to close down any space that is available for alternative language practices.

Evidence from other contexts demonstrates that multilingual or bilingual education can work (e.g. Benson, 2005; Brock-Utne, Desai, Qorro, & Pitman, 2010; Chimbutane, 2011; Heugh, 2011), even within linguistically diverse and poorly-resourced countries, with the most compelling evidence provided from Ethiopia (Heugh, 2010), and from the comparable context of Papua New Guinea (Klaus, 2003; Siegel, 1997a). However, in Vanuatu, space that might appear to have opened up for the vernaculars and Bislama has been shut down by the perceived need for all ni-Vanuatu to have access to both English and French, and by a lack of serious interrogation of other possibilities. While the language planning framework continues to treat each language as a separate and discrete entity, requiring its own slot on the timetable, the desire for both English and French leaves insufficient room for Bislama and the vernaculars. An alternative scenario can be imagined in which teachers and pupils can make use of the resources of vernacular(s), Bislama, English and French in order to learn, without compartmentalising these into discrete media of instruction (see Willans, 2013, for

elaboration). However, unless serious attempts are made to occupy ideological and implementational space when it opens up, this type of proposal can only be imagined.

The discussion within this paper also raises numerous questions for any research that takes a national education policy as its focus. While the influence of supranational donors and organisations has recently been highlighted in a wide range of policy literature (Brock-Utne, 2007; Goldstein, 2004; King, 2007; Mazrui, 1997), do national governments still retain control over the ways that they utilise and transform these supranational agendas? Are we seeing “double standards” and “a hidden agenda”, through which supranational agencies may declare rhetorical support for multilingual education but continue to exert conditions that favour the sole use of European languages (Mazrui, 1997, p.43), or are we seeing tensions between globalised and more local priorities? To what extent are national policymakers complicit in the agendas set by donors and external agencies, thereby maintaining their ‘elite’ positions of power, and to what extent are they simply having to mediate between the conflicting drivers of policy change?

The natural question that follows is what do we mean by ‘top-down policymaking’ when it is hard to define who or what constitutes ‘the top’? It has long been pointed out that no solitary body is responsible for a unidirectional process of agenda setting, policy formation, and implementation, but it is increasingly difficult to identify who or what is exerting what kind of top-down influence. Is there a new, globalised chain of policy, in which supranational agendas exert an influence on national policymaking bodies, who in turn get to influence educators (and ultimately learners)? Although both of these types of influence are undoubtedly being exerted, it is clearly rather more complicated than this. Tollefson and Tsui’s (2004, p.viii) call “to unravel the complex social and political agendas” involved must increasingly be answered by extending the scope of enquiry further outside the national domain of policymaking.

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<sup>ii</sup> For consistency, I refer to this party throughout by the name which they have used since 1977. They originally formed as the New Hebrides Cultural Association in 1971, reconstituted themselves as a political party, the New Hebrides National Party, later that year, and finally renamed themselves as the Vanua'aku Pati in 1977.

<sup>iii</sup> Interviews were carried out predominantly in Bislama, although certain elements that would be recognised as English or French were used. My transcription adopts the convention of Blackledge and Creese (2010) in which I use the same font for elements of all three languages, thus avoiding marking fixed boundaries between them.