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Grassroots talk back on social media: An analysis of public engagement in Vanuatu’s language-in-education policy

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Abstract

This paper analyses the participatory space for political debate opened up by social media in Vanuatu with reference to the implementation of a recent language-in-education policy, jointly funded by the governments of Vanuatu, Australia and New Zealand. Although Vanuatu appears to have been debating the same language issues for several decades, what is new is the level of participatory engagement in political matters, with the Facebook group *Yumi Toktok Stret* providing one platform through which democratic citizenship is established and negotiated. Analysis of a debate that erupted on the group in March 2016 reveals significant disquiet and confusion about a change to the medium of instruction in early primary education. I argue that social media provides an invaluable insight into the extent to which the general public understands, feels consulted about, and supports policy change. The debate on *Yumi Toktok Stret* also shows that the Government, its international development partners, and technical advisors would be well advised to pay attention to such debates, and engage with social media as a new mediated 'think tank' through which new policies can be democratically debated.

Keywords

language-in-education policy, social media, development aid donors, civil engagement, Vanuatu, Bislama

Introduction

With mobile phones and internet services becoming dramatically cheaper, social media has opened up an “alternative avenue for free speech and civic engagement across the Pacific region” (Tarai, 2015, p.1), as citizens are coming to realise that they have the means to engage and participate in national politics in an unprecedented way (ToKunai, 2012). A national government’s position within this new mediatised policy space is complex. Traditionally, governments have had control over the extent to which their citizens are informed about political matters, and have been able to work relatively unchallenged by their electorates. An end to this unquestioned authority is understandably unwelcome, and many Pacific governments have recently attempted to censor public criticism of their activities on social media. For example, Vanuatu banned its public servants from using social media in 2016 (Radio New Zealand 2016). Nauru banned a number of sites including Facebook in 2015. Papua New Guinea’s 2016 cybercrime bill contains ambiguous provisions on defamation that may be used to undermine freedom of expression. The Solomon Islands has taken steps to deregister the Facebook group *Forum Solomon Islands International*. Finally, the Police Commissioner of Fiji warned social media users in 2015 to tone down their criticisms of designs for a new national flag, despite the Government having asked for public feedback via Facebook (Tarai, 2015). There is clearly some disquiet across the region about social media usage.

Yumi Toktok Stret (henceforth YTS, explained below) is a Facebook group established by a group of young graduates in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, for the purpose of debate on a range of political, social and economic issues relevant to Vanuatu. At the time of writing (June 2017), there are more than 76,500 participants in the group, roughly three times the number of members that there were in March 2016, the month in which the data was collected for this paper. Membership in the group comprises ni-Vanuatu (nationals and

citizens of Vanuatu) based in Vanuatu, ni-Vanuatu based overseas, citizens of other countries based in Vanuatu, and citizens of other countries based overseas who presumably have some connection to the country. The population of Vanuatu was estimated by the most recent (2009) census to be 234,000. Even taking into account group members residing in and originating from other countries, the figures demonstrate the significant membership and increasing popularity of this group. Certain events have sparked prolonged flurries of debate on YTS, including the bribery case in late 2015 that led to the imprisonment of 14 members of parliament, the subsequent general election, and the proposal to introduce income tax. Other topics such as the rights and roles of women, the increase in traffic accidents, and the lack of jobs for graduates provide recurrent themes, which appear relatively frequently on the group's newsfeed for short periods of time.

My informal observations as a member of the group suggest that posts relating to language-in-education issues are relatively infrequent. However, on 11 March 2016, one member's question about a change to medium of instruction policy in early primary education led to two weeks of fierce debate, and is the focus of this paper. The paper presents an analysis of this Facebook debate for three broad reasons. The first is in attempt to listen to the 'policy voices' (Linn, 2010) that cut across multiple levels of stakeholders without differentiating between members of parliament, advisors, teachers and parents as legitimate voices. The second is to examine the way the national Government is positioned as either unwilling or unable to explain its policymaking to its electorate, failing to take control of strategies that may have originated elsewhere but are now firmly located in the national sphere. And the third is in the hope that those with policy power take seriously the concerns of the general public that are raised through this debate, as they do now need to take ownership of the policy if it has any chance of success. This brief snapshot of participatory engagement in policy reveals positive signs of the public's critical interest in language-in-

education issues, but also highlights a wide range of resistance, criticism and misunderstanding that the Ministry of Education and its international development partners cannot afford to ignore. I use this case to argue that the Government, its development partners, and technical advisors would be well advised to pay attention to these types of debate, with social media as a new mediated ‘think tank’ through which new policies can be democratically debated.

‘Yumi toktok stret’: The nature and status of Bislama

The Bislama phrase *Yumi toktok stret* can be translated most literally as ‘we speak directly’. Bislama is Vanuatu’s national variety of Melanesian Pidgin, an English-lexified expanded or creolising pidgin spoken throughout Melanesia. The term ‘English-lexified’ means that most vocabulary derives from English, while the grammatical structure does not (Crowley, 2004). Some aspects of the grammar reflect features of the Austronesian languages spoken throughout Melanesia that are more complex than English. For example, *yumi* is the inclusive plural first-person pronoun in a system that distinguishes between inclusivity and exclusivity, and between dual, trial and plural number. Other aspects of the grammar reflect a tendency in pidgins and creoles towards simplification. For example, tense and aspect are indicated through separate free morphemes rather than inflectional affixes, meaning that verbs such as *toktok* never change their form. Lexical items may exhibit multi-functionality, such that the word *stret* can be used both as an adjective and an adverb, with meanings that encompass ‘straight’, ‘directly’, ‘openly’ or even ‘fine’ as in the phrase *i stret nomo* (that’s fine). So the group name captures multiple meanings: ‘we share our ideas frankly’, ‘we talk directly to the people concerned’, ‘we tell it like it is’, or simply ‘straight talking’.

Recognition of the lexical similarities between English and Bislama but the lack of corresponding grammatical similarities leads, at best, to futile attempts to compare the

complexity and utility of the two languages and, more problematically, to the false belief that Bislama simply has no grammar at all. Three negative attitudes held by the general public are well-documented in the literature from the 1990s (Crowley, 1996; Lynch, 1996; Siegel, 1997), and appear not to have changed a great deal since then (Vandeputte-Tavo, 2013; Willans, 2014). Firstly, the dominance of English vocabulary and the phenomenon of multi-functionality have led to the label '*Broken English*', despite the comprehensive development of Bislama vocabulary for use in new domains from Bible translation to climate change awareness, and despite the fact that English itself has borrowed so extensively from other languages. Secondly, although a Bislama dictionary and reference grammar exist (Crowley, 2003, 2004), and although a spell check exists for Microsoft Word (Government of Vanuatu, 2007) that would assist with consistent usage, spelling errors dominate in public documents and newspapers, leading to the perception that Bislama cannot be written in a standardised way. Finally, it is considered to have a negative influence on the way people use English, although, as Siegel (1999) notes, very little research has been conducted in the area, and his own small-scale research (Siegel, 1997) shows no such influence. Bislama has thus often been banned from schools, merely compounding some of these issues, since users are not taught to write the language consistently or understand its grammatical patterns.

However, Bislama is constitutionally recognised as an official language alongside the two former colonial languages, English and French. It is also the sole national language of Vanuatu, uniting the country in two ways. With more than one hundred indigenous languages, Bislama is a lingua franca for all, whether spoken as a second or first language. In addition, due to a dual colonial arrangement between the British and the French from 1906 to 1980 (Van Trease, 1995), ni-Vanuatu continue to be divided between English-medium and French-medium schools, giving Bislama an important role as the lingua franca between

‘Anglophones’ and ‘Francophones’ in high-status domains such as Parliament and the media. Bislama is also the most commonly used language on YTS.

Analysis of the Facebook discussion

This paper examines conflicting discourses within a language ideological debate (Blommaert, 1999) that is by no means unique to Vanuatu as a postcolonial country contending with tensions between indigenous languages and former colonial languages (Meeuwis, 1999; Stroud, 1999). These tensions have been described in detail elsewhere with reference to the legacy of Vanuatu’s complex colonial past (Miles, 1998; Van Trease, 1995), and the development of language-in-education policy since independence (Crowley, 2005; Early, 1999; Willans, 2015). They are presented here through an analysis of a social media discussion, as a way of understanding the extent to which there is public buy-in to the work being carried out by the Government of Vanuatu and its donor partners in the education sector. The YTS Facebook group is considered a “site of grassroots media engagement ... offering a forum to voices that are excluded from mainstream media” (Androutsopoulos, 2012), and it is this engagement and its implications that the study attempts to understand. The study is situated within a body of language planning work that recognises the agency of those outside traditional positions of policy power (McCarty, 2011; Shohamy, 2006), and moves towards a form of engaged language policy and planning (Davis, 2014), that brings about dialogic and transformational engagement with people less visibly involved in language planning.

This study is non-reactive (Zeller, 2017) in the sense that I did not deliberately set out to elicit the data. I have been a member of YTS since October 2014 and follow discussions with interest, although I only post on language-related topics. I could be considered a participant-observer in this particular debate as I commented on six occasions myself, two of which were

to post links to a series of blog posts that I wrote on the issue whilst the discussion was unfolding (Willans, 2016). Once the debate had ended, I saved an offline copy of all 989 posts within the single thread (the original post, comments that replied directly to the original post and sub-comments that replied to these comments). Within a broad framework of thematic analysis, I used an open coding approach to identify recurrent topics, which were synthesised into four key themes, which are used to structure the four main sections of this paper.

YTS is a closed group (members must request to join and be accepted by another member), which had just over 26,500 members during March 2016. We can consider the data discussed in this paper to be public in the sense that all comments were made in the full knowledge that they would be read by a large number of people who are not personally known to the poster but still restricted in the sense that people can only view the discussions if they have joined the group. For these reasons, I use no profile names or information that would identify participants from this paper alone. However, I make no claims that participants remain anonymous, since members can easily return to the discussion and view the comments again. I have therefore not focused on the comments of individuals in detail, as my arguments draw on the collective rather than individual views of the YTS members, and what they can tell actors and agencies involved in language planning about new mediatised spaces of political engagement.

The debate

On 11 March 2016, an opposition member of parliament posted the following question on YTS: '*Igud blo yumi tijim ol pikinini wetem Bislama or?* [Is it good to teach children with Bislama or?¹]. By 25 March, the question had received 562 'likes', 5 'loves' and 5 'laughs' via Facebook reactions. It received a total of 988 comments, and 222 participants contributed

in total, of whom 129 posted once each, 56 posted 2-5 times, 28 posted 6-20 times, and 9 posted more than 20 times.

The question relates to a policy endorsed in 2012 that is in the process of being implemented nationwide. Prior to 2012, the medium of instruction throughout primary and secondary school was either English or French. Two separate school systems were created during the Anglo-French colonial period, using separate curricula and instructional languages. When Vanuatu became independent in 1980, the contents of the curriculum were unified for primary and junior secondary education, but this curriculum continued to be delivered in English in Anglophone schools and in French in Francophone schools, while the senior secondary curriculum remained completely separate. In 2010, a new national curriculum was launched for the whole of primary and secondary education, followed by a new language-in-education policy two years later, which stipulated that teachers should:

...teach in either French or English in all schools. However, in the first two years of school, Bislama or a local vernacular can be used while either French or English is introduced by the second semester of Year 3. By the end of Year 3, the language of instruction should be either French or English. However, teachers will continue to use, for as long as is necessary, the agreed local vernacular languages to support children as they make the transition to English or French. (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 2012, p.2)

To avoid constantly referring to “Bislama or a local vernacular” and “French or English”, the labels L1, L2 and L3 are used throughout this paper, following the definitions provided in the policy (p.3):

L1: the dominant language children use at home and in the community where children and their parents live. This language is usually their mother tongue, which in Vanuatu might be a vernacular language, Bislama or French or English.

L2: One of the principal languages of education that children will learn and is either French or English, whichever has been agreed to be the language of instruction.

L3: The principal language of education not used as the language of instruction. This language will be taught as a foreign language from Year 4.

L4: Other foreign languages studied by students specialising in language studies at a senior level of schooling.

The term ‘vernacular’ is widely used across the Pacific to refer to the indigenous languages. These languages are rarely referred to by name in Vanuatu, except in linguistic catalogues and archives, at which point the names used are often simply the geographical locations in which the languages are spoken. Many children speak two or more vernaculars (for example, if their parents come from different islands), and many speak Bislama in addition to a vernacular, while others speak Bislama as their L1. The numerical labels therefore do not necessarily capture the sequence of acquisition of the different languages, but distinguish between the home language(s), and subsequent languages learnt at school. A local vernacular is used during early education wherever the community in which the school is situated is linguistically homogeneous enough for this to be feasible. However, where a community is too mixed, particularly in the larger urban areas, Bislama is used, and the thread on YTS relates specifically to this scenario.

The core pedagogical argument on which the new policy is based is that children cannot learn effectively through a language that they do not already know well. Literacy levels in Vanuatu are low, according to results from national assessments such as the Vanuatu Standardised Test of Achievement (VANSTA), regional assessments such as the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA), and internationally designed assessments such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), and these results are blamed in part on the use of L2 from the start of school. This argument is a familiar one in the international literature (Cummins, 2009, Heugh, 2011, Thomas & Collier, 2002), and UNESCO’s (2016) report ‘If you don’t understand, how can you learn?’ reiterates the point it has been making since 1953 that children who do not speak the classroom language at home will struggle at school (UNESCO, 1953). With reference to reading in particular, Walter (2013, p. 265) suggests that “educational policy on language of instruction may, in fact, be the most salient explanatory variable in explaining the widely observed deficit in reading skill

development” in low-income countries. He reports that children who learn to read in an L2 in such contexts only begin to decode meaning accurately during their fourth year of school, and only start to become fluent during the fifth year, at which point they are still only likely to be able to understand 30-40% of the material presented in academic texts considered appropriate for their level such as those used to learn other school subjects. If Walter is correct, even Vanuatu’s brightest students are likely to be reading well below the level required for successful learning across the curriculum. The intention of the new policy is thus to address this issue by starting with education through L1, whilst also mastering other languages to a high level.

The question and subsequent comments posted by the opposition member suggest that he feels that the policy was passed without adequate consultation and that there is still some confusion as to its rationale. However, the policy came into being in 2012, well before the current parliament was elected in 2016, and the final policy is the product of a very long and complex process that has only recently started to effect real change. The Education Master Plan of 1999 was the first publicly available document produced in response to the Asian Development Bank-sponsored Comprehensive Reform Program of 1997, in which the Ministry of Education set out its priorities for the education sector. This plan included the proposal for early education to be conducted through the vernacular before a transition to either English or French at around Grade 3, but this particular attempt never got further than the pilot phase, and the Education Act of 2001 only allowed for the possibility that the Minister might stipulate that certain subjects should be taught through the vernacular or Bislama.

As the global education arena came to be more and more shaped by supranational strategies such as the Millennium Development Goals, Education for All, and the World Bank’s Education Sector Strategy, the Vanuatu Government started to release its national

priorities for education via the Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy in 2006 and the Vanuatu Education Road Map in 2009. A joint partnership approach to funding was then established between the governments of Australia, New Zealand and Vanuatu, through which donor funds have been pooled and allocated towards the priorities established in the national strategies under the Vanuatu Education Sector Program (VESP) from 2012. Literacy is given high priority throughout the strategy documents that emerge from such collaborations between the Ministry of Education and its donor partners, and the difficulties of teaching children to read and write through a language they do not speak at home are highlighted. However, very limited attention is devoted in the policy texts to the planning of any actual change.

One barrier to this change has been a rather different national language planning priority: The creation of a single education system out of the two that were inherited from a dual British and French colonial period. ‘Quality education’ in Vanuatu must encompass unification of two different curricula and assessment systems, and the opportunity for all children to master both English and French, as well as the attainment of other goals such as raising literacy and numeracy rates. Attempts to prioritise the vernacular or Bislama in education have thus often been viewed as threats to the maintenance of English, and particularly French (Vandeputte-Tavo, 2013). In 2009, two different international consultants were recruited, who had to work within this complexity. The first was engaged to lead the development of a new unified national curriculum for both Anglophone and Francophone schools. The second was engaged to lead the development of a new language-in-education policy in which the vernacular, Bislama, English and French could all have a place. Due to several disagreements, the curriculum team led by one consultant and language policy team led by the other failed to work together (interviews with both consultants, 2011), and the suggestions put forward by the latter for a double transitional policy from L1 to French to English by the end of primary school were completely unworkable (interview with Director of

Educational Services, 2011; see also Vandeputte-Tavo, 2013; Willans, 2013). Although the new curriculum statement was launched in 2010, it contained only vague statements about language that were pending an outcome from the work of the language policy team – which did not materialise. Eventually, the matter was handed over to the curriculum team, who drafted the language policy that was subsequently approved by the National Education Commission and the Council of Ministers. The policy is essentially the same as that contained in the Master Plan of 1999 in that it prioritises the teaching of early literacy in L1, before making an early transition to L2, which would be either English or French. The resultant policy is far from ideal, as the transition to L2 is made very early in primary school, and the policy still reinforces the monoglossic ideology of one language at a time in the classroom (see Willans, 2017). However, Vanuatu does appear to have reached a high degree of consensus between government policy, technical advice, and donor support with regard to the importance of providing initial education in L1, and the implementation process sees good cooperation between the different actors involved.

Two further technical advisors have been engaged to assist with the materials development work. One was recruited internationally to work on the pedagogical content with the curriculum development unit, which is producing Bislama versions of all classroom materials for kindergarten and the first two years of primary school. The other, a naturalised citizen of Vanuatu, is a linguist at the University of the South Pacific who has surveyed the linguistic situation across Class 1 of all primary schools, and has coordinated a series of workshops through which linguists with expertise in particular languages of Vanuatu work with communities to prepare the early primary materials in 45 of the larger vernaculars. So the current situation is one in which a policy has developed over a period of nearly two decades, shaped by both national and international priorities, and is finally being rolled out into schools. Its implementation appears sudden, but it is in fact the collaboration of the

Government, its development partners, and locally-based advisors that is really new, since the funding is in place specifically to implement a policy that has already been passed by the Council of Ministers. There is a real incentive for the Government to show that they are moving forward with a policy that has been in progress for so long, and there is a real incentive for the donor community to keep things moving while the political scene is apparently cleaning itself up after the bribery scandal that led to the imprisonment of a number of long-serving members of parliament. From the perspective of the partnership, this policy has to work, since a significant amount of money and resources have been invested in it, and since the first cohorts of children are already in the new system.

However, when the debate about the use of Bislama in early education flared up on YTS, it became clear that many members of the public knew nothing about the policy, and that there was a lot of confusion about its details. Although the Government and its donor partners may have made significant progress in reaching a mutual understanding amongst themselves, they appear to have left their most important stakeholders - the public - behind. Whatever the opposition MP's motive for posting the question might have been, this lack of public buy-in to what is understood to be the Government's idea of educational progress is potentially very damaging to its success. The remainder of this paper discusses the YTS debate about the new policy in detail.

Education in languages that children understand

A small number of participants in the YTS debate seem well informed about the pedagogical rationale for the policy, and contribute multiple posts setting out the arguments for teaching through languages that children already speak fluently. They present the use of English and French only as a '*barrier to learning*', '*wan bigfala wall ia we i blokem teacher wetem student* [a big wall that separates the teacher and student]', confusing children during their

first encounters with formal education, and making them reluctant to speak in class for fear of making mistakes. These posts also explain how Year 1 children are participating more actively since the policy change, understanding the teacher's explanations and instructions, expressing themselves enthusiastically (teachers having to stop them talking at the start of break time) and writing full page stories, a situation that contrasts starkly with classrooms under the previous L2-only policy. When others maintain that L2 only is preferable, these participants point out that Bislama has long been used even when the policy prohibited it, that a very small minority of the population had access to formal education in the past (a '*pyramid we fulap oli stap long starting line be long end few nomo oli go true* [pyramid with many people on the starting line but very few going through to the end]'), that literacy levels remain low despite over 30 years of this system since independence, and that the many adults who struggle with administrative paperwork today were educated in this supposedly superior L2-only model. Some provide anecdotal evidence that initial education through L1 worked well in the pilot that followed the 1999 Education Master Plan, while others explain that countries such as Samoa, which conducts primary education in Samoan, have much better outcomes in regional assessments. A small number of posts make the point that countries such as China are more developed due to mainstream education in their own language. Some YTS members thus appear very well-informed about the policy, and well-versed in the discourse that supports it. Unfortunately, this group is in the minority, according to my analysis.

Reactions from other participants to this knowledge are mixed. Many posters thank participants for their explanations or 'like' the posts, seeming to genuinely want to understand. Indeed, while only 10.5% of posts to the thread address the pedagogical aspects of the policy, these posts are the most focused on informational content, containing non-rhetorical questions and responses. For example, some respond directly with affirmative comments such as '*stret toktok ia nao* [correct explanation]', '*nice explanation. thanks*' and

'likem tingting blong yu [like your idea]'. Others request further information, either calling indirectly for 'those involved *oli highlightem yumi smol* [to explain a bit to us]', or addressing apparently knowledgeable individuals directly:

Bro sipose yu save elaborate lo previous system and maybe save differencem tufala system ya. mi kasem smol about Vernacular lo early age but sipose i gat more clear advantages we yu save outlinem then bae ie help more.. ta [Bro could you elaborate on the previous system and maybe differentiate the two systems. I understand about the vernacular at the early age but if there are more clear advantages that you could outline it would help more. Thanks.]

In these posts, YTS members seem to be trying to understand the policy, clarify what was wrong with the previous system, and inform each other about this important change. However, while these participants generally accept the logic that it is easier to explain things to children in a language that they already understand, many still argue that this only applies to weak students. There is a feeling that an L2-medium system is the ideal but that some students will not cope with this or that the main problem lies in other areas such as teacher training and school management. These participants appear willing to tolerate the new policy, provided that the time allocated to L1 does not encroach too much on English or French. The first group of such 'moderates' reason that the arrangement is only for three years, after which the classrooms will revert to monolingual spaces in which English and French can be prioritised. The second group accept the use of L1 to support weaker students, explain difficult concepts or conduct review sessions of the week's work, but do not see it as a viable medium of instruction. Although these 'moderates' are not openly critical, they are diverting attention away from the real intention of the policy for all children to learn through a language they understand, and they are promoting unrealistic expectations for instant success within three years.

Meanwhile, a number of posts make it clear that more will be required before the rationale will be accepted, such as the following from someone who had asked for clarification:

Thanks, mi kasem [I got] some good points from you.. Language barrier..Communicating inside class rooms, confident in classes mo [and] literacy.. Bae mi no conclude sister se mi happy until yumi luk ol first fala fruit blo system ya. [I won't conclude sister that I'm happy until we see the first fruits of this system.]

A great many other participants simply refuse to listen to any points in favour of this policy, and they do not engage with the pedagogical aspects at all. They are not swayed by explanations about why their government has decided to implement this change and dismiss them either with insults or with unrelated arguments. The remaining three sections of this article will deal with these other arguments.

Access to international opportunities

Nine percent of posts to YTS make explicit reference to the importance of learning English and French in order to access new opportunities. Points are made about the need to access further study, information, trade and participation on the world stage and these posts reflect today's reality that English in particular is the language through which many such opportunities can indeed be accessed. The following post sums up these sentiments, combining a number of themes that recur throughout the discussion:

If children are taught only in bislama, then they have little chance of attaining further education in Vanuatu or overseas in french or english (or any other international language for that matter). That's fine if we just want Vanuatu to be an isolated country with only limited interaction with the outside world. But this is a bad idea if we want Vanuatu to be an active participant in regional and world affairs, and we want future generations of ni-Vanuatu to be able to work overseas, exchange ideas with international colleagues and bring back useful knowledge learned elsewhere that can help Vanuatu develop.

While nobody disputes the importance of learning such languages, this post reveals the common misunderstanding that we must choose between different languages, such that the use of L1 will limit opportunities to acquire L2. Contributors appear to feel that the new policy will merely exacerbate issues such as low levels of literacy and L2 proficiency amongst university students and the workforce.

However, the debates about access to international languages also demonstrate that participants are acutely aware of the mobility and international connectedness that are essential in today's world and that they are not simply reproducing colonial ideologies that English and French are intrinsically better than local languages. They recognise that different languages are powerful, but that this power is contingent on the context. For example, a call is made for outsiders immigrating to Vanuatu for investment purposes to be required to learn Bislama before starting a business and pay a fee to do so, an idea reiterated by four others, before another post states that expatriate children should be required to learn the language in school. Such comments present an interesting subversion of the typical line of argument that Bislama is not good enough, thereby deflecting accusations that people are against the policy simply because they don't like this language:

Have Some pride in our Nation. Expats want to work here he Learns through a Ni Van School [ni-Vanuatu, i.e. a locally-run school]. Not in school for our kids. But good for expatriate in private school. Long live bislama.

Another way in which the connection between language and mobility has been extended in a more critical way is through the awareness that people and goods now move relatively freely into and out of Vanuatu, bringing people into contact with international languages in an unprecedented way. Over the last decade, initiatives such as New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme and Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme have led to large numbers of ni-Vanuatu taking up short-term contracts in these two countries, providing a new source of income. The concern raised by two contributors to the debate is that these workers will be exploited unless they speak English. This is expressed firstly in the post '*yumi mas toktok lo lanwis we bae oli no exploitem yumi lo kaontri ovasi* [we must speak the language that will stop them exploiting us overseas]', and later expanded with the anecdote of a ni-Vanuatu who was able to sign only with an X on forms at Auckland airport, making it likely that '*kain person olsem bae oli exploitem hem 200%* [this kind of person will be exploited

200%]’. Later posts from the same person note that this is also a problem within Vanuatu as many are unable to understand contracts prepared by foreign companies, to which a co-contributor adds: ‘*Will it stop exploitation if you learn Bislama in school? Its a problem of understanding. As some cannot understand a simple contract we emi wan problem blo Nivans tudei we Union istap feisem* [which is a problem for ni-Vanuatu today that the union is facing]’. Similar points are made about the fact that instructional manuals for hi-tech products are written in English, with the result that ‘*sam lo yumi save prestem green Mo red button nomo* [some of us only know how to press the green and red button]’ without understanding the instructions. Vanuatu knows that it is dominated by forces that are ultimately controlled by outsiders, and ni-Vanuatu both need and want to be a part of this new hypermobile global population. While these are indeed valid concerns, they miss the point that children will be taught through Bislama or a vernacular, precisely because they already know them well, rather than learning how to speak these languages. They will also learn L2 and other international languages. Once again, we see the public raising a legitimate concern that they feel has not been addressed adequately by those in power, and we see considerable misunderstanding about the policy.

The national language on trial

The original question posed to the group asked specifically about Bislama. Although the new policy specifies that Bislama will only be used as L1 if this is the dominant language of the school community, it is unsurprising that many posts focus on this language in particular. While approximately 2% of posts make positive comments about the language (with reference to national pride and its utility as a lingua franca), 17% are negative. A small number of the negative posts declare that Bislama is ‘*bad*’, ‘*crap*’ or ‘*rabis* [rubbish]’, and that Bislama will cause everyone to ‘*fail now*’, without giving any further reasons, but the vast majority of

negative views about the language are followed up with reasons, and therefore invite further consideration.

The first set of negative comments about Bislama relate to its origins as a trading pidgin, which emerged during early contact with Europeans, was subsequently developed through the era of labouring outside Vanuatu, and then reinforced as a national lingua franca on plantations within the country. The period of history within which Bislama emerged and developed is thus tainted with exploitation, kidnapping into enforced labour contracts (known as ‘blackbirding’), and colonialism. One participant asserts several times that ni-Vanuatu should be proud of and remember this history, rather than pretending it never happened and allowing Europeans to dictate their versions of history. However, two others dismiss this idea, saying that nobody wants to be reminded of these ‘*dark times*’ from the ‘*slavery era*’, reinforcing this language of ‘*blackbirding*’ and ‘*colonialism*’, perpetuating the situation in which ni-Vanuatu ‘*bow down mo bend daon tumas long olgeta narafala races long world ya* [bow down and bend down too much to all the other races of the world]’. There is also a difference of opinion as to whether the reliance on the languages of the former colonisers keeps Vanuatu dependent on other nations, or whether rejection of these languages will have this effect. Only six participants engage with this aspect of the debate, but they use the word ‘slavery’ 62 times between them, often embellishing their posts with multiple exclamation marks, capital letters and swearwords, thereby dominating large sections of the debate.

The second group of negative comments relate to the linguistic properties of Bislama, illustrating the typical ‘Broken English’ beliefs summarised earlier. Some disparage the language in general terms (as an ‘*informal*’, ‘*mixed*’ or ‘*ungrammatical*’ language), while others specify the grammatical categories that Bislama supposedly lacks, including verbs, nouns, tenses and plurality. Although a few refer to the dictionary and grammar book to refute such beliefs, the most vocal proponent of the ‘language of slavery’ discourse argues that the

existence of a reference grammar merely demonstrates that academics in their ‘*ivory towers*’ are ‘*suppressing the advancement of the people of the république de Vanuatu by keeping them stupidly cutely quaintly speaking*’ this language in order to further their own careers and fulfil research grants. While the assertions that Bislama is just ‘broken English’ are not new, comments such as this again reveal a far more critical engagement with the questions of what counts as grammatical structure and who gets to decide whether Bislama is a true language, which are now finding space in policy debates thanks to social media.

The third group of negative points concern the lack of consistency with which Bislama is written. On several occasions, participants highlight specific spelling mistakes made by fellow contributors to the debate, and draw the conclusion that ‘*from samting ia nao oli stap talem c mas standardisem Bishlamar lol* [this is the reason they are saying we need to standardise Bislama lol]’. This is one of the most salient aspects of this particular YTS debate. By virtue of the fact that it is unfolding through the medium of Bislama, we see both that this language is a perfectly adequate medium for debating a very complex topic, and that its users do not write it in a consistent way, lending support to the erroneous belief that it cannot be written consistently. However, some posters do go on to note the obvious solution to this problem:

Mi luk ol post ia gogo nogat wan post even mi postm standard bislama language....so e gud oli tijim bislama. [I’m looking at all these posts and there’s not even one that posts in Standard Bislama ... so it’s good for them to teach Bislama.]

The final group of negative comments about Bislama concern its influence on other languages. The concern for English is that children will be confused by the lexical similarities between Bislama and English, and thus fail to master the latter:

bislama daonem standard blo english speaking & writing....wen bislama mixed with english, it produce another version of English that wen yu speak with it hemi no quality tumas. [Bislama lowers the standard of English speaking and writing ... when Bislama is mixed with English, it produces another version of English that when you speak it is not very high quality.]

Meanwhile, many posters who support the use of L1 for pedagogical reasons refuse to extend the definition of L1 to Bislama, for fear that it will threaten the vitality of the vernaculars. This is a legitimate concern, as an increasing number of children born to mixed marriages are growing up with Bislama as their first or only language at home, although the policy to use Bislama in urban schools is in response to this situation rather than the cause of it. Once again, this section shows that members of the public are raising valid concerns, but do not appear to have had a forum in which to discuss them with those who are implementing the policy.

Development through trial and error

The final theme that emerges is that this is yet another idea that the Government is trying without clear justification, and without having the budget in place to see it through, despite the unequivocal support of the donor community. It is referred to as a '*practical experiment*', another example of '*trial and error*', and '*blind leading the blinds*', in which the children are treated as '*guinea pigs*' or '*cobae* [Fr. cobaye, guinea pigs]'. Many people ask what the Government plans to do for these children if the policy does not work, and raise the question of compensation. The main complaint is that the constant trialling of new ideas has not led to improvements in literacy and numeracy, and it is understandable that people ask what was wrong with the system in place before. However, the frustration leads to slightly wishful thinking, with statements such as: '*Inaf blo mkm kaen ia we umi testm ol tnktnk lo ol pikinini blo Vanuatu. gvrnment imas putm in place wan raet sstm blo educatn we i save solvem problem we umi facem* [Enough of this approach of testing out ideas on Vanuatu's children. The Government must put in place an appropriate education system that can solve the problems we're facing]'.

The public do not seem to know the backstory to the current policy, and simply blame the current government who came to power since this policy was put in place. A number of posts state that there was no consultation before it came into effect, or that parents were simply told about the new system rather than actually consulted. Others refute this and say that parents should have attended their PTA meetings, or provide helpful advice about where they can get further information now. Those who are in favour of or resigned to the new policy note that it has already come into effect by law, so the important thing is now to work together in support of it rather than trying to undermine it. From many, there is a sense of discursive shoulder-shrugging, suggesting that we should give this a chance, try it out, and see what happens. Indeed, many posts simply challenge any negativity by asking ‘*so whats your alternative views*’, or ‘*after wanem solution blo yu?* [so what’s your solution?]’, as though anybody can chip in with a better idea.

This sense that very few are truly behind the new system but nobody has any better ideas leads several people to ask who or what is driving this new policy. Seven participants ask directly whose idea it was, typically in disparaging terms such as ‘*preview govman hmi go pikmak toti ia weah...??* [where did the previous government pick this rubbish up?]’ and ‘*WHO ia stap influence rabis lo education system blo yumi....STOPEM hemi NO wan development but disease mo destruction towards our Nation* [Who is having this bad influence on our education system ... Stop it it’s not a development but disease and destruction towards our nation].’ Strong public scepticism about development is well illustrated when one participant asserts that countries like Australia are deliberately misleading Vanuatu to keep the country from developing, another refers to a senior curriculum officer as ‘*papet blo ol dona* [a puppet of the donors]’, and several comments are made that the national government does not know what it is doing. One commenter asserts

that Vanuatu has no experts in education, and then proceeds to explain (taking on this role of ‘expert’) that the policy is ill-founded:

Vanuatu inogat expert dans l'education. Hu i advisem ministry blo usum bislamar lo classroom?m ia m ino wan development lo education ia olgeta.umi wandm hight standard education in place. Umi no sta kbk bihaen.mi no biliv se bislamar ba mkm wan positif change. Ba ko worst yes. Bifo introdusum ol kaen tink2 osm plz consultem ol teachers first c wanm nw academic solution? [Vanuatu has no experts in education. Who advised the ministry to use Bislama in the classroom? That’s not a development in education everyone. We want a high standard of education in place. We don’t want to go backwards. I don’t believe Bislama will make a positive difference. It will go worse yes. Before introducing kinds of ideas like this, please consult the teachers first and see what the academic solution is.]

When someone suggests that people ask the ‘superiors’ who can explain more fully, the retort comes back that ‘*eno gat superiors evriman wokmen belong ol citizen we public e pem salary belong olgeta ya tinktink gut* [there are no superiors everyone is a worker for the citizens and their salaries are paid by the public for them to think properly]’. It seems to be a vicious cycle. Until the education system improves enough to provide well-trained graduates who can develop policies based on research-driven evidence, the Vanuatu Government and its donors continue to look outside for their experts. However, the policy that these ‘experts’ have come up with to create a more critical and educated workforce is considered with suspicion. There is a certain discomfort with the continued reliance on outsiders, and yet a lack of faith in the current Ministry of Education to proceed without their donors and advisers.

Taking Facebook banter seriously

Comments made on Facebook may not seem worthy of the attention of policymakers. Social media tends to be dismissed as an informal domain that provides light entertainment and a distraction from serious work. However, this study provides evidence that we should look past the informal language and the banter, and take note of this collective public voice engaging seriously in politics. We can consider YTS as a new mediated and inclusive think tank that more accurately represents the people that the Vanuatu government aims to serve.

The Government may not like this rapid shift in civic engagement. Social media opens up discussion that is both faster-paced and more critical than traditional forms of consultation, and the new level of transparency that it heralds highlights gaps in the government's own expertise. It is left vulnerable in its accountability to both the donors and the electorate, its national sovereignty contested from above and from below, and social media enables us all to watch and comment with interest. But what we see is largely positive: the critical engagement of a public who want to understand the policies that affect them and their children, and a genuine desire to participate as active citizens in national affairs. If this critical engagement is *not* considered positive by either the national government or its donor partners, then the public are right to be suspicious.

This evidence would suggest that the Government should respect this new level of interest, and engage with the public in response. The public clearly does not feel well informed or adequately consulted, and those who are trying to implement change would be wise to take note of these concerns and misconceptions. Gone are the days in which policymakers can say that they have consulted the public and made their decision. Although consultations were done in this case, they involved relatively small numbers of participants, particularly compared to the membership of YTS. More importantly, if erroneous ideas about the policy are left unaddressed, platforms such as Facebook only make it easier for them to recirculate and gain credence. In particular, the 'moderates' who appear to be engaging with a slightly watered down version of the policy may be quick to call for a reversal of the new policy if it doesn't show immediate results. The Ministry of Education and those implementing this new policy need to clarify the points of confusion, providing simple factsheets and bulletins to eliminate some of the misunderstandings from the debate, if they want the public to buy in to the policy change.

The coming together of academics, advisors, donors and the national government within this implementation team is of no use in a context in which the general public sees political instability, corruption and low levels of progress in key areas. They either do not trust their own government to do the right thing or they do not trust what the external, so-called ‘experts’ are up to. However, notions of expertise appear to be diffused amongst stakeholders. The few YTS members who seem well-versed in points from academic research are generally taken seriously by the group and it is clear that the public really does want to be informed so that they can think for themselves about new initiatives. A positive sign is that teachers tend to be granted respect within the debate, so focused in-service training could see this group mediate between government and parents in a more systematic way.

This study would also suggest that the Government, technical advisors and donors need to do more to generate early findings from the policy implementation. They need to build in monitoring activities throughout even these earliest stages, and make results public, rather than allowing anticipation to build to unrealistic levels. Such monitoring could take the form of teacher testimonies and video footage from classrooms, as well as more typical measures such as achievement tests. Such monitoring would do well to include schools using different L1s, rather than only those using Bislama. As well as demonstrating that the vernaculars are included, any positive results from rural schools could have additional positive outcomes, such as encouraging parents to rethink a move to urban areas if they see better educational prospects for their children at home. Long-term, there will need to be clear evidence that children are reading better, learning content subjects more effectively and also reaching higher levels of proficiency in English and French. These results will take longer than three years to bring about but they are achievable if stakeholders at every level get behind the same policy.

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¹ The question is posed in Bislama. Three non-standard features of Bislama (following Crowley, 2004) are present: the conjoining of the subject marker 'i' and the adjective 'gud' into a single word, the clipping of the preposition 'blong' to 'blo', and the English spelling of 'or' instead of 'o'. The Facebook data presented throughout the paper reveals a variety of non-standard features in both Bislama and English. I present these examples faithfully (using italics for directly quoted material, regardless of language, and translating Bislama excerpts into English), without commenting from this point forward on non-standard usage.

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