

## Review of *A Dictionary of Vunës, Vanuatu*

Catriona Malau, Australian National University Press, Asia-Pacific Linguistics, Aston, ACT. 2021. 471pp. ISBN 9781760464608. A\$154. Available for free download at [press.anu.edu.au](http://press.anu.edu.au)

Most of the speakers of the almost 2000 languages of Melanesian do not yet have a dictionary of their language, and of those that do, few are fortunate enough to have a dictionary as attractive as that which Catriona Malau and her collaborators have produced for Vunës, a language spoken by around 2000 people on Vanua Lava in northern Vanuatu. As Dr Malau explains in her forward to the dictionary, this work is the result of more than two decades of fieldwork and immersion in the Vunës-speaking community. It has been produced with both linguists and the community in mind and on the whole, suits both audiences. In her acknowledgements, Dr Malau recognises the help given by her in-laws and others in the local community as well as by academics affiliated with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. The value of collaborations with custodians of traditional linguistic and other traditional knowledge and with botanists and biologists is obvious to see, as is the availability of a central national institution such as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to support such work.

English, rather than French, is the dominant language of education in the Vunës area, and so the dictionary is trilingual Vunës-English-Bislama, with English being used for almost all the explanations and supplementary information. The dictionary begins with 25 pages of introductory material divided into eight sections. After a general introduction and guide to using the dictionary, there is a short overview of Vunës and its orthography. Because education until recently has been only in English, and few Vunës speakers are literate in their own language, considerable space is devoted to the Vunës orthography and the use of vowels with diacritics to denote sounds not present in English. This is followed by notes on the type of Bislama used in the dictionary (i.e., the national standard rather than a local variety), an explanation of the mainly oral recorded corpus used in the compilation of the dictionary, notes on the organisation of entries, an explanation of the position of Vunës as an Oceanic language and of the sources of etymologies, and a useful list of references reflecting the state of scholarship into language and culture in northern Vanuatu. The last introductory section is a list of abbreviations. In all of the introductory material, explanations are clear and as non-technical as possible, obviously written with community members in mind.

The main part of the volume is a Vunës to English and Bislama dictionary, covering 235 pages with around 4000 entries and subentries. Each entry has a Vunës headword, its part of speech, and translations into English and Bislama. Some entries have explanatory notes beyond just translations into English and Bislama. For example, *ga susul* is translated as ‘morning glory’ and we learn that it is ‘used as a medicine for problems with breastfeeding babies’. About 10% of entries have colour photographs. On each page, between one and six entries have example sentences that include the head word. These are translated into English and Bislama. Etymological information is given for some words. Many, but not all, listings of species of flora and fauna have their scientific names.

The English finderlist covers 30 pages, with around 1800 entries and subentries. For some words, all the Vunës words for types of a particular item are grouped together, such as a list of “types of baskets” under “basket” or a list of “tree species” under “tree”. Bound forms, such as body parts, are listed individually under an entry, such as “her/his/its arm **banēn**” and “my arm **bēnik**” as subentries under the entry “arm **bēni**”.

The Bislama finderlist covers 23 pages, with approximately 1600 entries and subentries. The introduction to this section, which explains what a finderlist is and how to use it, is the only part of the volume where

the metalanguage is Bislama and not English. As with the English finderlist, some entries have a long list of “types of X” as well as subentries for bound forms.

For Vunës speakers the section that might be most interesting is the 150-page section following the finderlists, which Dr Malau calls the “thesaurus”. In this section, Vunës words are listed thematically, using a hierarchy of categories that Dr Malau explains was pre-set by the computer program she used to compile the dictionary. There are 25 main categories, which are further divided into subcategories, which in some cases are further divided into further sub-subcategories, and so on. For example, one of the 25 main categories is “the natural world”. One of the seven subcategories in this category is “fauna”, which is further divided into six sub-subcategories. One of these is “water creatures”, which is further divided into five subcategories. One of these “water creatures” is “eels”, where we find entries and subentries giving the Vunës names of 15 types of eels. These 15 entries and subentries more or less repeat the information given in the main Vunës to English and Bislama section and the same photographs are used. As in that section, each entry is explained in English and Bislama and some entries have example sentences and further information, such as the scientific name of a particular species or the cultural significance of a particular item or concept. Some words are repeated in different sections, such as **vusarōr** “kill pig in order to release the spirit of someone who has died”, which is repeated in both the “ceremonies and rituals” and the “death and mourning” sections.

As the author explains, this section is primarily to help literacy classes and the production of written materials. These entries contain much valuable cultural information, such as the uses of various plants or concepts related to local customs, such as “**vōlōt** traditional practice in which when the first child of a couple is born, the family of the mother come and try to throw stones at the father of the child and family”. Having related concepts in one place will help the acquisition of vocabulary and act as a stimulus for emerging Vunës authors.

Because these categories and the hierarchy of concepts were pre-set by the computer software the author used, the categories do not necessarily reflect indigenous Vunës categories and taxonomies. The fact that they probably do not is reflected in the fact that the headings and subheadings are given only in English, not in Vunës or even Bislama.

The volume concludes with an appendix of publicly available recordings that were the corpus used in the compilation of the bulk of the dictionary. Example sentences in entries have references to these recordings. The names of speakers are given for each recording.

The dictionary has an attractive format, with a colourful cover and numerous colour photographs, especially of flora and fauna. The three languages are differentiated by fonts in different colours in entries. This may help to differentiate the languages, but for me the light blue font used for Bislama was difficult to see in low light. Based on the very humid conditions where I live, the binding and paper seem to hold up well in humid, tropical conditions, which is important for the long term use of the dictionary by the local community. Besides the rather expensive print version described here, an online version is available for free download at [press.anu.edu.au](http://press.anu.edu.au). Given the growing spread of smartphone and tablet use and the difficulties of printed book distribution in Melanesia, this is an excellent way to provide access to the dictionary to both the general community and secondary and tertiary students.

While I cannot comment on the Vunës texts, I can say that in the English and Bislama texts there are very few typos and misspellings, the use of *ones* for *one's* in the example below being one of the few. One minor, but annoying, issue is an inconsistency in some entries in the use of “you”, “one”, “they” or “persons” to refer to people in general, as in the English explanation for **gon ganar**: “tie a rope around ones neck as a symbol to indicate that you are mourning the death of ones father or mother” (the Bislama

explanation does not have this inconsistency, using *man* 'man, person' and *hem* 's/he' where English has both *ones* [sic] and *you*).

Occasionally the information in an entry is not exactly the same as information given elsewhere. For example, **me** is translated as only "name of a traditional dance" in the entry for **me**, but the caption to the accompanying photograph is more informative, "**me** snake dance". These mismatches are, fortunately, quite rare.

These are, however, minor quibbles. On the whole, Dr Malau and her collaborators have produced a dictionary that is an attractive and useful contribution to its two intended audiences, the Vunës-speaking community and academic linguists. It is also a good model of the type of dictionary that should be produced for every language in our region. I hope that both the online and hardcopy versions of this dictionary will be shown to linguistics students at universities in the region so that they can be inspired to produce similar dictionaries for their communities.

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