



Documenting Vera'a and Vurès, the surviving endangered languages of Vanua Lava, Vanuatu

Language background

Vera'a and Vurès are neighbouring languages spoken on the island of Vanua Lava, one of the Banks group of islands in northern Vanuatu, southwest Pacific. Vanuatu is one of the most linguistically diverse countries on earth, with approximately 100 distinct languages for a tiny population of around 260,000. The languages are all members of the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian language family. The indigenous languages are threatened by increasing influence from English, French, and the local pidgin, Bislama. Vera'a has roughly 300 speakers and Vurès about 1200.

Long term collaborative language work

Members of our team have spent a total of about 20 months in the speech communities, collaborating intensively with native speakers of the two languages to document a rich body of cultural and ethnobiological knowledge and customary traditions. Speakers of the languages have been involved in transcription and translation of audio and video recordings, and edited a number of traditional stories for a storybook. As one outcome of this work, the two languages can today be written in a form that is widely accepted by members of the speech communities.



Stefan Schnell with Vera'a speakers on *nasara* of main village



Traditional house with bamboo walling and sago thatch roof, built for project use by members of the Vera'a village community



Stefan Schnell and Vera'a speaker, George Atkins, work on transcription of audio recordings

Aspects of cultural knowledge

Specific topics of documentation:

- » weaving and plaiting techniques
- » flora and fauna, in particular marine life and the usage of wild plants
- » fishing and cooking techniques
- » house construction



Women of Vurès dancing the *liañ* at Vētuboso

We have produced a total of four DVDs on three of these topics that have been distributed in the speech communities and made accessible to a wider public in Vanuatu.



The cover of the Vurès DVD set, which focuses on documentation of weaving and fishing techniques

Interdisciplinary work

Collaboration of linguists, anthropologists and biologists has been particularly fruitful. We collected hundreds of names of local marine and plant species in the local languages, together with scientific identifications and professional quality photographic documentations.

We have recorded the speakers' knowledge of the usage of different parts of plants for construction and traditional medicine.

Team members

Philemon Ala (botanist)
 Raymond Ammann (ethnomusicologist)
 Sabine Claudia Hess (anthropologist)
 Katherine Holmes (marine biologist)
 Catriona Malau (linguist)
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