

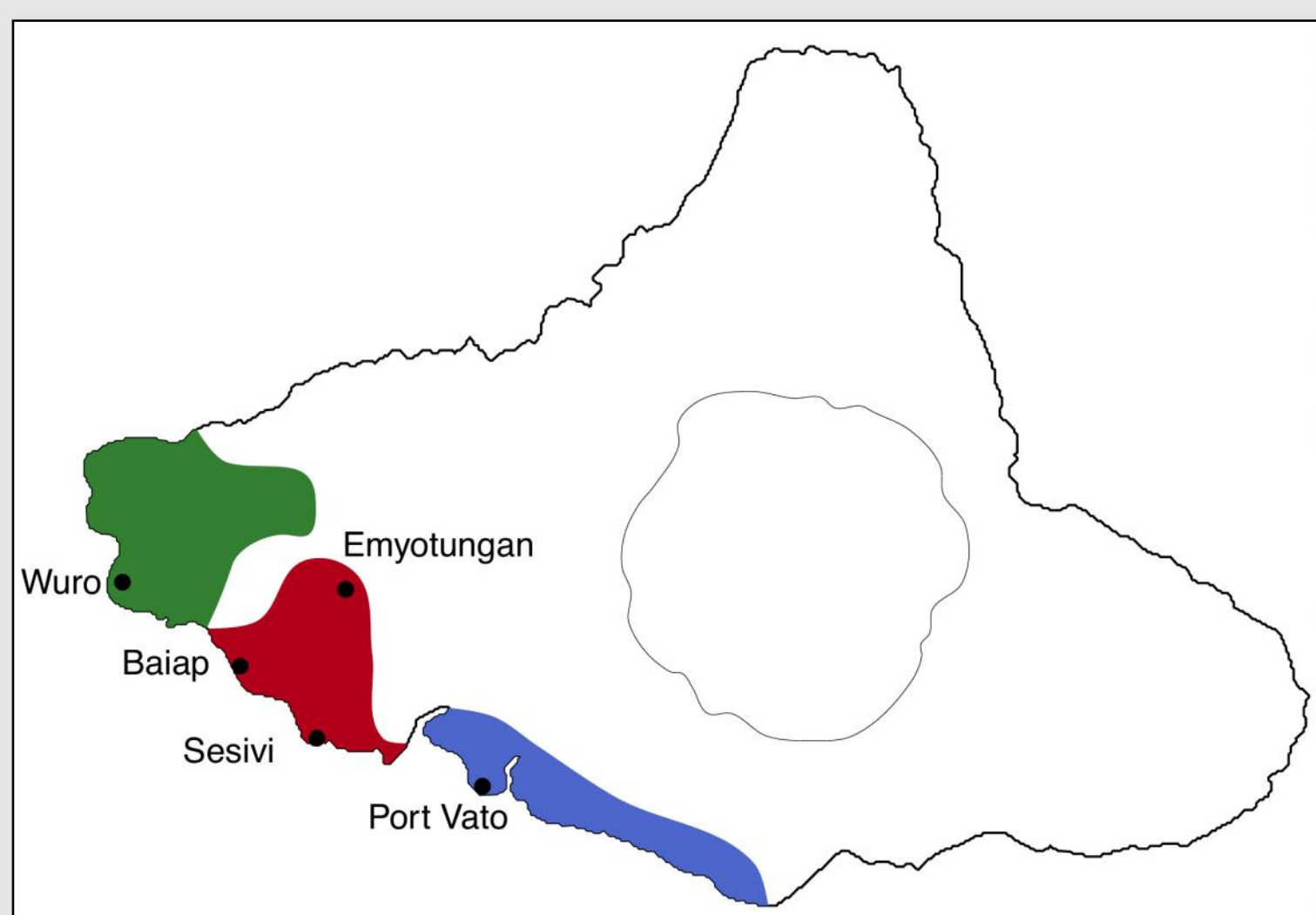
Documenting and maintaining three Oceanic languages of Vanuatu

The Region

The Pacific island nation of Vanuatu consists of 82 relatively small islands, of which 65 are inhabited.

With only 240.000 inhabitants and about one hundred languages, Vanuatu has the highest ratio of languages per speakers in the world. Most of the local languages are only spoken by small numbers of speakers and not used in schools. In official and educational contexts, the three national languages Bislama, French and English are used instead.

Ambrym is a volcanic island in the northern part of Vanuatu. It has a total of about 9000 inhabitants and is divided by geographical barriers into three parts, the North, the West, and the South-East.



A map of Ambrym, with the central caldera and the three language regions for Daakie (blue), Daakaka (red) and Dalkalaen (green). © Kilu von Prince

The Languages of West Ambrym

The western corner of the roughly triangular island is home to three major vernaculars: Dalkalaen, Daakaka and Daakie (each term means "the spoken language" in the respective vernacular). Each language is spoken by about one thousand speakers on Ambrym, and most children still acquire them as a first language. There are several hundred speakers in the urban centers of Port Vila and Luganville, where children do not acquire the language anymore.

The languages are structurally very similar, but differ clearly in their sound systems and vocabularies.



Chiefs from the Daakaka and Dalkalaen regions in the nasara (dancing ground) of Emyotungan before a sand drawing performance © Soraya Hosni



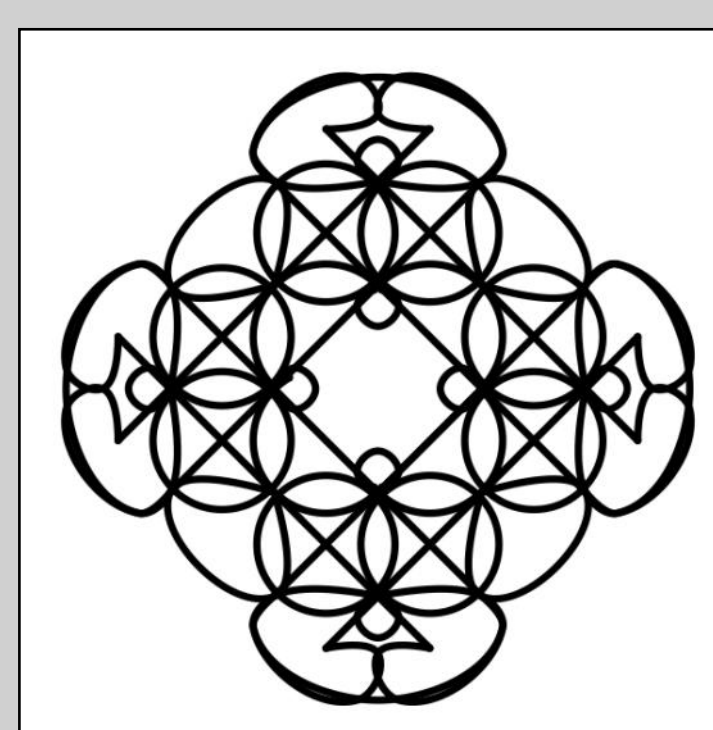
Participants of a mini art festival at Wuro © Soraya Hosni

While many properties of the languages are quite typical for the languages of Vanuatu, some of their features are rather exceptional for the region, and others have not been well-described before. These include several aspects of nominal possession, semitransitive verbs and event argument serializations.



Members of the Daakaka Language Committee © Soraya Hosni

Linguistic and Cultural Documentation



The patipasel sand drawing, which represents a small bird. Lena Karvovskaya

In the course of the project from 2009 to 2012, we have recorded a variety of genres and practices, in close collaboration with speaker communities. The recordings include traditional stories and legends, cultural practices, celebrations and rituals as well as information about the local environment, kinship relations and traditional crafts.

A great number of recordings have already been transcribed, translated, analyzed and archived, and they are the basis for the grammatical description of Daakaka, which is already completed, and the still preliminary grammar sketches of Dalkalaen and Daakie. We also compiled comprehensive dictionaries of the languages.



The village of Emyotungan © Kilu von Prince

A particularly interesting aspect of cultural practices are the so-called sand drawings, which are highly abstract geometrical figures written into the fine volcanic ash that covers the island.

Resources for Local Communities

The documentation work does not only serve academic purposes, but is also the basis for the development for educational resources for local communities. In particular, we developed orthographies and books for local uses. At the point of writing, one illustrated dictionary each for Daakaka and Dalkalaen and a story book in the two languages have already been produced and distributed, along with DVDs containing video recordings of story-tellings, sand-drawings and traditional children's games. A story book for Daakie, a children's book and a children's bible are nearly complete and will be distributed in 2013.



The Daakie Language Committee © Soraya Hosni

Team

- » **Manfred Krifka:** Team leader and responsible for the linguistic documentation of Daakie
- » **Kilu von Prince:** Linguistic documentation of Daakaka and Dalkalaen
- » **Soraya Hosni:** Anthropological and visual documentation of traditional practices, ceremonies and arts; data collection and analysis of networks of kinship relations.

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