Bislama

Tanna Volcano, Vanuatu
The Republic of Vanuatu

- 80 islands, 65 inhabited
- Population (July 2009): 218,519
  - 25% urban population
- National language: Bislama
- Official languages: Bislama, English, French
- 113 indigenous languages
Historical Background

• Account of Settler Groups
  – 1843 - first permanent sandalwood station established in south islands
  – 1867 - first European acquisition of land for cotton plantations on Tanna
  – 1880s - most plantations owned by native French speakers

• Characterization of contact setting
  – Has roots as a Trade Pidgin, with sandalwood and sea slug shore stations
  – Plantation Creole in the late 1800s
Chronology of Language Contact

- 1200s - minimal Polynesian contact
- Late 1500s through early 1800s - European contact, resulted in short-lived trade pidgin
- 1827 - temporary sandalwood stations established
- 1843 - Melanesian "English" appears in Vanuatu
- 1849 - rival shore stations established on other islands
Chronology of Language Contact

• 1863 - native Melanesians brought to Queensland to work in plantation settings
• 1867 - first European acquisition of land for cotton plantations on Tanna
• 1880s - most plantations owned by native French speakers
• 1906 - government established on Vanuatu, language begins evolving independent of Pijin in the Solomon Islands and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea
Sociolinguistic Variation

- "Town Bislama" spoken in urban areas
- "Island Bislama" spoken in rural areas
  - depends on indigenous local languages
- Varying epenthetic vowels - some Bislama speakers produce an epenthetic vowel (identical to the next following vowel) within consonant clusters
  - depends on indigenous local languages
- Primarily spoken by men until the 1970s
  - lost domain specificity in the 1990s
- Covert prestige among younger speakers
Classification of Bislama

• English-based creole
  – Remains an expanded pidgin in rural settings
### Phonology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Labiodental</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
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<td>b</td>
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- Reduced as compared to English or French
- Knowledge of English, French
- Wide range of phonemic variation because of local languages
Phonetic Variation

• Voiced / voiceless stops
  – *dok*, *tok* ‘dog’, *tok* ‘talk’
  – *draem*, *traem* ‘dry (something)’, *traem* ‘try’
• /f/ and /v/ contrast
  – *Vanuatu*, *Faniuatu* ‘Vanuatu’
• Nasal-stop clusters
  – *stampa*, *stamba* ‘stump’, *namba* ‘number’
  – *pima*, *mbima* ‘chili’
Phonetic Variation

• Voiceless bilabial stops / fricatives
  – pik, fik ‘pig’, faea, paea ‘fire’

• Deletion of the consonant h
  – biaen, bihaen ‘behind’
  – harem, arem ‘hear’
  – ae, hae ‘eye’ (insertion)

• Lengthening of stressed vowels
  – apol ‘apple’ can be pronounced as:
    • [áːpil] (Tanna), as opposed to [ápol]
Lexicon

• Lexical make-up:
  – 0.25%: other sources
    • *pikinini* ‘child (from Portuguese: *pequenho*)’
  – 3.75%: local languages
    • *nawita* ‘octopus’
  – 6-12%: French
    • *pamplimus* ‘grapefruit (from *pamplemousse*)’
  – +90%: English
Lexicon

• Borrowed words have obvious roots, but meanings can be modified
  – *mama* ‘biological mother, mother’s sisters’

• Creative compounding
  – *mama loa* ‘constitution (mother law)’
  – *blufis* ‘parrotfish (blue fish)’
  – *hanbom* ‘grenade (hand/arm bomb)’
Morphology

• Pronouns

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<th>Dual</th>
<th>Trial</th>
<th>Pural</th>
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<td><em>yumitrifala</em></td>
<td><em>yumi</em></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td><em>hem</em></td>
<td><em>tufala</em></td>
<td><em>trifala</em></td>
<td><em>ol(eta)</em></td>
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• Postpositions affixed onto verbs

*Hem I solemdaon meresin blong hem.*

‘She swallowed her medicine.’

*Yumi stap miksimap Bislama wetem Inglis oltalem nomo.*

‘We are always mixing Bislama and English.’
Morphology

• Reduplication
  – Plurality
    *Mi no laekem ol set we i gat kala-kala olsem ia.*
    ‘I don’t like shirts with lots of different colors like that.’
  – Intensity
    *Sapos yu go long New York, bae yu luk trak i fasfas long evri kona.*
    ‘If you go to New York, you will see cars all clogged at every intersection.’
  – Variety
  – Continuous / habitual actions
  – Random actions
Syntax

• **Blong**
  - Possession
    
    *ki blong trak*
    
    ‘car key’
  - Characteristic
    
    *man blong singsing*
    
    ‘singer’
  - Part of a whole
    
    *handel blong baket*
    
    ‘handle of a bucket’
Syntax

- **Long**
  - Location
    - *Mi wok long Vila.*
    - ‘I work in Vila.’
  - Goal
    - *Bae mi talem wan stori long yu.*
    - ‘I will tell you a story.’
  - Source
  - Time or duration
  - Comparison
    - *Mi longfala long Noel.*
    - ‘I am taller than Noel.’
  - Instrument
Syntax

• Wh in-situ questions

*Olgeta oli planem wanem long garen blong yu?*
‘What did they plant in your garden?’

*Bae yu teken wanem kos long USP?*
*Bae yu teken wijwan kos long USP?*
‘Which course will you take at USP?’

*Bae kava I redi wataem?*
*Bae kava I redi wanem taem?*
‘When will the kava be ready?’
Syntax

• Negation

  *Olgeta oli no bin stap singsing.*
  ‘They had not been singing.’

  *Mi neva totok olsem ia.*
  ‘I never speak like that.’

  – Double negation (*no, nomo, neva*)

  *Kensen i no haremsave nating voes blong mi taem mi totok long telefon.*
  ‘Kensen didn’t recognize my voice at all when I spoke on the phone.’
Speech Sample

Mi nem blo mi Samuel.
My name is Samuel.

Mi blong Tana lo Vanuatu.
I’m from Tanna in Vanuatu.

Aelan blo mi ol turis oli stap kam plande lem blo luk volkeno mo stap harem i stap faerap oltaem.
Many tourists come to my island to see the volcano and hear it constantly erupting.

Oli sta kam luk ol kastom danis.
They come to watch traditional dancing.

Mo tu oli stap kam traem ol aelan kakae long vilej.
In addition, they come and try local food in the village.

Mo i bin gat wan kaofis we i stap oli sta kam luk, swim wetem.
And there used to be a dugong which was there that they came to see, (and) to swim with.

Be hem i ded finis.
But it has died.
They say I've got no home
I get abused
They say I'm worthless
They say I'm all broken apart
But I'm still the winner

The English don't like me
The French don't like me
Mixed bloods don't like me
Melanesians don't like me
But I'm still the winner

We teach English
We teach French
We learn our language
But I'm still the winner

You English, you French, you mixed bloods, you
Melanesians
Who do you think you are?
Peace and unity come with me
To bring us together
You can't escape from me
I'm really sorry
But I'm still the winner
Bibliography