

L566 Principles of Sociolinguistic Survey
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Indicators of Ethnolinguistic Vitality ... Assessing Language Strength

INTRODUCTION

During my 15 year tenure as a surveyor in Papua New Guinea, I studied the socio-historical, socio-cultural, sociolinguistic milieu of the country. One of the results of that period of study was a model assessing ethnolinguistic vitality now referred to as the Indicator of Ethnolinguistic Vitality.

In order to assess relative linguistic strength, I have gone, lived among, and interacted with the people of approximately 80% of the known villages of each speech community that I am to assess. I listen to leaders as well as the rank-and-file speak about their language; and observe and document their language use.

It was within the jurisdiction such sociolinguistic survey that I came to work briefly among the Labu and Vanimo people groups, in 1988 and 1989 respectively.

Here they are roughly sketched in relation to Papua New Guinea...

Overhead: **Map of PNG**
 Point out locations and Vanimo and Lae towns.

Vanimo and Labu share remarkable similarities, but diverse ethnolinguistic outcomes.

Elements shared by both communities:

1. both speech communities *were displaced* from their traditional homes, Vanimo by natural and perceived spiritual catastrophes, Labu through subjugating warfare; both have very similar *population figures*
2. both have the majority of their population are *located in 3 coastal communities* closely adjacent to each other
3. both are *located near commercial and political centers whose main core populations are expatriate* (both national and international);
4. both have had *significant European contact prior to, during and after WWII* as well as contact with Japanese forces; however, the character of early European contact differed;
5. both speech communities include people who have attained *high levels of education* (by PNG standards); and
6. both have had *mission contact for nearly 100 years.*

However, their language use characteristics are markedly different.

Indicators of Ethnolinguistic Vitality

The indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality are a collection of factors that have been found in sociolinguistic literature and developed through experience in Papua New Guinea.

These factors have been useful in indicating the probable direction a speech community will go relative to the maintenance of, or shift from its traditional language.

Within the Papua New Guinea context no one factor has become a leading indicator of linguistic strength, but whether a language appears to be "maintained" or "dying" is relative to the collective impact of generally positive (maintained) or negative (dying) indicators.

It may be that language maintenance isn't only associated with the quantity of the indicators present, but perhaps the quality of interrelationships between relatively positive and relatively negative forces.

As such language maintenance and shift are long term consequences of consistent patterns of language choice throughout the speaking community.

****IEV HANDOUT reference****

In an attempt to make each of the indicators practical to the Papua New Guinea setting, the handout you were given when we last met briefly states

- 1) the sociolinguistic principle,
- 2) the underlying question(s), and then provides a ranked ordering of characteristics that manifest the principle in relative support of the vernacular, from 3 points (most supportive) to 0 (least supportive).
- 3) bolded underlying principle.

I will go through each of these indicating principles, briefly profiling both language communities, and then will make comments on ways expatriate intervention stimulated or facilitated the development of the sociolinguistic characteristics of each speech community.

OVERHEAD: 1 Relative Position on the Remote Urban Continuum

Labu: 80% of the ethnically Labu use locally available outrigger canoes /motorized dinghies to make the trip into Lae, 6 days per week for the purposes of employment, marketing, visiting relatives, use of medical facilities, and to enjoy recreational opportunities. For approximately half the population the trip takes 20 minutes, for the majority of the remaining group the trip is only 40 minutes.

Score: 1: "fairly easy access"

Vanimo: The Vanimo speech community is located 20 kilometers east of the International (Irian Jaya, Indonesian) border community of Wutung, and 5 kilometers west of Vanimo town.

An all weather road links Vanimo with these two expatriate centers. Transport is available through either locally owned vehicles or public motor vehicles.

Score 1: "fairly easy access"

OVERHEAD: 2 Domains in which the target language is used

Labu: Tok Pisin is the primary language in more domains than the vernacular for all age groups under 45. In domains where the vernacular is used, Tok Pisin is also used, including the home. As the age of the speaker decreases the extent of use of Tok Pisin increases.

Domains specified:

Church – Tok Pisin – historically Yabem
Education – English and Tok Pisin – historically Yabem
Commerce – Tok Pisin primarily, English secondarily
Medical Assistance – Tok Pisin, English secondarily

Language primarily overheard in all village settings – Tok Pisin

Score 0: VL mixed with lingua franca/other languages in every domain

Vanimo: Vanimo was the preferred choice of language across all generations. Tok Pisin is acquired secondarily.

Domains specified:

Church – Tok Pisin – historical precedents of vernacular use before WWII, currently Vanimo is used for a few songs, announcements, occasional sermons, and for one mass.

Education – English (in the classroom), Vanimo in recreation outside the classroom. Three local teachers are Vanimo speakers.

Commerce – Vanimo, secondarily Tok Pisin

Medical Assistance – Vanimo, English, or Tok Pisin (depending on where one would choose to go to receive medical help). There is a local Vanimo man trained as a physician.

Language primarily overheard in all village settings – Vanimo

Score 2: VL used in the home and cultural events, lingua franca in some social events.

OVERHEAD 3: Frequency and type of code switching

Labu: Overheard conversations in Labu territory indicated a marked shift toward Tok Pisin primarily and English secondarily. In fact, when code switches occurred, they occurred between the new matrix language, Tok Pisin, and the traditional vernacular Labu, which seems to function now as the embedding language among all speakers under 45.

Score 0: “Frequent individual unbounded code switches”

Vanimo: There seems to be only situationally induced code switching – and that only in the environments of the church and educational settings. However, even in those settings where Tok Pisin or English are the “official” languages, there is evidence of code switching to the vernacular. If a Vanimo speaker is employed in town, he/she will naturally have to switch to English or Tok Pisin ... however, there was a complaint in the market that Vanimo speakers use Vanimo and that others have to switch to that language to access their produce and clay pots.

Score 2: “Evidence of a diglossic or stable bilingual situation”

OVERHEAD 4: Population and group dynamics

Labu: Only the very old (60-70 years of age) perhaps 1% use Labu as their sole means of communication. Marriage patterns (now generally exogamous) and lack of land has resulted in homes that are bilingual if not also displaced from the three current Labu village sites. In the cross cultural marriages noted by the survey team, the language of choice within those family units was Tok Pisin. Thus there is a decreasing number of Labu speakers with whom younger generations have contact, with a concomitant change of preferred language choice - to Tok Pisin.

Score 1: Immigrants communicate using a lingua franca or trade language.

Vanimo: Vanimo is the language of choice across all generations when speaking to relatives, known as “wantoks”. Most marriage alliances are formed between the clans of Vanimo speakers. However, when marriage partners come from different linguistic heritages (a small minority of occasions), the non-Vanimo spouse typically gains at least passive fluency in Vanimo.

Score 2 plus: Immigrants are passively bilingual. cf. few immigrants.

OVERHEAD 5: Distribution of speakers within their own social network

Labu: The Labu have marked contact with outgroups through their suburban lifestyle. All of their primary needs are met through their business, trade and market exchanges in Lae.

Score 1: Cross cultural dependence – divided network system.

Vanimo: The Vanimo group is characteristically highly educated and as such has members serving in every significant social role in the community. Further Vanimo people tend to marry other Vanimo speakers. Except for communication with the Catholic priests and lay brothers, and for those who are employed in town, a Vanimo speaker can use Vanimo throughout everyday life.

Score 2 + : Cross cultural interdependence – divided network system – internally dense, with the degree of multiplexity attenuated by the necessity to communicate with outsiders for some goods/services.

cf. only in the domains of church and school does one primarily use a non-vernacular, however even in these domains there is room for the use of the vernacular.

OVERHEAD 6: Social outlook regarding and within the speech community

Labu: The Labu seemed to be an ethnically subjugated group. Historically they fled their traditional lands, during WWII they were overrun twice, they are surrounded by more populous language groups, and exist adjacent to one of the most cosmopolitan commercial centers of Papua New Guinea. While they may have been recognized, for example the Lae-Wampar did note them enough to terrorize them¹, the Labu people seem to have had a history of accommodating, rather than being marked for their strength or ethnic distinctiveness.

Material and non-material evidence of their distinctiveness is certainly lacking. Judging from statements made by the Labu people during my time among them, this lack of distinctive cultural evidence may have been due in part by active discouragement of those practices by the European expatriates who first contacted and worked among them. The Labu non-material culture is similarly decimated.

SCORE 0: Weak internal identity, negative status conferred by outsiders, with few, if any cultural markers present.

Vanimo: The Vanimo people have maintained a significant amount of material and non-material cultural distinctiveness. That they have done so may have been

¹ Wagner and Reiner, 1986, 51

² Wager and Reiner, 1986, 52

due in part to the attitude of the European expatriates who first made contact with them. Histories of work in the region record that those first working among the people groups of the northwest Sepik rejected the head hunting and cannibalism, but with rare exception appreciated other aspects of the lifestyle they met.

The Vanimo still make clay pots – one of the few groups in PNG that continue this cultural skill. Houses are traditionally made, though ordered like “good” German Catholics! Tattooing continues in the rainy season, specialized male-only canoes are constructed and used with associated taboos for the women, and so forth.

SCORE 3: Strong internal identity, high status/notoriety conferred by outsiders, with cultural markers present.

OVERHEAD 7: Language Prestige

Labu: As a language, Labu has had negative status both inside and outside the community. Initial western contact imposed a different language for both education and religious instruction. At the time of my stay in Labu territory, I was told that Labu is “too hard for anyone else to learn” and thus no one was expected to learn the language, even those who married Labu speakers and came to live in the limited land remaining of Labu territory. Thus, within Labu society the Labu language is disparaged.

Outside of the community attitude toward Labu today is ambivalent at best. The *linguae francae* in Lae, Tok Pisin and English, take precedent over any of the local vernaculars. The neighboring Bukawa’ and Adzera speech communities are much larger in population and are also the sites of extensive missionization and education. Labu by comparison is a small remnant of a people group and language.

SCORE 0: Locally disparaged variety.

Vanimo: Vanimo is part of a chain of languages that follow the north coast of Papua New Guinea. In an otherwise generally egalitarian social setting where surrounding languages are equally small and equally isolated, speakers of Vanimo are considered “big head” because of their use of Vanimo in domains where others would switch to a *lingua franca*, such as Tok Pisin or English. To Vanimo speakers, Vanimo has a great deal of internal prestige. To speakers of other languages, Vanimo as a language has a certain amount of notoriety, if not grudging respect.

SCORE 1: Locally recognized variety with neutral status

OVERHEAD 8: Access to a stable and acceptable economic base

Labu: The majority of ethnic Labu people live either on that tiny strip of land between the swamp and the sea or in settlements within the city limits of Lae. Of necessity the Labu have transferred to a cash economy depending on town employment or trade in “kambang” and fish that they could sell in the Lae market, and supplementing both forms of income through the sale of baskets to the tourists.

SCORE: 0: Dependence on an economic system requiring use of a non-vernacular.

Vanimo: Although cash flow does not seem to be a problem to the Vanimo people due to various schemes of marketing, trade stores, transportation and

outside employment, they also seemed to have adequate resources to continue well as an ethnic identity without cash by reason of their adequate land, gardening, ability to navigate, and fishing skills.

SCORE: 2: Adequate dual economy where the linguistic code used is dictated by choice of economic base (vernacular vs. alternate language)

Conclusions:

Change is inevitable. Thus begins Jean Aitchison's book, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* It is true, not only do languages change, but also the cultural milieu in which they find themselves. Nothing is static.

The two communities profiled today are cases in point:

The **Labu were harassed and subjugated** by the Lae Wampar, moving to their present location long before expatriate arrived to negotiate a peaceful settlement²

The **Vanimo experienced** such a significant amount of what they **termed "natural and spiritual disasters"** that they uprooted and traveled east from Lake Sentani (located in Irian Jaya, Indonesia) to their adopted homeland on the northwest stretch of coast in Papua New Guinea.

Changes in these societies continued **with the advent of European contact:**

Entrepreneurs brought economic ventures, requiring land and labor;
Missionaries imported western religious systems and classical education;
Colonial governments overlaid European expectations of law, order, and justice, and loyalty before, during, and after the incredible upheaval of WWII.

Changes continued with independence - the forming of the modern nation-state of Papua New Guinea and the place these two language communities find themselves in it.

Through it all **the cumulative affects of a stream of local choices have resulted in ethnolinguistic vitality among the Vanimo and ethnolinguistic demise among the Labu.**

One could say that on the one hand expatriate contact seemed to have contributed toward ethnolinguistic demise among the Labu, but, as quickly one must admit that the same contact did not seem to have any negative impact on the ethnolinguistic vitality among the Vanimo.

Perhaps the issue is not so much "contact" but what type of contact.

Expatriate Attitude toward Culture:

The SVD fathers who first served among the Vanimo were remarkably sensitive to and apparently honored what they could of the traditional culture, (drawing the line at head hunting and cannibalism).

In contrast those first serving among the Labu were perhaps less than respectful, denying the value of what marked the Labu as distinctive culturally.

Expatriate Attitude toward Language:

Then there is the matter of the Vanimo and Labu languages themselves. Whether entrance of an expatriate team specifically tasked to document and develop the vernacular language would have significantly changed the direction of the Labu language or

increased the vitality of the Vanimo language is difficult to tell.³ We don't know for certain what might have been, but we may have a clue.

We do know that the Vanimo people had in their corporate memory the recollection that their language had been learned by an expatriate, written down, and initial materials had been produced (though destroyed in WWII). Whether memory was the catalyst or something else I don't know, but at the time of the survey a modern Christmas mass, as well as a worship song has been written in the vernacular, the latter by a local ethnic Vanimo man living in the community.

By way of contrast again, the Labu people apparently have had no one who learned Labu or produced materials in it, instead had a neighboring language imposed on them if they were to access the religious and educational instruction offered them.

There are suggestions in the literature (e.g., Harwood, Giles and Bourhis, 1994. 167-206) that external support of vernacular languages can facilitate the ethnolinguistic choices of minority language speakers.

However, it also seems evident that these minority groups must have the inner will and focused strength to continue using their vernaculars choosing to take advantage of any opportunity or support that an external agencies such as those we come from may lend. Do we have the right to "interfere"? Do we have the right to withhold our support? Ultimately it seems to be a choice tied within the ethics and opportunity of the individual linguistic, sociolinguistic, community developmental professional, and the desires of the communities they propose to serve. With the indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality ... I also leave with you these questions to think about.

Bibliography

Landweer, Lynn. 2006. A Melanesian Perspective on Mechanisms of Language Maintenance and Shift: Case Studies from Papua New Guinea. PhD Thesis: University of Essex, England. Chapter 3

Landweer, M. Lynn. Indicators of Ethnolinguistic Vitality Handout.

³ There is anecdotal evidence regarding the Urat and Kamasau people of the East Sepik Province, Binumarien of the Easter Highlands Province, and various languages in Milne Bay, that specific expatriate (national and international) attention to and development of these local vernacular languages has resulted in a reversal of language shift, and in the case of the Binumarien a reversal of a perception of cultural demise as well. Cf. Cooper, 1998 and Oates, 1992.