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ELEANOR RIDGE

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# Language Contexts: Vatlongos, Southeast Ambrym (Vanuatu)

Eleanor Ridge

*SOAS, University of London*

**Language Name:** Vatlongos (also Southeast Ambrym)

**Language Family:** Central Vanuatu, Oceanic, Austronesian

**ISO 639-3 Code:** TVK

**Glottolog Code:** sout2859, endu1237

**Population:** ~2500-3700

**Location:** -16.30, 168.21

**Vitality rating:** EGIDs 6b-5

## Abstract

*Vatlongos*, known as *Southeast Ambrym* in previous literature, is an Oceanic language spoken by somewhere between 2500 and 3700 speakers in Vanuatu. As well as being spoken in the Southeast region of Ambrym island, it is spoken by a relocated community outside the capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila, on Efate island. One of the villages on Ambrym, Endu, speaks a different dialect and has close cultural links to speakers of North Ambrym languages. This article begins by summarising prior research on the context of Vatlongos language, then reports the results of a sociolinguistic survey taking in demographic factors, language repertoires and language attitudes in the three communities. It concludes by assessing the vitality of Vatlongos, distinguishing its status in each speaker community.

## 1. Introduction

Vatlongos is an Oceanic (Austronesian) language of Central Vanuatu spoken in the Southeast of Ambrym island and other parts of Vanuatu. It is most closely related to Paamese (Parker 1968a: 81-82; Crowley 1982: 8). It is known by the toponym ‘Southeast Ambrym’ in prior literature, but the name ‘Vatlongos’ (roughly, ‘family sound’) was chosen during language development workshops for a Bible translation project, which resulted in a

Vatlongos Bible published in 2015 (Wycliffe Bible Translators 2015). The name Vatlongos has also been used in materials developed as part of the Vanuatu Education Sector Programme (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2012). In everyday conversation speakers are likely to refer to the language as ‘our language’ or ‘the language of the Southeast’ but ‘Vatlongos’ is gaining popularity.

Vatlongos has complex verbal morphology, with a lot of syncretism and overabundance in its subject-indexing prefix paradigms. Along with Paamese, it has one of the most complicated systems of verb-initial consonant mutation in North-Central Vanuatu (Crowley 1991). Like many other languages in the region it has double marking of negation, but unusually the negative clitic can appear in different positions in the clause to signal differences in scope of negation. Serial verb constructions exhibit complex morphological dependencies between component verbs, and while both verbs can take a negative prefix, the negative clitic only appears once in a construction. Vatlongos also has an unusual auxiliary verb construction in which the auxiliary verb only partially inflects, undergoing verb-initial consonant mutation without prefixation.

Vanuatu is a highly multilingual country where 91% of the population speak at least three languages (VNSO 2013) and the Vatlongos-speaking community is no exception. The two languages of education in Vanuatu are English and French, and the national language is Bislama, a variety of Melanesian Pidgin English. Most people in Vanuatu will speak Bislama, receive some education in either English or French and speak one or more local languages (Crowley 2000; François et al. 2015).

Speakers of Vatlongos can be divided into three communities based on geographical location, sociolinguistic differences and attested differences in language use. As well as being spoken on Ambrym, Vatlongos is spoken in Mele Maat, a peri-urban community whose original members relocated from Ambrym to near the capital city Port Vila in the 1950s. The succeeding generations of speakers have been exposed to a different linguistic environment from their contemporaries on Ambrym, and to different sociolinguistic pressures in the cash-economy of the urban environment.

Speakers on Ambrym can be further divided to distinguish Endu, the northernmost village, from other villages in the Southeast. Speakers in Endu and the rest of Southeast Ambrym report that Endu dialect has various linguistic differences from Vatlongos as spoken in the other villages. Where it is useful to make a distinction between the dialects I will refer to Endu-Vatlongos as opposed to South-Vatlongos. The dialects are mutually intelligible to a large extent. All but a few elderly speakers in Endu understand South-Vatlongos without any difficulties, but South-Vatlongos speakers report some difficulty in understanding Endu-Vatlongos. For example, language consultants from other villages found that recordings of

Endu speakers were more difficult and time-consuming to transcribe, but were able to record most Endu-Vatlongos forms faithfully and translate them into Bislama. A similar pattern of directional intelligibility has been well documented for a marginal dialect of Apma, a language of neighbouring Pentecost island (Gooskens & Schneider 2016; Schneider 2018; Schneider & Gooskens 2017), and seems to be related to greater exposure to other dialects for the speakers of the marginal dialect.

The most frequent lexical variants are summarised in Table 1, and these lexical differences are the most salient marker of the dialect for speakers in Endu and other villages.

Table 1: Lexical variants in Endu dialect<sup>1</sup>

Gloss	General Vatlongos form	Endu variant
3SG.NFUT.finish <sup>2</sup>	<i>bus</i>	<i>buis</i>
2SG	<i>xouk</i>	<i>exo</i>
again	<i>mun</i>	<i>men</i>
1PC.INCL	<i>ratel</i>	<i>ratil</i>
one, such	<i>tava</i>	<i>top</i>
very	<i>tavatang</i>	<i>toptang</i>
on and on	<i>maa</i>	<i>ve</i>
PROX	<i>xai</i>	<i>xal, xei</i>
1PC.EXCL	<i>xametel</i>	<i>xamtel</i>
REL, SUB	<i>xa</i>	<i>xe</i>

There are some phonological tendencies that are recognised as indicative of Endu-Vatlongos, but none of them are unique to Endu speakers, nor do Endu speakers consistently use these forms to the exclusion of South-Vatlongos alternatives. For many lexemes in Vatlongos there is a choice between using a form with /o/ or a form with /a/, and Endu speakers use the /o/ form more than speakers from elsewhere in Ambrym. The /a/ forms could be a recent innovation, as it is usually the /o/ forms that are listed in the 1970 *Dictionary of Southeast Ambrym* (Parker 1970a). It might be that Endu-Vatlongos is more conservative in this area. Another tendency is a preference for CVC over CV.CV syllable structures: this can be seen in variants for ‘one, such’, ‘very’ and ‘1pc.excl’ in Table 1.

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: EXCL, exclusive; INCL, inclusive; NFUT, non-future; PC, paucal; PROX, REL, relativiser; proximal; SG, singular; SUB, subordinator.

<sup>2</sup> This form occurs very frequently as a marker of completive aspect.

Grammatical differences in Endu-Vatlongos are again tendencies rather than absolutes, and are restricted to areas of morphology which have a lot of variation for all speakers of Vatlongos. There are some differences in verb-initial consonant mutation patterns. Speakers from Endu are more likely to use the *r*- onset for *t/d/r* verbs in negative environments, where speakers could alternatively use the basic *t*- stem. Endu-Vatlongos speakers are also more likely to have a *k/g* mutation, where a */g/* onset is used in affirmative non-future environments, while speakers of South Vatlongos would use a regular invariant *k*- stem for the same verb lexeme. There are also differences in the conditioning the zero allomorph of the third person singular non-future prefix *mi*-. Whereas in South-Vatlongos the zero allomorph is usually used before bilabial or prenasalised onsets, Endu speakers often use the *mi*- form in these environments, but conversely do use the zero allomorph before */k/*, where *mi*- would be used in South-Vatlongos.

Aside from these linguistic indexes, there are also cultural differences between Endu and other Vatlongos-speaking villages. Endu has close ties to North Ambrym communities, resulting in exposure to other languages and cultural practices. Endu is also a base for tourists to visit Ambrym's volcanoes, and the increasing numbers of English and French-speaking tourists staying in the village have resulted in a different sociolinguistic environment in Endu, as tourists rarely stay elsewhere in Southeast Ambrym, except to pass through the airport at Ulei.

Within South Vatlongos, speakers report that speech in Sameo and Toak is also distinctive, confirming reports of differences in the late 1960s (Tonkinson 1968: 16). Impressionistically, Sameo may have some features of Endu-Vatlongos, while Toak speakers seem to have distinctive prosody: speakers describe a difference in 'tune'. However, this requires further research and for the purposes of this project a distinction between Endu and the other villages of Southeast Ambrym is sufficient.

For clarity, these three communities will be referred to as Mele Maat, Endu and Ase-Taveak; the last term refers to all the villages of Southeast Ambrym except Endu, starting from Ase going South to Taveak (see Figure 3). Where it is useful to group Endu and Ase-Taveak communities together they are described as communities 'on the island'.

This paper summarises prior research on Vatlongos-speaking communities, and then presents the results of a survey of the sociolinguistic profiles of speakers in the three communities. It concludes by commenting on the vitality of the language, paying attention to differences between the speaker communities.

This research was conducted during fieldwork for a project focussing on variation in the verbal morphosyntax of the language, especially differences between speaker-communities. Occasionally texts from the resulting corpus are referred to by a code given in [square brackets]. These texts will be available in a corpus to be archived in the Pangloss Collection (Pangloss 2018).

## 2. Background and prior research

### 2.1 Location of speaker communities

Ambrym is a volcanic island in Central Vanuatu ( $16.2478^{\circ}$  S,  $168.1564^{\circ}$  E, Figure 1). The Southeast is cut off from the rest of the island (Figure 2) by challenging terrain overland, while travelling by sea is made difficult by a rugged coastline with poor anchorage and strong tides (Tonkinson 1979: 106). As a result, it is linguistically and culturally distinct from the rest of Ambrym island (Parker 1968a: 81; Parker 1968b: 27; Paton 1971: 119; 1979: viii; Von Prince 2012: 2-3; Franjeh 2012: 22-3).

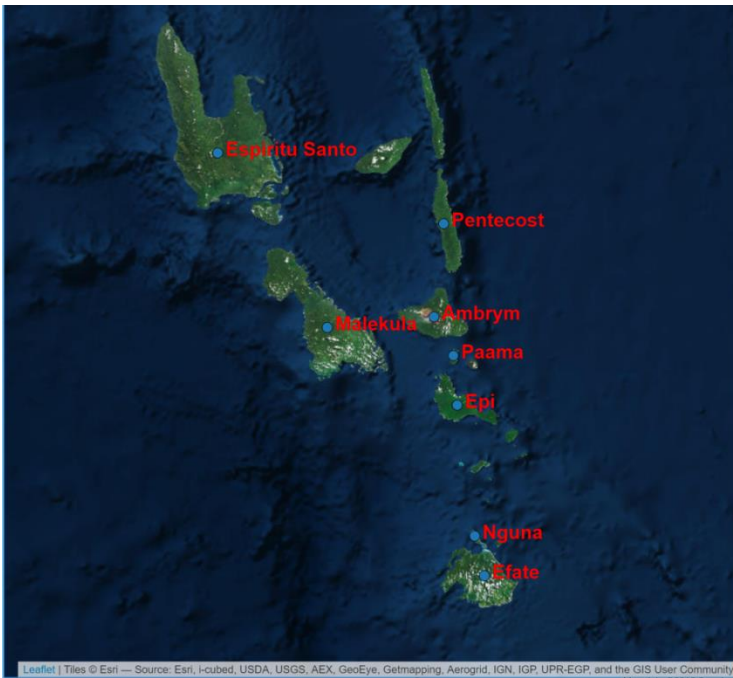
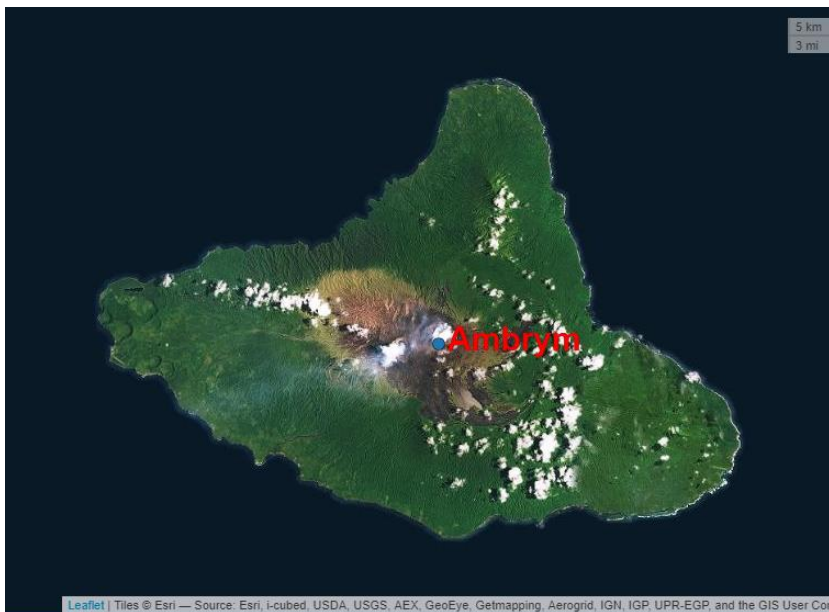


Figure 1: A map of Central Vanuatu showing Ambrym and Efate islands<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The maps in Figures 1-4 were created using the Lingtypology package (Moroz 2017) in R (R Core Team 2017) and RStudio (RStudio Team 2016), using Leaflet (Agafonkin 2018) and the map tiles Esri.WorldImagery and OpenTopoMap, © OpenStreetMap contributors (OpenStreetMap contributors 2018).



*Figure 2: Map of Ambrym Island*

Endu is an exception to this pattern of independence from the rest of Ambrym island. It is the northernmost village in the Southeast (see Figure 3) and has a long tradition of intermarriage with communities in North Ambrym, resulting in high levels of bilingualism in North Ambrym language. People from Endu attend custom ceremonies performed in Northern Ambrym, beyond those connected with marriage, death and circumcision which are the only rituals performed in the Southeast since the twentieth century (Tonkinson 1968: 25)), and occasionally these Northern Ambrym ceremonies are performed in Endu. The central ceremonies of marriage, death and circumcision are also noticeably influenced by Northern Ambrym practices.



Figure 3: Map of Southeast Ambrym showing Endu and Ase-Taveak villages

Vatlongos is also spoken by the Mele Maat community, outside the capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila, on Efate Island (see Figure 1, Figure 4). This community relocated from Maat village, Ambrym, following a volcanic explosion in 1951. In the aftermath of the disaster, Elder Solomon and Chief David, leaders in Maat village, arranged for their community to work for a French trader on a plantation near Port Vila. The Maat community therefore founded a new village, combining the name of their village on Ambrym with the closest neighbouring village on Efate, Mele. The arrangement was a success and was gradually formalised as a permanent resettlement. Tonkinson (1968) gives a detailed history of these decisions and the progress of the new community in its first fifteen years. Rosie Obed describes her memories of the disaster and the relocation in a contribution to this project [20141117a\_n01m003]. Although the rights of the Mele Maat community are in theory well



established by various payments and custom ceremonies, there are still conflicts over land rights both within Mele Maat and with adjacent Mele village (Johansen 2012). Mele Maat residents also retained their rights to land around Maat on Ambrym, which has been continually occupied by relatives on the island (Tonkinson 1968: 270).

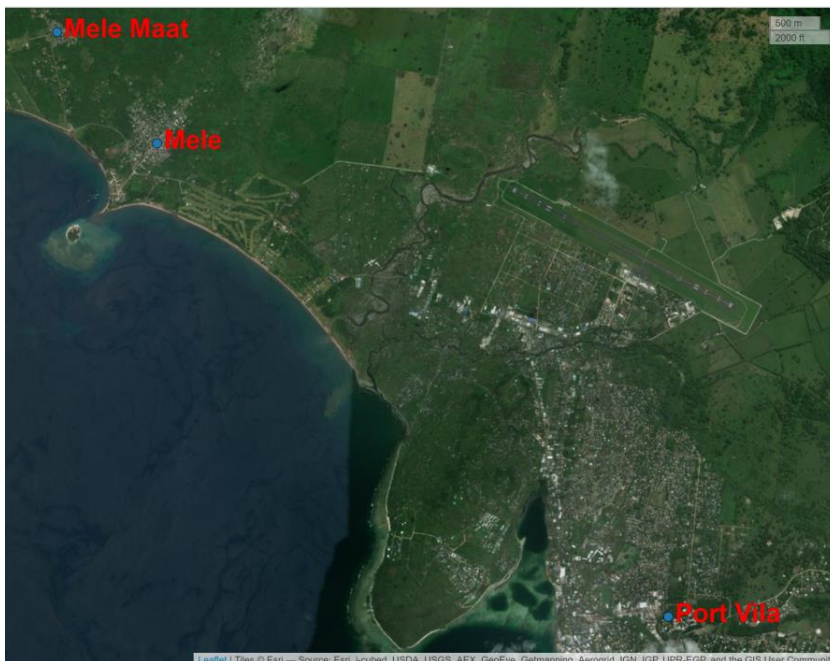


Figure 4: Map of Efate island showing Mele Maat and Mele outside Port Vila

## 2.2 Speaker numbers

Crowley (2000: 70) estimates the speaker population of Vatlongos at 3700. This is based on extrapolation from the regional population of areas known to speak the language in the 1989 census, increased to reflect overall population growth. However, while Crowley (2002: 660) states that the population of the villages in Southeast Ambrym itself was around 2000, the 2016 mini-census put the figure at 1549 (VNSO 2017), showing either a decline between the year 2000 and the present or that Crowley's estimate was inflated. Crowley then calculates the population of Mele Maat on the basis of Tonkinson's (1979: 112) estimate that 40% of speakers lived in Mele Maat in the late 1970s. However, not all residents of Mele Maat speak Vatlongos: those who have married into the community often do not learn the language, and

increasingly children do not learn it either. It is even harder to estimate the number of speakers living in other parts of Vila and Vanuatu. Taking all these data into account, I propose that 3700 is probably the upper bound for possible speaker numbers, which could be as low as 2500.

### **2.3 Anthropological research on Vatlongos-speaking communities**

A wealth of details are available about the original relocation and the progress of the Mele Maat community since the late 1960s, as well as social conditions in Southeast Ambrym, thanks to the anthropological work of Tonkinson (e.g. (1968; 1979; 1981; 1982; 1985; 2011)). Tonkinson's work also constitutes an important documentation of the pre-Christianised culture of Southeast Ambrym, including many lexical items and concepts that are no longer widely known in the Vatlongos-speaking community.

Although the relocation to Mele Maat was originally intended to be a temporary response to the effects of the natural disaster on Ambrym, it was quickly adopted as a permanent settlement thanks to the many advantages the location offered, especially access to water, medicine and education. However, links between Mele Maat and Southeast Ambrym were maintained by letters and visits in both directions (Tonkinson 1968: 270-273). The Mele Maat settlers retained their land rights in Maat (see Figure 3) and it was useful for the Southeast Ambrym community to have a base in Port Vila if they needed to visit the capital for work, healthcare, or to escape threats of sorcery on Ambrym (Tonkinson 1981: 83). However, by 1978, Tonkinson observes that Mele Maat was hosting fewer short-term guests, and a higher proportion of young men were now marrying outside the Vatlongos-speaking community (Tonkinson 1979: 110-116). The community was increasingly embracing an urban lifestyle with 85% of men and 64% of women working in central Port Vila, rather than in subsistence gardening or plantation labour.

Globalisation is increasingly relevant to the Mele Maat community, faced with Port Vila's urban sprawl and a huge rise in tourism in the capital. The Vanuatu National Statistics Office reports an increase in the total number of tourists per year from 82,019 in 1995 to 328,861 in 2014 (VNSO 2018a). The 'Mele Cascades', a waterfall not far from Mele Maat village (see Figure 4), has become a major tourist attraction (Tourism Vanuatu 2017). This is a drastically different situation from that faced by the Mele Maat community in 1967 when Tonkinson could assert that 'few tourists come to Vila and those who do rarely visit Maat' (1968: 131). In the mixed economy of Mele Maat, families have to find time to maintain 'gardens' providing traditional foods from subsistence farming while also earning money to purchase goods and services available in the urban environment.

Mele Maat residents discuss these challenges in recent anthropological research (Johansen 2012: 31-34).

However, Mele Maat is not the only part of the Vatlongos community affected by the huge increase in international tourists in Vanuatu. Endu village is a base for visiting Ambrym's volcano, and with the increase of tourists many guesthouses and an organised cultural tour have been established (Malampa Travel 2017; Vanuatu Travel 2017). Data on international tourism at the level of village or region is not available, but data on tourism to Ambrym has been collected since May 2014, and a comparison of the first twelve month period for which data is available (May 2014-April 2015) to the most recent (October 2016-September 2017) suggests a steady increase in international visitors over the past few years, rising from 618 to 714 (VNSO 2015; 2018b).

## **2.4 Linguistic research and interventions**

Gary J. Parker's fieldwork between 1967 and 1968 was the most detailed linguistic investigation of Vatlongos in the twentieth century. The results were published in three articles on phonology, verb inflection and morphophonemics, and the morphophonemics of inalienable nouns, as well as a dictionary of around 1800 lexemes (Parker 1968a; 1968b; 1970a; 1970b). The findings of these works were adapted and supplemented with material from another speaker of the language to form a sketch grammar of the language in Crowley (2002). Linguistic research which makes reference to Vatlongos relies on Parker's dictionary and articles as sources, and has included work on verb initial consonant mutation (Crowley 1991), reduplication (Inkelas & Zoll 2005: 54-57), and historical phonology (Lynch 2008; Blevins & Lynch 2009). However, very few speakers are aware of Parker's dictionary and his work seems to have had little effect on usage or standardisation of the language.

The work of the Presbyterian mission has been the most concerted linguistic intervention in the Vatlongos-speaking community. After Southeast Ambrym villages converted to Christianity under the evangelism of James Taltaso from South West Ambrym at the turn of the twentieth century, the churches came under the control of the Presbyterian mission in Paama (Tonkinson 1968: 41). Paamese was used as the language of education in mission schools and Bible study groups for children and adults for many decades (Frater 1922). While the mission appealed for funds to produce religious materials in both Paamese and Vatlongos, the dominance of Paamese in religious life meant that many Vatlongos speakers learnt Paamese as a prestigious second language during this period. Taveak, the southern-most village in Southeast Ambrym, was chosen as the site for the first mission in the region and it is possible that there has been some dialect-levelling in the

direction of Vatlongos as spoken in Taveak. However, there are no clear linguistic consequences on the structure of Vatlongos that can be ascribed to this history of missionisation, which has not privileged a standard form of Vatlongos. For example, most speakers have a relaxed attitude to orthography and will find a range of systems acceptable.

In recent years there have been several projects that could encourage more use of Vatlongos in literacy, potentially leading to greater standardisation. A Bible translation (New Testament and sections of Old Testament) was completed in 2015 (Wycliffe Bible Translators 2015). Though it will be in competition with Bislama and English translations of the Bible, it has the potential to make literacy in Vatlongos a significant part of daily life for all age groups. As one of the most widely spoken local languages in Vanuatu, Vatlongos has been included in the Vanuatu Education Sector Programme project to develop vernacular materials for the first three years of primary education (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2012). Materials in Vatlongos for Year One were available in 2017 and materials for Years Two and Three have been released for the 2018 academic year (the author was involved in workshops to translate these latter materials in December 2016 and January 2017). Observations in early 2017 revealed large disparities between how the Year One materials were being used in different primary schools, but it is hoped that with more time and training to familiarise teachers with the new syllabus this could encourage greater use of vernacular literacy, potentially strengthening the vitality of Vatlongos as well as improving educational outcomes for the community.

Texts from the corpus developed as part of this project have also been distributed as E-books on SD cards to 90 speakers across the three speaker-communities, and speakers were encouraged to share and transfer the files with any interested family and friends. This is made possible by the growing popularity of touchscreen phones, which meant that early versions of the texts could be cheaply distributed and allowed for feedback on orthography. The E-books were prepared using Calibre (Goyal 2018), and could be read in any pre-installed E-reader application: AI Reader (Neverland 2018) is an example of a free, small-size application that was easily accessible in the field. I plan to distribute revised and additional texts as well as a draft version of a Dictionary app created with SIL Dictionary App Builder (SIL International 2018) during future visits.

The extent to which these recent developments will affect written-language use or have effects on linguistic practices or structures in the Vatlongos-speaking community remains to be seen.

### **3. The sociolinguistic survey**

I will now summarise the results of a sociolinguistic survey conducted with 112 speakers contributing recordings to a corpus. The survey was designed to be cross-referenced with the corpus to investigate factors affecting differential language use. This means that the survey is not an accurate reflection of the whole of the communities, as less confident speakers were less likely to participate. This is apparent in the average age of respondents in each community: 44 in Ase-Taveak, 50 in Endu and 55 in Mele Maat. The younger sample in Ase-Taveak reflects greater involvement of young people confident in their language abilities.

A higher overall number of respondents took part in Ase-Taveak (67) reflecting both high population and high levels of enthusiasm for the project. In Endu, which has a smaller population, there were 21 respondents. Although Mele Maat has a large population, only 24 respondents took part, sometimes due to lack of confidence but also due to employment patterns causing lower availability. Nevertheless, interesting patterns emerge from the results.

This section is organised to reflect the main sections of the survey: demographic details, language repertoires, language domains and language attitudes. The survey also included detailed consent, and altogether it was made up of 68 questions and took around ten to twenty minutes to complete.

#### **3.1 Demographic trends**

Some non-linguistic factors were included in the survey: employment, education and literacy, religion and community roles. These are some of the factors that Haugen (1972: 336) groups under ‘linguistic demography’. Some questions also targeted mobility between the communities on the island and Mele Maat.

Respondents were asked to identify their main form of employment. Although most community members will have several sources of income including a ‘garden’ or subsistence farm, this superficial approach did confirm the expected differences between the rural and urban communities. While around half of those interviewed in Ase-Taveak and Endu identify ‘gardener’ as their main form of employment, only 16% of speakers in Mele Maat describe this as their main job. Instead, they are more likely to be involved in the cash economy or consider housework their main role, reflecting the relative scarcity of land for gardening in Mele Maat, as well as the availability of other employment options.

The Mele Maat community is on average more educated than communities on the island. This is due to greater demand for qualifications to access employment opportunities in Port Vila and higher purchasing power to pay for school fees, which are usually the greatest expense for most families in

Vanuatu. In Ase-Taveak and Endu the average number of years of education is just over six years, close to the national average of 6.8 years (UNDP 2016) and suggesting few speakers make it past compulsory primary education (Crowley 2000: 79; 2005). In Mele Maat the average speaker has received 8.5 years of education, showing that more people have progressed to secondary education. A handful of individuals have reached tertiary level education. Across the communities, there is no correlation between age and years of education, probably because the Presbyterian mission provided at least primary education to most of the population long before compulsory education was introduced at a national level.

Self-reported literacy rates are very high in all communities, but especially in Mele Maat where everyone interviewed said they could read. Only a few elderly speakers on the island described themselves as non-literate. Bislama is the main language of literacy, despite only recently being taught in schools officially (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2012).

The Vatlongos speaker population is overwhelmingly Presbyterian Christian: 78% of respondents describe themselves as Presbyterian, the denomination of the first missionaries to reach this part of Ambrym (Frater 1922). This religious background accounts for the prevalence of English as the language of education, with only the very small Catholic population in the village of Pamal using French in education. An account of how Pamal came to be the only Catholic community in Southeast Ambrym is given in [20170220c\_h01s146].

The main competition to the dominance of the Presbyterian church comes from the Seventh Day Adventist church (SDA). It is especially popular in Mele Maat where nearly a third of respondents identified as SDA. Mele Maat is more exposed to international missionaries in Vila and seems to be a driver of religious innovation on the island as well, for example by fundraising for an SDA church building in Bethel village, Ambrym (see text [20141218e\_i01s073]).

As well as having multiple forms of employment, most members of the community will hold one or more voluntary roles, usually through the churches or in the hierarchy of chiefs. The results support an impression that the church and other communal activities are less important in Mele Maat. More than a quarter of speakers in Mele Maat described themselves as having no community role, and this included younger people, unlike on the island where only the very elderly made such a claim. In casual conversation Mele Maat's lack of community spirit was often decried and blamed on urban lifestyles. The women's and youth groups are also attached to the churches and the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union (PWMU) is a major force in the community, regularly organising fundraisers, projects and religious events. More than half of women on the island gave positions in women's groups as their main role in the community, along with a still substantial 40% of women in Mele Maat.

The final demographic factor in the survey was mobility between the communities, and especially whether speakers on the island have spent time in an urban environment. The results show that there is still a lot of communication between the communities. 83% of the respondents in Mele Maat have visited Southeast Ambrym at some point in their lives. Many explained that they had been sent there as children to stay with relatives, both to relieve childcare pressures in Mele Maat and to encourage them to learn Vatlongos and cultural practices. This pattern of exposure to vernacular languages for children in urban families is described by Crowley (1990: 387). A similarly high proportion of respondents on the island have visited Port Vila: 94% in Ase-Taveak and 86% in Endu. Nearly all speakers on the island have therefore had some exposure to urban life. However only half of respondents in Ase-Taveak have visited Mele Maat specifically, and only a quarter of respondents in Endu. This suggests that Mele Maat's importance as a base for visitors to Port Vila from the island has continued to decline since the 1970s (Tonkinson 1979).

### 3.2 Language repertoires

For these questions, speakers were asked to self-assess their competence in Vatlongos, Bislama, English and French on a four-point scale (none, some, good, fluent). They were also asked about any other languages they knew.

There were high rates of self-reported fluency in Vatlongos and Bislama. As everyone taking the survey had already agreed to contribute at least one recording in Vatlongos to the project, these figures are not necessarily an accurate reflection of overall levels of fluency in the wider community. However, the decision to report their competence as 'fluent' rather than merely 'good' could be an indicator of confidence in their command of the language.

*Table 2: Rates of fluency in Vatlongos and Bislama in each community*

	Fluent Vatlongos	Fluent Bislama
Ase-Taveak	63 (94%)	57 (85%)
Endu	17 (81%)	16 (77%)
Mele Maat	21 (88%)	22 (92%)
Overall	101 (90%)	95 (85%)

Interestingly, the lowest proportion of reported fluency in Vatlongos is in Endu, which also has the lowest reported fluency in Bislama. This is because Vatlongos is in direct competition with North Ambrym language in many families in Endu where the women have married in from the North. This lack of confidence is perhaps also a result of a preoccupation with language purity in Endu, where many speakers believe that Endu-Vatlongos is the real original language of Southeast Ambrym and that knowledge of this true language is being lost due to mixing with South-Vatlongos. Schneider (2018: 8) cites similar beliefs about Suru Kavian, a threatened dialect of Apma language (Central Pentecost, Vanuatu).

Only in Mele Maat do a higher proportion of speakers consider themselves fluent in Bislama than in Vatlongos. However, the very high overall rate of fluency in Bislama (85%) indicates high levels of bilingualism in Vatlongos and Bislama in all communities.

The dominance of Bislama has not prevented some speakers from also learning other indigenous languages. Despite the ease of communicating in Bislama, there is still prestige attached to knowledge of other Vanuatu languages and learning them is seen as an important mark of family ties and friendship.

As predicted by the high incidence of intermarriage with speakers of North Ambrym, speakers in Endu have the highest rate of knowledge of other Vanuatu languages at 81%. Two thirds of speakers interviewed in Endu speak North Ambrym language, while others speak Fanbyak, another language from Northern Ambrym. Respondents were also familiar with Paamese and languages of West Ambrym and South Pentecost.

Although much less than in Endu, 37% of speakers in Ase-Taveak are also familiar with another Vanuatu language. Twenty of these speakers know Paamese, the geographically and linguistically closest language to Vatlongos. While it is particularly likely to be known by older speakers who experienced the use of Paamese as a mission language, Crowley (2000: 122) comments on the continuing growth of the non-reciprocal spread of Paamese as a second language in Southeast Ambrym, as well as Epi. Other languages known in Ase-Taveak are from the surrounding region: languages of Northern Ambrym, Western Ambrym and Epi.

Mele Maat has the lowest proportion of speakers who are familiar with another Vanuatu language, but it is still more than a quarter at 29%. While Paamese was the most popular additional language, others know languages nearer to Mele Maat, such as Ifira-Mele, the language of Mele village, and Nguna, the language of an island to the north of Efate. These languages, especially Ifira-Mele which is a Polynesian outlier, are less closely related to Vatlongos, suggesting high willingness and effort on the part of Mele Maat residents who have learned them (though for some these are parental or family languages). In fact, this was a conscious language policy planned by Elder Solomon, the founder of Mele Maat, in the early days of the community. John



Enoch Rangimen explains how Mele Maat children were sent to different villages on Efate to study in the hope that they would learn the local languages and help the community to integrate into the life of their new island:

it was a good idea, because they wanted us to be Efate people and we are truly Efate people because people know the language of different places. [20170413a\_h01m169\_44-5]

Due to Vanuatu's unusual colonial history, ni-Vanuatu today can choose to study in the English or French education system (Crowley 2000). Due to the prevalence of Presbyterianism in their community, Vatlongos speakers are overwhelmingly Anglophone in education. 90% of respondents gave English as their language of education: 90% in Ase-Taveak (which includes the only Catholic/Francophone village, Pamal), 95% in Endu and 87% in Mele Maat. The slightly lower rate in Mele Maat reflects an emerging trend to put children into the French education system rather than the Anglophone primary school in Mele, due to higher perceived educational standards in Francophone schools and an impression that students in the Francophone system end up speaking better English as well as French. Surprisingly few speakers mentioned a desire for their children to speak French as a motivation for this decision.

However, high rates of enrolment in English language education are not reflected in expressed confidence in speaking English. Only around a third of speakers described themselves as 'good' or 'fluent' in English, while nearly two thirds only claim to speak 'some' English. There is a slightly higher proportion of good and fluent speakers of English in Mele Maat (38%), as might be expected from the greater opportunities for exposure to English speakers and English-language media in Port Vila, as well as workplace environments where English is the dominant medium of communication such as in tourism, non-governmental organisations and civil service. This higher exposure seems to lead to higher standards of self-assessment and lower confidence in the Mele Maat community, with some competent speakers of English describing themselves as only speaking 'some' English.

Very few Vatlongos speakers describe themselves as 'good' or 'fluent' speakers of French, while three quarters speak no French at all. It will be interesting to see if this changes in Mele Maat as more students pass through the Francophone system.

### 3.3 Language domains

This section of the survey examined self-reported language use in different domains. Lewis and Simons (2010: 105; 2016:chap. 4), following Fishman (1991), discuss the importance of domains or functions as indicators of language vitality: if a language is used in more domains for more functions it is more valuable to speakers who are therefore more likely to maintain and transmit the language. They advocate a goal of stable multilingualism involving ‘clearly defined functional assignments of the languages in an ecology’ (Lewis & Simons 2016:sec. 4.6). To some extent, this is a good description of the typical language ecology in Vanuatu: local languages (like Vatlongos), Bislama, English and French are all specialised to different domains, in an especially complicated example of polyglossia (Hudson 2002).

However, not all languages are equally protected by specialisation to different domains. Mühlhäusler (1996: 274) warns that traditional languages in the Pacific have lost their power as they are used in fewer and less prestigious domains, especially when education is conducted in a metropolitan language. That said, the results of this survey show that, overall, Vatlongos is moving into domains beyond oral communication with family and friends, a promising sign for the vitality of the language.

Self-reported language attitudes do not always match up with linguistic behaviour, so I have also commented on areas where the results of the survey do not match observed language use.

Table 3 shows the most popular language choices in each community for each domain or situation, with the percentage of speakers in the community who gave that answer shown below. Speakers could name multiple languages for each domain, so the total includes speakers who named that language among others. The different contexts are arranged from intimate, oral contexts at the top to more official, written contexts at the bottom. Although school is a partially oral context, it is closely associated with literacy and formal education so appears towards the bottom along with school books. These latter contexts are associated with government functions and an international framework: they are domains that have been introduced through Vanuatu’s history of colonisation.

The domains and functions included in the survey are not claimed to be equally important to language use or language vitality, and the domains were largely chosen to be easily understood and answered in a brief survey. It is not particularly concerning that Bislama appears to dominate so many of the written and media functions in the middle of the table, as these make up a relatively small part of daily language use. The contexts of everyday oral language use within the community are vital to language survival (Fishman 1991: 94-96), but the contexts at the bottom have been included as they may have a prestige associated with economic advancement and modernisation that have been shown to incentivise

language shift in other language environments (Fishman 1991; Simons & Lewis 2013; Lewis & Simons 2016). One area that is missing from the survey, because it was found to be difficult to formulate in a way that was understood in the same way by speakers in Mele Maat and on the island, is formal oral language use in traditional contexts. I observed that formal speeches given at custom ceremonies connected with marriage, funerals and circumcision were usually given in Vatlongos and repeated more briefly in Bislama. Informal discussions suggested that Vatlongos was the most appropriate language for these functions, and Bislama was included in order for non-Vatlongos speakers from other areas to understand the proceedings and feel welcome. There also seemed to be more code-switching with English in these contexts than in conversational discourse, especially for Bible quotations or academic language, for example about the importance of culture.

The overall trend is to associate Vatlongos with intimate and oral settings, Bislama with official services and emerging technologies, and English with education and literary language use. This pattern is replicated in each community but with different cut off points for each language: Ase-Taveak communities use Vatlongos in some more formal domains like church, and only associate English with school textbooks. In Mele Maat, Vatlongos and Bislama were equally highly associated with friendship, while English is the top choice for school, reading the Bible and other books, as well as textbooks. Endu seems to fall somewhere between Ase-Taveak and Mele Maat, with a lower proportion associating Vatlongos with friendship than in Ase-Taveak, and a preference for using Bislama in church. Although some speakers in Endu said it would be better to use Vatlongos in church, they justified the use of Bislama by the number of women and children who are not fluent in Vatlongos.

Table 3: Preferred language in different domains and the percentage of respondents who chose that language (among others) by community<sup>4</sup>

	AT	%		E	%		MM	%
<b>Father</b>	V	94		V	86		V	92
<b>Mother</b>	V	94		V	81		V	92
<b>Siblings</b>	V	92		V	86		V	91
<b>Spouse</b>	V	76		V	90		V	75
<b>Children</b>	V	94		V	90		V	67
<b>Friends</b>	V	81		V	57		VB	91
<b>Church</b>	V	69		B	62		B	83
<b>Store</b>	B	76		V	67		B	100
<b>Hospital</b>	B	95		B	76		B	100
<b>Radio</b>	B	97		B	100		B	96
<b>Music</b>	B	92		B	95		B	88
<b>Text message</b>	B	79		B	81		B	100
<b>Email</b>	B	77		B	42		BE	71
<b>Letter</b>	B	88		B	81		B	83
<b>Newspaper</b>	B	95		B	81		B	95
<b>Bible</b>	B	82		B	71		E	79
<b>Other book</b>	B	80		B	57		E	83
<b>School</b>	B	49		BE	43		E	67
<b>Schoolbook</b>	E	78		E	76		E	96

V = Vatlongos, B = Bislama, E = English

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4 The following abbreviations for the communities are used here and in the tables below: AT 'Ase-Taveak', E 'Endu', MM 'Mele Maat.'

In all communities Vatlongos is the preferred language choice for communicating with family members (>80% for parents and siblings in all communities), but a lower proportion of speakers in Mele Maat use Vatlongos to communicate with their children (67%), suggesting interrupted transmission. The Mele Maat figures are much higher than the percentage of urban households using a local language as their main communication vehicle according to the 2009 census. The national figure is only 21% (VNSO 2009: 167). Although 88% of respondents in Mele Maat named Vatlongos alone as the language they spoke with their parents, and 50% named only Vatlongos as the language they spoke with children, observed language use suggested that nearly all families in Mele Maat used a mix of Vatlongos and Bislama, with Bislama dominant in most households and especially in child-directed language. In informal discussions speakers in Mele Maat complained that children did not speak or understand Vatlongos, necessitating the use of Bislama. It is likely that a much lower percentage of speakers in Mele Maat use Vatlongos as the primary family language than suggested by this survey.

While Vatlongos is mostly restricted to family communication in Endu, it is also associated with shopping, which reflects the high number of well-stocked stores in Endu compared to the villages of Ase-Taveak. It is likely that speakers in Ase-Taveak are imagining visiting a store in Vila or elsewhere and using Bislama, while for Endu speakers the first association is with local stores.

In Ase-Taveak, Vatlongos also seems to be moving into more official domains. It was the top choice for church services, and this is a recent development: it was a conscious decision by the Presbyterian church in Ase-Taveak to give services in Vatlongos where possible, partly in response to the work on the Vatlongos language Bible published in 2015 (Wycliffe Bible Translators 2015).

In addition, the recent policy shift in education to allow local languages or Bislama to be used in the first three years of primary school (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2012) is starting to be implemented in Ase-Taveak primary schools. Materials were available for Year 1 in 2017 and for Years 2 and 3 in 2018. Whether this policy is ultimately successful will now depend on the individual primary schools delivering the courses. Mele Maat primary school is using Bislama as it also serves children in Mele who would speak Ifira-Mele as their local language, so this shift in policy is unlikely to benefit the vitality of Vatlongos. It is not clear which language will be used in Endu: some speakers would like separate editions of the textbooks in Endu-Vatlongos specifically, while others believe Bislama will be more practical as some children speak North Ambrym rather than Vatlongos in the home. The kindergarten in Endu uses Endu-Vatlongos as much as possible, in contrast to the kindergarten in Mele Maat which has used Bislama and English to the exclusion of Vatlongos since it was established more than thirty years ago (see texts [20170315b\_n01m159] and [20170413a\_h01m169]).

Bislama is highly associated with both written and spoken media, and is also the preferred language for written communication via letters, text messages and email. Since the survey was designed, *Facebook* has become a popular social media platform, especially for young people in Mele Maat. Although it was not included in the questionnaire, observed language use on the platform shows a preference for using English and Bislama; English is preferred for status updates while comments are often in Bislama. This makes sense given the potentially international audience on the platform. Use of Vatlongos is usually restricted to emblematic phrases such as ‘thank you’ and ‘good morning’, often side by side with the same greeting in English or Bislama.

English was mostly associated with written and educational contexts. All communities have English as the most frequent association with school textbooks, but the percentage of people giving that answer is much higher in Mele Maat at 96%, while some speakers on the island associated schoolbooks with Bislama and a few with Vatlongos. These are mainly people who have been exposed to the new Bislama and Vatlongos materials for years 1-3. One reason for the very high proportion in Mele Maat might be that Mele Maat primary school and kindergarten have received many second-hand English language textbooks donated by tourists and non-governmental organisations.

Whereas most speakers in Mele Maat also associated English with general language use in schools, this was much more evenly split between Bislama and English on the island. Bislama edged out English in Ase-Taveak (49% compared to 31%), while in Endu both English and Bislama were associated with school by 43% of speakers, with some choosing Vatlongos. These figures show that the recent language policy changes (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2012) reflect the perceived reality in the classroom, where most teachers have always supported English language teaching with the use of Bislama and local languages, even when this was not officially condoned (Crowley 2000: 79; 2005; Willans 2011).

While Table 3 gives a good idea of the languages most used in different contexts, it does not give a full picture of the domains most associated with each language, especially French and other Vanuatu languages. Table 4 shows the five domains most often linked with each language in each community. Where they are equally ranked, father and mother are grouped together as ‘parents’, but in Endu, where exogamous marriages with North Ambrym speakers are common, more respondents spoke Vatlongos with their father than with their mother, and vice versa for other Vanuatu languages.

As already seen, Vatlongos is most closely connected with communication with family members and friends. Bislama is closely related to media and written communication. English is allied to formal written domains, but also with music. Music is also the main domain where speakers are exposed to French and other Vanuatu languages. Apart from music, French is associated

with media and education like English. Other Vanuatu languages pattern with Vatlongos in being most used in family domains.

*Table 4: Domains most associated with different languages in each community*

	Vatlongos	Bislama	English	French	Other
Ase-Taveak	1. Parents	Radio	Schoolbooks	Music	Music
	2. Siblings	Hospital	Other books	Radio	Parents
	3. Children	Newspaper	Music	Newspaper	Siblings
	4. Friends	Music	Bible	Schoolbooks	Spouse
	5. Spouse	Letter	Newspaper	Other books	Friends
Endu	1. Spouse	Radio	Schoolbooks	Music	Music
	2. Children	Music	Other books	Radio	Spouse
	3. Siblings	Text message	Music	Other books	Mother
	4. Father	Letter	Bible		Father
	5. Mother	Newspaper	Newspaper		Siblings
Mele Maat	1. Parents	Hospital	Schoolbooks	Music	Music
	2. Siblings	Store	Music	Radio	Parents
	3. Spouse	Text message	Other books	Newspaper	Siblings
	4. Children	Radio	Bible	School books	Children
	5. Friends	Newspaper	School	Email	Letter

### 3.4 Language attitudes

This part of the survey targeted value judgements and connotations of Vatlongos and the three official languages of Vanuatu. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of Vatlongos, Bislama, English and French on a four-point scale. The average scores for each language in each community are shown in Table 5. Vatlongos has the highest overall score showing that it is rated highly important and suggesting positive attitudes to the language. Although research in other communities in Vanuatu has found that Bislama is viewed less positively than English (Schneider 2018: 8), Bislama and English are rated very similarly by Vatlongos speakers, with Bislama slightly higher in Mele Maat than on the island. French is also rated slightly more highly in Mele Maat where there is a shift towards education in the Francophone system.

*Table 5: Average rating of the importance of each language on a four-point scale in each community*

	Vatlongos	Bislama	English	French
Ase-Taveak	3.3	2.7	2.8	2.0
Endu	3.1	2.7	2.9	2.0
Mele Maat	3.6	3.0	2.9	2.2
Overall	3.3	2.8	2.9	2.0

Respondents were then asked to explain their rating of each language. Answers were transcribed and grouped into themes under different tags. The most frequent positive and negative themes associated with each language are shown in Table 6 to Table 9, along with an example of an answer tagged as that theme and the percentage of speakers in each community who made that association. As suggested by the relatively high importance ratings in Table 5, respondents expressed quite positive associations with each of the languages. Even when respondents had rated a language as of low importance, they were reluctant to make only negative associations in the discussion. Apart from the very matter-of-fact negative of ‘not knowing’ French and English, respondents had a greater range of positive associations with languages and higher agreement on positive themes than negative ones.



Table 6: Positive and negative associations with Vatlongos

Positive associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
Identity	46%	53%	38%	29%	‘it’s my language’
Culture	11%	12%	10%	8%	‘it’s our culture’
Secrecy	11%	3%	0	42%	‘if I’m telling a secret someone else won’t understand’
Maintenance	8%	9%	0	13%	‘to keep the language strong’
Understanding	8%	7%	14%	4%	‘I can understand everything’
Negative associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
Corrupted	4%	1%	14%	4%	‘not our real language anymore’
Not Written	1%	1%	0	0	‘you can’t write it’
Not Widely Known	1%	0	5%	0	‘some people don’t know it’
Not Good	1%	1%	0	0	‘it’s not good’

The most frequent positive association with Vatlongos is identity, with answers like ‘it’s my language’ or ‘it’s our language’, an idea closely related to the second most frequent answer of ‘culture’, usually expressed with the Bislama term *kastom*. However, the association with identity is more widespread in Ase-Taveak than in Endu or Mele Maat. In Endu this might be because there is competition with North Ambrym language as a token of identity, and North Ambrym is more closely related with custom practices.

In Mele Maat the most popular association is very different: the ability to keep secrets from outsiders. Compared to speakers on the island, respondents in Mele Maat are much more likely to interact with non-speakers of Vatlongos and therefore benefit from this function of the language.

These are common associations for local languages in Vanuatu. Meyerhoff (2000: 33) finds similar reasons for speaking local languages in her research in Malo and Santo: she mentions language maintenance, emphasising family roots and maintaining privacy when speaking around outgroup members as instrumental and affective motivations for choosing to speak in *lanwis* (Bislama for ‘local languages’, as opposed to Bislama, English and French).

Schneider (2018: 8) finds that speakers of Suru Kavian dialect of Apma strongly valued their dialect as a marker of identity, community and home.

The most frequent negative association with Vatlongos is the theme of language corruption: the idea that the language has already changed and degraded too much to be worth speaking. This narrative is especially prevalent in Endu, and a preoccupation with language purity may explain the low proportion of speakers in Endu who rate their Vatlongos language level as ‘fluent’. The situation in Endu closely parallels the findings of Schneider (2018: 10) for Suru Kavian, the minority dialect of Apma: she discusses her consultants’ fears around the widely held language ideology that the dialect ‘is changing and will be lost’.

*Table 7: Positive and negative associations with Bislama*

Positive associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
National Status	22%	28%	5%	21%	‘it’s Vanuatu’s language’
Communication	29%	18%	47%	46%	‘you can talk to other people’
Understanding	6%	6%	10%	4%	‘I understand straightaway’
Widely Known	4%	3%	0	13%	‘lots of people know it’
Friendship	4%	3%	10%	4%	‘I use it with my friends’
Negative associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
Not Secrecy	4%	4%	0	4%	‘it reveals hidden things’
Not Identity	4%	6%	0	0	‘it’s not my language’
Not Clarity	4%	0	14%	4%	‘things aren’t clear’
Not Culture	1%	3%	0	0	‘makes us forget our culture’

The most frequent positive association for Bislama is its national status as a language that unites Vanuatu: Bislama played an important role in the movement for independence and in unifying Anglophone and Francophone regions (Thomas 1990). Second to this is its value for communication. This association is more salient for speakers in Endu and Mele Maat, who are more likely to interact with non-speakers of Vatlongos. Meyerhoff (2000: 33) also identified these two themes as positive associations with Bislama in her research in Santo and Malo. Interestingly, Bislama was considered easy to understand by some speakers, but unclear by others, especially in Endu. Lack of clarity is a problem from the perspective of speaking as well listening to the

language: in informal discussions about Bible translation and language choice for sermons in church, some speakers felt that Vatlongos and English were a better vehicle for religious concepts than Bislama.

The other main theme emerging in the negative associations is the idea that Bislama cannot express identity or culture. The idea that Bislama, and pidgins and creoles more generally, are inherently foreign and colonial (Walsh 1984; Mühlhäusler 1996: 98-101), is belied by the role of Bislama ‘as a focus for anti-colonial discontent’ in the run up to independence (Thomas 1990: 238), and these views are much less common than the positive theme that Bislama represents Vanuatu.

*Table 8: Positive and negative associations with English*

Positive associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
Tourism	20%	19%	33%	8%	‘to talk to tourists’
Education	20%	21%	5%	29%	‘for children at school’
Travel	11%	6%	0	33%	‘to travel overseas’
Communication	10%	12%	14%	4%	‘to talk to other people’
Employment	3%	3%	0	4%	‘have to know it for work’
Negative associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
Not Known	13%	15%	19%	4%	‘I don’t know it’
Difficulty	7%	6%	19%	0	‘it’s too hard’
Not Understanding	3%	3%	0	4%	‘I don’t understand’

The main associations with English are tourism and travel, with an interesting distinction between respondents on the island and in Mele Maat. Speakers on the island associated English with tourists; a third of speakers in Endu made this connection, showing the impact of tourists staying in Endu to visit the volcano. On the other hand, a third of speakers in Mele Maat saw English as useful for travelling abroad, especially to Australia, reflecting a more internationally mobile community than on the island. English was also associated closely with education, though surprisingly few speakers connected it with employment opportunities, even in Mele Maat.

The main negative associations are to do with lack of knowledge of English and perceived difficulty in learning it. Many speakers in Endu, especially, believe English is inherently difficult, perhaps because they are more likely to experience the challenge of interacting with international

tourists speaking varieties of English that do not conform with standards of English in Vanuatu, and without recourse to Bislama as an auxiliary shared language.

*Table 9: Positive and negative associations with French*

Positive associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
Tourism	13%	12%	24%	8%	‘sometimes French tourists come’
Education	9%	12%	0	8%	‘children have to learn it at school’
Travel	3%	3%	0	4%	‘if you go to New Caledonia’
Employment	2%	1%	0	4%	‘can help you find work’
Negative associations					
Tag	All%	AT%	E%	MM%	e.g.
Not Known	64%	57%	67%	50%	‘I don’t know it’
Difficulty	5%	7%	5%	0	‘too hard’
Not Employment	1%	1%	0	0	‘doesn’t help you find work’

As with English, a major association with French is tourism (especially in Endu), though it is less closely linked with travel and education. Although some speakers associate it with employment opportunities, one speaker feels that it is not useful for finding work, at least in comparison to English. For most respondents French is not important because they do not know it themselves.

#### **4. Comments on language vitality**

The absolute speaker numbers (somewhere between 2500 and 3700) may appear to indicate that Vatlongos is vulnerable from an international perspective, and as the UNESCO report on language vitality and endangerment points out, ‘a small speech community is always at risk’ (Brenzinger et al. 2003: 8). However, from a Vanuatu perspective Vatlongos is one of the most robust languages in the country, based on speaker numbers alone. François et al. (2015) put Vatlongos in the top 20% of languages in

Vanuatu by speaker numbers based on the figure of 3700. Even if the speaker population is nearer 2500, it is still comfortably in the top third. Most languages in Vanuatu are limited to one or two villages with a few hundred speakers, but are still robustly transmitted to children (François 2011; François et al. 2015).

Using the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) developed by Lewis & Simons (2010; 2016:chap. 5), *Ethnologue* (2018) rates Vatlongos as a level 5 ‘developing language’ and therefore ‘safe’. This reflects that it is used orally by the whole community and in written form by part of it: the publication of the Vatlongos Bible in 2015 (Wycliffe Bible Translators 2015) raised it into this category. However, it remains to be seen how much the Vatlongos Bible will be used: in Ase-Taveak 23% of respondents mentioned Vatlongos as one of the languages they access the Bible in, but only 7% in Endu and 9% in Mele Maat. The high figure for Ase-Taveak may also be inflated as both assistants conducting interviews in Ase-Taveak were involved in Bible translation. For now, at least, most respondents prefer to use Bislama or English language Bibles, although this may change with increased focus on vernacular literacy in education as well as religious settings.

The *Ethnologue* assessment therefore seems to be an accurate assessment of the vitality of Vatlongos in Ase-Taveak, and in fact the new developments in education policy (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2012) could push it up to a level 4 ‘educational’ language, where literacy is taught through an institutionally supported education system. However, the new policy only affects the first three years of primary education, and whether this policy change has a significant effect on the vitality of the language will again depend on uptake by the community. Lewis and Simons (2016:sec. 5.2.5) stress the importance of community-based institutional support to achieving this level of vitality.

However, applying the EGIDS criteria to the vitality of the language in the other speaker-communities gives less encouraging results. In Endu, Vatlongos is not used in church and the community is less enthusiastic about using the new Vatlongos materials in schools. Vatlongos is rated as less important than in Ase-Taveak or Mele Maat, and a lower proportion of respondents connect Vatlongos with their identity than in Ase-Taveak. Two respondents in Endu feel that Vatlongos has become corrupted and can no longer function as a marker of identity, and this ideological stance was also raised by other Endu speakers outside of the formal survey. In Endu, Vatlongos is in competition with North Ambrym language for the key domain of the family, and although children and young people all appeared to understand Vatlongos, fewer were confident or enthusiastic enough to contribute recordings to the corpus. Overall Vatlongos in Endu is probably at level 6a ‘vigorous’ on the EGIDS (Lewis & Simons 2016:sec. 5.2.7), but could quickly become threatened depending on the decisions made by young people now.

In Mele Maat, the vitality of the language is again much less robust than in Ase-Taveak. Here there are no plans to use Vatlongos in education, although a few speakers are using the Vatlongos Bible (9%). In Mele Maat, the language is not being transmitted orally to all children making it a level 6b ‘threatened’ language, the equivalent to a ‘vulnerable’ language on the UNESCO scale (Brenzinger et al. 2003). This supports the observation made by Simon & Lewis (2013), summarising the results of applying EGIDS to the languages in *Ethnologue*, that urbanisation is now the main driver of language endangerment.

An interesting feature of the Mele Maat situation is that transmission seems to be delayed rather than completely disrupted. One of the questions on the survey asked about age of acquisition, and it was designed to be asked only to non-native speakers, such as wives marrying in to the community. However, the language assistants also asked the question of native speakers and the results were revealing: while most speakers in Ase-Taveak and Endu said they learnt Vatlongos at age 1 or 2, speakers in Mele Maat often said they learnt the language as late as 8 or 10. This may reflect higher standards for ‘learning’ the language due to lower confidence in the urban community, but I did observe that only older children and teenagers were comfortable speaking Vatlongos in Mele Maat, though younger children may have already acquired a passive understanding of the language.

It became apparent in discussions around the survey and in other conversations with community members that while many children do not speak or understand Vatlongos, many of them go on to learn and use the language as teenagers. Young adults who had acquired Vatlongos in this way spoke about their motivations: they often felt a need to have a language connected to their island identity or a private language around strangers. Sometimes being around speakers of other Vanuatu languages at secondary school led them to see the value of Vatlongos. This might be an example of how languages can be maintained by their wider linguistic environment (Mühlhäusler 1996): it is by seeing how a parallel local language is a valuable resource to other groups that Mele Maat teenagers see the potential of Vatlongos. Thurston (1992: 135) describes teenage speakers of Amara (New Britain, Papua New Guinea; Austronesian) unexpectedly embracing the highly endangered language and using it to ‘show off’ to peers in other language groups.

To conclude, while Vatlongos appears to be safe in most of the villages in Southeast Ambrym, it is threatened in a relocated urban community. Overall the results of the survey show that even in the outskirts of the capital threats to the vitality of Vatlongos come not from the colonial languages of English and French but rather from the national language Bislama, supporting the findings of Crowley (2000: 122) and François et al. (2015: 12).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has described the language context of Vatlongos, Southeast Ambrym, distinguishing three speaker communities. The Mele Maat community relocated from Maat village in Southeast Ambrym in the 1950s following a volcanic explosion and is now a peri-urban settlement on the outskirts of Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, on Efate island. Within Southeast Ambrym, Endu village has been distinguished from the villages of Ase-Taveak on the basis of dialectal differences as well as cultural and social differences, which arise from close contact with North Ambrym communities and exposure to international tourists using the village as a base to visit Ambrym's volcano. The paper has identified the location of these communities, commented on estimated speaker numbers to suggest that figures in the literature may be too high, and summarised anthropological and linguistic research and interventions, including recent developments in Bible translation, primary education and literacy outcomes from this project.

A sociolinguistic survey of 112 speakers across the three communities reveals a speaker-community that is literate, mobile between urban and rural areas, predominantly Presbyterian, and English-language educated though usually only to primary level. Overall, speakers are confident in their language abilities in Vatlongos and Bislama, and hold positive attitudes to all the languages in their repertoires. Vatlongos is most-used in the family domain and is linked to identity, culture and private in-group communication. Despite near-total bilingualism with Bislama, the national language and main vehicle of communication between language groups in Vanuatu, more than a third of speakers also know at least one other local language. This shows that there are strong incentives, beyond basic communication, to learn other Vanuatu languages: in the case of Mele Maat, this was an explicit policy to integrate with communities on their new island. One surprising result of the survey was how few speakers cited employment opportunities as reasons to learn English or French.

Endu differed from the other communities in the very high proportion of speakers who spoke another local language (mostly North Ambrym), the preponderance of fears about the purity of Vatlongos and the close association of tourism with English and French. Speakers in Endu were less confident in their language level in Vatlongos and were less likely to speak Vatlongos with friends. Mele Maat was the only community where more respondents were fluent in Bislama than in Vatlongos, and a lower proportion of respondents spoke Vatlongos with children or spouses. Despite these indicators of disrupted transmission, many young people in Mele Maat are learning Vatlongos as teenagers, which may have interesting linguistic consequences if this becomes the main pattern of acquisition. The Mele Maat community is also more internationally mobile, and more likely to associate English and French with international travel than with tourists visiting Vanuatu. There is

also an emerging trend in Mele Maat to send children to Francophone schools, although interestingly this was linked to perceived higher education standards, and even higher standards of English, rather than with a desire for children to learn French.

Finally, this paper has discussed the vitality of Vatlongos. The language appears to be secure in the Ase-Taveak community where it is robustly transmitted to children and there are promising developments for further institutional support in religion and education. However, the language is potentially threatened in both Endu and Mele Maat, though for different reasons. In Endu, Vatlongos is in competition with languages of Northern Ambrym in the key domain of communication with family members, and there are fears around the loss of Endu-Vatlongos dialect and mixing with South-Vatlongos which might explain lower confidence in Vatlongos language-abilities. This is particularly concerning as dialect loss seems imminent. In peri-urban Mele Maat, on the other hand, Vatlongos is threatened by an increasing shift to Bislama, with many children unable to actively speak Vatlongos. This shift is closely tied to different patterns of education, employment and socialising in an urban environment. These differences at a community and even village level show the importance of distinguishing speaker-communities when forming judgements on language vitality.

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