

THE POLITICS OF DICTIONARY MAKING ON TANNA (VANUATU)

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Sturtevant has defined a culture as "the sum of a given society's folk classifications" (1964:100). This interpretation of culture – although it can be taken as a gross simplification – stresses the centrality of socially constructed definitions of reality. Dictionaries, in literate societies, are folk attempts to standardise a society's classifications and definitions. They are part of the apparatus by which cultural knowledge is codified and transmitted. Codification systematises cultural definitions and their linguistic labels. Transmission ensures that the systematised cultural code extends throughout a society and across time.

Codification and transmission of standardised cultural definitions are not apolitical processes. Instead, they forward the interests of some people and groups and challenge those of others. At the broadest level, political competition involves definitions of reality. Competing groups advance variant interpretations of the world. Concepts (e.g., of natural and unnatural, masculine and feminine, wisdom and stupidity, goodness and evil) must be continuously validated (and sometimes revised) in social interaction and argument. Those individuals and groups commanding positions of political and economic power within a society also control the cultural definitions of that society, and their codification as transmitted by dictionaries.

Powerful groups validate and maintain their command of social reality by codifying and transmitting this in dictionary form. The appearance for the first time of authoritative English dictionaries in the 18th century (Wells 1973) correlated with increased political muscle of the British middle class. The programmatic statements of early dictionary makers and their supporters castigated the speech of both the vulgar poor and "people of fashion" (Wells 1973:46). The more recent publication of Webster's *Third international dictionary* – which for the first time listed and defined "ain't" and a number of other rude American words – occasioned a long debate about the authoritative versus descriptive functions of dictionaries (Sledd 1962). Those who protested the vulgarising of dictionary language accurately perceived the political competence of dictionaries which protect dominant group interests by making a particular speech style and system of folk classification the standard.

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The question comes down to the degree of shared culture (including language) within a society. If a culture is entirely shared, no disagreement or conflicting interpretations of word meaning or of word pronunciation could exist. A dictionary would be completely descriptive and this description would have no political significance. Much of culture, however, is not shared. Groups and individuals within a society possess different sets of definitional constructs and work with variant grammatical rules which generate a number of different speech styles. Most speakers, of course, agree on at least the primary codified meanings and indicated pronunciations of many of the words found in an English dictionary. One still need ask, however, after determining that culture is shared to some degree, how these particular codifications become and remain standardised.

Dictionaries transmit an interpretation of reality. Even if they succeed in being partially descriptive of shared and variant cultural meanings and linguistic form, they remain authoritative political statements. A dictionary is authoritative not only in the sense that it instructs its readers in the correct manner of defining, pronouncing and spelling, but also because the particular definitions and speech styles it codifies and transmits become a standard removed from ongoing speech interaction. By codifying a standard code and by storing and circulating this in literate form, dictionaries objectify language. Thus objectified, dictionary-disciplined language achieves greater autonomy than language which exists only in memory.

If all dictionaries demand "making and controlling translations" (Voegelin, quoted in Robinson 1969:10), bilingual dictionaries involve further, cross-cultural considerations of control. Writing bilingual dictionaries is a small part of Western appropriation of the world. Linguistics, like anthropology, fixes in print a cultural system in such a way that it becomes a knowable object more accessible to manipulation by those both within and without the speech community. Malinowski, who instituted early anthropological and linguistic fieldwork in the Pacific, scribbled in his diary as he sailed north to the Trobriand islands:

I hear the word "Kiriwina" ... I get ready; little grey,
pinkish huts ... It is I who will describe them or
create them (1967:140).

His claim, grandiose and egomaniacal, nevertheless applies also to the composition of dictionaries. Dictionaries objectify sounds into orthography, utterances into morphemes and inference into denotation. Dictionary codification is literary cryogenics. In addition to capturing only a particular moment in communicative flux, a dictionary flash-freezes a language into a configuration which is only one of a number of possible abstractions of its present state. Each of these alternatively possible dictionary codifications presents its own attendant political implications.

This paper discusses three codificatory puzzles which arose in the compilation of a dictionary of the N̄nin̄ife (Kwamera)¹ language of Tanna in the southern part of Vanuatu (Lindstrom forthcoming). These puzzles consist of island words which are more than arbitrary acoustic symbols of material and immaterial ideas. They also indicate something about the speaker and speech context. This secondary, political utility often dominates the primary referential function of a word (cf. Salisbury 1962; Strathern 1975; Sankoff 1976, 1977).

About 17,000 people live on Tanna and speak five closely related Austronesian languages (see Lynch 1978; Tryon 1976). Two thousand people along the south and east coasts of the island speak N̄ninife (described in missionary sources as Kwamera). Presbyterian missionaries, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, invented several orthographies of three of the island's languages acting according to the usual protestant dictum of Bible translation. They produced a N̄ninife New Testament as well as a number of hymnals, elementary primers and other material used in mission schools (see Watt 1880, 1890, 1919, for example). A generation of men, now in its late 50s and 60s, learned to read (more than write) their language.

In the 1960s, the British and French colonial governments took control of and expanded the mission school systems. Political concerns in the main motivated this educational expansion. Government schools purposely neglected indigenous languages as well as Bislama, the Pidgin English lingua franca of the archipelago, to ensure student literacy in one or the other of the colonial languages. Few young Tannese can read their own languages, although some have a passing acquaintance with English or French.

Although the recently independent Vanuatu government supported a language conference in 1981 which made recommendations concerning the future role of the nation's 105 indigenous languages in education, law, and the mass media, it has yet to undertake much of a program to ensure their national significance or utility. The conference did recommend, however, the production of dictionaries partially as linguistic salvage (of those languages "on the verge of being lost because of declining population") and partially to transform (literalise) local languages into objects of utility within national institutional contexts (Pacific Churches Research Centre 1981:17). This dictionary objectification of local languages is an initial requirement for subsequent national appropriation and manipulation.

Dictionaries make sense by codifying word meaning and word form. Attempts to codify local languages, however, encounter a number of practical problems with serious political implications. Some difficulties relate to the fact that word meanings are socially unshared. Other difficulties relate to variant word form. This paper discusses the problematic codification of three sorts of politically significant words. Some words are meaningful because they have no meaning. These function, partially, to signify the importance of a communication. Others are words the articulatory rights to which individual speakers inherit and control. These mark personal distinctiveness and identity. Finally, a third type of words consists of sets of cognates which are associated with particular residential groups. These words symbolise speakers' local affiliations and signify the existence of political boundaries.

Dictionary codification flounders in the first instance in that although speakers use a word they do not share its meaning. It flounders in the latter two instances in that although speakers share meaning they are unable or unwilling to pronounce the word. Because of the significance of these variations, the choice by a dictionary maker to resolve codificatory uncertainty in one way or another may have local political impact if his dictionary becomes known and used.

WORDS WITHOUT MEANING

People sometimes use words the meaning of which they claim not to understand. Malinowski, encountering similarly senseless words in Trobriand Island garden spells, described the problem as "the meaning of meaningless words" (1935:213). Nonsensical words, on Tanna, occur principally in song (cf. Fortune 1963:257-258; Lewis 1980:59). People discern songs to be ancestral messages. These may be inherited from forebears or have more immediate origins if some songsmith is ancestrally inspired as he dreams. Gray, a 19th century Presbyterian missionary on Tanna, noted:

a native, we know, readily uses the preformatives of his own dialect with the stem root words of another dialect. I have found these corruptions and foreign words in all native songs I have examined (1894:43, see also Codrington 1891:334-336).

"Meaningless word", of course, is an oxymoron. A nonsense word has meaning even if this is inferential rather than referential. Malinowski suggested that meaningless words function to mark the extraordinariness and magical status of an utterance (1935:224). The words of Tannese songs, partially or completely senseless, share this utility. Songs are the chief form of ritual speech at traditional ceremonial occasions. Supporters of the principals involved in the day's exchange of goods gather to dance and sing throughout the night. Singers are ignorant of the sense of many of the traditional songs in their repertoire. Meaningless libretti also characterise the songs which people sing during the ceremonial events of modern ideological organisations. These include the various Christian sects and the John Frum Movement (a successful political organisation cum cargo cult). Christians, for example, are content to yodel English or French hymns, singing words with no denotation for most of the hymnists.

* * * * * * *	
lou, Tomi Timi Kaupoī Tīna Okei okei Wel tumaruma Iso soera tieni tenama.	<i>I, Tommy, Jimmy Cowboy Tanna Okay, Okay (senseless language until song's end).</i> John Frum Hymn
* * * * * * *	

An equation of semantic opacity, remoteness, and antiquity informs folk etymology. People, to account for their choral lexical ignorance, suggest that nonsense words either are of foreign origin ("Tahiti" and "Tonga" are suspected venues) or are the speech of the ancestors. In some cases a word may be both these things; linguistic consultants sometimes identify a word which exists as a common form in a neighbouring dialect as ancestral, and therefore spookily senseless.

Even though Malinowski claimed that nonsense words are meaningful "in that they play a part" (1935:247), he was also very concerned to pin down any denotations he could. He relied sometimes on flimsy morphological evidence but more often on his key informant in these matters, Bagido'u:

In some formulae we are able to translate the words clearly and satisfactorily after our magically illumed commentator has given us their esoteric meaning (1935:219).

Malinowski's anthropological efforts, however, to elucidate and codify these meaningless lexical riddles run counter to politically functional ambiguity in Melanesian societies. A word meaning known by a single person (i.e., "wise informant") is not a social fact until this meaning is communicated to another. The transformation of personal interpretations into socially shared meanings is one of the bases of power in the area. On Tanna, this exegesis of esoterica is the main avenue to prestige (Lindstrom 1984). The existence of political competition on the island generates much more disagreement than agreement in semantic interpretation. Malinowski, had he found a second wise informant, would probably have discovered likewise divergent explications (see Malinowski 1935:232; Lewis 1980:67-71).

Songsmiths, on Tanna, continue the production of nonsensical songs in order to sustain an interpretive role. Nikiau, for example, a John Frum leader of the 1940s, instructed young men and women in the meaningless words of a set of new cult songs. These represented, he claimed, John Frum's language. He instantly became a religious pundit and an individual of some prominence in as much as people were willing to sing the songs according to his interpretations. Meaningless words provide material for politically motivated exegesis. A particular semantic interpretation, of course, may or may not establish much exchange value. A semantic savant's political success within the local information market is measured by the degree to which his interpretations are accepted by the public (and, sometimes, by his ability to convince — or take in — visiting ethnographers such as Malinowski). Dictionary codification of one interpretive version of these words obviously would lend support to one leader vis-a-vis his semantic competitors.

A leader, or big-man, in this sense is an interpreter. He, too, is a dictionary maker. His advantage is that his interpretive codifications are stored in memory rather than in print. The 'meaning' of this sort of word is socially constructed to a degree far beyond the imagination of any phenomenologist. These meanings have no guarantee of permanency, depending as they do on political exigency, and they thus violate the temporal semantic expectations which make dictionary making possible. Meaningless words, which signify the specialness of a communication or permit definitional fancy, must be glossed as political supersense rather than nonsense. This sense, however, will probably decay before a dictionary does.

VERBAL ASSETS

There are words which everyone speaks and sings but only certain people agree to understand (as above). There are others which everyone understands but no one speaks. The problem with this second category of word is not the codification of meaning; it is a problem of word control. These lexemes are personal property inherited from one's ancestors. Dictionary appropriation of this sort of word becomes a form of symbolic thievery, etyma-larceny, as it were. Fortune, collecting on the sly Dobuan spells which contain various secret names for supernatural actors, animals, things, etc., noted that had he used such names publicly, he

would have aroused such resentment in my teacher of magic that my learning of magic would have been over. I would have been giving names of power, giving power itself, to those who had no birth-right to such power, but who had to fee the special practitioners and possessors of such power to exercise it on their behalf (1963:114).

Personal names are one possible set of verbal assets. On Tanna, as elsewhere in Melanesia, many personal names (which also label plants and animals) belong to particular lineages (or "name-sets", see Lindstrom 1985) and are recycled through the generations. Other islanders, however, have rights of pronunciation of these lineage nomenclatural assets and can use them to refer to the so-named people as well as to their natural object namesakes. The proprietary assumptions linking a person and his name do not entail a speech taboo which prevents the articulation of the name by others (as occurs elsewhere in the Pacific, see Fortune 1932:62-68, for example).

- * * * * *
- K+MTI N
1. *Kind of taro.* 2. *Personal name.*
- K+RA N
1. *Kind of tree.* 2. *Ladder.* 3. *Personal name.*
- PAUPAUK N
1. *Butterfly.* 2. *Personal name.*
- * * * * *

Other verbal assets, however, do entail enunciatory taboos, or at least a wariness on the part of those speakers with no rights to the word. These, especially, are words which label or describe various magical paraphernalia. Most men have inherited magical objects (e.g., sets of powerful stones), along with knowledge of necessary bark and leaf accoutrements and the right to legitimate magical practice. This distinctive knowledge is part of the constitution of every man's individuality. Its transmission is highly restricted in order to maintain its secrecy. On Tanna, there is thus an 'organic' distribution of magical knowledge in which every person controls a small part of the whole. As event dictates, various individual practitioners are called to the fore in order to regulate the weather, diagnose and cure disease, ensure the fertility of the season's crops, etc.

People are conspicuously careful not to violate the barriers of information transmission which would threaten the current distribution of restricted knowledge. Part of this prudence extends to an unwillingness to pronounce in public words associated with one or another of the magical technologies. These techniques frequently involve very similar materials distinguished only nomenclaturally. A magically treated length of wild cane (ordinarily nig) can take a different name depending on which person's magic so treated it. People without rights to operate a magical technique publicly claim ignorance of all that it entails. They reveal only in private their illicit knowledge of associated names and words.

- * * * * *
- NUKWEI NARI N
Sorcery, or magical stone.
- KWATIUTIU N
Magically treated length of wild cane (Miscanthus sp.)
- PWIP N
Magically treated length of wild cane.
- * * * * *

Malinowski, collecting his spells, encountered a similar distribution of verbal assets in the Trobriands. People informed him:

"This is Bagido'u's magic — we cannot speak about it."
It is bad form to trespass on the magician's exclusive field of knowledge (1935:225).

Malinowski went to Bagido'u, learned from him, and subsequently revealed his knowledge in print. Makers of dictionaries need to discern whether speakers make a distinction between oral and written revelation of verbal assets. If none exists, the lexicographer must consider seriously the consequences of potential semantic trespass — a dictionary redistribution of linguistic private property.

There are other words which everyone understands but is wary of speaking, although for different reasons. Here, words are taboo not because they are associated with a body of personally managed secret knowledge but because they serve to mark particular categories of social relationships (cf. Goodenough and Sugita 1980:1-11). A speaker's avoidance of certain words when communicating with an interlocutor marks the social identities involved in the interaction and makes a comment on the current state of the relationship.

Brothers and sisters (real and classificatory), in particular, avoid discussion of topics running the gamut from copulation, through pregnancy to parturition. They are also careful not to use any of a set of marked words which denote sexual body parts and their functions. Men, particularly young men who call each other by a reflexive kin term *-ieri* (*actual/potential brother-in-law*), on the other hand, regularly bandy these terms as part of expected verbal abuse. Violation of either expectation of linguistic immoderation or punctilio signifies some derangement in the social relationship.

*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
KANARI	N						
<i>Vagina.</i>							
KWANIHI-	N						
<i>Penis.</i>							
KWANARE-	N						
<i>Testicle.</i>							
-EHI	V						
<i>Copulate.</i>		-EHI	IKOU,	<i>copulate from the rear.</i>			
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

The conversational exchange of marked words of this sort is also characteristic of various social situations. A major setting for jocular obscenity, for example, is an informal football game during which youthful players comment both on the play of the game and on the qualities of fellow players. Men seemed to experience a certain illicit diversion in teaching me the set of marked vocables and explaining the niceties of their usage. This, however, only occurred within uneasily stimulated all-male groups. Linguistic consultants, nervous at my writing all this down, specifically stated that such words do not belong in a dictionary. (They agree, in this, with Webster.) Dictionaries, unlike football games, ought to contain only polite language.

A comprehensive dictionary could offend people's sensibilities in that it threatens the expected distribution of linguistic markers of social relationships. If people of the wrong kin type in future happen together to peruse the dictionary and encounter a marked term, social tumult akin to an infamous local showing of David Attenborough's film on the John Frum Movement is not inconceivable. Attenborough had photographed men drinking kava — an activity at least ideologically never seen by women. When his film made its way back to the island to play to a mixed sex audience in a school room served by an electric generator, men leapt to their feet in dismay and set about stuffing their wives and daughters under the nearest chairs or hustling them out of the room. Like an ethnographic film, a dictionary — because it is literary — at least partially removes a language from the control of its speakers.

LINGUISTIC CHAUVINISM

A third type of politically significant words consists of limited sets of microdialectal cognates. These words signify speakers' wider affiliations and mark group boundaries (Grace 1981:153-161; Lindstrom 1983). People conversationally recognise the distribution of these cognates to situate speakers within neighbourhoods. (There is also a much larger set of cognate lexemes in free or microdialectal variation throughout the area which people ignore as inferentially useful.) Whereas with senseless words, a dictionary fails in the codification of meaning, here the difficulty is in codification of phonetic form. Although every Nininife speaker knows all significant variants (and can locate these geographically), each uses the set associated with his particular village (cf. Salisbury 1962; Gumperz 1978:394). To do otherwise would signify displacement from his local group.

	* * * * * * *
-ATA	V <i>See, look (also -ATONI, Port Resolution).</i>
-+K+NEK+N	A <i>Strong, rigid (also -+KM+K+N, mountain area)</i>
-KAF+K	G <i>First person singular possessive marker for certain semi-alienable nouns (also KOK-, Imaki area).</i>
REK+M	I <i>No (also REKAKU, Port Resolution; N+K+M, mountain area).</i>
-VEHE	V <i>Come, move towards (also -AFE, Port Resolution).</i>
	* * * * * * *

Speakers of all microdialects claim their particular variant as the 'stump' of language — the origin of all other (distorted) island languages and the proper manner of speaking. They accuse others of misspeaking or twisting real language. Islanders, except in multilingual or joking contexts, avoid producing available variants from other areas (although they understand these) not only because of the symbolic displacement of identity thus generated, but because they consider such variants as outlandish, less prestigious, if not also incorrect. Similar linguistic chauvinism also characterises people's estimations of the island's other languages.

To concentrate dictionary effort on one N̄nin̄ife microdialect would confirm one local group in its prejudices and offend all others. To include all microdialectal variation would please nobody. The exigencies of field-work and personal knowledge, nevertheless, dictate an intermediate course (cf. Harrell 1967:56-57). This involves concentration on one microdialect supplemented with available information from the others (which will, perhaps, both displease and offend).

LANGUAGE OUT OF CONTROL

Writers of bilingual dictionaries must select their audience in order to determine how best to structure the information they compile (Haas 1967). This becomes problematic when recording unwritten languages. In whose society will the controlled linguistic object become a meaningful artifact? If a dictionary has meaning only within one of the societies of the bilingual conjunction (the English-speaking), codificatory difficulties which stem from the political utility of language – constantly revised in an arena where political interest partially dictates semantic and phonetic structure – are unimportant. One society's political tool becomes the other's curious artifact and this is acceptable whether or not it contains non-denotative words, individual verbal assets, taboo words, or verbal markers of local group affiliation. If a dictionary, however, becomes a meaningful artifact in both societies, the translations it makes and controls become one of many possible political statements. This dictionary statement differs from the rest, however, in its literate form and permanency. Language, thus codified, escapes the usual controls of individual interests and memory.

Tannese cultural definitions and speech patterns are currently codified only in memory and transmitted by speech. A dictionary constitutes a channel for knowledge codification and transmission which is more powerful than speech, more permanent than memory. Dictionaries, because of this, partially remove a language from the control of its speakers. What was constantly negotiated in political interaction is now frozen in literate form.

Goody and Watt distinguish controlled (or literary) language from non-literate. As characteristic of the second, they argue:

There can be no reference to 'dictionary definitions', nor can words accumulate the successive layers of historically validated meanings which they acquire in a literate culture. Instead the meaning of each word is ratified in a succession of concrete situations, accompanied by vocal inflexions and physical gestures, all of which combine to particularise both its specific denotation and its accepted connotative usages (1968:29).

Dictionaries, because they transcend the control of individual memories and interests, make apparent inconsistencies in language over time and across a society. They make apparent the fact that culture is not totally shared and that language is variable. N̄nin̄ife has changed enough since the publication of a 19th century translation of the New Testament that the men able to read the remaining specimens of this book recognise and comment on the variation. This diachronic variation, however, fits neatly with the idea that ancestral language as spoken either by one's grandparents or by ancestors who appear in dreams should be different from everyday speech.

Dictionary codification and revelation of contemporary linguistic variation (i.e., culture which is either unshared or differentially valued), on the other hand, is more disturbing. A dictionary reveals some of the infrastructure of power and inequality on the island. Moreover, dictionary control of meaningless words, verbal assets, and variant cognates is an objectification of only one of a number of competing political statements. By taking the making and controlling of translations out of everyday interaction, a dictionary as a new artifact in Tannese society could support the definitional claims, political interests, and linguistic expectations of some groups and individuals over others. The dictionary regulation of language may have political consequence as well, in the case of bilingual dictionaries, between societies.

In literate societies, speakers are no longer the sole judge of the meanings and the proper forms of words; nor are they any longer solely responsible for codification and transmission of their language. Dictionaries, instead, define a standard and, therefore, help to reproduce as well as merely describe shared culture. Two hundred years ago, when dictionaries were created to be authoritarian statements of one particular interpretation of linguistic and cultural reality, speakers of English lost partial control of their language.

Standards of meaning and of pronunciation also exist in non-literate (or functionally non-literate) societies such as Tanna. These standards, however, are not predominant in that all speakers negotiate and transmit them daily in public conversation and store them only in memory. There is no determining, written authority. Ruling structures of political inequality, of course, affect the outcome of these processes of conversational negotiation which create and validate shared meanings. Literate dictionary storage and circulation of lexical meanings and forms, however, offers a new mechanism of language control of a different, more durable order. This authoritative competence is given in the name; dictionary, dictum, and dictate, of course, are etymological kin.

This is not to say that a system of defined meanings is immune from challenge because it is written. Speakers, in the end, are capable of regaining a measure of linguistic control by recognising that dictionaries, as authoritative standards, are also political statements. This has already occurred, on Tanna, with ethnographic codifications of non-linguistic aspects of culture (cf. France 1969). In the early 1950s, the anthropologist Jean Guiart attempted to record the names of men possessing rights to two traditional 'chiefly' statuses in every local group. Although ideologically inherited through patrilineal links, men actually appropriate these statuses by astute political manipulations including the revision of the unwritten past. When men peruse this catalog of chiefs today, they are confounded by what they see as a pack of lies. Guiart (1956) remembers in print what they find convenient to forget. They do not, naturally, cease to forget. Instead, Guiart becomes the gullible victim of past deceptions.

A dictionary, as representative of certain interests over others, perhaps expects no better future than codified ethnography. Political circumstance will determine the future standing of its controlled word meanings and phonetic forms. In one event, a dictionary will be a valuable treasury of ancestral speech; in the other, a fraudulent counterfeit of real language.

NOTES

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1. The symbol [ɨ] represents a mid central vowel; [v] a voiced high central glide; and [ŋ] a velar nasal stop (see Lynch 1978).

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