

BORROWINGS IN URIPIV

ROSS MCKERRAS

1. INTRODUCTION

As with all languages of Vanuatu, many words and phrases continue to be borrowed into the Uripiv language.¹ A few come from nearby languages and other dialects of the language, but the vast majority come from Bislama, and, behind that of course, from English. This results in many native words falling out of use. There is concern about this, and a move to return to purity of language, especially among some older men. But often people use Bislama or English words without being aware that they are doing so. An example of this occurred one day when I overheard a group of people talking about a *lanis* (from English 'launch'); then a younger person remarked that *lanis* was not a true language word, and he asked an older man what was the 'real Uripiv' word for it. After a few moments' thought the older man replied that the real Uripiv word was *kata*, unaware that this too comes from an English word, 'cutter'. The position is rather like people from Australia or New Zealand objecting strongly to Americanisms coming into their language, but accepting as their own Americanisms that came in over ten years ago because they no longer recognise them! However, most Bislama borrowings are recognised by everyone, even if a little thought is required sometimes, because virtually everyone is fluent in Bislama. Also the phonetic shape is unchanged – a Uripiv speaker will pronounce the word the same way whether he is using it as a Bislama word in speaking Bislama, or as a Uripiv word in speaking Uripiv. There is no changing of dress, as for example the English words 'bus' and 'dollar' undergo when borrowed by the Maori language, becoming almost unrecognisable as *pahi* and *taara*.

2. THE EFFECT OF BORROWINGS ON THE LANGUAGE

Let us now give brief consideration to the question of how and to what extent the Uripiv language is affected by borrowings.

Firstly we should note that the great majority of borrowings have no effect at all on the grammatical structure of the language. Those that do are a minority, and the effect is small. It is like pouring water into a bottle of soft drink; the water displaces some of the soft drink, which runs out, but the shape of the bottle stays the same. So borrowings have displaced some of the words of Uripiv, but the shape or grammar of the language is basically unchanged.

¹ This language is spoken by about six thousand people living on North-East Malekula. For more details see McKerras (1989 a, b and c).

Here are some examples of structural change caused by borrowings:

- (1) *Nukat san.*
I.have one
I have one.

Here the Bislama word *gat* (here spelt *kat*) is the borrowing, and with its introduction into the language the older structure (which is however still heard) – see example (2) – has been altered and shortened.

- (2) *Nga inu san otoe.*
of me one 3SG.exist
I have one.

- (3) *fes nanu*
first thing
the first thing

In example (3) the introduction of the Bislama word *fes* has brought with it a reversal of the usual Uripiv word order where the noun comes first in the noun phrase.² The ‘correct Uripiv’ way of saying this, which many are now consciously reverting to, is:

- (4) *nanu nga womu ne-n*
thing which first of-it
the thing which is first

Another common example is the use of the Bislama transitive ending,³ which is only and always used on borrowed Bislama verbs:

- (5) a. *Rrapstat.*
1PL.IRR.start
We will start.
b. *Rrapstatem.*
1PL.IRR.start.TR
We will start it.

This of course makes the borrowing conspicuous.

These examples show a certain grammatical pressure being exerted by Bislama on Uripiv language; in each case a borrowed word brings with it a grammatical change. It is noteworthy too that in two out of the three examples above, a briefer expression results.

In passing here we should remark on the influence of Uripiv language on Bislama as it is spoken by Uripiv people; while words would not usually be taken from Uripiv into Bislama, since the usual purpose of using Bislama anyway is to communicate with a non-Uripiv speaker, yet the grammatical and phonetic influence of Uripiv is evident listening to a Uripiv person speaking Bislama. As everywhere in Vanuatu, Bislama takes its local colouring from the idiom and structure of the local language(s). So the influence is not just one way, but is two way, as with any bilingual community.

² This is not always the case; note for example the common phrase *naim sukul* (lit. ‘house school’) ‘church (house)’.

³ Uripiv verbs take a variety of transitive endings (see McKerras 1989a), but *-em* is not normally one of them and occurs only on Bislama borrowings.

Any idioms that are of widespread use in Bislama which are found in the language are suspect as borrowings, of course; however, it is likely that these idioms were already in the language, and came into widespread use in Bislama because they happened to be common to many languages of Vanuatu.

- (6) *e-rres nga e-rres*
 3SG-good REL 3SF-good
 very good

This example exactly parallels the Bislama idiom *gud we gud*, and in example (7) is also said exactly as in Bislama.

- (7) *Batu-n o-toe.*
 head-his 3SG.REAL-exist
 He is clever.

Perhaps in the same category too are certain phonological features, such as the tendency for final *ng* to be lost in the common words *long* (in Bislama) and *bbong* (in Uripiv).

3. WHY ARE SOME WORDS DISPLACED BY BORROWINGS AND NOT OTHERS?

Now in answer to the question which words are displaced and why, we note first that nearly all the words displaced by borrowings are nouns or verbs (where 'verb' includes adjectives). This is no doubt the usual pattern of borrowing, followed for example when so much French vocabulary was added to basic Anglo-Saxon English during the period when French culture and literature was highly esteemed in England. Introduced items, too, are usually referred to by introduced names, such as *plen* 'aeroplane', *tep*, 'table', *kap* 'corrugated iron sheeting'. However occasionally local labels stick, some of these more than others; examples are *roplet* (dry banana leaf) for 'paper', *delrurr* for 'iron'.⁴ Some of these are translations of the name, such as *nevöt* 'stone' for 'money' (since *vatu*, the nation's unit of currency, means 'stone'), and *metali ne ling* (lit. door for wind) which is seen as the etymology of 'window'. But these are in the minority, and it is a good general rule to say that a new thing will mean a borrowed name. In the same way introduced concepts or abstractions are now conveniently expressed by borrowed terms, such as *kastom* 'traditional way of life', *vot* (vote), *raet* (right or privilege), *mersin* 'medicine' – where typically, each word comes from English, but through Bislama, with Bislama pronunciation and Bislama meaning-area.

Among non-introduced things, we note first that numbers, some colour words, and some kinship terms have been prone to displacement. No doubt in the case of numbers, and perhaps also with colours, we can blame the education system (education was in the Uripiv language up until about 1960, when the Government took over and established English schools). This is clear when we note that the colour terms most often displaced are the ones most likely to be discussed in the classroom: *o-songsong* 'it is red', *e-ingango* 'it is yellow', *e-jejen* 'it is green/blue'. Other colour terms that have specific reference to fauna and flora, things encountered in everyday life outside the classroom, are not displaced.

⁴ *Delrurr* is found in Acts 12:10 (published in 1910). Other good examples are *lemrot* 'biscuit' (literally 'crunchy thing'), *nevis tingting* 'guitar' (literally 'crying bow'), *lerow mare* 'aeroplane' (literally flying-above thing), *wene lepek* 'shilling' (literally wild-yam fruit), *drrow nabin* 'thousand vatu note' (literally 'sail canoe', because of the picture of the sail canoe on it), and *newri* 'truck, car' (literally 'crab'!).

With kinship terms, there is a tendency particularly among children to use *brata* as a simplification, where the language has the two words *tasi-n* and *tuwa-n* (lit. younger brother his, older brother his); then *sista* comes in too, perhaps to go with it. But interestingly, the common usage *mama* instead of *tasu* for 'mother' stands in contrast to the firm position of the Uripiv word *tata* 'father'. Evidently this is the clearest case of a borrowing coming in through women from other islands married into the Uripiv community; while the father teaches his children to call him *tata*, the mother, despite her fluency in Uripiv (which most such women attain) prefers to be called *mama*. This is especially true of wives from Wala-Rano, where no language word other than *mama* seems to be known. Other borrowings in this area are *apu* 'grandparent', which also comes from the Wala-Rano dialect, and the common *famle* for 'family' (instead of *niaken*), and *jeneresen* 'generation' instead of *dul*. People's names are mostly from English, but a noteworthy trend seen in at least four families on Uripiv now is for the youngest son in a large family to go by a 'custom' name. It should be noted that borrowings are virtually absent among certain groups of nouns, notably body parts, canoe parts, wind directions, house parts, astronomical terms (including star names, thunder, lightning, cloud, rainbow, sun, moon) and names of indigenous fauna and flora.⁵

Verbs are often borrowed because their meaning-area is more specific than the available Uripiv word. In this way the Uripiv word is not completely displaced. For example, *e-apan* (it happened) is more specific than *e-plari* (literally 'it came out'), which previously did duty for that meaning; and *o-stop* 'it stopped' seems more suitable for such things as engines than the broader *o-mosi* 'he stops/spells'.

Other examples are *karen* 'garden' (*orsel* can mean 'garden' or also the whole area where gardens are made); *lanwis* 'language' and *wod* 'word', splitting up the semantic range of *nale*; *sol* 'salt', where before *dis* 'sea' did duty; *e-minem* 'it means' where before something like *o-wosi* 'it carries' did duty; *e-sendem* 'he sent' where before *e-lai* or *o-koni* was used (*e-sendem* is more specific than *e-lai*, which can mean 'give', 'take', or 'send'; however it is also broader in a way, since it can also cover *okoni*, which refers to sending a person). This is like *brata* above, covering *tuwa-n* and *tasi-n*. Ross Clark (1982) gives two other examples of words from Bislama (borrowed in the case of his study, into the Fila-Mele language of Efate), which have broader meanings than their nearest native equivalents: *was* 'to wash' and *kuk* 'to cook'. Both of these are also borrowed into Uripiv. In this case, as Clark also points out, these words could be borrowed because they were used in 'areas of association' with Europeans – this is perhaps more significant.

Clark also talks about 'uninhabited areas of semantic space', giving as examples the borrowings *lanem*, *mas*, *impotan* ('learn', 'must', 'important'), all of which are also borrowed into Uripiv; these are further examples of words being borrowed because their meaning-area is more specific than the native words. The semantic space was not uninhabited, but covered by a word which in the light of new circumstances seemed to need help.

However, there are notable cases where borrowings have not taken place; so the multi-use word *ko*, which serves where Bislama has at least four words (*mo* 'and', *be* 'but', *nao* 'and then', *oraet* 'all right'), maintains its position, giving ground only to *oraet* in the speech of some.

⁵ Exceptions: *pos* 'post' usually instead of *nabur*; *nakato* 'hermit crab' instead of *natu*; and *at se nevö* 'cup sponge' (literally 'hat of turtle') and *at se moivel* 'sea-egg' (literally 'hat of sea-snake').

Another reason for borrowing, as noted above, is brevity; so *o-loli lesi* (literally 'he does-looks') becomes *e-traem* 'he tried it'; *e-vinvin ore* (literally 'he come-come blocks it') becomes *e-finisem* 'he finished it'; and *e-jipjipteni* becomes *o-joinem* 'he joined them'.

Among words other than nouns or verbs, displacement by borrowing is quite rare, as noted above. Such words seem to be more fundamental to the language, perhaps more closely tied to its structure. So all pronouns, possessive words, verbal affixes (except in the case of Bislama transitive endings being used on borrowed Bislama verbs), words indicating the tense and moods of verbs, locatives, interrogatives, exclamations, greetings, hesitation forms, nearly all adverbs, and sundry other small words, are not displaced. However, linking words used at the beginning of sentences are sometimes prone to displacement, for example *Taem* ('time') *nga...* 'when' (lit. 'time that') for *Daron nga...*, and such things as the more sonorous and impressive '*At the same time...*' instead of '*Ko...*'. The common displacement of *kele* in its sense of 'too, also' by *tu* is like that noted above for *eplari* and *omosi*. So *inu tu* 'I too' instead of *inu kele* (sometimes *inu kele tu* is heard).

A study of twelve stories collected by Sanita Kenneth in 1974, working for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, showed that the ten storytellers, all older men, used 59 Bislama borrowings in about 330 lines of text. The favourite borrowing by far was *taem* 'time, when', used in all the stories but one. However, it is noteworthy that eleven of these stories were local history or folktales, and these contained only 32 borrowed words; the 27 additional borrowings all occurred in one of the stories, in which a man told of going to army training camp during World War Two. In this story most of the borrowed words could be broadly classified as having to do with army, or government, or shipping. On the other hand one man used only one Bislama word in 39 lines of text telling a folktale. Of course among younger speakers the proportion of borrowings will be higher. In a 250-line text which I transcribed in 1992 from a speaker of about 30 who has lived in Vila (the capital of Vanuatu) for a long time, there were about 80 borrowed words. These were used a total of 188 times and made up just over 10 per cent of the total number of words (about 1,700).

4. SUMMARY

In summary, many words have been and are being borrowed into the Uripiv language, and as a result some words are falling out of use. This has been particularly evident in areas of contact between local people and Europeans, such as with common words used in the classroom, in church, in contact with colonial government administrators, in shipping and plantation work, and generally for new things and ideas. Otherwise, words tend to be borrowed for their more specific meaning-area, or because of their brevity.

However, there is now a strong feeling that the purity of the language needs to be restored, and many people are trying to avoid the use of borrowed words, at least in public speeches. Also, contrary to the fears of some, it appears that few words have actually been completely forgotten. This is due to the excellent memories of the older people. In preparing the dictionary (McKerras 1989c), we went through all the published works of the Presbyterian missionary John Gillan (for references see McKerras 1989a), amounting to about 500 pages of Bible translations and stories, and were able to recognise every word he used, with only two exceptions (which are possibly misprints) – despite the fact that his

works have been disused for decades.⁶ The Uripiv language will certainly survive, though it continues to change, like all languages.

REFERENCES

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⁶ Lindstrom (1988:30) made the same kind of study, with similar results, for Kwamera on Tanna.