



**The Dominion Post**  
**18-Nov-2009**  
**Page: 5**  
**Opinion**  
**By: Janet Holmes**  
**Region: Wellington**  
**Circulation: 91500**  
**Type: Metro**  
**Size: 283.76 sq.cms**  
**Frequency: MTWTF--**

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## *Simple pidgin offers everyone a mouthful of exciting subtleties*



**W**HEN our friendly bus driver suggested “Mifala go beach,” during our holiday in Port Vila, We had no problem in guessing his meaning, nor in agreeing.

Later another sociable person suggested “Yumi dring bia?” Again we were willing to agree. But the ease with which speakers of English can understand, or often just think they can understand, Bislama, the creole used in Vanuatu, is a mixed blessing. It can nurture false confidence as well as sow the seeds of potential misunderstanding. Bislama is spoken by almost everyone in the republic of Vanuatu. It is the official language, used in Parliament as well as in newspapers (but not in schools which teach in either English or French). It is a crucial lingua franca or language of wider communication among the 200,000 people of this multilingual Pacific republic, spread over around 80 islands with more than 100 languages.

Like most pidgins, it developed initially as a language of trade, drawing on English for its vocabulary and local languages for its structure. There are many such creole languages throughout the world, reflecting the trade routes of different nations, and based on a many languages, including French, Spanish, Arabic, Malay and Portuguese. The name Bislama derives from the sea cucumbers or sea-slugs (beche de mer) which were popular with traders when the pidgin first developed in Vanuatu. But the language expanded

considerably during the cane-field era in the late 19th century when it proved an invaluable lingua franca between Melanesians from different islands taken (forcibly) to harvest sugarcane in Queensland and Fiji, a deplorable practice known as blackbirding.

Initially Bislama had no native speakers. It was an auxiliary language, used mainly for trade and very basic communication. Eventually, however, some children began to use it as their first language and, at least in Vila and Luganville, the two towns on Vanuatu, it has developed into a creole.

A creole is a pidgin language that has acquired native speakers. This often happens when a pidgin is the language of communication in homes where each parent speaks a different mother-tongue. The parents use the pidgin language to communicate with each other and the children obviously learn it too.

Fascinatingly, it appears that in such situations children not only expand the vocabulary of the pidgin, they also gradually make the structure more complex in order to convey grammatical subtleties. In New Guinea Pidgin English (Tok Pisin), for example, there is an interesting and well-documented case of the development of a future tense prefix on verbs which had its roots in the English phrase “by and by”, a phrase with obvious future reference. It gradually got cut back from baimbai to just be- and was attached



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to the front of verbs yu bego (“you will go”). Though there is little empirical research on the details of how this process of creolisation actually proceeds in families, for instance, we have plenty of evidence of the results as the creole spreads and becomes a valued communicative tool.

Most outsiders find pidgin and creole languages very amusing, and it is often hard for Europeans to overcome the impression that Bislama resembles baby talk. But there are many subtleties that we are unaware of. So the words mifala and yumi which we encountered on our trip to Vila both translate as “we”, but the choice between them results in subtly different meanings. In the first case we were being invited to join a group (mifala) who already planned to go to the beach, while the second invitation (involving yumi) for a

drink was spontaneous.

And a notice on a beach we visited provided a further example of the potential for misunderstanding by English speakers. It said “spos you wantem feri, you kilim gong”. Like the Maori “patu”, the semantic range of the verb “kil” includes the meaning “beat” or “hit”.

The potential for misunderstanding is clear. But we did “kilim gong” and were transported safely back from the island beach to the mainland. We had a lovely holiday, and we learned a lot about the way that the people of Vanuatu respect and exploit the subtleties of their indigenous creole language.

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