



The social and sonic semantics of reggae: Language ideology and emergent socialities in postcolonial Vanuatu



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ABSTRACT

This study breaks new ground into the emerging discipline of sonic semantics and the study of language ideologies in postcolonial contexts. The case in point is the reggae sociality in Port Vila, Vanuatu, where young Pacific Islanders are forming new ways of socializing on the fragments of *kastom* 'traditional culture' and with an ambivalent stance towards the value system represented by *jioj* 'church'. As a cultural keyword, *reke* 'reggae' offers a rich point for understanding local language-embedded ideologies, and also for understanding the status of Bislama, the national creole.

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1. Introduction

Far from Bob Marley's Jamaican hometown, "Pacific reggae" has come to form a constitutive part of youth socialities in countries such as Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia, and Papua New Guinea. As a musical genre, *reggae* is increasingly described and studied as a global, transcultural, and deterritorialized kind of music (see e.g., Alvarez, 2008; Mazzoli, this issue; Sabelli, 2011), but precisely because of that, one cannot (or can no longer) assume that *reggae* makes up a homogenous conceptual category. In other words, there are many "reggaes". Ethnomusicologist Philip Hayward (2012: 55) posits that "local responses [to globalization] are always more complex and autonomous than Western theories imagine them to be". With the local spelling *reke*¹ 'reggae', I want to signal that the current paper studies a recent Melanesian concept, which does not fully match with the semantics of *reggae* in the Caribbean context or the Anglo-international *reggae* concept. This paper studies *reke* in Port Vila, Vanuatu's postcolonial, plurilingual capital from a postcolonial semantic approach, and with a focus on the language ideologies constructed by and related to *reke*. In the Pacific, the concept of "neo-culture" is sometimes used in relation to the "cultural turn" of contact languages such as Bislama, Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea), and Pijin (Solomon Islands). Originally, these languages were restricted codes used in interethnic communication. In recent times, these languages have undergone profound expansion, as they have come to function as the base languages for many urban dwellers and as the primary means of cultural expression (see Tryon and Charpentier, 2004:481).

Port Vila is ethnolinguistically complex (see e.g., François et al., 2015; Rio, 2011; Vandeputte-Tavo, 2013a, b). Due to urbanization, a high number of different Southern Oceanic languages are spoken in Port Vila's streets, along with varieties of English, French, Chinese, and Bislama. The many polylingual speakers manage these complexities with a fascinating pragmatism and ease (on language, urbanisation and modernization in the Pacific see Jourdan, 2006; Jourdan and Angeli, 2014; Vandeputte-Tavo, 2011, 2013b; on the decolonization of the Pacific, see Aldrich, 2000; Wittersheim, 2006).

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¹ There are many ways of spelling Bislama words. For most speakers, Bislama spelling and writing are used mainly in text messaging and on social media (such as Facebook). As for the spelling *reke*, this was how I saw it used in text messages, along with the English spelling *reggae*. Crowley's dictionary has the spelling *rege* (Crowley, 2003: 221, 402). In this paper, I will use the form *reke* when talking about the concept of reggae in Port Vila, in its localized sense.

Encountered with this kind of ethnolinguistic complexity, one is reminded of cultural linguist Karen Risagers' research questions: "what themes are verbalized by discursive practice? How is cultural (non-verbal) practice included: buildings and objects, sound and music, the use of the body, etc. and how is this totality organized socially?" (Risager, 2006:190). To the cultural outsider, *reke* is recognizable partly through its sonic codes, a strongly accented subsidiary beat that resounds from stores, busses, radios, and related visual codes such as Bob Marley iconography (which can be found on busses, t-shirts, caps, beanies, walls, etc.), the Lion of Judah, or reggae colors – yellow, green, and red. At the time of writing, it was even possible to buy reggae ice cream at a local vendor. By a historical coincidence, Vanuatu's flag happens to be reggae-colored, and many speakers seem to blend the semiotics of "reggae – the music" with the semiotics of "Vanuatu – the nation" in their visual decoding of the streetscape. Such first impressions can give important clues to the national prominence of *reke*, but studies in ethnolinguistic concepts and ideologies can never successfully be grounded in an outsider's impressionistic analysis. Meanings are invisible sociocognitive constructs that can only be analyzed through careful studies in local semantics and with the collaboration, cooperation, and consultancy of local people.

The purpose of the paper is twofold: first, I will contribute with an original semantic analysis of the *reke* concept, using evidence from semantic consultation with young urban dwellers in Port Vila. Second, I will contribute theoretically to language ideology studies, demonstrating how in-perspectives (ideology *in* language) can bring new light to of-perspectives (ideology of language). The paper is organized as follows. In section two, I will discuss the notions of "ideology" and "sociality" and how these terms will be used in the paper. In section three, I will describe two methods, "semantic explications" and "semantic consultations", and how they are utilized in the study of urban Bislama. In section four, I will give further background on the Bislama universe of meaning and its key concepts. In the sections five and six, I will analyze the sociality of *reke* by providing a detailed explication of the *reke* concept, and explore the ideologies of language embedded in *reke* discourse. In my concluding remarks, I will sum up the main findings, and discuss the theoretical implications for future studies in language ideology research in postcolonial contexts.

2. Two perspectives in language ideology research

The relationship between 'language' and 'ideology' is complex and multifaceted, and I will not attempt to review the many ways in which language and ideology have been co-conceptualized across various schools and frameworks (see e.g., Blommaert, 2006; Underhill, 2011; Woolard, 1998). Instead I will focus on two analytical perspectives that seem particularly important for my case study on *reke*. For simplicity's sake, I will call these perspectives 'in-perspectives' and 'of-perspectives'. The in-perspective is used to study the ideological orientations that can be located *in* language, i.e. the meaning of keywords, clusters of words, metaphors, and other cultural-linguistic practices. The of-perspective is used to study ideology as a set of beliefs that speakers hold *of* or *about* language, speakers, and discourse. The former perspective on ideology has been the primary concern in European ethno-linguistics (Underhill, 2011, 2012) and related research on linguistic worldviews, and the latter has been the primary focus in American linguistic ethnography (Silverstein, 1979; Schieffelin et al., 1998; Irvine, 2012). We can, very roughly, sum up the trajectories of the two different perspectives as follows. For in-perspectives, the target of analysis is encoded meaning and linguistic worldviews. In of-perspectives, the target of analysis is speakers' opinions, or tacit beliefs about language and languages, and their manifestations in public discourse.

In my view, the two analytical perspectives have much to offer each other, and cultural keyword studies provide an intersection where 'in' and 'of' can meet. Cultural keywords are words around which whole cultural domains are organized, and which for the researcher offers a starting point for exploring linguistic meaning and cultural knowledge systems (see Goddard and Ye, 2015; Levisen, 2012; Peeters, 2015; Wierzbicka, 1997). A recent publication by Tien (2015) has showed that musico-cultural meanings have an important role to play cultural keyword studies. His study of the Chinese keywords *ya yue* 'exquisite, elegant, refined music', *su yue* 'common, unrefined, vulgar music' (p. 216–218), and other Chinese-specific music-related concepts shows the cultural constructedness of musical meanings. In addition, it demonstrates how cognitive, sociocultural, technical, and kinaesthetic elements of meaning can be co-studied with keywords as the starting point (p. 259). In this way, cultural keywords offer a starting point for exploring the language/culture/cognition complex (Goddard, 2014). The central tenet is that word meanings are, or represent, conceptualizations of reality, and this is precisely why they are considered to be both cognitively and culturally salient in speakers' lives. A postcolonial semantic approach to cultural keywords (Levisen and Jogie, 2015; Levisen, *in press*) adds to the complex an emphasis on language contact and postcolonial reinventions of meaning.

Keyword studies – both cultural and postcolonial – stand in stark contrast to theories of universalist pragmatics, where words are viewed as something "people do things with", and where the focus tends to be on the individual rational agent, who has intentions and who uses words in order to achieve certain goals within a neatly typologized set of "universal" speech acts. As argued by the Goddard and Ye (2015), such models of meaning-making grossly underestimate the cultural foundations of speech. Levisen and Waters (*in press*) further argue that words are not just "tools" in the hand of individual agents who can freely use them to achieve non-linguistic or acultural goals. In fact, it often works the other way around, so that "words do things with people". To this one could add that academics' words, while often solemnly called "terms", are not in principal any different from ordinary words. "Terms" are just as culturally and historically shaped and constructed as other words, and they make up packages of meaning, which, when used diagnostically, enables a specific way of paying attention to world.

The two central terms in this paper, "ideology" and "sociality", should be viewed in light of this discussion. Ideology means 'a set of ideas and ideals', and the term helps to shed light on the discursive co-construal of cognitive, cultural, and political

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