

Late Vernacular Production in Island  
Southeast Asia and the Pacific

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# Late Vernacular Production in Island Southeast Asia and the Pacific

1. Introduction
2. Late Vernacular Production in Abui: A case study
3. What conditions Adult Vernacular Production?
4. Theoretical implications of Late Vernacular production
5. Conclusion

# Definitions

## ► Multilingual communities: Local vernacular + lingua franca

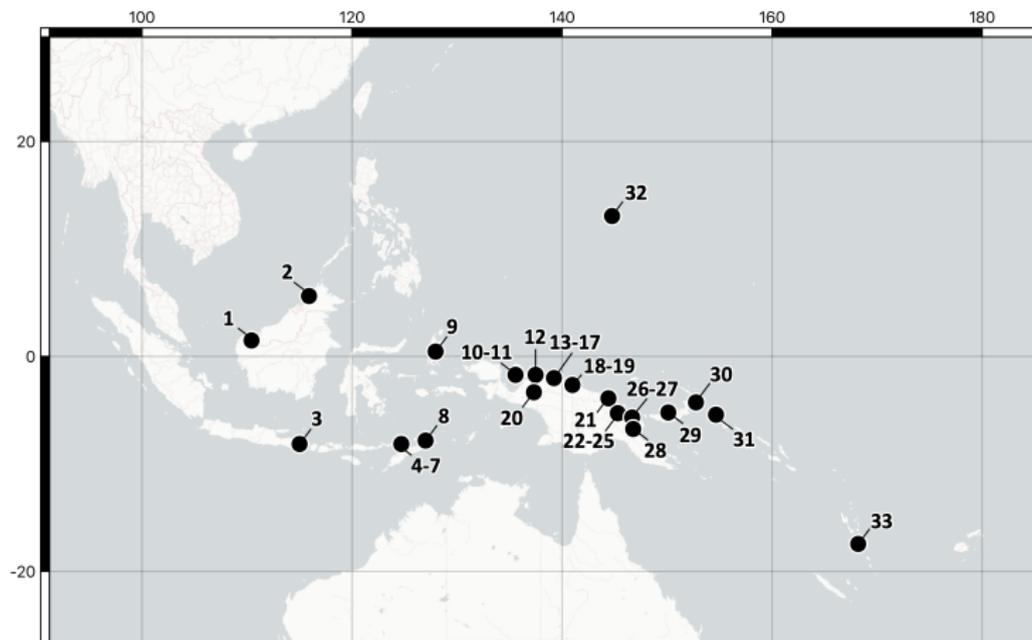
“...children grow up speaking a language of wider communication, and only start speaking the ‘vernacular’ when they join the community of adults. This could be termed ‘adult acquisition’ although, given that children are regularly hearing the language from adults around them, it might be better termed ‘adult/delayed vernacular production’. The switch... may be gradual, or show a sharp divide corresponding to initiation into adulthood.”

Anderbeck (2015: 27)

# Definitions

	Childhood		Adulthood	
LVP	Active:	Lingua franca	Active:	Lingua franca, vernacular
	Passive:	Vernacular	Passive:	—
Simultaneous/ early sequential bilinguals	Active:	Lingua franca, vernacular	Active:	Lingua franca, vernacular
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Language shift	Active:	Lingua franca	Active:	Lingua franca
	Passive:	Vernacular	Passive:	Vernacular

## Distribution in ISEA and the Pacific



Saad et al (sub.), based on Peddie (2021) and Arnold (in press)

## Distribution in ISEA and the Pacific

### ► Skou (Sko: Papua)

“Although children attending school do not speak the language, it is apparent that they do understand it, as they are frequently addressed in it by their parents and other elders... **on leaving school these same teenagers are suddenly speakers of Skou.**”

Donohue (2005: 10)

## Distribution in ISEA and the Pacific

- ▶ Sawai (Austronesian > South Halmahera-West New Guinea: North Maluku)

“In [some] villages... Malay is the first language learned by children. The children understand Sawai, and **once they are finished with school, then some/most of them will begin to use the Sawai language on a somewhat daily basis.**”

Ron Whisler (pers. comm.)

## Distribution in ISEA and the Pacific

- ▶ **Bebeli (Austronesian > Oceanic: West New Britain)**

“In Banaule it was reported that children can speak Bebeli by the time they are about eight years old, but that they are not fluent until they are fifteen or sixteen. **Respondents in the other two villages said that children do not speak Bebeli until they are teenagers, and do not speak it fluently until they are at least twenty.**”

Spencer et al. (2013: 14)

## Distribution in ISEA and the Pacific

### ► Waube (Trans-New Guinea > Madang: Madang)

“Children who are not yet old enough to attend school primarily speak Tok Pisin... In every village visited, general consensus was that Waube and Tok Pisin would still be used by children when they became adults.”

Lambrecht et al. (2009: 24-25)

### ► Uyajitaya (Trans-New Guinea > Madang: Madang)

“Young children (pre-school age) primarily speak Tok Pisin. All villages reported that children would speak Uyajitaya as adults.”

Lambrecht et al. (2008: 32)

## Distribution in ISEA and the Pacific

### ► Ulwa (Keram: Sepik)

“There are very, very few people younger than 40 years old who are fluent speakers of the language. Ethnic Ulwas who are between the ages of 20 and 40 tend to be semi-speakers... some adults overestimate the linguistic abilities of the younger generation, **assuming that they will naturally become speakers of Ulwa once they become older**”

Barlow (2018: 25-26)

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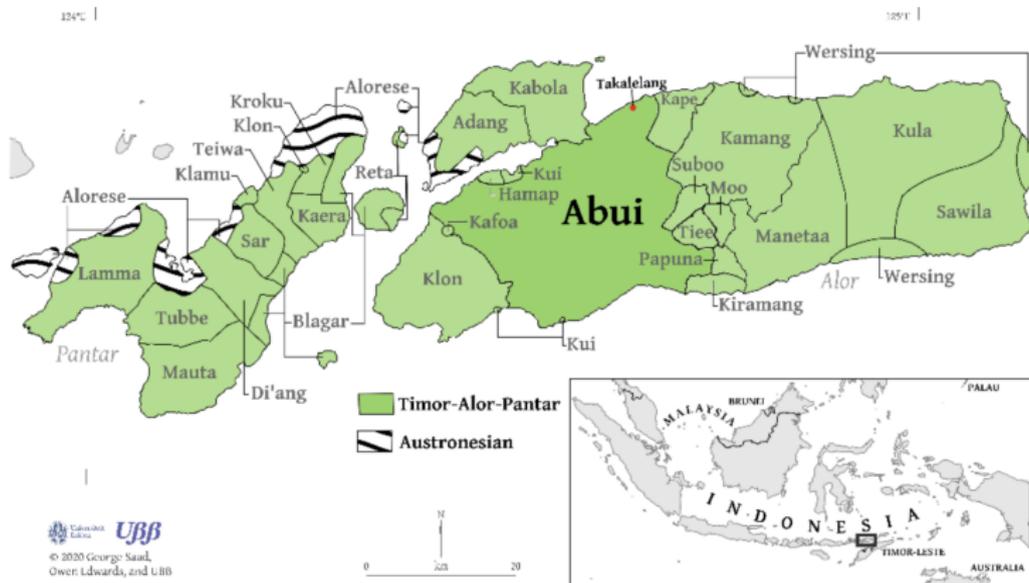
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# LVP in Abui



## LVP in Abui

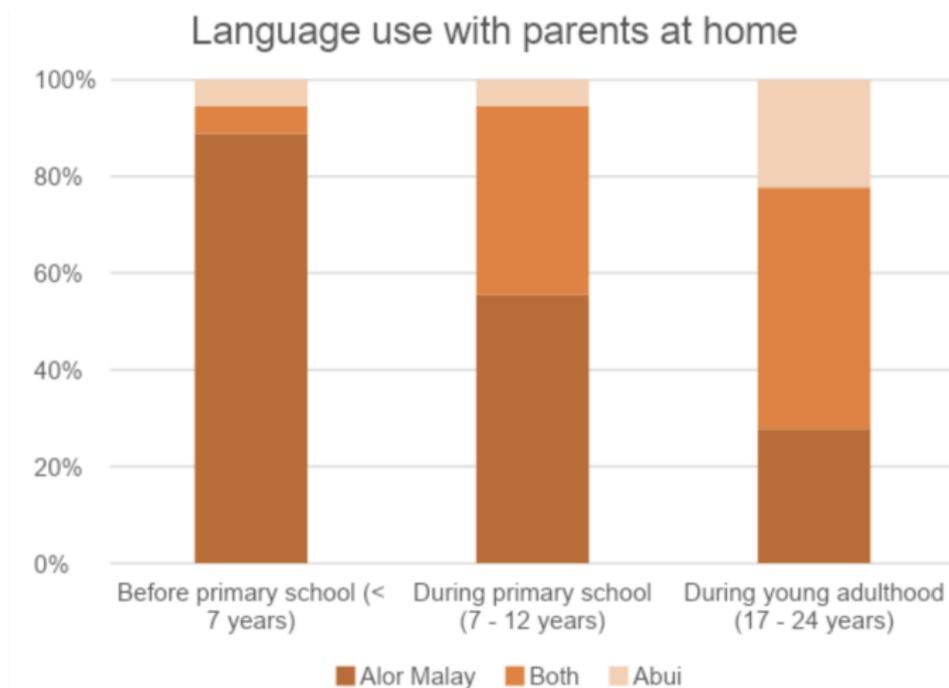
“In Takalelang [village, on the north coast], most children are brought up in Malay, though they become more proficient in Abui when they grow up because it is still the main language used between adults.”

Kratochvíl (2007: 4)

# LVP in Abui



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## Attitudes to the lingua franca

- ▶ Language in the education system:
  - ▶ Lingua franca only language used as the medium of instruction (e.g. Abui, Bebeli, Labu, Waube)
  - ▶ Vernacular stigmatised in schools (e.g. Abui, Waube)
- ▶ Local job opportunities scarce; knowledge of the vernacular not an economic advantage (e.g. Abui, Dabe, Vitou, Edwas, Kwinsu)

## Attitudes to the lingua franca

“[Bebeli parents] want their children to learn English and Tok Pisin because those languages are good for education.”

Spencer et al. (2013: 22)

“The fact that [Uyajitaya] adults speak more Tok Pisin than vernacular to their children seems to indicate that they see significant advantage to their children learning to speak Tok Pisin. This could be due to educational opportunities, as well as economic and social benefits related to being able to interact with outsiders.”

Lambrecht et al. (2008: 31-32)

## Attitudes to the vernacular

- ▶ Positive attitudes towards vernacular—language of local cultural expression and identity

“Waube people hold a positive attitude toward both their language and toward Tok Pisin, the language of wider communication.”

Lambrecht et al. (2009: 26)

## Attitudes to the vernacular

### ► Strong sense of in-group identity

“Discussions around the survey, and other conversations with community members, suggested that while many children do not speak or understand Vatlongos [in Mele Maat], many 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.”

Ridge (2019: 85)

## Attitudes to the vernacular

### ► Strong sense of in-group identity

“One feature of Bale culture is a **strong boundary control system**... There are clear criteria for group membership. One of these is speaking Bale-dha.”  
Araali & Boone (2011)

“The Gurindji people became famous for their determination during [their workers’ strike between the years of 1966 – 1975], and their eventual triumph further solidified the **strength of the Gurindji identity**. This strength of identity has probably driven the maintenance of many elements of the Gurindji language...”

Sloan et al. (2022)

## Attitudes to the vernacular

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## Attitudes to the vernacular

- ▶ Several groups with LVP maintain traditional practices:  
e.g. Abui, Sentani, Skou, Iau...

“...life in Skou has not drastically changed compared to the way it proceeded, say, fifty or eighty years ago.” Donohue (2005: 10)

# Language ideologies

## ► Language use and participation in community activities

“[The sudden switch from Indonesian to Skou by school leavers] reflects their status now not as wards of the state educational system... but as **members of the village community**. As such, in the absence of any significant employment for Papuan school graduates, [they] now adopt a more traditional lifestyle, including gardening, hunting, fishing, and speaking the language of their ancestors.”

Donohue (2005: 10)

## Language ideologies

### ► Expectations w.r.t. language proficiency in childhood

“Amongst the lau, young people below marriageable age (...roughly 14-15 years old) are not traditionally expected to fit into the highly prescriptive sets of rules and behavioural regulations that characterise society on the Van Daalen river. **They are permitted a significant degree of freedom, including that of the language they use**, which is denied more ‘grown’ adults.”

Janet Bateman, pers. comm. cited in Donohue (2005: 10)

# Language ideologies

## ► Expectations w.r.t. language proficiency in childhood

“[Amongst the Bebeli,] functioning as an adult necessitates the local vernacular, while children’s speech is not considered important.”

Spencer et al. (2013: 15)

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# Models of language bilingual acquisition

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► Cf. ‘active-passive bilinguals’ (Kulick & Terrill 2019)

# Models of language bilingual acquisition

- ▶ Relationship to critical period hypothesis
  - ▶ Vernacular production: L1-like or L2-like (or something else)?
  - ▶ L1-like vernacular production would challenge strong variants of the hypothesis (e.g. Lenneberg 1967)
  - ▶ Saad et al. (2019): Simplification of Abui possessive constructions
  - ▶ How to distinguish from ‘natural’ language change?

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  - ▶ Saad et al. (2019): Simplification of Abui possessive constructions
  - ▶ How to distinguish from ‘natural’ language change?
- ▶ What do we mean by ‘acquisition’?

## Models of language change

- ▶ Contact-induced change:
  - ▶ What kinds of innovations are introduced by LVP bilinguals?
  - ▶ How much variation is there?
  - ▶ How stable are innovations through the lifespan?
- ▶ Relationship between variation and change:
  - ▶ Apparent time approach robustly predicts phonetic, phonological, morphological, and lexical change (Sankoff 2006)
  - ▶ Age-grading more accurately captures language use in LVP bilinguals

# Models of language endangerment

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# Models of language endangerment

- ▶ All endangerment scales (e.g. EGIDS, UNESCO) privilege intergenerational transmission as primary indicator of vitality...
- ▶ ...and promote generational asymmetries as a proxy for transmission (Lewis & Simons 2010, UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages 2003)

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## Summary

- ▶ LVP a distinct but poorly attested and little-described pattern of language acquisition, socialisation, and use
- ▶ Small-scale, indigenous languages under-represented in the psycholinguistic literature (Adamou 2021, Anand et al. 2011, Bowerman 2011)
- ▶ True extent of LVP unknown
  - ▶ Likely more common than reported here
  - ▶ Although likely rare when compared with language shift

## Looking forward

- ▶ How widespread is LVP in ISEA and the Pacific? Elsewhere in the world?
- ▶ What social and cultural factors are required for LVP to develop?
- ▶ What (if any) intergenerational differences do we see in the vernacular of LVP bilinguals? How do these relate to language change in situations without LVP?
- ▶ To what extent are linguistic ecologies involving LVP stable?