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## Bislama, a Lingua Franca of Vanuatu

George Berninger

Bislama is one of the national languages, along with English and French, in the Melanesian country of Vanuatu. It is also spoken by some in New Caledonia. It is a creole language based on English with a number of words from French. There are about 10,000 native speakers of Bislama with an additional 200,000 L2 speakers. Its grammar based on various languages of Melanesia. This article will give an overview of the Bislama language, its history, writing system, phonology, vocabulary and grammar. This is a brief guide to Bislama and is not intended to be complete by any means.

The origin of the name for the Bislama language, is derived from the word "Beche-de-mer", meaning "sea cucumber". Like other creoles it began as a pidgin.<sup>[1]</sup> It began as a simplified form of phonetic English, with French and a few Spanish colloquialisms added for more richness.<sup>[2]</sup> This English-based pidgin was used by traders throughout the Pacific from the 19th century. Later in the 19th century many people from the islands of Vanuatu served on whaling ships. Bislama was developed during Blackbirding Era of the 1870 's and 1880 's, thousands of Ni-Vanuatu made to work on plantations in Fiji and Australia. The workers came from different islands that each had their own local languages, a form of pidgin English was developed that combined English words with the grammatical structures from the Pacific region. This pidgin allowed communication between both the native populations as well as the plantation owners, and settlers. Most of those who suffered this "Blackbirding" eventually returned to their islands in the early 20th century and, this pidgin became widespread throughout Vanuatu.<sup>[3]</sup>

Vanuatu has maintained a two-language education system since its independence in 1980. As a result few people speak both English and French outside of the capital, Port Vila. In addition Vanuatu has the greatest density of languages relative to any country in the world. Bislama took the role of *lingua franca* because of this. [3]. Bislama became established as a standard *lingua franca* in the mid-20th century for the country of Vanuatu. The first dictionary of Bislama was not published until 1995, however<sup>[4]</sup>. In 1998, the Bible (OT & NT) was completed in Bislama making it the longest written work in the language.





















Bislama is related most closely to other creoles of Melanesia such as Tok Pisan (Papua New Guinea), Pijin (Solomon Islands) and Torres Strait Creole. Unique among these four creoles, Bislama has some borrowings from French.

Bislama has a more limited phonology compared to English. There are five vowels: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. In addition Bislama has four diphthongs: /ei/, /ae/, /ao/ and /oe/.

Bislama has fewer consonants than English and lacks the alveo-palatal fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. These sounds are thus replaced with the alveolar sound /s/. Lacking the interdental fricatives /θ/, /ð/ found in English, these sounds are replaced with the voiceless alveolar stop /t/.

Bislama uses the Latin alphabet like most Austronesian languages. The Bislama Latin alphabet has the letters: "A", "B", "D", "E", "F", "G", "H", "I", "J", "K", "L", "M", "N", "NG", "O", "P", "R", "S", "T", "U", "V", "W", "Y". Note that "NG" is a digraph for the sound /ŋ/. Also there are digraphs "AE" and "AO". The letters "C", "Q", "X" and "Z" are not used in proper written Bislama. The letter "J" is pronounced like the voiceless alveo-palatal affricate (\*ch). On Pentacost Island many Ni-Vanuatu have been the Avoiuli writing system since the 1990s. This 20 character writing system was created by Chief Viraleo Boborenvanua (following)<sup>[4]</sup>.

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 A	 G	 K	 NG	 T
 B	 NGG	 L	 O	 U
 D	 H	 M	 R	 V
 E	 I	 N	 S	 W

Bislama is based on English and therefore about 95% of its vocabulary is derived from English<sup>[6]</sup>.

#### Words based English with little or no modification:

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e five  
/ei/, /  
  
alatal  
und /  
unds

The  
"I",  
"W",  
raphs  
roper  
alatal  
oiuli  
eated

ae = eye	drag = drug	hos = horse
aeon = iron	drim = dream	isi = easy
aedia = idea	eg = egg	jakol = charcoal
aes = ice	epot = airport	jea = chair
aelan = island	evri = every	jioj = church
anamol = animal	faea = fire	kek = cake
angka = anchor	famle = family	klaod = cloud
anian = onion	fi = fee	krab = crab
anti = auntie	fiva = fever	lemon = lemon
bitwin = between	floa = floor	leta = letter
blu = blue	flot = float	mama, mami = mother,
braon = brown	foto = photo	mom
bred = bread	fri = free	man = man
dei = day	frut = fruit	mesej = message
dip = deep	gita = guitar	miting = meeting
doa = door	gras = grass	namba = number
dog = dog	go = go	nao = now
dokta = doctor	gud = good	oel = oil
dota = daughter	haos = house	pablik = public
dolfen = dolphin	hevi = heavy	papa = father, dad
drae = dry	holede = holiday	pig = pig



plen = plane	smael = smile	tede = today
polis = police	sigal = seagull	tija = teacher
prea = prayer	spia = spear	trak = truck
raes = rice	stoa = store	
ren = rain	swit = sweet	
rum = room		
sam = some		wil = wheel
skin = skin		wok = work

Words derived from English with compounding, clipping or other modification. Compounds are indicated in the parenthesis:

aftarem = pursue (after+him)	gokros = to cross (go+cross)
antap = above (on+top)	hamas = how much
bel = belly, stomach	kaliko = cloth (calico)
bensin = petrol, gasoline	kamtru = arrive (come+true)
blakanwaet = sea snake	leven = eleven
(black+and+white)	longwe = far (long+way)
blakpam = blackam (black+palm)	
blufis = parrotfish (blue+fish)	lusumaot = release, untie
bokis = box	(lose+them+out)
bonem = give birth (born)	medel dei = midday (middle+day)
dipsi = ocean (deep+sea)	naf = enough
faerap = eruption (fire+up)	nambawan = best (number+one)
faol = chicken (foul) ** French	nani = nanigoat
fas = stuck (fast)	nildaon = kneel (kneel+down)
fasin = manner (fashion)	oltaem = always (all+time)
fastok = foreward (fast+talk)	ovasi = overseas
fored = front (forward)	pasraon = move around
fulap = full (full+up)	(pass+around)
fultaed = high tide (full+tide)	pijin = bird (general)
gudhat = generosity (good+hat)	plasem = to add up (plus+them)

puskat = cat (pussycat)	stewe long = avoid
rentaem = rainy season	(stay+away+long)
reshaos = guesthouse (rest+house)	strongskin = surgeonfish
ronem = chase (run+em)	(strong+skin)
sanbij = beach (sand+beach)	tabak = tobacco
sem = shy (shame)	tumas = very, too much
solap = to swell	turisbot = cruise ship (tourist+boat)
solwota = sea (salt+water)	wokbaot = walk (walk+about)
somap = sew (sew+them+up)	welfis = whale (whale+fish)
sotleg = ground dove (short+leg)	yangfala = young man
stanap = to stand (stand+up)	(young+fellow) <sup>(5)</sup>
stap = stay, be (stop)	

Semantic broadening is occurs in some cases as well as clipping in others. The word "pijijn" is derived from English "pigeon" but now refers to all birds. "Kaliko" is from English "calico" but has been expanded to include "cloth" in general.

#### Borrowings from French:

save = to know, to be able to
si = yes (after negative ?)
haremsave = to understand
luksave = to recognise
tingsave = to realise
ananas = pineapple
ariko = bean (Fr. Haricot)
bebe = baby
ekolpiblik = French primary school

#### Borrowings from Spanish:

pima = chilli pepper <sup>(5)</sup>
-------------------------------------

Other words of Bislama are borrowed from various Melanesian languages. Note that many of these words refer to flora and fauna. Many of these words begin with "na-"

abu = grandparent	nakato = hermit crab
nabakop = gecko	nalake = ankle rattle
be = but	nalaklak = white-eye (bird)
burao = cottonwood (tree)	nalnal = club
buluk = cow	namala = hawk
busong = lid, stopper, cork	namalao = incubator bird
flasem = to decorate	namarae = eel
fokonafis = boxfish	namariu = acacia tree
gato = donut	nambangga = banyan tree
giaman = false	nambilak = railbird
hemia = this, that	nambiru = swamp hen
kakae = to eat	namalao = megapode (bird)
kaon = bill (to be paid)	namatal = puzzle tree
kapa = metal	namele = cycad tree
kasem = to attain	nananara =
kleva = expert, magician	New Guinea rosewood
kokias = sea shell	nandao = lychee
korosol = soursop	nanggalat = nettle tree
lafet = festival	naora = crayfish, lobster
laplap = vegetable pudding	nasara = ceremonial ground
los = grouper	nasiko = kingfisher
manioc = cassava	nasivinu = lorikeet
manis = month	nasivi = plover
mawea = but	natalae = clam
nabakop = gecko	natongtong = mangrove tree
naeka = flying fish	natora = heartwood (of tree)
nakaemas = black magic	nawita = octopus
nakamal = meeting house	nevamaen we = although



languages.  
ie words

nilpat = centipede	salusalu = flower garland
nomo = only	sas = expensive
novunu = special after kava food	simboro = grated casava
olsem = like, as	sipos = if
pamplimus = grapefruit	sora = ear
papiong = butterfly fish, angelfish	stasen = village
pikinini = child	taswe = therefore
piko = rabbitfish	tawian = in law
popo = papaya	tu = also
pupu = conch (shell)	

Reduplication is used for many words, most of which are nouns. Most of the reduplicated words derive from English as well, and may exhibit semantic shifting.

baebae = goodbye	singsing = song
dakdak = duck	sipsip = sheep
fasfas = crowded	stapsatp = live
fatfat = fat	sofsof = soft
fraetfraet = scared	tamtam = slit drum
hothot = very hot	tingting = thought
konkon = bitter	toktok = talk
nalnal = club	
ronron = jogging	
raorao = to argue	nalaklak = white-eye (P)
rasras = grated coconut	nalumlum = moss (P)
salusalu = flower garland	natongtong = mangrove tree (P)
simboro = grated casava	sokapsokap = shock absorber (P)
pispiis = urine	

(P) = partial reduplication<sup>[5]</sup>

Bislama has an SVO canonical word order, the second most common type in the world and the same order used by English and French.

Pronouns are borrowed from English and simplified with only one form for various cases. Unlike modern English Bislama includes four grammatical numbers which are: singular, dual, trial and plural. Bislama also shows clusivity for first person personal pronouns. They have separate words for inclusive and exclusive "we" equivalents.

mi = I, me, my

yu = you, your (singular)

em = he, him, him

hemi = she, her, her

yumi = we, us, our (4 or more)

yufala = you, your (plural)

olgeta = they, them, their

This chart gives an overview of the person pronouns for person and number.

	SINGULAR	DUAL	TRIAL	PLURAL
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Person</b>	mi	mitufala	mitrifala	mifala
<b>Inclusive</b>	--	yumitufala	yumitritfala	yumi
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Person</b>	yu	yutufala	yutritfala	yufala
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Person</b>	hem	tufala	tritfala	olgeta

Bislama verbs are almost entirely derived from English stems. They are usually inflected with some suffixes to indicate their part of speech (but not person or tense).

Bislama verbs can have one of the three suffixes: (-em, -im, -um). -em ending verbs are the most common, and -i ending verbs are the next most common followed by -um stem verbs. The affix of the verb is generally related to the first vowel in the stem. Some verbs have no suffix though. Verbs do not inflect

type in for person, grammatical number, tense or passivity. Here are some examples:

<i>-em</i>	<i>-im</i>	<i>-um</i>
mekem = to do	filim = to feel	
dropem = to drop	fixim = to fix, repair	bukum = to book, reserve
faenen = to find	givim = to give	hukum = to catch (fish)
karem = to carry	kikim = to kick	jusum = to select
kolektem = to collect,	kipim = to keep	
gather	mitim = to meet	kukum = to cook
letem = to let	ridim = to read	putum = to put, wear
helpem = to help	singim = to sing	sutum = to shoot
sendem = to send	winim = to win, earn	yusum = to use
statem = to start		
wantem = to want		
wokem = to work		

Here are some verbs without any affix (exceptions):

save = to know, be able to  
 dring = to drink  
 gat = have  
 pem = buy  
 pre = to pray  
 stanap = to stand  
 wet = to wait

Verb negation in Bislama is accomplished by placing "no" in right before the verb. This is much like Spanish.

Mi **no** laekem fis.                      I **don't** like fish.

In Bislama the word "blong" is used a great deal. It is derived from the English "belong". It is the primary possessive indicator. It also serves as an

adjectival bond like the word "of" or "from" in English. It can also indicate purpose:

<u>Bislama</u>	<u>English</u>
hos blog mi	my horse
haos blong yu	your house
Hemi blong Tanna.	She is from Tanna.
taem blong kakae	time to eat
sid blong plane	seeds for planting

"Stap" is used to indicate the progressive aspect.

Mi <b>stap</b> dring yet.	I am <b>still</b> drinking.
---------------------------	-----------------------------

"Bae" or "Mbae" is used to indicate future aspect. There is no difference in the meaning of the two.

<b>Bae</b> yu go silip.	You are going to go to sleep.
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"Bin" indicates the past tense.

Yu <b>bin</b> tuarem Tanna las yia.	You toured Tanna last year.
Mi <b>bin</b> go long stoa long morning.	I went to a store this morning.

The preposition "long" is used to cover many functions in Bislama. These could translate as "in", "on", "under", "into" or "beside". It can also mean "where" in a question. Here are some examples:

<u>Bislama</u>	<u>English</u>
Aranis i stap <b>long</b> tebol.	An orange is <b>on</b> the table.
Yu silip <b>long</b> naet.	You sleep <b>at</b> night.
Mi kam <b>long</b> sip.	I came <b>by</b> ship <sup>[3]</sup>

Some other common prepositional words are *insaed* = inside, *klosup* = close up and *bihaen* = behind.

Bislama lacks articles corresponding to English “a”, “an”, “the” or French “le” and “la”.

Bislama is assessed as an EGIDS level 1 (National language) according to the Ethnologue. “The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the national level.”<sup>[7]</sup> Bislama itself as a language is in no danger, however some of the indigenous languages of Vanuatu may be threatened as their children learn only Bislama and not the mother tongue of their parents. The use of Bislama as a first language has considerably encroached on indigenous languages of Vanuatu, whose use in the population has decreased from 73.1 to 63.2 percent (between 1999 and 2009).<sup>[8][9]</sup> Bislama will continue to be an important lingua franca of Vanuatu in the 21st Century, hopefully alongside the other native languages of the linguistically diverse country of Vanuatu.

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