

NZ PhD research documents endangered language

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(PhysOrg.com) -- PhD graduate Laura Dimock spent nine months on an island in Vanuatu documenting the Nahavaq language, a previously undocumented language in danger of extinction.

Dr Dimock, who graduated with a PhD in [Linguistics](#) from Victoria University, New Zealand, yesterday, says that there are still hundreds of undocumented languages worldwide, many of which are endangered.

"I hope the Nahavaq language survives, despite the modernising changes affecting Vanuatu," says Dr Dimock.

Nahavaq is spoken by about 700 people in South West Bay, on the Island of Malakula. There is no road access to that part of the island, no mains electricity and very limited phone coverage.

Dr Dimock spent nine months on the island recording Nahavaq speech and translating it. She helped to create a new spelling system and teach it to some of the speakers, which has begun to be used in local kindergartens. She also worked on story books, dictionaries and DVDs for the local people in their language, transcribing and editing where necessary.

"I did this by first learning Bislama, the national pidgin language, which was relatively easy to learn because of its similarity to English. I then interviewed various Nahavaq speakers in Bislama to find out how they say things, and slowly figured out a lot of patterns and systems within the

language.

"One of the things about the Nahavaq language that interests me the most is the large number of labial consonants, that is the sounds made using the lips. For example, there are two sounds that would both sound like b to English speakers, but in Nahavaq, you could be saying two different words depending on which b you use. The island of Malakula is also special for using 'bilabial trills', a sound made by flapping the lips together the way people sometimes do when they are cold. That sound is rarely used as part of the sound system of a language, but it happens on Malakula."

The only previous documentation of the Nahavaq language was done by missionaries in the early part of the 20th century and by linguists doing survey work. The last researcher to spend a long time in this area, anthropologist Bernard Deacon, died in the field of malaria in 1927.

Dr Dimock faced a number of obstacles herself, including ciguatera fish poisoning, tsunami warnings, broken solar panels and precarious boat rides, "but I lived to tell the tale", she says.

The data from Dr Dimock's research are deposited in archives so that they will stand as a record of the [language](#). She hopes to get her thesis *A Grammar of Nahavaq* published.

Provided by Victoria University

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