

## **Oral histories and sociolinguistic data collection**

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The canonical sociolinguistic interview is designed to guide participants to discussions of high involvement topics which will elicit the vernacular, such as the classic ‘danger of death’ scenario. This paper demonstrates how an oral history format can elicit such narratives in highly naturalistic contexts, including a willingness to retell the stories in a local lingua franca.

We report on fieldwork undertaken on the Nkep language, spoken in Hog Harbour Village (East Santo, Vanuatu) between 2011-2014. During this time the community took control of the data collection process and guided it to the collection of oral histories about an armed attack on the village in 1980. Aside from eliciting highly animated, vernacular speech well-suited to sociolinguistic research, the oral history project allowed a very large number of people to become actively involved in the project and recorded an important (but hitherto, undocumented) battle for Vanuatu’s independence to be documented.

This paper discusses the (chance) genesis of the process, the subsequent negotiation of community involvement in the project, and how the resulting interviews have contributed to (a) the documentation of the structure and variation in Nkep, and (b) indigenous histories of colonialism and the Pacific. We illustrate (a) with a case study showing how the realisation of unstressed rounded vowels in Nkep is crucially informed by the oral history narratives (where the distinction between mid-open and mod-close rounded vowels is neutralised), and (b) with details that have never before been recorded about the 1980 Santo Rebellion and have been denied in official histories of Vanuatu.

Oral histories may seem, on the face of thing, to be monitored and less vernacular forms of speech. But, in fact, they are excellent sources of sociolinguistic data, which can also give voice to marginalised and unempowered groups in the community.