

False witness: when historical texts fail ¹

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1. Introduction

Efate is an island in the chain that makes up the western Pacific nation of Vanuatu. The language discussed in this paper is spoken at Erakor village in the south of the island and is part of a group of dialects that has around 3,000 speakers. As the language has no local name I refer to it as South Efate. It is part of the Southern Oceanic group of Austronesian, and the current subgrouping has it as part of North-Central Vanuatu (Lynch 1995).

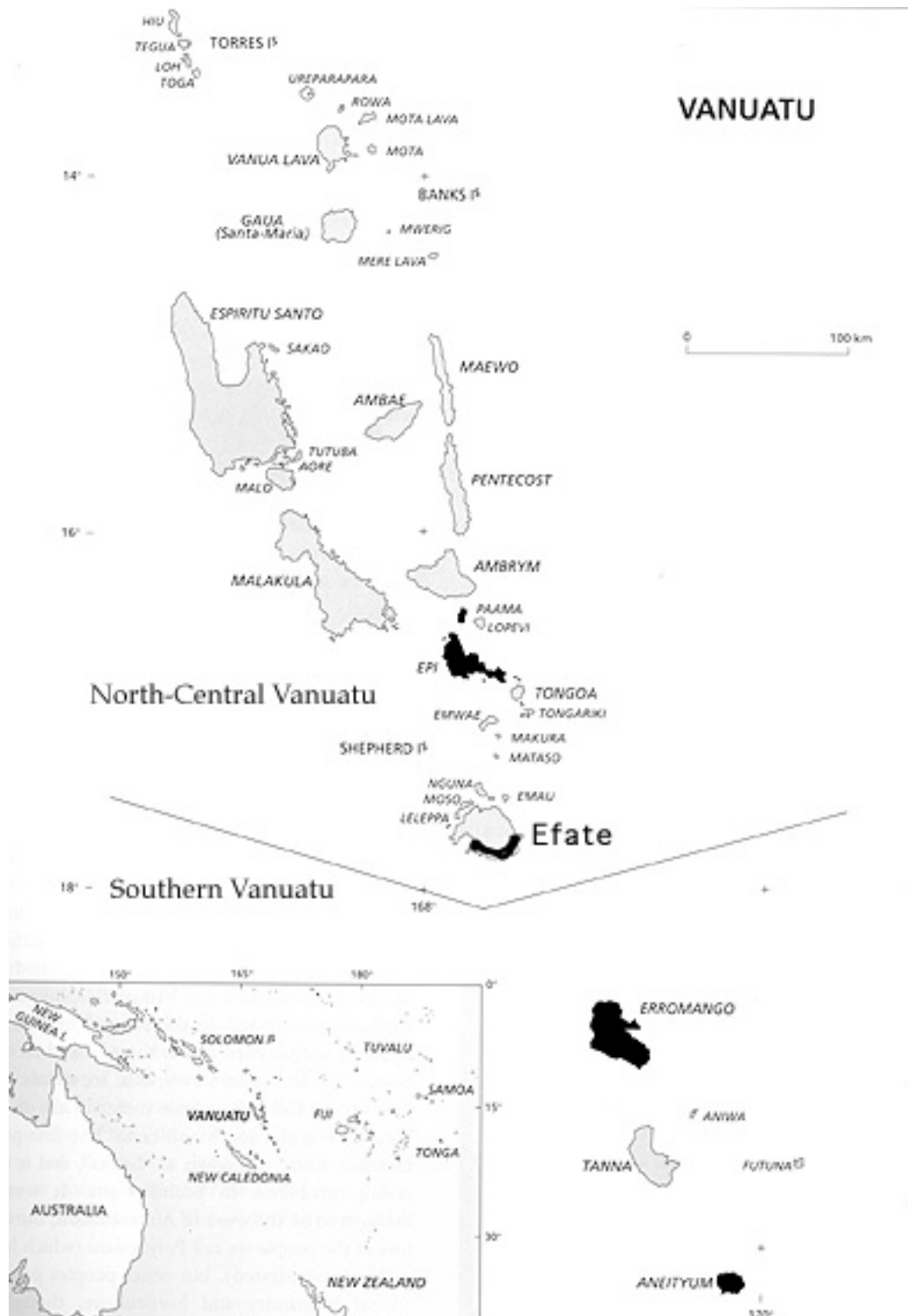
This analysis is based on fieldwork and the resulting electronic corpus of textual material collected since 1996, and also on a keyboarded version of Genesis (1874) and stories written by Pastor Sope in the 1950s and held in Arthur Capell's collection in Balmain. The texts I recorded were spoken by both males and females of varying ages from 7 to 87.

I have had trouble understanding all uses of the morpheme *na* (and its more archaic form *nag*.) Some are straightforward as I will show below, but there is clearly a sense of *na* that means 'to want'. Other languages of Vanuatu also have polysemous forms (not isomorphic with South Efate) that include both meanings of 'want' and 'say'. However, in written material from last century and from the 1950s there is no example of this polysemy, although potential contexts for its use do appear. This paper sketches the uses of *na* and then suggests that written sources can be unreliable witnesses of the semantics of a language.

2. Typical sentence structure in South Efate

A sentence in South Efate is generally SVO, in which the verb is preceded by an auxiliary containing at least a cross-referencing subject pronoun (plus other optional elements as listed below) and is followed by an object pronoun. The auxiliary position occurs following the free subject, which may be unstated. If the subject occurs it must be a free pronoun or noun which is then cross-referenced by the proclitic or first element of the auxiliary.

¹ Thanks to Peter Austin, John Henderson and three anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Note that \tilde{p} and \tilde{m} represent the labio-velar stop and nasal respectively. Unusual abbreviations used are as follows: IRR - irrealis; REAL - realis; REFL - reflexive; STAT- stative; Tsay - second part of a tell/say construction; IS -Irrealis Subject; RS - Realis Subject. Thanks also to Dina Thieberger for keyboarding the Sope stories and Kensis.



Map of Vanuatu showing the major linguistic divisions.
 Islands referred to in the text are shaded in black.
 (Basemap from Bonnemaïson et al. 1996: 9)

Structure of Auxiliary:

Pronominal Prefix Subject (ASP / COND) (NEG) (REFL + POSS) (NUM)

- (1) **Kafotatmok** wat kineu mau
ka- **-fo** **-ta** **-tmo** **-k** wat kineu mau
 1sgIRRS IRR FUT NEG REFL 1sgPOSS hit 1sg all
I will not hit myself

2.1 Aspect

Aspect is an obligatorily marked feature in South Efate. There are separate pronoun paradigms for realis, irrealis and perfective. Some verbs mark irrealis by alternating the initial realis /p/ with an irrealis /f/. This is a relic of a widespread feature of languages of Central Vanuatu. In these languages the alternation affects a larger set of phonemes, but in South Efate it is restricted to p/f, for example:

	Realis	Irrealis
'to go'	pa	fa
'to eat'	pam	fam
'to be'	pi	fi
'to appear'	pakor	fakor

3. Four meanings of *na*

I am trying to understand one of the meanings of the morpheme *na*² which appears in at least four different verbal functions in South Efate. They are:

1. the verb 'to say'
2. a complementiser following the indirect object of verbs of telling
3. a complementiser with the meaning 'in order to'
4. the verb 'to want'

I address each below.

3.1 *na* is the verb 'to say'. It varies freely with the more archaic *nag*. In common with other verbs it requires a subject and tense/aspect marking. It is intransitive and can be used to report speech (4) as well as direct quotation.

- (2) I wel tem i **na** "Ore i wi"
 3sgRS thus father 3sgRS say yes/right 3sgRS good
So the father says, "Yes, it is good." (toukelau2: 104)

² The homophonous morpheme *na* is the definite article (and associated hesitation morpheme, often *nana*). The determiner role of *na* is uncontroversial and is presented here for clarification only.

- (3) Go tekaru nen i piatlak wak nmatu nen i **nag**,
 and other that 3sgRS have pig woman this 3sgRS say

"O i wi top"
 Oh 3sgRS good very

And the other who owned the female pig said "Oh very good..." (013:13)

- (4) ...i **na** nagi māat nen kin ru soso ki Mātleplep.
 ... 3sgRS say name snake this REL 3pIS call TR Mātleplep
 ... he said the name of the snake which they call Mātleplep (044:13)

3.2 *na* / *nag* is the second part of a complex construction involving verbs of telling, asking, seeing, wanting, finding (among other meanings). I call this the 'tell/say' construction after a similar construction in Bislama (discussed in Crowley (1989)). When functioning as the verb 'to say', *na* is preceded by the auxiliary, but in the 'tell/say' construction it appears in a non-finite form and with no cross-referencing pronominal subject. In this construction *na* follows immediately after the verb, or after the direct object clause following the verb as in the quoted speech in example (5). The dependent clause in this construction differs from other subordinate clauses in being introduced by *na* rather than *nen* (as it is in example (7)).

- (5) Go i telephone pak Mary me i paos ki na,
 and 3sgRS phone to Mary and 3sgRS ask TR Tsay

"Ku tae **nrik** marik gag ki **na** ke mai."
 2sgRS know tell man your TR say 3sgIRR come

He rang Mary and said, "You tell your husband to come." (63:103)

- (6) Ra **nrik** wou ki **nag**, "Suker nigmam i nom"
 3dIS tell 1sgO TR Tsay sugar ours 3sgRS finish
 "They (2) tell me "Our sugar is finished." (015:5)

- (7) Ale naminwen kineu a pi natamōl
 okay drinking 1sg 1sgRS be man

i skei **nen** a min
 3sgRS one this 1sgRS drink

Drinking, I am a man who can drink. (040:63)

- (8) A tae **nag** ke fo **nrik** mam
 1sg know Tsay 3sgIS ut tell us

ki naḗpet nafsān **nag** i til i
 TR meaning language say 3sgRS tell TR

I know he will tell us the meaning of this story that he told us (023:12)

The main verbs used in the 'tell/say' construction are the following (and this is not an exhaustive list):

lek	<i>look for</i>	preg	<i>make</i>
mur	<i>want</i>	pregnrog	<i>try</i>
nrik	<i>tell</i>	tae	<i>know</i>
paos	<i>ask</i>	til	<i>say</i>
pañor	<i>discover</i>	trok	<i>agree</i>

The verb 'to say', (*na/nag*) discussed in 2.1 does not occur as the main verb of the 'tell/say' construction.

3.3 'in order to'³

In this usage *na* appears to function as in the tell/say construction. It is non-finite but it occurs with verbs that in most other occurrences do not take *na* to form their complement. It could be that it is functioning as the complementiser, and the translation of *na* should be 'that'.

(9) Ku nrok **na** p̄a slat namrun.
 2sgRS bend **in_order_to** 2sgIRR take something
You bend down to get something (017:105)

(10) Ku p̄el ki nas **na** p̄a mot -i
 2sgRS pull TR bow **in_order_to** 2sgIRR tie -TR
You pull your bow to fasten it (017:149)

(11) A pato Efil mai **na** ka fakot wak.
 1sgRS go/stay Vila come **in_order_to** 1sgIS buyIRR pig
I came from Vila to buy the pig... (017:117)

3.4 'want'

Mur is the verb 'to want' in South Efate,

(12) A- **mur-** in **na** ka gakit traus
 1sg want- 3sg say 1sgRS 1plIncO tell

 natrausuen ses i skei
 story small 3sgRS one
I want to tell you all this small story (052:1)

However *mur* does not appear in the following examples for which the gloss supplied by speakers is 'want'. Examples (13) and (14) show *na* with the 'want' meaning.

(13) Nat i skei i **na** ke wat kineu napu
 man 3sgRS one 3sg want 3sgIS hit 1sg road
This man wants to hit me on the road (017:199)

³ Similar to 'long' in Bislama.

- (14) Ra tok panpan nrak i skei ra **na**
 3dl stay until time 3sgRS one 3dlS want
 rak fak talmat gar
 3dl to garden 3pl
They stayed until they (wanted to) go to their garden one day. (019:3)

na appears to have taken on the intentional meaning of a construction like *mur...na*, 'want...say' and become the main verb itself. The 'say' or complementiser function exists together with this main verb function, giving examples like the following, in which the first use of *na* behaves like a main verb and is cross-referenced to the subject, unlike the second:

- (15) Ntuam i **na** i sat nalag **na** i
 devil 3sgRS want 3sgRS take organ in_order_to 3sgRS
 si, trau sat -i sef
 blow just take TR escape
The devil (wanted to?) take the mouth organ to blow it, just took it and ran away. (035:20)

Example (16) shows the 'want' meaning, but with an inanimate subject, suggesting that either the boat is given animate status for the sake of the story, or that the interpretation of *na* as 'want' needs refining. These examples suggest that *na* could have an aspectual function, although it is occupying the position of a verb, not an aspect marker.

- (16) Raru p̃ur i skei i mai.
 ship big 3sgRS one 3sgRS come
 I **na** i- mai **na** i torwak
 3sgRS want 3sgRS come in_order_to 3sgRS anchor
A big boat came. It came to anchor. (035:8)

- (17) Mpak i **na** i tarpek
 banyan 3sgRS want 3sg fall
The banyan fell over. (035:37)

- (18) Mal-en nafkal i to **na** ke mai.
 time-this fight 3sgRS STAT want? 3sgIRR come
Then the war started. (040)

- (19) Ku mai pak brij, i piatlak naur ses
 2sgRS come to bridge 3sgRS have island small
 go faat i laap nlaken kin
 and stone 3sgRS many because REL
 i **na** ke tfagkr- o
 3sgRS want 3sgIS build- TR
*You come to the bridge, there's a small island with lots of rocks which is why she **wanted** to build it. (029:28)*

- (20) Okay ru soso ki luksal selwan kin ku **na**
 okay 3pIS call TR luksal when REL 2sgRS want
 ku tai panpan i nomser
 2sgRS cut until 3sgRS every
 Okay, they call it 'luksal' when you NA you cut until it is all (cut). (018:2)

4. Evidence over time

Written sources for the language go back to 1864, but the more reliable early work comes a little later. More christian material was produced until the 1920s, but then we have nothing for the next thirty years until both Arthur Capell and Shirley McRae collected some handwritten stories which I have copied and analysed.

The translation of Genesis from 1874 has the verb 'to say' and the complementiser both consistently as *nag* (about 1460 mentions of *nag*) as do (Bible [1880]) and (Bible 1919). For example:

- (21) Isa ki **nag**. Ka tuok tete natamol nigneu **nag** a tok belak er ruk tok o rakik. Ki **nag**. Me kua? Ag naot nigneu ba nrum iou. (Genesis 33: 15)
 And Esau **said**, Let me now leave with thee some of the folk **that** are with me.
 And he **said**, What needeth it? let me find grace in the sight of my lord.

There is one example in Genesis of the use of *na* in a 'tell/say' construction:

- (22) Natamol nifanu wan rukui bous kina ki nimatu niga; ki til i, i nag, Niga i bi borek; ki mtak tilsei bag i bi nimatu niga ki nag, natamol nifanu nin ruf mur Ribeka la wat wou. I bi nimatu nag rukui lo wi a kin.
 And the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, She is my sister: for he feared to say, She is my wife; lest, said he, the men of the place should kill me for Rebekah; because she was fair to look upon. (Genesis 26:07)

There are 22 uses of *mur* 'to want' in Genesis, but none of *na* as 'to want'. The English King James version of Genesis does not include a single use of the verb 'want'. Where *mur* occurs it translates 'choose', 'respect', 'love', or makes an English passive active, for example:

- (23) Ba folfol wi go ka fo mur uk
 p̄a folfol wi go ka fo mur uk
 2sgRS act good and 1sgIS FUT want 2sgO
 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? (Genesis 4:07)
 [Literally: You act well and I will want you.]

It is possible that the 'tell/say' construction is derived from an earlier construction in which both the main verb and the verb 'say' were both fully inflected verbs prefixed by cross-referencing pronouns as in example (24).

Remember that, in current usage, there is no person marking on *nag/na* in this position.

- (24) Isreel ki nrik Yosef kin **i nag**, Mesanin a mar: kai lek nrem: ku ta mol tok.
 And Israel said unto Joseph, Now let me die, since I have seen thy face, because thou art yet alive. (Genesis 46: 30)
- (25) Rukui nrik Fero kin, **ru nag**, ...
 They said moreover unto Pharaoh, ... (47: 04)

From the 1950s we have 21 handwritten stories (Sope [195?]) with 140 mentions of *nag* but none of *na*. The 'tell/say' function of *nag* represents 48 mentions, and the remainder are the verb 'to say' and the complementiser.

Macrae (nd), also writing in the late 1950s includes a wordlist which lists *nag* as "1. to say. 2. that". *na* is not listed, neither is the current complementiser *nen*, despite her discussion of the role of *nag* as a replacement for the infinitive (what we are calling the complementiser function)

None of these early sources shows a use of *na* or *nag* as 'to want' which, however, does occur in a collection of stories published in 1983 (Wai *et al.* 1983), for example:

- (26) Ra **na** ra pan go Ririal i nrik
 3dl NA 3dl go and Ririal 3sgRS tell
- Ririel ki **nag**, "Ag p̄a fag"
 Ririel 3sglRRS say 2sgRS 2sglS climb
*They (**wanted?**) to go and Ririal said to Ririel, "You climb" (012:3)*
- (27) Go ra po nru ler mai pak Efate
 and 3dl fut two back come to Efate
- go selwan ra **na** ra ler mai pak Efate
 and when 3dl NA 3dl back come to Efate
*And they would both come back to Efate and when they (**wanted?**) to come back to Efate.[sentence continues]...(001:11)*

From these examples we can see *na* has developed from the loss of the final consonant of *nag*. Younger speakers today use *na* exclusively while *nag* is still present for older speakers. Younger speakers also report that it sounds old fashioned to use *nag*.

5. Evidence from regional languages

The language to the north (Ngunese) is closely related to but generally more conservative than South Efate. The form in Ngunese for the verb 'to say' is

naga, or *noa*, but only *naga* also serves as the complementiser (Schütz 1969). *Naga* is the source for South Efate *nag* and *na*.

- (28) Kusue e pasa-tara, e **naga**, "..."
rat he answer, he say (69)
- (29) Go e noa ki munuai, e **noa naga**. "..."
and he say to diviner he say that (122)

These texts are thirty years old and tell us that at that time, *naga* apparently did not include the meaning 'want' (which is *masau*.) A more recent source on Ngunese gives the meaning of *naga* as "to say; so that; in order to." (Facey 1988:327)

In Epi languages (Robert Early pc) the same polysemy occurs in Lewo the form *issape*; in Lamel *vere* (*pere* in realis); and in Baki *ver* (*ber* in realis). Further to the north, in Paamese, *vit* means both 'say' and 'want' (Crowley 1992). The language to the west of South Efate is an unrelated Polynesian outlier, in which *na* means 'and then' (among other meanings not relevant here) (Clark 1998:48). This does not appear to be a source for an intentional meaning of *na*.

To the south is the language Sye, on the island of Erromango. Sye has a verb *ocu* which Crowley (1998:254) says is "generally used lexically with the meaning 'say', though it can also be used to mean 'want' or 'think'." John Lynch (pc) notes that for Aneityum, the southernmost island in Vanuatu, *ika* has the same range of meanings/functions as *na* in South Efate:

- i. a "normal" verb = 'say'
- ii. with echo-subject prefix m-, it introduces complements:
ek atou m-ika ... 'I know that ...'
- iii. a "normal" verb = 'want, intend, be likely'

Note that there are not many other descriptions of languages of Vanuatu, and that this feature may not have been described in the grammars we do have.

As these languages are all descendents of what Lynch (1995) calls Proto-Southern Oceanic (see Clark 1985:221), it is unlikely that this innovation has occurred independently in at least seven languages (in Epi, Paama, Erromango, Aneityum and South Efate). It is also unlikely that the similarity is an areal feature given the geography of the region, widely dispersed islands between which communication would have been sporadic at best.

While the form of the verb looks like it could be cognate for the southern languages (*naga*, *ika*, *ocu*) reconstruction of the relevant correspondence sets indicates that this is unlikely (John Lynch pc). When we take the Paamese *vit*

into account, we can see that there is shared function but not a shared form between these languages.

6. Conclusion

I wanted to explicate the meanings of *na* in South Efate, hoping that they would all be relatable to one core meaning. I used historical sources which seemed to suggest that the original meaning of *na* was 'to say' and that 'to want' is an innovation, because *na* does not occur as a main verb meaning 'want' in any text until the 1980s.

However other Vanuatu languages have a word that shares the same bundle of meanings as South Efate *na*. As this is a feature of several related, but not geographically contiguous, languages it would not have been separately innovated and must have been present in the proto-language. But, as the form is not cognate we are left with the possibility that the form has changed independently in each of the daughter languages. If this is the case it raises interesting questions for lexical comparisons. These are not cognate forms, but they are cognate functions, or even cognate polysemies if you will.

Had I relied on language-internal evidence and only used the written sources I could have constructed a convincing case that the meaning of 'to want' for *na* is an innovation in South Efate. The lesson is that the early texts did not reflect the usage of *na* as 'want' that was clearly present at the time the texts were written, but may have been considered too colloquial for bible translation. Clearly the genre of the writing must be taken into account when making claims about usage based on historical material.

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