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Sorry in the Pacific: Defining communities, defining practices

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the distribution of speech acts based on the word *sore* 'sorry' in Bislama, the creole language spoken in Vanuatu. Three functions of these "apology" routines are identified and analyzed within the framework of politeness theory. Women are shown to use *sore* more frequently over all than men; they are also found to use *sore* to express empathy with the referent/addressee. Empathy is expressed in men's speech in other ways. The asymmetric distribution of *sore* is shown to make sense, given wider societal beliefs about and attitudes toward appropriate behaviors for women and men. Given a strict definition of a "community of practice," it is clear that this shared speech behavior does not mean that women in this speech community can be said to form a community of practice. Analyses based on the speech community and intergroup distinctiveness are more useful in understanding this variation. (Apologies, creoles, women's language, community of practice, speech community, intergroup distinctiveness, Vanuatu, Bislama.)*

Understanding what something is often requires understanding what it is not. This article analyzes the social and linguistic significance of apology routines within the context of a community of speakers in Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides, SW Pacific). The distribution of apologies within this speech community is a helpful case study, highlighting both what communities of practice are and what they are not.

The article has five sections. After this introduction, I present the linguistic facts relevant to the analysis of apologies in Bislama, the English-lexified creole spoken in Vanuatu. The following section presents some of the basic properties of the speech act of an apology, within the framework of politeness theory.

Next it is shown that the distribution of the word *sore*, literally 'sorry', is sex-preferential in Bislama, occurring predominantly in the speech of women. It will also be shown that the discourse functions associated with *sore* are distributed even more asymmetrically than are the tokens over all. The significance of

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this asymmetry within the context of the speech community is considered in some detail.

The final section addresses the question of whether practices shared by groups of speakers necessarily entail that these speakers constitute a community of practice. It is shown that there is no such direct implicational relation. Principled reasons are presented that argue for maintaining a stringent definition of communities of practice, such that more than shared practices or behaviors is required.

BEING SORRY IN VANUATU: *Sore tumas long Vanuatu*

Sore, originally derived from English 'sorry', has several meanings in Bislama, which are illustrated in examples 1–5. First, like English 'sorry', it can be used to express an apology:

(1) a. *Afta Lili hem i girap, hem i talem sore long hem.*[1]
'So Lily went and she said sorry to him.'
(*sore* 'be sorry for something [that the speaker has done to another]')

Also like English, *sore* can be used to express empathy with the theme:

(2) *Yu luk long hem, yu sore long hem.*
'When you see her, you feel sorry for her.'

The theme, i.e. *long hem*,[2] is optional. There are two circumstances under which it may be omitted. First, it may be omitted when the referent is given information; an example is shown in ex. 1b, an utterance the speaker made shortly after 1a.

(1) a. *Afta Lili hem i girap, hem i talem sore long hem* ...
b. *Taem Lili talem sore, i pusum tang blong hem.*
'When Lily said sorry [to him], he pushed out his tongue.'

Only two referents had been introduced at this point, Lili and the referent of the theme – her pet snake. It has been shown that the object of some prepositions in Bislama can be deleted when it is discourse-old information (Meyerhoff 1998). This principle also seems to determine the deletion of the theme of *sore* (the deletion of the subject in the final clause is constrained by somewhat different factors; see Meyerhoff 1997).

The second discourse condition under which the theme of *sore* may be omitted is when the act of empathy is more salient than the empathetic theme. For instance, listeners insert utterances of bare *sore*, or *sore we* (*we* marks intensification in a predicate), as back-channels in someone else's narrative. When *sore* is used like this, the effect is similar to an exclamation of *Oh no* or *Poor thing* in English. These turns are very brief and are inserted in another's narrative in a minimally disruptive way. They indicate involvement in the narrative, not an attempt to take the conversational floor. This is made clear by the fact that the narrator may look at the person who says *sore* and acknowledge their utterance with eye contact or a small nod, but the speaker does not cede the floor. An example of this is given in 3 below. Lisa, Adelin's aunt, is telling a story about an earthquake. The people in the story were so scared that they ran out of their house,

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forgetting to pick up their baby. Adelin expresses her dismay and concern for the baby by repeatedly saying *sore*.

(3) L = Lisa; A = Adelin

L:	*Afta tufala i ron olsem ya,*	So they both ran like that,
	mama blong pikinini tu.	even the child's mother.
A:	*Sore.*	Oh no.
L:	*Mama blong pikinini tu i ron*	Even the child's mother ran,
	afta bebi i stap, ledaon gud.	and the baby stayed, lying quietly.
A:	*Awe, sore.*	Oh NO.
L:	*I stap smael,*	It's smiling,
	i stap toktok hem wan insaed.	talking to itself inside.
A:	*O, sore.*	Oh, oh dear.
L:	*Hem i no save*	It doesn't know
	wanem i hapen from, save,	what's happened because, you know,
	pikinini, a?	just a baby, eh?

Another situation in which *sore* was used like this, to express empathy without overtly mentioning the theme, is in speech directed at babies. A common strategy for attempting to soothe a crying baby is to repeat, *sore, sore,* as the child is patted or bounced up and down. An English equivalent in this case might be, *There, there*.

The third meaning that *sore* expresses in Bislama is 'to miss someone or something':

(4) *Man i go: "Man ya, hem i sore long papa blong hem we."*
'People say: "That man, he really misses his father."

The first two senses of *sore* have direct analogs in English *sorry* – which, indeed, is often misunderstood because of this ambiguity. People wanting to express their empathy or concern may say *I'm so sorry* to interlocutors, only to have them reply, 'That's OK, it wasn't your fault' – as if they had offered an apology. By contrast, the third meaning of Bislama *sore* is not a core meaning of English 'sorry', although we can speculate about its probable development. In the next section, we will look briefly at the politeness functions of *sore*, and this will show how the third meaning of *sore* might have developed.

SORE AS A POLITENESS STRATEGY

There are a number of detailed discussions of the social distribution and functions of apologies, and many of these also discuss the extent to which apologies can be incorporated into the framework of politeness theory proposed by Brown & Levinson 1987. Consequently, I will not cover old ground here. One of the interesting characteristics of an apology, though, is the way in which it resists easy categorization within that framework. Others have pointed out (e.g. Goffman 1971, Cohen & Olshtain 1985, Ohbuchi et al. 1989, Holmes 1990, 1995) that although an apology seems superficially to be a negative politeness strategy, this is by no means its sole function. Inherent to an apology is not only deference, i.e. negative politeness, but also an affirmation of shared community norms, i.e. positive politeness.

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Clearly, when *sore* is used to express empathy as in exx. 2–3, its principal interpersonal function is not to express negative politeness. A negative politeness strategy either stresses the social distance between the interlocutors, or reinforces the addressee's role as an autonomous individual.

Sore does neither of these things when it is used to express empathy. Rather, by asserting co-identification of the speaker with the referent of the theme, its function is to reduce maximally the social distance between the speaker and the theme. If we combine this observation with a constrained and psychologically based definition of empathy, it is clear that *sore* functions here as a positive politeness strategy. Wispé 1986, who provides a systematic contrast between empathy and sympathy, concludes that the salient distinction between the two psychological processes is that empathy involves the speaker's experience of subjective qualities IN the object of his or her empathy, whereas sympathy involves the speaker's experience of subjective qualities ABOUT it (1986:316).

The fact that apologies function as both negative and positive politeness strategies is not simply an incidental curiosity. It seems likely that this bifunctionality is central to the development of the meaning 'to miss someone' that *sore* also has in Bislama. Consider what empathy and missing something both mean: Wispé's analysis makes it clear that to empathize with someone or something is to express positive affect, and to adopt a stance of psychological identity with a person or thing that exists in the world of the immediate discourse. But to miss something is to express positive affect toward an entity that existed once, but which no longer exists, in the world of the speaker. When we miss someone or something, we are expressing a wish that we and the person or object we miss were once again united in space or time. Thus this use of *sore* in Bislama is a straightforward extension of the meanings and discourse functions of the source lexeme, Eng. *sorry*.

DISTRIBUTION OF *SORE*

The three functions of *sore* are not distributed evenly among all speakers of Bislama. Over all, the most frequent users of *sore* are women. In a transcribed corpus of casual conversation, there are 35 tokens. We find all three meanings exemplified in the corpus; but only four of these tokens were uttered by a man, and all four came from a short piece of conversation produced by a single male speaker. Even more suggestive than this rough quantitative distinction is the difference in HOW *sore* is used by women and men.

It is often difficult to assign a single, or even primary, function to an utterance in an interaction. Politeness strategies like *sore* can be especially difficult to categorize, because two people are involved. A strategy that attends to the addressee's negative face wants – e.g. their desire for their actions to be unimpeded – may threaten the positive face of the speaker, perhaps by impinging on their autonomy or freedom of choice. In addition, as we have noted, one function may be parasitic

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on or derive from another. Even when a function is derived, the more recent development may retain some connection with its prior or primary function(s).[3]

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that, even though the terminology of politeness theory may suggest that positive and negative politeness are scalar opposites, they might better be characterized as two sides of one coin. Certainly, the potential for the speaker's and the addressee's face wants to be in competition requires a framework that treats politeness as a more complex process than a simple scale does. Once we attempt to incorporate the perspectives of both speaker and addressee into politeness theory, it becomes extremely unlikely that a specific routine or gesture will ever be interpretable purely as a gesture of positive or negative politeness.

However, general practice in the analysis of interpersonal behaviors is to attempt to assign a PRINCIPAL function to any discourse strategy. In this analysis and discussion of the distribution of *sore*, I have followed this convention – at the same time as I acknowledge that many (all?) apologies may evoke secondary or even tertiary functions. Once the groundwork and descriptive analysis of apologies in Bislama has been completed, we will be in a better position to approach the questions raised by the multifunctional nature of apologies.

Women use *sore* with all three of the meanings discussed: apology, empathy, and missing. The one man in the corpus who used *sore* used it only in its meaning 'to miss someone or something' (this was illustrated in 4). My field notes provide one further example of a man saying *sore*, in this case to apologize. An area chief, after telling off a younger man (his classificatory nephew), apologized, saying, "I'm very sorry to say this." Clearly, the principal function of this token of *sore* was to express negative politeness. The apology functions as an attempt to redress any damage his censure may have done to his nephew's negative face. But this example is worth examining in more detail for two reasons.

First, it is a useful reminder that the deference expressed by an apology may be motivated by the social distance between the interlocutors, as well as by a power difference between them. In this particular case, the power difference between the two interlocutors – a chief and a member of his community – was great. An exchange initiated by a powerful speaker and directed to a less powerful subordinate should disfavor use of a negative politeness strategy. Here, however, the social distance between the interlocutors is not great. The interlocutors were drinking partners and good friends. So even though the chief's identity as an area chief licenses him to censure his nephew, and it does not require him to attend to a less powerful person's negative face wants, in this case his identity as a friend of his addressee seems to cancel out the second factor. We can assume that the primary function of this apology was to redress any damage done to the negative face of a friend.

The second interesting point about this apology is how it was received. In response to the chief's apology, his nephew replied, "No, it's good that you say all this,"[4] using the respectful form of the pronoun 'you', *yufala*. By saying "no," the

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TABLE 1. *Summary of distribution of* sore *in speech of women and men by function. Symbols: ✓ = recorded; (✓) = attested but not recorded; * = not attested.*

	Function of *sore*		
Speakers	Apology	Empathy	Miss s.o./s.t.
Women	✓	✓	✓
Men	(✓)	*	✓

nephew accepts the apology as having been appropriate between friends. But by immediately following this with a negative politeness marker of his own (the deferential *yufala*, appropriate for a classificatory uncle), he acknowledges the criticism as fair comment from a higher-status member of the community. What makes this token of an apology especially interesting is that it is an example of the speed with which interlocutors negotiate the salience of the many social and personal roles with which they can identify. In this example, the salience of personal identities and group identities was problematized and resolved contrapuntally.

The generalization, then, is that both women and men use *sore* to apologize and to express the fact that they miss someone. Women, but not men, also use *sore* to signal other-orientedness or empathy.

The corpus of conversational Bislama contained 18 tokens of empathic *sore*. This means that more than half of the tokens women uttered had this function. But two tokens of *sore* in women's speech were excluded from the quantification of functions; even in context, these tokens could not reliably be categorized as primarily expressing empathy or missing someone. For instance, a woman discussing the imminent departure of a friend said,

(5) *Doroti bae i gobak long namba 26, a? sore long Doroti.*
'Dorothy will leave on the 26th, eh? sorry PREP Dorothy.'

The meaning of *sore long Doroti* is unclear here. As noted, the theme of *sore* always occurs in a prepositional phrase; i.e., *sore long Doroti* could mean 'I will miss Dorothy', or equally 'I am sorry for Dorothy; poor Dorothy'. The scope of the adverbial *bae*, which indicates future in this context, is crucial. If its scope is restricted to the first clause, the second clause indicates speaker empathy ('poor Dorothy'). But if *bae* has scope over both clauses, then the interpretation 'I will miss Dorothy' is favored.[5] Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the three functions of *sore* in the conversation of women and men that was recorded in northern Vanuatu.

Of course, the pattern represented in Table 1 does not mean that men do not express empathy. For example, during my fieldwork, I saw men hang their heads

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or cry when someone else was expressing or experiencing sorrow or loss. Men sometimes take responsibility for child care, but the strategies (linguistic or non-linguistic) that they use to hush a crying baby do not include repetitions of *sore*.[6] The conclusion to be drawn from this distributional difference is that women and men prefer different behaviors for expressing their empathetic concern for others.

Interpreting the distribution

The question now becomes: Why do men and women prefer to express empathy with others through different behaviors? What, if anything, can we infer or learn about different members of the speech community from the distribution of *sore*? Why is the empathetic use of *sore* marked for men and unmarked for women? What social information is conveyed when speakers use *sore* with one meaning or another?

First, we must determine whether the distributional differences noted above reflect a genuine difference in women's and men's use of *sore*, or whether they are a byproduct of other factors. That is, if women's speech is always more other-oriented than men's, then the different distribution of *sore* in men's and women's speech might result from this.

Research into politeness strategies, cross-culturally and cross-linguistically, has documented numerous strategies by which a speaker can attend directly and indirectly to the addressee's face wants. Obviously, a quantitative or qualitative discussion of these strategies in Bislama is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, one straightforward comparison of the other-orientedness of women's and men's speech can be undertaken by comparing the proportion of finite clauses with a 2sg. subject with the number of clauses with subjects of all other persons and numbers, in women's and men's conversations. The hypothesis is that differences in the distribution of empathetic *sore*, in women's and men's speech, is a consequence of women's orienting their talk around their addressee more generally than men do. If we find that the proportion of 2sg. subjects is significantly higher in women's speech than in men's, we can interpret this as support for the hypothesis. If we find no significant difference in the proportion of 2sg. subjects in men's and women's speech, this would not support the hypothesis.

Obviously, this test is simplistic, and its results are far from a definitive resolution of the hypothesis. Utterances with a 2sg. subject are hardly the only way that speakers make their discourse other-oriented; nor are all utterances with a 2sg. subject empathetic. A result of no difference probably tells us very little; however, if there were a result of some statistical significance, we would take this as an indication that there are indeed more fundamental differences in the speech styles (specifically related to orientation around the addressee) in women's and men's speech, and that they need to be investigated further.

Table 2 shows that the proportion of clauses with 2sg. subjects in women's and men's speech are almost identical. It seems unlikely, therefore, that women's use of *sore* to express empathy is a consequence of a more general tendency. Women

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TABLE 2. *Frequency of 2sg. subjects vs. all others as a test of other-orientedness in women's and men's speech. Difference between specifically addressee-oriented discourse not significant (t-test = 0.87).*

	Women		Men	
	%	N	%	N
2sg. 'you'	8	249	7	190
Other subjects	92	2918	93	2349
Total Ns		3167		2539

do not seem to orient their talk around their addressee significantly more than men do. Let us consider, then, the possibility that the distribution of *sore* is better understood in terms of how the quality of empathy fits into a local understanding of women's and men's social roles. This discussion will require us to expand the analysis beyond the minimal linguistic context examined so far, to include wider contextual information of an ethnographic nature.

Social significance of empathy in the Bislama speech community

Empathy, being the projection of self onto the experiences of another, satisfies both personal and social needs. By acknowledging that a sufferer's situation is a plight that the community agrees to be both unfortunate and noteworthy, an expression of empathy enacts social cohesion. Empathy affirms group norms and common ground. However, an expression of empathy also satisfies interpersonal needs; it is intended somehow to minimize the unhappiness or pain being experienced by the subject of the empathy. In English we say, "A problem shared is a problem halved." This may be more desideratum than description, but it is often the case, in Anglo-Western culture, that people find it easier to bear their troubles if they feel someone else appreciates their predicament, or understands their misery or desperation. This is interpreted as an indication that the other person cares for you; i.e., it is a gesture of group strength realized at the personal level.

However, the work of appreciation and understanding is not always allocated evenly in a community. For example, in Anglo culture, the conventions about who may disclose painful or unfortunate personal information, and to whom, are asymmetric. As a generalization, women are free to disclose painful or unfortunate information to another woman; a man can similarly disclose to a woman. But both women and men are more constrained in the freedom with which they disclose unhappy or painful personal experiences to a man.[7] Consequently, we would expect that, in Anglo culture, expressions of empathy would occur in women's speech with greater frequency than in men's, simply because women are exposed

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more often than men are to disclosures that conventionally demand an empathic response.

The same principle seems to underlie the distribution of *sore* in Bislama. Traditional notions of the social and mythic roles played by women and men in this region of Vanuatu are constituted through sex-preferential behaviors. In the past, according to Rubinstein (1978:319) men have been "perceived as activists, as doers, as owners, as social creators and activists, and as transactors, while women are seen as growers and nurturers." Rubinstein's fieldwork in the early 1970s was conducted very close to where my own fieldwork was carried out 20 years later. His thoughtful examination of the subjective and objective criteria by which people defined their identities therefore provides an invaluable background, complementing my own observations.

Rubinstein noted that women seldom take on public leadership roles or engage in formal competitive displays of skills, e.g. in making formal speeches at large gatherings. This was still largely true in the mid-1990s. This is not to say that women (the "growers and nurturers") are completely unempowered socially. However, their power and authority are defined by analogy with non-human forces, such as the ocean and the gardens; they are established and recognized through different activities. Moreover, the community as a whole recognizes the sources of their authority both directly and indirectly.

Thus it is notable that, in the very private men's domain of the graded society (where men traditionally increased their social status through, e.g., pig-killing), images and representations of female power were co-opted. One very high rank in the men's society is the 'placenta of things' – *tavu i cina* in Tamambo, the local language (Rubinstein 1978:321); another takes its name from a mythic female figure. In addition, although this region principally traces membership patrilineally, a secondary and still vital line of descent is defined through one's mother and her father (Rubinstein 1978:190, 375). This line of descent defines kinship and interfamily networks in terms derived from the vocabulary of planting and grafting. Thus even in the important domain of land rights, in which patriarchal power is generally defined and perpetuated, one's authority is tied up with a recognition of the significance of women's power. An act of defining familial relationships and of belonging to a place thereby simultaneously constitutes male and female power, as well as authority within the community.[8]

Rubinstein also correctly points out that, although women are conventionally excluded from political competition in public, they do compete actively in the domains that the community associates with them (1978:315, 318). All women, it is assumed, are equally well equipped and well motivated to compete for covert prestige and covert social power through recognition as good mothers.

The fact that covert prestige is here associated with women's speech may seem odd. In the speech communities that introduced the term "covert prestige" to the sociolinguistic literature (Labov 1966, Trudgill 1972), the targeting of speech norms with covert or subconscious positive evaluations has been associated with

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men's behavior. It has been presented in opposition to women's supposed targeting of the standard, which has overt prestige. Clearly, the temptation to generalize from these cases (e.g. Trudgill 1983:92) is unwarranted. Labov's and Trudgill's original findings did not identify a natural association between men's speech norms and covert prestige; covert prestige was defined in highly local terms, as it is here.

In this speech community, it is generally agreed that a good mother is someone who has the ability to influence or control her husband's and children's behavior. Optimally, however, a woman should do this by employing control strategies considered appropriate for women. Although women try to influence their family members' behavior in many ways – threats, bribes, rage, setting good examples, cajoling – these strategies are not considered equally appropriate behavior for a woman to engage in. However, routines and behaviors that nurture or display care for individuals or the family group are valued positively by the community. Examples from my own fieldwork include focusing children's attention on an elder when the elder wants to speak (cf. Ochs & Taylor 1995); avoiding public fights or *tok kros* (complaining or grousing) in the extended family; and looking after children whose primary caregiver is absent or indisposed. A common way of describing a woman or girl as 'good' in Bislama is to say *Hem i wan kwaet gel*, lit. 'She's a quiet girl.'

The relevance of these facts to the analysis of the distribution of *sore* is straightforward. If the community takes a favorable view of women's displays of nurturing behavior, and if we assume women are rational agents, then we must expect that they will try to capitalize on this situation. We should not be surprised to find that they make use of nurturing strategies wherever they can: In doing so, they can at the least do no damage to their community status, and at best they may achieve some covert measure of prestige.

Conversely, men stand to gain little by expressing empathy with an apology. Their status within the community and as men is evaluated on different metrics, and these may be better attended to by the use of other linguistic strategies. For instance, when men wish to signal that they share an evaluation of an event as unfortunate or unhappy, they do so not by adopting the apology strategy, which claims identity of experience between the agent and theme, but by passing judgments or evaluations, e.g. *Be i gud* 'That's good', or *Kranke wantaem/I nogud nating* 'Outrageous/That's terrible'.[9]

Of course, engaging in empathetic and caring utterances also strengthens the association of women with these sorts of behaviors. The act has both interpersonal and intergroup significance. An existing ideology is turned to individual advantage, and thus constraints on the group are reaffirmed. How women and men choose to express empathy is reflexive; simultaneously reflecting the social landscape in which women and men play out their gender roles, it fosters an association of nurturance with women, and of agentivity with men.

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In a similar vein, Schieffelin 1984 discusses Kaluli speech acts using the term *adɛ* (roughly 'younger brother of a girl'). Like the Bislama empathetic apology, the use of *adɛ* reflects a particular relationship between the speaker and addressee/referent; however, its use also constrains the behavior of the interlocutors within roles that reaffirm the relationship that licenses *adɛ*. Duranti 1992 points out that the use of respect words in Samoan not only reflects the social distance between speaker and addressee/referent, but it also functions as a constraint on others' behavior. Like the use of these address terms, *sore* as an expression of empathy is a performative, creating a context that manipulates or constrains others' interpretations of the speaker herself.

To sum up, the conclusion to be drawn from this data is NOT that women are nurturing and empathetic while men are not. Rather, women's and men's potential sources of social power are different, by virtue of being associated with different social roles; and these differences in social power are reflected in the linguistic strategies they use. This makes interactional sense, since the social return on the same linguistic strategy will differ greatly for men and women. The full meaning of the linguistic act lies in its social context, and this includes the sex of the speaker.

RELATION BETWEEN SHARED PRACTICE AND COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The question now is whether the distribution of *sore* in Bislama indicates the boundaries between different communities of practice. It should already be clear that the answer to this question must be "No." Let us briefly review why.

We recall that Wenger's criterial characteristics of a community of practice (1998) are mutual engagement, a jointly negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Although the use of *sore*, particularly as a means of expressing empathy, is part of a speech repertoire shared by women speakers of Bislama, the other two criteria are absent. Being a woman may be a good predictor of one's likelihood of using *sore* to express empathy, but it does not constitute membership in a community of practice consisting entirely of women.

As noted in the introduction to this collection, there are key differences between a community of practice, a speech community, and a group identity. Since the three terms describe different relations between speakers – with different emphases on linguistic and non-linguistic acts, agency, and affect – I believe that all three terms are needed for the study of language in society. This can be seen quite clearly in the case of the linguistic variable we have just examined.

It was demonstrated above that, in northern Vanuatu, the norms for the use (or non-use) of *sore* are shared by male and female speakers of Bislama. This shared knowledge is one factor that defines a cohesive Bislama speech community, in the sense of Labov 1972.

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In addition, *sore* obviously serves as a marker of intergroup distinctiveness. Its distribution in women's and men's speech is cleanly divided, and it has acquired at least one specialized use among women (attending to a fractious baby). Above I gave a detailed analysis of how social beliefs about the nature of the intergroup boundaries between women and men in this community are consistent with the semantics of *sore* and its adoption as an intergroup marker.

Nonetheless, all women in a speech community hardly constitute a community of practice. Levels of mutual engagement vary greatly across individuals. Some women see each other frequently and spend a lot of time together. Others only meet at market or at major events, such as a wedding or a funerary gathering. Clearly, in turn, this presents a practical constraint on the extent to which all the women in a speech community might have some jointly negotiated enterprise.

If we accept that linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors both constitute and reflect the social categories with which they can be shown to have a positive correlation, then one might argue that, when women observe the norms for frequency and function of *sore* in speech, they are engaged in an enterprise of defining what it is to be a woman in this speech community. But this seems an undesirable option. This can only be called an "enterprise" in the very weakest sense of the word. Certainly, if we admit this sort of enterprise as a means of satisfying the definition of a community of practice, then it becomes very unclear how the term differs substantively from the term "speech community."

A more tightly constrained definition of what it means for speakers to form a community of practice has clear potential for the study of language change. The community of practice – defined in Wenger's terms, with its distinction between core and peripheral members – suggests new hypotheses about where we might look for the initiators of social and linguistic changes. A stringent definition of the community of practice will also allow us to determine with greatest precision whether the criterial requirements are important factors in determining the vectors along which linguistic change spreads through the larger speech community.

In conclusion, then, we have seen that women's and men's complementary repertoires for the expression of empathy strongly suggest that *sore* is one means by which the intergroup boundary between genders is indexed in this speech community. Saying *sore* is not the only practice that constitutes and reflects gender roles in Vanuatu; other significant differences in practice include walking and sitting in single-sex groups in public, learning to drive (almost exclusively a male activity), or choice of jobs that one takes outside the home village (women work as other people's housekeepers, but not men; men work in bakeries in the region where I stayed, but women seldom do).

Even though we have seen that women share a linguistic and behavioral repertoire of which men make limited (or no) use, this does not mean that women constitute a community of practice. The fact that there are highly gendered domains in the Bislama speech community does not alter the fact that the women who share the practice of saying *sore* are a heterogeneous and socially diffuse

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group. In the Bislama speech community, saying *sore* is normative of women; and the use of *sore* is one means by which intergroup boundaries between the sexes are established and maintained. But more than a shared practice is required to constitute a community of practice.

NOTES

* This article has benefited from discussions with other members of the Language and Gender panel at the 6th ICLASP meeting, University of Ottawa, May 1997, especially Janet Holmes. Some of the data were also presented at the Second British Roundtable on Social Theory in Sociolinguistics, University of Wales, Cardiff, July 1997; discussions there with Ben Rampton and John Heritage were very helpful. My early thoughts were shaped in conversations with Herbert Morris and Gillian Sankoff. None of the aforementioned necessarily agree with the analysis presented here. Many thanks to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for their generous support in the field (#5742).

[1] All examples (unless noted otherwise) are taken from a corpus of conversational Bislama recorded in northern Vanuatu in 1994–95, ca. 30,000 words. Warmest thanks go to Sharon Tabi, whose cheerfulness and wisdom assisted greatly with the transcription and analysis. Speaker names, where given, are pseudonyms.

[2] *Long hem* is the locative preposition *long* plus the gender-neutral 3sg. pronoun *hem*.

[3] More detailed discussions of this perseverance in cases of semantic shift can be found in the extensive literature on metaphor and is beyond the scope of this paper.

[4] In Bislama: *No, i gud yufala i talem olsem*.

[5] *Bae* can certainly scope over more than one clause. *Bae* always occurs outside the finite verb phrase; i.e., it cannot intervene in subject-verb agreement, but it may precede or follow the subject pronoun (if overt). The constraints on this variation have not yet been defined.

[6] Some other strategies – employed by both men and women – are to distract the baby (focusing the child's attention on something else); to scare the baby; or to put a hand over the baby's mouth.

[7] Obviously, this is not categorically the case; individual differences abound, within the sexes, as to the amount of disclosure with which a person feels comfortable. It is also true that norms for both sexes, about the amount of information it is considered appropriate to disclose to non-intimates, seem to be changing.

[8] This grading system was still reasonably active in 1973, during Rubinstein's fieldwork; but many of the families I stayed with in 1994–95 were observant Christians. This meant that, even though older men held ranks in the graded society, younger men (under 40 years) were not active participants in the system.

[9] How a male speaker is evaluated, if he does use *sore* to express empathy, is an open question. Given that the distribution patterns are conventionalized, we would expect that, if a man flouts these norms of use, this will invite hearers to draw some additional inferences beyond the literal meaning of an apology.

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