12 Taboo 'languages', special vocabularies and registers of Yélî Dnye

Yélî Dnye had three distinct types of 'taboo language' or special vocabulary ('had' because all three are falling into disuse). First, women avoided a number of ordinary words, especially for the sea and sea-faring equipment, presumably because this was a domain for ritual caution, men for example singing *nt:amênt:amê* hymns to pacify the ocean and its currents. Secondly, in the presence of in-laws, and especially those with whom a special level of taboo had been contracted, a large range of everyday terms denoting body parts, clothing and personal possessions were replaced by a special in-law vocabulary. Thirdly, each sacred place had, according to its legends, specific words that had to be avoided, e.g. the name of the resident god, the names of various of his attributes and avatars, etc. Only indirect reference would be made to the god or resident *'nmo* anywhere near his abode (instead he would be referred to just as *kê pini* 'that man' or by means of a set of secondary descriptive names). Similarly, the names of his abode would be avoided in the vicinity – for example on *Mgî* (Mt Rossel, home of Ngwonoch:a the high god) one talked of *Denikpâpuchóó*, avoiding *Mgî*. In the case of the sacred islet of Lów:a the taboo vocabulary was quite extensive and is given here as best we can reconstruct it. In addition to the special taboo vocabularies detailed below, there are many ways in which avoidance is behaviourally manifest – for example in name avoidance and very indirect reference (see Levinson 2005, 2007b).

12.1 Women's language

In addition to a few lexical switches (e.g. *kî méédi* or *kî kyîmwi* 'that woman' instead of the gender-neutral speaker version *kî pyópu*), women's speech shows exaggerated palatalization, so for example the prenasalized stop written /nt/ is likely to be pronounced palatalized, orthographically /nj/ [ndʒ], and this is extended to some words beginning with /t/, like the name Tili, pronounced /chili/ [tʃ].

In the past especially, women avoided using ordinary words in reference to certain entities. The terms avoided with their respectful alternates are given in Table 12.1. No morphosyntactic reflexes were triggered by these substitutions:

(576) a. (man speaking) *nt:ee* *lee* *dmyino*
sea.LOC go.FOL 2plIMP.Intrans
'You3, go to the sea'

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b. (woman speaking) *tpyele* *lee* *dmyino*
sea.LOC go.FOL 2plIMP.Intrans
'You3, go to the sea (woman speaking)'

c. (man speaking) *ntii* *nmyinê* *vy:ee* *yó*
salt.water 2PlCI fetch 2Pl.IMP3sO.Trans
'Go and fetch sea water'

d. (woman speaking) *tpili* *nmyinê* *vy:ee* *yó*
salt.water 2PlCI fetch 2Pl.IMP3sO.Trans
'Go and fetch sea water'

Table 12.1: Sample of women's traditional vocabulary replacements.

Everyday men's term	Gloss	Women's term	Gloss if transparent
ntii	'sea, salt water'	*tpili*	
nt:ee	'sea LOCATIVE'	*tpyele*	
nee	'canoe'	*dyudu*	
kwede	'bailer shell'	*kódu yââ/ mtene pyu*	
lyé	'sail' (of pandanus)	*pele yââ*	'coconut mat'
mbwaa	'fresh water'	*tolo*	'?throwing'
Lów:a	'Lów:a isle'	*mwada tpili pee*	'the far sea side'

12.2 In-law taboo vocabulary

There is great respect shown to in-laws in Rossel Island society (the converse of this is that a favourite past-time is joking about another, co-present, man's father-in-law (see Levinson 2005) – retaliation is in kind!). Usually a spouse adopts one or two brothers-in-law or sisters-in-law as *kédikââ*, in-laws due elaborate and punctilious respect, at the time of marriage. Proper respect to these people involves not saying the person's names (i.e. never uttering those sounds and avoiding similar words), speaking of the person in the plural and always using an intermediary when giving something to the person. As well as one or two of the wife's sisters or the husband's brothers, the relationship may target a man's brother's wives, his sister's husband's sister, his mother's brother's wife, etc. For example, my principal consultant Yidika's grandmother (Tómokigha, now deceased) observed these strict relations with just three classes of people: her husband's sisters, her brothers' wives, and her sisters' husbands. People in these strict respect relations observe, or used to observe, a *choko* relationship involving the replacement of a number of ordinary words by *choko* counterparts when in

their presence, the avoidance of close proximity (they were given a wide berth), the avoidance of direct exchange of anything by hand with them (children were used as intermediaries), and strict taboos on helping them bodily or with apparel in any way (a great inconvenience in the case of sickness, for example). They were considered *yâpwo*, sacred or taboo.

Although the alternate vocabulary has largely died out, two linguistic aspects of the original *choko* relation and other in-law avoidances remain: an absolute, strict taboo on the use of the name of the *kédikââ* (even if when being used to refer to someone or something else), the use of a polite plural of reference, and a general rule of avoiding co-presence where possible. A woman, instead of naming her husband Yidika's brother, for example, might use his wife's name Ngmidimuwó, saying *Ngmidimuwó u pi knî* '*Ngmidimuwó's folks*' or even *Ngmidimuwó u wee mgî knî*, 'Ngmidimuwó's district Mount Rossels'! In turn, she might be referred to by the husband's brother as *Yidika u p:aa tpémi* 'Yidika's village's people'. The use of the polite 3rd person plural for *kédikââ* (either in address or reference) remains current not only for those in the strictest *kédikââ* relation, as in:

(577) *a* *kédikââ* *daa* *pyede* *té*
1sPoss taboo.in.law not sitting.plural plS.Intrans.CIPROX
'My taboo-in-law (singular) are not there (plural)'

but also for others to whom respect is owed, including a man's own sisters (classificatory or real). For example, a middle-aged man (Y:emwe) said of his classificatory sister,

(578) *wu* *dmââdî* *kî* *d:uu* *lê,* *daa* *a*
that.invis girl DEF 3IMM.PI.MOT go not 1sPoss
lama *yéli*
knowledge group.of.people
'That girl who left, I don't know those-many (= her!)'

Even a man's elder sisters may be referred to in the plural, although the name will not be avoided:

(579) *Yóóta* *daa* *pyede* *té,* *kêdê* *lee*
Yóóta not sitting.plural plS.Intrans.PROX CERT3IMMPI go.FOL
dmi
plS.PI.PROX
'Yóóta (my sister) is not here, she's gone'

This plural of respect is a referent-honorific, but the alternate vocabulary which also used the plural of respect was essentially a system of addressee/bystander honorifics (see Levinson 1983:90 for the distinction, after Comrie). In bystander honorifics, where respect is shown to the non-addressed present parties, 3rd person plural in reference to individuals was used in their hearing. Apparently, despite the 3rd person forms, it was possible to combine them with the N (assimilating nasal) of 2nd person singular possessive forms, to make address obliquely clear if absolutely necessary. Women in the presence of their in-laws held up a large bush-umbrella (*kaa*) leaf to hide themselves.

The alternate vocabulary with its everyday counterparts is given in Table 12.2 (where there is more than one form, they came from different informants). Most of the words replaced are body part terms or words for clothing and carried possessions. Not all body part terms were replaced: the neck (*mbwamê*), adam's apple (*ndîkîdi*), stomach (*km:oo*), and others not mentioned here retained their ordinary form. Of some interest are the conflations, e.g. of everyday terms for upper and lower leg with a single term, where there is no such term in the everyday language (similarly for male and female genitals, clothing in general, etc.), paralleling such taboo vocabularies in Australia (e.g. Haviland 1979a).

Table 12.2: In-law respect vocabulary.

Everyday term (unpossessed form)	Gloss	In-law term (in polite 3rd Person plural Possession)	Literal gloss if transparent
BODY PARTS			
ngwolo	eye	*yi wuché / yi chéé dê*	'their ?'
komo	mouth	*yi kp:aa têdê*	'their felling place'
kópu	words	*yi kp:aa têdê*	'their felling place'
'n:uu	nose	*yi kwodo*	'their maiden'
mbodo	head	*yi njé*	'their rib (of sailing canoe)'
mbêmê	head(locative)	*yi njee*	
ngwene	ear	*yi pééni yââ dê*	'their ? leaves dual'
kêê	hand	*yi kéépi*	'their ?'
kpââlî	upper leg	*yi péépi*	'their ?'
yi	lower leg	*yi péépi*	'their ?'
yodo	belly	*yi mbwene*	'their ?'
nyóó	teeth	*yi kpéngima tii / wóóma tii*	'their ?'
mbodo gh:aa	hair	*yi njé gh:aa*	'head(taboo) hair'

Table 12.2 (continued)

Everyday term (unpossessed form)	Gloss	In-law term (in polite 3rd Person plural Possession)	Literal gloss if transparent
gh:aa	hair (feathers, etc.)	*yi njé yââ vyi*	'head(taboo) leaf bunch'
kpââlî vyuwo	groin	*yi tpyodo*	'their ?'
mdî	penis	*yi tapa*	'their boulder that runs down a mountain'
tpe/tpoo	vagina	*yi tapa*	idem
ngmo	breast	*yi ntînî dê*	'their scented herb species'
kêê pyââ	finger 'hand woman'	*yi kéépi pyââ*	'hand(taboo) woman'
yi pyââ	toe	*yi péépi pyââ*	'leg(taboo) woman'
kwódo ng:oo dmi	face	*yi ghââ kn:ââ dmi*	'embarrassment base bundle'
nkene kn:ââ dê	shoulder	*yi mbw:ene knââ dê*	
OTHER WORDS			
kpîdî	cloth, clothing	*yi kpéni nkoo*	
'ne	grass skirt	*yi kpéni nkoo*	
pwono	male pubic leaf	*yi yââ*	'their leaf'
pee	male belt for pubic leaf	*yi yedê kpê*	'their vine string'
péé	basket	*yi mgéé*	
u mênê	inside (house, basket, etc.)	*yi tp:ênê*	
kada	in front of	*ghââ*	'slashing'

12.3 Lów:a island taboo vocabulary

Sacred places, or *yâpwo ghi*, were (and largely remain) taboo in the proper sense: they could only be approached in the presence of the *yâpwo chóó* or guardians, singing the appropriate propitiatory *nt:amê* (see Levinson 2008). Free talk would have been avoided inside these areas, and words that had particular resonance with the myths attached to the place were likely to have had alternate replacements. Large areas, including the whole of Mgî, Mt Rossel, would have fallen under these injunctions, and to this day in these areas reference to the residing god and his home will be indirect (e.g. as mentioned above, instead of mentioning the mountain *Mgî*, home of the high god *Ngwonoch:aa*, people will say *Denikpââpuchóó* 'name for any taboo mountain' if in the bush near the mountain).

Armstrong's (1928) ethnography provides a list of alternate terms (pp. 149–50) used on the sacred isle of Lów:a, 16 km east of the main island. Although Armstrong's spelling is sometimes unrecognizably obscure, it provided a useful base for further elicitation (showing too that the vocabulary has not changed much in nearly a century). Unlike with other sacred places, these words are not themselves considered very secret knowledge, as many men visit Lów:a for fishing (although women may not set foot there). On a visit I made in 1999 with East Point men, the vocabulary was still at least partially observed. A rich mythology links Lów:a with Lââp, a goddess who takes the form of a huge octopus and crab, controlling the SE trade winds, with her husband Kpiye (with a moray eel avatar), and with Yee, a malevolent god in the form of a sea eagle who had incest with his sister and ate her, thus initiating cannibalism.

The alternate vocabulary, as far as I have been able to elicit it, is as in Table 12.3:

Table 12.3: Taboo vocabulary used on sacred isle of Lów:a.

Everyday word	gloss	Lów:a taboo vocabulary	Literal meaning if any	Notes
kââdî	sun	*mwââdî*	'rainforest tree sp.'	
d:ââ	moon/pot	*têpêm:aa*	'?earth daddy'	taboo term has same polysemy
tpii	rain	*mgâmu (also means 'flying fox')*	'flying fox'	
ndê	fire	*nt:u*	'body, flesh (of e.g. shell-fish), fruit'	
mbwaa	water	*tolo*	'water' in woman's language	Also said to be 'water' in Saman dialect
koo	limepot	*chimi*	'clam species'/ 'uncle with nephew'	
yélî	Rossel	*tenukwo / denikpâpu chóó*		(Armstrong glossed these terms as 'paddle')
mbu	mountain	*denikpâpuchóó*	'?Pass over hills of Deeni'	Also the way to refer to specific mountains on Rossel
Mgî	Mt Rossel	*Yee Lów:a*	'The God Yee's Lów:aa'	

Table 12.3 (continued)

Everyday word	gloss	Lów:a taboo vocabulary	Literal meaning if any	Notes
pyede	a fish species	*déél:ââ*		
tpile pê	snake	*chii tepê*	'jungle eel'	
(no term)	sea eel (generic)	*te pê*	'fish snake'	covers all the sea eels: *yóódu, k:ii kigha pê, poko pê, tênê tênê pê, daa too pê*
mââwe	bigman	*limuwee*	'?limu district/ beetle'	
chêêpî	stone	*yéli vy:eenî*	'?group of old people'	
yi	tree	*lîmî*	'lightening'	
péé	basket	*chimipéé*	'clam sp. basket'	
wêê	blood	*vyêêdî*		
nt:eemi	NW Season	*mbweene*		
ch:ee	to cook	*mwéé*	'tree species with nice smell'	
pêla	tongs	*ndenikê*		
ndap	shell coinage	*mbwênêma, mbonoma*		
kpaapîkpaapî	white	*nyipinyipi*		
kpêdêkpêdê	black	*mgwâmumgwâmu*		
Y:amî	Sudest island	*Njiipe*		
yedê	rope	*limokpêti*		
yimê	rat	*lów:a dpuwomgaala*	?'Lów:a conch palm'	
'nmo	bird	*kînî*	'sooty tern'	
'nmo	yâpwo, sacred site	*kînî*	'sooty tern'	same polysemy in both vocabs over god/ bird
pywâpo	dugong	*nkéliyipââ*	'foreign log'	
pyaa	crocodile	*ghêdêpââ*	'?shaking log'	
vyee	kill	*mb:uu, waa*	'crying'	
dpî	sleep	*kwo*	'standing'	

Table 12.2 (continued)

Everyday word	gloss	Lów:a taboo vocabulary	Literal meaning if any	Notes
mbii	sick	*kinima (dê kinima – I got sick)*		
nkwépi	sorcerer	*pwiyépyu*	'?doer of coming'	
ghê dmi	ghost	*dênté*		
mbwêmê	pig	*kpémi*	'shark'	
w:ââ	dog	*kpémi*	'shark'	
Ngwonoch:a	high god	*kênêwee*	'?Kênê district/ insect'	
nkéli chêêpî	steel, knife	*limone (= knife only)*		
maa	road	*wuputii*	'?bee line'	also in Mgî taboo language
yodo	moray	*mbwene, mbwééné*	'belly' (in-law vocab)	Everyday word yodo = belly, moray
dpênê	river eel	*tolo têpê*	'water (woman's language) soil'	
kpii modo ghêê	clam spp	*kmenemuwó (for all clam sp)*	'woman's monthly period'	
tââkê	turtle	*kwee w:uu*	'nut species, widow's retreat'	
kwodo	maiden	*tpe kwodo mbuwó*	'vagina maiden heron'	Here extended to 'wife'
pyââ	woman	*njenge*		
nêêdî	possum	*ghaa knâpwo mbwamê*	'?croak bottom neck'	
mbweembwee	'getting big'	*kênêkênê*	'?uncle, uncle'	
kpânêkigha	village name	*teekigha*		
	cooking	*mwéé 'cooking'*	'fragrant wood sp.'	
	sleeping	*kwo*	'standing'	
vy:êmî	fetch (water)	*mbaana*		
dpuwó n:uu	a well	*mbyw:a*	'?East wind'	
pyudu	seven	*wéniwali*	'six eight'	

Table 12.2 (continued)

Everyday word	gloss	Lów:a taboo vocabulary	Literal meaning if any	Notes
mweeli mbwó	cooking stones	*mwe w:uu dyuu*	'mwe round. things heap'	
mdî	penis	*kweeli kînî*	'Pandanus species sooty tern'	
tpe	vagina	*pîdê*	'?1st sing. counterfactual'	
mbodo	head	*nkênî km:ii*	'?shoulder coconut'	
kpé kn:ââ	reef passage	*mbéli kn:ââ*	'blue.sea base'	
kpéé	bush hen	*dówo mgaala*		
kpéé	scraping	*chimi kpee*	'clam sp. coconut. scraper'	

Included in the list are a number of taboo register verbs. These are inflected in a regular way, giving us some independent insight into the default inflection for verbs, as shown in Table 12.4:

Table 12.4: Some verbs from the taboo vocabulary used on sacred isle of Lów:a.

	Aktionsart	Imp	Proximal tenses	Remote Past
mwéé 'cook'	**Punctual**	*mwéé ngi*	*mwéé*	*mwéé ngê*
mb:uu 'kill'	**Punctual**	*mb:uu ngi*	*mb:uu*	*mb:uu ngê*
kwo 'sleep'	**Continuous**	*chii kwo*	*kwo*	*kwo*

There are a number of points to be made about the full list of taboo terms. First, as earlier reported for taboo vocabularies, there are interesting conflations of everyday terms in one taboo term. For example, the everyday language has no category for clam shells, so one might think the Tridacnidae are not recognized as a family – but the taboo language has one term covering the six species found on Rossel. Note also the single term for domesticated animals, pigs and dogs. In the same way, while Yélî Dnye has three (at least incipient) colour terms (black, white and red – but see Levinson 2000b), the taboo language has only black and white terms, as if it were in the first Berlin and Kay (1969) stage. Second, the motivation for particular ordinary terms being replaced lies largely in the details

of the mythology connected with this sacred isle. For example, 'seven' (but not any other number) is replaced because Laap, the aforementioned goddess of the place, is conceived of as an octopus with seven arms. The everyday term for octopus, *kpé,* is avoided in the same manner as the names of in-laws: any word, whatever the meaning, which has a similar sound must be avoided: for example, the man's name Kpakpé will be changed into Kpambwéli. An exception is the word for shark, *kpémi*, used to replace both the everyday words for dog and pig: this is motivated by the belief that in T:eemî, the Rossel heaven under the lagoon, the sharks are the inhabitants' domesticated animals. Laap's husband Kpiye has a moray eel avatar, so the everyday word *yodo* 'moray, belly' is also replaced in both its meanings. Similarly, a magical possum called *Pele* plays a role in the myths, so the everyday word for 'possum' is replaced. Many of the other objects whose names are avoided are also related to the myths, especially to a competition between Yee on Lów:a and Ngwonoch:a on Mgî, Mt Rossel. Thus fresh water has special resonance, as the spring on Lów:a has its alleged source on Mgî.

There are said to be other taboo languages for other sacred places on Rossel, e.g. for the highest parts of Mgî, and the sacred area of Pwelevyuwo. It is clear that they share some of the same terms – for example, the Mgî vocabulary has *tolo* for water, and *wupitii* for road (path). Some informants tell me that the in-law *choko* vocabulary for body-part terms is also used on Lów:a, and presumably in other sacred sites. But sacred places are likely to have their own specialisms, as dictated by the mythology connected to the places.

12.4 Special registers and genres

For a society without any significant division of labour (above the level of men and women's work), there are a surprising number of specialist registers. One of the most obvious of these is the register for talking about *kêndapî* 'shell money' (even the use of it is called 'speaking', as in *kê tpapê a lama daa tóó*, 'the use of *kê*, lit. the speaking of it, is not known to me'). There are for a start the twenty odd denominations of *ndapî* shells, with names such as *puch:em* (high value coin formerly used for compensation to the victim's family at a cannibal feast), *yodonkîpwéntoo* (high value coin used in brideprice payments). Then in addition there are function or role names for any payment: e.g. *mgêmî ndapî* is the crucial coin that is permanently passed over in brideprice payments, which must be of *têpudî ndoo* denomination. Parallel to the *ndapî* series of coins, there are *kê* coins (large beads), some of which also have names, like *tap*, a *kê* coin that used to be used exclusively for a secondary marriage type where a woman was bought for

prostitution. Or at a pig feast, ten crucial *kê* coin-strings (*kê kn:ââ*, base *kê*) must be produced to form the bottom of the *kê* string in payment of the pig. These each have role names (1. *knââ*, 2. *kn:ââ u pwo*, 3. *kn:ââ kn:ââ yi pwo*, 4. *mwo u pwo*, 5. *mudu u pwo,* 6. *mgêmî ngmênê kééni kn:ââ* , etc.) since the actual choice of coin is up to the pig seller. In addition, the first payment coin to be presented is (once accepted) called *kn:ââ*, but it is usually later retrieved upon presentation of one called *ngm:aa kn:ââ* or *pwee kn:ââ*, a substitute payment. The biggest *kê* are usually lent on security, with special terms for each level: *ngm:aa kn:ââ* (in the case of brideprice) or *pwee kn:ââ* (in the case of pigs) is security for *kê kn:ââ*, and *kââ kn:ââ* is (in the case of pigs) in turn security for *ngm:aa kn:ââ*. There are also special verbs for e.g. repaying shell money debt (*ngmepe*), etc. Altogether there is a large body of vocabulary dedicated to shell money transactions (the procedures themselves described in Liep 2009).

More interesting than the technical terms is a whole mode of speaking associated with talking about shell money, where *inter alia* an extended metaphor of hunting seems to be employed. Thus to give a shell coin is to 'throw it' (*kéé/kéké*), or to 'hold tight to something trying to get away' (*tpee*), to earn one is to 'break' it (*puwâ*), a pig sold for *kêndap* is *te* 'fish, game' and the capturing of a base *kê kn:ââ* is 'to hit/kill' it (*vy:a*), when it becomes *ntóó* ('a corpse, dead body'). The mode of speech may reflect the actual hunt for victims in cannibal days. There are also fixed similes, so that e.g. saying that the tail of the fish is shaking at the fish trap means that investing in that man's son's marriage will bring a quick return since he has nearly mature daughters who will yield brideprice. Or saying *mbwaa n:aa ngmêêpî* 'I am going to exchange the river' means 'I am going to trump, overbid'. The hidden, secret nature of the jargon perhaps reflects the difficulties of hanging onto valuables (shell coins, ceremonial axes, shell necklaces, ceremonial limesticks) in an exchange society, thus an inheritance of valuables is *nj:ee* 'rubbish', a valuable is *wópu* (specialized archaic term).

Another specialized register and use of language is found at the mortuary feast or *kpaakpaa* after a death. Since sorcery accusations are at stake, the language is particularly opaque, and cast entirely in parables. Such opaque speeches are called *yey*. Even the lead-up speeches make heavy use of analogy:

(580)	*dî*	*-a*	*ndê*	*mu*	*mgîtpóngo*
	1sImPast	-DEIC.PROXS	come_from	that	place_of_mourning
	u				
	his/her/its				
	'I didn't go to the lying-in-state place				

mênê d:oo kee wo, nê kââkââ
in/inside NEG1s go sSREM(ivPostN) I/me Grandfather/Uncle
because I am to grandfather
u nkîgh:ê paa neepi p:uu komo
his/her/its near side sago_vessel_SPEC sago_funnel mouth
only at the lip of the secondary sago-vessel
neepi nmye mu tóó
sago_vessel_SPEC to/from_you that sitting/being(s/d)
the (secondary) sago vessel before you
(i.e. I am not the real son, the real son is here, i.e. Harry)
mee kn:ââ yinê a peepee
tree_species butt that's_the_one DEIC.PROXS hitting/cutting
kîgha
going_to
The base of this great oak (i.e. Harry) is the one who is going to cut this into pieces (i.e. explain Dalaan's life)'

There are three major traditional song types, *yaa, nt:amê,* and *tpile wee*. *Yaa* are songs of lament, typically composed especially on the occasion to be sung over a dead body, especially by women but also by men. Mgâwo (Noel's father) is famous for arriving to pay his respects to the dead body already singing a *yaa* composed on the way. *Nt:ame*, by contrast, cannot be composed, but are handed down from generation to generation, supposedly composed by the gods Ngwonoch:aa, Mêê, etc. Nt:amês exist for weeding, gardening, pulling and launching new canoes, sailing over dangerous reefs, and entering *yâpwo*, etc. Some of these (e.g. those for new canoes) are vast compositions, designed to be sung continuously over a 12 hour night, modelled on the journeys of the first gods of Rossel. There are about a dozen distinct song cycles of this kind, each region of the island having its own speciality. Their language is opaque and often archaic. Finally *tpile wee* are also 12-hour long compositions, entirely different in tone: they have light-hearted pastoral themes with sometimes wicked double-entendre. There are c. 50 such song cycles in the current repertoire on Rossel Island, each perhaps 50,000 words in length, and entirely committed to verbal memory without written support. They are composed by known individuals, who usually draw on much existing verse in compiling the huge assemblage, which consists of a number of thematic sections, each typically dedicated to a natural history theme (the cliff, the lizard, the river, the grasshopper, etc.). Repetition of key polysemous words, playing on the different meanings, plays an important structural role. The following example gives the flavour. It comes from the *tpile wee Mgopópó* (name of a legendary figure), or *Mbéépi km:ee tp:ee* (lizard sp.), composed by the late

Thomas Keleta and Raymond Y:emwe. Notice the two tokens of *nkoo* with different meanings 'bush' and 'inside', echoed in the next line by *nkoo* 'prow'; similarly in the first line *chii* 'wander', is echoed in the next line by *chii liy:a* 'slip'; in the first line *kpiki* and *dodo* are distinct shrub species but in the second line the *kpiki dodo* denotes a broader shrub category. This gives a sense of the complex structure of Rossel verse.

(581) *mu* ***nkoo*** *mwaa* ***nkoo*** *dî n:aa* ***chii*** *dê,* ***kpîkî kpîkî dodo dodo*** *y:i dê n:aa lê*
that bush rock inside 1sPstAway wander shrub$_1$ shrub$_2$ there 1sPstAway go
'I wandered to that inland and to that bedrock, kpîkî and dodo shrubs I went through there'

ghîpî chêêpê ***nkoo*** *mbêmê até d:a* ***chii liy:a, kpîkî dodo*** *nênê u l:uu a nê*
slippery stone prow on sudden 1sPst slip shrub-type flower its tune 1sPrs
yiye n:aa kaapi,
put 1s stand.up
'on top of the slippery stone I slipped, I am putting the tune on the flower of the shrub'

Yo ghe pwil:a knî pye daa ny:ee too
Yo area shout AUG 1plNEG NEG hearing MFS3plOREM
'There were shouts in the Yo area, we did not hear them'

Yepe yuu wuwó mbiye mu wee ntééntéé,
Yepe foot Pitta.bird cooing that area floating
'In the Yepe area the cries of the wuwó bird are floating'

mbéépi km:ee tp:ee apuu!
tree.sp shade child [=lizard sp.] taboo!
'The *mbéépi*.tree lizard, don't touch!' [REFRAIN]

ye vyapê u wupu mwéli ngê a té vyâ, mwapê komo kpîki nênê lépi a té vy:oo ngê,
'The gust of wind has killed that area Vyapê's bee (i.e. Pius), He has already sucked the flower of kpîki shrub, the woman, at Myapê Komo,'

mwaa nkwodo mbwini dini mu yiyé,
there on the cliffy mountain

yo ghe u wupu, pyidi vyuwo a dî pwii, mwaa nyii mê vyuwo,
Yo area's bee (=man), he came out at Pyidi Vyuwo (searching for woman), at Mwaa nyii he is looking

ghîpî chêêpî u mêknâpwo w:êêmî dini a da ghodo, tepe yuu mê dpudu,
under the slippery stone, it spoils the calm of W:êêmî area, making noise in Tepe Yuu,

mbéépi km:ee tp:ee apuu! [REFRAIN]

These two verses, separated by the refrain of the name of the *tpile wee*, have been compiled into the *mwaa* 'bedrock' section of the whole performance. They – or at least the second – was in fact composed earlier by Pius Dâch:aa, to commemorate how he was hit on the head by his own brother's widow when he proposed to her (in the end she accepted him). It expresses self-mockery by veiled allusion. In this way, *tpile wee* verses combine both lyrical pastoral on one level and witty allusion to people and events on another. The verses employ a poetic register, with many words of very low frequency, some of them archaic or from other dialects (e.g. *kukmono* for elders, grandparents, used in Eastern dialect songs but a Western dialect word). Grammatical words may be altered euphonically to enhance singability, e.g. the plural *té* with high short vowel may be pronounced like *tee*. Despite the marathon all night performances, the audience clings to the words, asking for encores of particular verses to appreciate their subtlety. Incidentally, the performed verse never ends on the refrain but repeats the first line again.

The islanders are a people who make no visual representations; none of the carvings, masks and ritual paraphernalia found elsewhere in Melanesia will be found on Rossel. They make no pottery, and have only simple functional crafts. Their art is almost entirely verbal and it is here they invest their intellectual play and display their refined aesthetic. Perhaps the complexity of the grammar also reflects this interest in verbal art. It will take a native speaker to unravel the complexities and explain them fully to an external audience.