
On ‘true talk’ and its opposites: ways of speaking in urban Bislama

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This talk explores “ways of speaking” in Urban Bislama from the vantage point of *trutok* ‘true talk’ discourse in Port Vila, Vanuatu. More broadly the talk aims to investigate the cultural pragmatics of “speaking the truth”. The empirical case study on ni-Vanuatu discourse focuses on words and constructions related to *trutok* discourse, such as *mi talem tru* ‘I’m saying [what is] true’, *tru ia* ‘true this!’, as well as *giaman* (roughly, ‘be fake, to trick, to fib, to deceive’), which is thought of as the discursive opposite of *trutok*. *Giaman* is a salient cultural concept and, at the same time, a highly “untranslatable” word. The *trutok-giaman* order of discourse is found to be radically different from English and Eurocolonial notions of “truth and lies”. Through an in-depth study of evidence from interactive rituals, translational practices, narratives and metapragmatic commentaries, the paper develops a new account of the pragmatic order of *trutok* and *giaman*.

Aiming to understand the cultural scripts for the logic of *trutok* attestation and contestation in Urban Bislama, the paper advances three research agendas, all of which contribute to the general theme of “ways of speaking”: (i) The study of “cultural veracities” and the keywords, constructions, and linguistic rituals that express and undergird “speaking the truth”, (ii) A challenge to the Gricean “maxim of quality” and related Anglocentric theorizing concerning the alleged universality of “truth and lies”, and (iii) a contribution to the study of the entanglement of ways of speaking with ways of thinking, feeling, and living. In doing so, the talk contributes to the development of linguistic relativity and linguistic worldviews, and to the theoretical and empirical account of the variety of ways in which “words do things with people”.