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### French, English or Kanak languages? Can Traditional Languages and Cultures be Sustained in New Caledonia?

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# French, English or Kanak languages? Can Traditional Languages and Cultures be Sustained in New Caledonia?

## Abstract

New Caledonia has an unusual linguistic dynamic in comparison to other French overseas territories. While New Caledonia was established as a penal colony in 1853, the other French islands were settled as plantation colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries. In these areas, French Creole is usually the lingua franca and has lower status than French. In New Caledonia, although French has official status and dominates in state institutions, it is the native language of only half of the population. There are 28 indigenous languages and a French Creole, Tayo, spoken mostly in the rural areas. The 2014 census population revealed a multicultural New Caledonian population, it did not however record the rate of multilingualism in speakers. The present study conducted in two stages addresses a gap in the research by focussing on patterns of language use and social attitudes of New Caledonians towards their own multilingualism. The same methodology was used to collect data in both stages of the research so that a comparative analysis could be carried out between urban and rural New Caledonia. This paper focuses on social perceptions of ancestral languages and cultures as well as challenges to their preservation in multilingual spaces, as New Caledonia transitions towards the thorny question of independence in a referendum, expected to be held between 2016 and 2018. Preliminary results from the study show a difference in the language habits between older and younger generations on New Caledonians of Melanesian descent. Although French is perceived as the lingua franca by all, English is more valued than ancestral Melanesian languages by the younger generations. In terms of cultural representations and links with family history, there seems to be a discrepancy between the younger and the older generations. Whilst the older generations perceive the Centre Culturel Tjibaou as a traditional space for Melanesian art and culture their younger counterparts on the contrary view it as a place associated with contemporary art and music performances.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# French, English or Kanak languages? Can Traditional Languages and Cultures be Sustained in New Caledonia?

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## Abstract

New Caledonia has an unusual linguistic dynamic in comparison to other French overseas territories. While New Caledonia was established as a penal colony in 1853, the other French islands were settled as plantation colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In these areas, French Creole is usually the lingua franca and has lower status than French. In New Caledonia, although French has official status and dominates in state institutions, it is the native language of only half the population. There are 28 indigenous languages and a French Creole, Tayo, spoken mostly in the rural areas. The 2014 census population revealed a multicultural New Caledonian population; it did not, however, record the rate of multilingualism in speakers. The present study, conducted in two stages, addresses a gap in the research by focussing on patterns of language use and social attitudes of New Caledonians towards their own multilingualism. The same methodology consisting of a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview was used to collect data in both stages of the research so that a comparative analysis could be carried out between urban and rural New Caledonia. This paper focuses on social perceptions of ancestral languages and cultures as well as challenges to their preservation in multilingual spaces, as New Caledonia transitions towards a new status to be defined in an independence

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referendum in 2018. Preliminary results from the study show a difference in the language habits between older and younger generations of New Caledonians of Melanesian descent. Although French is perceived as the lingua franca by all, English is more valued than ancestral Melanesian languages by the younger generations. In terms of cultural representations and links with family history, there seems to be a discrepancy between the younger and the older generations. Whilst the older generations perceive the Tjibaou Cultural Centre as a traditional space for Melanesian art and culture, their younger counterparts view it as a place associated with contemporary art and music performances.

## Keywords

**New Caledonia; French; English; Kanak; multilingualism; sustainability**

## Introduction

French is a pluricentric language; in other words, it has several interacting centres, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) forms (Clyne 1992: 1). In his discussion of French as a pluricentric language Lüdi (1992) classified the French-speaking world into three categories according to the status of French in these areas and the number of speakers who have French as their first language. New Caledonia falls into the second category of Francophone countries in which ‘French is the official language ... without generally being among the languages of the first socialization of the population’ (Lüdi 1992: 150). The diglossic situation, whereby French dominates in the education system, media and administration (Fillol & Vernaudo 2004; Roche 2015), and the asymmetrical nature of pluricentricity, are highlighted by the fact that French is the native language of only half the population in New Caledonia (Ball 1997: 57; Taglioni 2004: 250).

Lüdi (1992: 171) suggested a number of directions for future research, which include the links between language and identity in multilingual societies where French is not the first language of the majority of the population. Sallabank (2015: 38) highlighted a lack of sociolinguistic research on language attitudes about language change and policy in New Caledonia. The present study contributes to addressing this gap by investigating language practices and language attitudes of New Caledonians towards the various languages present in their environment. The article focuses on patterns of language use, perceptions of multilingual spaces and attitudes about the preservation of ancestral languages and cultures as New Caledonia transitions towards a new status to be defined in an independence referendum by 2018.

One of our interview participants sums up the feelings of New Caledonians in the following terms with regard to their relatively isolated position in the predominantly English-speaking Pacific: ‘On se sent un peu seuls quand même car dans tout le Pacifique tout le monde parle anglais. On n’est pas nombreux à parler français, on a Tahiti, Wallis et Nouvelle-Calédonie.’<sup>1</sup> If this quotation is placed in a regional context, it can be stated that of the ten million inhabitants of the island members of the Pacific Islands Forum, most speak more than one language, and this occurs often in countries where there are numerous local languages (for example, Papua New Guinea alone has over 850 languages). Furthermore, the populations

<sup>1</sup> ‘We feel a little isolated all the same because throughout the Pacific everyone speaks English. There aren’t many of us who speak French: Tahiti, Wallis and New Caledonia.’ All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated.

of the French territories in the Pacific total around 500,000, with the other islands widely speaking English (Pacific Community 2016). Which languages, then, will be used in New Caledonia after New Caledonians decide on their future? Indeed, what role does the question of languages play in the discussions, debates and decisions leading to the definition of the future status of the territory? Will ancestral languages and customs be lost? Will English become the lingua franca?

## Historical overview of New Caledonia

Situated about 1,500 kilometres east of Australia, New Caledonia was established as a French penal colony in 1853 by Napoleon III, who wanted to secure France's presence in the Pacific Ocean where Australia and New Zealand were already British colonies. Similarly to Australia, New Caledonia also had an Indigenous population and was peopled by convicts as well as other European migrants and missionaries. As a consequence of this increase in European population, the Indigenous Melanesian or Kanak population became more and more suppressed and acculturated. Free settlers were encouraged to migrate, and approximately 60,000 indentured labourers from the Pacific islands, Vietnam, Java, Indonesia and Japan were imported to work in mines, agriculture, fishing and domestic service between 1864 and 1939 (Shineberg & Foster 2017). It is of note here that New Caledonia has twenty-five percent of the world's nickel reserves (Pitoiset 2016). A nickel boom in the 1960s and 1970s attracted additional migrants from France and the French Pacific territories to the islands (Aldrich & Connell 1992: 139) in a deliberate program by the French state to outnumber New Caledonia's Indigenous people (Fisher 2013: 57).

The 1980s were marked by the rise of the Kanak independence movement in response to that French program, and by a strong resistance to independence among the non-Indigenous population ('Spotlight on Overseas France' 2011). In 1988, tensions and violent unrest on the island of Ouvea resulted in the negotiation of the Matignon Peace Accord, which gave New Caledonians a ten-year transition to vote on the future of the country. However, in 1998 the Matignon Accord was extended into the Nouméa Accord, which stipulated that the referendum on self-determination should be deferred and decided by a three-fifths majority in local Congress between 2014 and 2018, failing which the French State must convene a referendum by the end of 2018. The Nouméa Accord established a Customary Senate in 1999 whose role is purely consultative and yet it must be consulted for projects or propositions related to Kanak identity by the local government and courts (Pitoiset 2014: 60).

Since 2004, New Caledonia has the status of a Pays d'Outre Mer (POM), which means that it has more autonomy to administer its domestic affairs than other French overseas territories (TOMs) and Departments and Regions (DROMs) (Chappell 2012; 'New Caledonia Profile' 2016). The volatile political situation in New Caledonia was highlighted by Chappell (2012) in his analysis of social tensions and political divisions that have led to several government resignations over issues related to local identity. One example was the lack of consensus over which flag—the French Tricolore or the Kanak flag—would best represent New Caledonian identity in the 2011 Pacific Games, an issue that ground government to a halt for several months in that year, and on which there are continuing differences. In the end, the local Congress voted for the flying of both flags until an agreement could be reached on a single flag accepted by all (Fisher 2013: 166). Another example from 2015 concerns differences over the eligibility to vote arising from complex definitions in the Nouméa Accord that restrict the electorates for the local provincial assemblies and the final referendum. The

finalisation of the electoral rolls by a French commission has been a controversial subject, with observers from the United Nations called in to assist. As Nic Maclellan, a journalist and researcher in the Pacific islands puts it, ‘the road to a referendum will not be smooth, and time is short’ (2015).

## Language situation

According to the 2014 census, the population of New Caledonia including the North and South provinces and the Loyalty Islands was 269,000 (Broustet & Rivoilan 2015). The majority of the population lives in the South province with two out of three New Caledonians based in the capital city Nouméa and its suburbs. The census also asked New Caledonians to indicate the community or communities with which they most identified. A breakdown of the population by community in Table 1 reveals a multicultural population with the largest community being Indigenous Melanesians or Kanaks (39.1 percent), followed by Europeans (27.1 percent) and a minority of Polynesians (10.3 percent), Asians (2.7 percent), those who identified with several communities (8 percent), those who identified themselves as ‘Caledonian’ or mixed race (7.4 percent), and those who did not identify with any community in particular (2.5 percent). It can be noted that the census did not ask which language(s) New Caledonians most frequently used to record the rate of bi/multilingualism of the population.

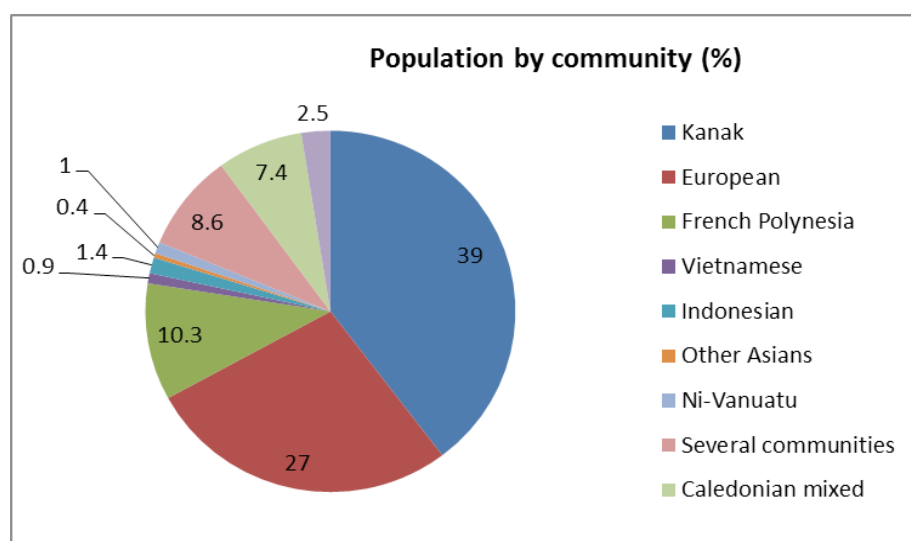


Table 1 Population by community. Source: ‘Structure de la population et évolutions’ (2015).

As New Caledonia is a French POM, the official language is the same as that of metropolitan France: Standard French. French dominates in the administrative, legal and education systems as well as the media. French is also the vehicular language in New Caledonia in its standard and regional varieties called New Caledonian French (NCF) (Roche 2015). New Caledonian French or *français calédonien* (Darot & Pauleau 2010: 286), described by Corne as ‘different from any regional variety spoken in metropolitan France or from any other overseas variety,’ is ‘mutually intelligible with other varieties of French, both metropolitan and overseas’ (Corne 1999: 16). New Caledonian French originates from the *français populaire* spoken by convicts sent out to the island in the nineteenth century and developed *in situ* when it came into contact with local languages. The most salient differences between New Caledonian French

and standard French are of a phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical nature (Darot & Pauleau 2010: 294–297).

From a phonological perspective, New Caledonian French bears similarities to varieties of regional French spoken in North Africa and the south of France, resulting from language contact between French, Melanesian languages and Australian English, as Indigenous populations, Francophones and Anglophones travelled to or worked in those areas (Corne 1999; Darot & Pauleau 2010). The most significant difference between standard French and NCF pronunciation is in the area of nasal vowels, where NCF has lost the opposition between the /ô/ and the /â/ due to contact with Melanesian languages (Tryon 1991: 282–283). Another distinctive feature of New Caledonian French is loan words from local Melanesian and Polynesian languages, which have contributed to the development of its lexicon, particularly in the areas of fauna and flora.

There are 28 Indigenous Melanesian languages, also called Kanak languages (Nocus *et al.* 2013: 85), in new Caledonia, and they are currently spoken along with a handful of Polynesian and Asian languages. As highlighted by Sallabank (2015: 33), the term Kanak is not an Indigenous Melanesian name, but is derived from *kanaka* in Hawaiian which means ‘man’ or human being. Although all New Caledonian Melanesian languages belong to the Southern Oceanic group of the Austronesian languages (Corne 1999: 19), they are not mutually intelligible. This is one reason why French, the language of the colonial master, has evolved into not only the lingua franca, but also the vehicular language across New Caledonia. Indigenous Melanesian languages are mostly used in informal situations, such as the home domain, and with members of the same community or tribe, and have a lower status than French. The diglossic situation between French and Indigenous languages is further enhanced by a lack of intergenerational transmission of ancestral languages (Roche 2015) and a belief that French is the superior language (Salaün 2007) in a context of education funded and controlled by the French State, where French is the sole language of education and is associated with social mobility and academic success (Fillol & Vernaudon, 2004). As the linguist Vernaudon puts it, ‘le message de l’école est pour l’instant assez clair: la langue, la seule langue de la réussite, c’est le français’ (2009: 23).<sup>2</sup> Tayo, also known as *Patois* de Saint-Louis (Siegel *et al.* 2000: 75) is a French-based Creole that emerged in the nineteenth century from the contact between Marist missionaries and local Melanesian tribes. This vernacular, mainly spoken in the village of Saint-Louis, is unknown to many non-Kanak New Caledonians (Corne 1999: 26). The relationship between Tayo and French is also one of diglossia, in that Tayo has a lower status than French. English, another pluricentric language, is also present in the New Caledonian linguistic landscape. However, it is very much a foreign language since it has been taught, only relatively recently, as the first foreign language in schools and is not used by most New Caledonians in everyday life. A deliberate education policy introducing English at primary and secondary school in an effort to enable closer associations with the region is leading to changes in the multilingual landscape of New Caledonia.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The present study was carried out in December 2015. It was stage two of a wider research project that investigates patterns of language use and attitudes in multilingual and

2 ‘The message from school is quite clear: the language, the only language, associated with success is French.’

multicultural New Caledonia on the eve of the independence referendum vote, which may take place in 2018. While stage one of the research focused on urban Nouméa (Bissoonauth 2015), stage two of the research emphasised language practices and social perceptions of linguistic spaces and ancestral cultures by New Caledonians from rural areas.

The methodology used was a multi-response structured questionnaire complemented by a face-to-face interview carried out in the field. In the follow-up interview, participants were asked to expand on their language use and language choices in a variety of social contexts, their perceptions and attitudes towards multilingual spaces in New Caledonia, with particular reference to the Tjibaou Cultural Centre (CCT), where the Agence de développement de la culture kanak (ADCK, Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture) is based. The same questionnaire and semi-structured interview from stage one of the research, consisting of ten and five questions respectively, were used so that we could compare urban and rural areas. In the second phase of the investigation, however, there were some limitations that impacted on the scope of the study, as explained below.

The present sample consists of 28 participants (14 male and 14 female), six of whom were from the two tribes that were visited as described in the next section. The remaining twenty-two had been invited to participate in the study by the cultural liaison facilitators because of their diversity and were from various parts of New Caledonia. Eleven participants were born outside Nouméa (Saint-Louis, Mont Dore, Conception and Northern provinces), ten were from French Polynesia (Wallis and Futuna, and Tahiti) and one was from La Réunion, and all were living outside Nouméa. Twelve respondents (5 male and 7 female) from the sample participated in the interviews that followed the completion of the questionnaire, thus allowing qualitative data to be compared with quantitative data.

### LIMITATIONS OF PRESENT RESEARCH

As the study dealt with the New Caledonians living in rural areas, a customary path had to be followed in order to meet Indigenous communities living in tribes in these areas. Indeed, before visiting a tribe, the chief had to be contacted by the Customary Senator of the region under whose jurisdiction these tribes fall. The senator had to contact the chief in person and arrange for a convenient day and time to visit the tribe. The cultural liaison facilitator, a member of the Kanak community, would then accompany the researcher on the visit, as the protocol required.

We followed the same procedure for data collection with each participant to ensure that bias was kept to a minimum. On arrival to the tribe, there would be a customary welcome ceremony during which gifts would be exchanged and the cultural liaison facilitator would be the first to speak and to introduce the visitor/researcher. It was only then that the visitors could introduce themselves, explain the aims of the research and ask the chief's permission to conduct the investigation in their community. Because of time constraints during this second stage of the research we only visited two tribes. The first tribe was located at Boulouparis (some 70 kilometres north of Nouméa) and the second at Yaté (approximately 50 kilometres east of Nouméa). This is why the number of participants from the tribes is small in the present sample (6 participants).

It should be noted that both chiefs participated in the survey and it was through the interviews with them as cultural leaders that it became apparent how languages participate in this complex customary system. In the interview on language use and language choice with the tribe chief at Boulouparis, who used to be the former president of the Customary

Senate, he was quick to point out that before the French language was imposed by colonial rule, bi- or multilingual elders would participate in and negotiate the customary path when making contact with another tribe. Nowadays these exchanges are carried out in French, which is obviously more efficient in many ways, but it erases the complexities and nuances of the customary system and does little to sustain the use and understanding of different ancestral languages and traditions.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative analysis of the data was carried out by calculating the frequency and percentage in each response category for every response. Answers to most questions were pre-coded and a statistical analysis allowed a rapid production of figures and cross-tabulations which illustrate the language trends of the sample. The qualitative analysis was carried out by transcribing verbatim individual responses to questions 1 and 2 in the questionnaire. The interview questions allowed participants to expand on their responses related to their language practices and perceptions of multilingual spaces with a focus on the Tjibaou Cultural Centre involved in the preservation of Melanesian oral languages and cultures. An analysis of twelve transcriptions using a thematic approach allowed topics to be identified (Guest *et al.* 2012: 10–11). Language(s) most frequently used on a daily basis in four social contexts (home, work, friends, strangers) and social perceptions of multilingualism were identified as topics, allowing qualitative data to be compared with quantitative data from the questionnaire in order to gain a better understanding of factors influencing language practices and attitudes towards sustainability of ancestral cultures among the participants. Data analysis was carried out for the whole sample as the aim of this study was to show general trends rather than individual variations.

The results are for the whole sample, unless stated otherwise. The percentages do not always add up to a hundred since the questionnaire was a multi-response one, whereby participants could indicate several languages used in a variety of contexts.

## LANGUAGE USE ON A DAILY BASIS

In the present sample of 28 New Caledonians, fifty percent of the participants claimed to be residing in a rural area outside Nouméa. It should be noted that most jobs and schools are situated in the capital, so many New Caledonians reside in Nouméa and its surroundings for professional and educational reasons. The ethnolinguistic profile of the sample can be said to cover a number of ethnolinguistic backgrounds, since 10 percent claimed to be of European descent, 45 percent of Melanesian ancestry and 37 percent of mainly Polynesian and Asian migrant descent.

Question seven of the questionnaire asked participants which language(s) they used in the following contexts: at home, at work, with friends and with strangers. As can be noted from Table 2 below, French is the language most commonly used in all four social contexts (88 percent on average) followed by ‘other’ ancestral languages originating from Polynesia and Asia (11 percent), then Kanak languages (9 percent). Tayo (7 percent) was mostly used in the home context and not at work. English, on the other hand, was used especially by those who worked in IT and in the tourism industry in Nouméa city centre (25 percent). In the interviews, the majority of participants (90 percent) said they had learnt English in school as a foreign language.

2015 sample (N=28: 14 Male & 14 Female)	Home (%)	Work (%)	Friends (%)	Strangers (%)	Average (%)
English	7	25	17	37	22
French	82	93	89	86	88
Kanak	18	4	11	4	9
Tayo	11	0	4	4	4
Other (Wallisian, Futunian, Tongan, Bislamar, Réunionnais Creole, Spanish)	25	4	4	11	11

**Table 2** Language(s) most frequently used on a daily basis (%) in 2015 sample.

A comparison with results from the first stage of the study in urban areas (Table 3) shows that, as expected, French is the language most commonly used at work and with strangers. The slight difference with English in the home context is due to the fact that one female participant, who is a teacher, said in the interview that both her spouse and herself, whose first language is French, prefer speaking English with their young child to get him accustomed to the language. The change in learning and using English between the two samples is quite an impressive development in a very short time, and results from a deliberate educational policy to teach English. Not long ago very few New Caledonians studied English at school and this increase in usage points to efforts to better integrate with the English-dominant region. The most striking difference between the two samples is the presence of Tayo, which was absent in the 2013 sample, except for one participant who spoke it when visiting family in Saint-Louis (Bissoonauth 2015: 282). The presence of Tayo in the 2015 sample is explained in the next section.

2013 sample (N=30: 15 Male & 15 Female)	Home (%)	Work (%)	Friends (%)	Strangers (%)	Average (%)
English	0	13	17	37	17
French	80	100	97	100	94
Kanak	43	10	27	7	22
Tayo	0	0	0	0	0
Other	17	7	17	13	14

**Table 3** Language(s) most frequently used on a daily basis (%) in 2013 sample.

### WHO ARE THE TAYO SPEAKERS?

In the sample, eight participants answered that they could understand Tayo, but only three participants responded that they used Tayo at home. All three respondents in the present sample resided in the outskirts of Nouméa in the tribes located at Conception, Saint-Louis and further east from Nouméa in Yaté. The first Tayo speaker was a male senator over 60 years of age, the second a female student under 20 years of age and the third was a female museum community liaison officer in her forties. Although there was no family connection between

them, they all were from the main Tayo-speaking areas in New Caledonia (Saint-Louis and Conception). This may be significant since Saint-Louis, in particular, has been the location of ongoing violence, in the last decade, by young Kanaks against other rival groups of Kanaks, Wallisian families who have settled in the area and French authorities (ABC Radio Australia 2012).

In Question six of the questionnaire participants were asked to rank their language ability according to a scale between 1 and 4 where 1 was weak and 4 very good. Altogether the three Tayo speakers of the sample claimed proficiency in French, English, Tayo and Drehu (a Melanesian language from the Loyalty Islands). It is interesting to note that the older participant, the male senator, only indicated French, Tayo and Drehu, and did not include English in his language repertoire. The two women, on the other hand, who are younger, included English as part of their multilingual skills. These results confirm what other informants said in the interviews about English becoming more prominent in the education system in New Caledonia with it being offered as an option in all secondary schools and increasingly in primary schools.

In the third part of Question six of the questionnaire, participants were invited to rate the importance of the languages they come into contact with on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 was not important to 4 being very important. The male senator who claimed to speak French, Drehu and Tayo, rated French as more important than Tayo, whereas both women rated English, French and Tayo, the non-dominant Creole, as equally important. The trend would seem to indicate a difference in attitudes between generations and genders that merits further investigation.

## VIOLENCE AND THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

An aspect that should not be neglected in the participants' responses is the regular association of violence with the French language. This analogy is unsurprising given the often aggressive nature of colonial rule, the imposition of the French language, and a school environment with its strong emphasis on discipline. One male participant, in response to Question 2 about which public space one should visit to hear Tayo, states very diplomatically: 'il y a aussi on va dire qu'on nous a un peu imposé cette langue française.'<sup>3</sup> He then goes on to talk of his father being hit if he used his Indigenous language at school. Another participant told of schoolgirls' hair being cut off if they did not express themselves in standard French. Confirming Fillol and Vernaudon's (2004) observations, one participant emphasises the obligation of children to speak good French in order to do well at school, a pressure that he believes has become more significant since his own childhood: 'car nous on a vécu dans les langues.'<sup>4</sup>

In her interview, the older Tayo female speaker repeatedly states that, as schoolchildren, they were not allowed to speak Tayo because it deformed French: 'il fallait pas parler le tayò parce que ça déformait le français.' She also expresses great resentment and anger at linguists coming to study the Kanak languages whilst the authorities were actively and violently not allowing their use: 'En même temps qu'on a vu les linguistes qui sont venus nous étudier et d'un autre côté le système nous interdisait de parler nos langues ou nous violenter pour justement ne pas pratiquer notre langue.' This paradox is strangely mirrored in this participant's admission to mainly using French in her everyday life with colleagues, friends, and even

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3 'there is also, let us say that they imposed a little this French language on us'.

4 'because we were immersed in indigenous languages'.

her children. She claims to use Tayo when she does not want others to understand: 'Quand on parle la langue le tayo c'est pour ne pas être compris par les autres.' In her case, Tayo has become a type of secret language that is forged through cultural bonds. French, it seems, holds value in terms of linguistic identity, but is separate from cultural identity.

Emmanuel Tjibaou, the director of the Cultural Centre Tjibaou (CCT) and the Agence de développement de la culture kanak (ADCK), and son of the independence leader, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, participated in the survey and agreed to be interviewed as the director of CCT-ADCK about the centre's activities and role in preserving New Caledonia's oral languages and cultural heritage. Emmanuel Tjibaou defines himself as an ethnolinguist and a cultural activist. He leads the CCT-ADCK's Research and Heritage Department and maintains that the relationship to French in New Caledonia has changed. The younger population is used to speaking French ('les gens ont l'habitude de s'exprimer en français et c'est plus la même chose que nos parents ou nos grands-parents, ils avaient du mal') and for them it is no longer a question of domination, of violence, and of power relations, as it would have been in the recent past. French is the lingua franca and is readily accepted as such: 'on passe par le français et c'est communément admis que c'est le français c'est la langue qui nous permet de se comprendre entre nous.' This generational difference is reflected in the differing responses from young adults, parents and grandparents in the interviews for this project. Emmanuel Tjibaou emphasizes the significance of multilingual cultures and sustaining their usage in New Caledonia by showing respect when addressing others in their language ('c'est une question d'installer une familiarité, moins de distance avec les individus le fait de, d'être étranger et de parler la langue c'est du respect vis-à-vis de la personne qui s'exprime en langue'), the efforts made to not impose one's own language on others ('je fais des efforts pour éviter d'imposer mon ... ma langue aux autres'), but above all the importance of a choice of languages ('Voilà, l'important c'est le choix').

#### HOW DOES THE CENTRE CULTUREL TJIBAOU CONTRIBUTE TO MAINTAINING TRADITIONAL LANGUAGES AND CULTURES?

The CCT was inaugurated in May 1998, the day before the signing of the Nouméa Accord, and is named after independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, who was assassinated in 1989 by one of his supporters after he signed the precursor to the Nouméa Accord, the Matignon-Oudinot Accords. As noted above, the CCT houses the ADCK, whose breathtaking design was conceived by Italian architect Renzo Piano, assisted by the ethnologist, Alban Bensa, a specialist in Kanak culture. Its structure is based on the villages in which the Kanak tribes live: a series of huts that distinguish the different functions and hierarchies of the tribes and a central alley along which the huts are dispersed. Jean-Marie Tjibaou had originally asked the French government to build a cultural centre in Nouméa in June 1988. The centre's official primary purpose, as expressed in its mission statement, was to 'promote the Kanak archaeological and linguistic heritage' (Tjibaou Cultural Centre and ADCK N.d.). Interestingly, it was the first of Mitterand's *grands projets* to be invested in or built outside France. Thus the political meets or appropriates the cultural in an attempt to bridge the gap between the aspirations of the French government and the desire by activists to achieve a new and independent state of Kanaky (Message 2006: 155), particularly following the troubles of the 1980s. The CCT was transferred to the local New Caledonian government in 2012, as part of scheduled handovers of various responsibilities under the Nouméa Accord.

The CCT-ADCK plays an interesting role with regard to the various languages spoken in New Caledonia. Other institutions, such as the Académie des Langues Kanak (ALK, Academy of Kanak Languages), the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, French National Research Centre) and the Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, are also working to preserve local Kanak languages and cultures as intended in the Nouméa Accord, but in this article our focus is on the CCT-ADCK because of the symbolic importance of its location. The CCT-ADCK's Research and Heritage Department is engaged in collecting the oral traditions of the different tribes in New Caledonia (ADCK N.d.) for digital presentation and display in the Centre's multimedia library. As Emmanuel Tjibaou states in his interview, this heritage project is collecting knowledge in the form of local and everyday know-how, and as a result it takes place in the language of the specific tribe for each oral tradition. The project does not aim to take knowledge away from the tribe or to steal it, but rather to ensure its transmission to the next generations. Linguists are involved at every stage of this project as the ancestral language plays a key part in understanding a particular tribe's heritage. Interestingly and perhaps paradoxically, although the Research and Heritage Department's working languages are French and all the Kanak languages, the languages that the CCT uses to present its exhibitions—French, English and Japanese—are not the same, thereby demonstrating that there is a gap between those who visit the Cultural Centre and those for whom it was initially intended. The choice of French, English and Japanese at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre reflects the three highest numbers of visitors by nationality and language to the centre, as shown in the 'Tourisme bilan 2014' section of the *Institut de la statistique et des études économiques Nouvelle-Calédonie* (L'année finit mieux qu'elle n'avait commencé' 2014).

The CCT-ADCK therefore collects, documents and provides digital access to the various traditional languages and cultures of New Caledonia. But to what extent will this public space be able to sustain the linguistic heterogeneity that characterises the make-up of Kanak societies and cultures? The responses to the interviews conducted for this project indicate differing understandings of the CCT for different generations. The older participants are generally appreciative in their understanding of the Centre and its aims. One interviewee comments: 'Le centre c'est la vitrine du peuple kanak.'<sup>5</sup> Another participant describes it as a place that preserves and shares knowledge: 'un lieu qui sert à conserver et à partager les savoirs.' Another interviewee is learning Xaracúu at the CCT and talks about the opportunity to have a structure that favours safeguarding not only languages, but their practice, on cultural and artistic levels: 'la chance d'avoir cette structure qui favorise la sauvegarde de la langue et pas que la langue, c'est encore la pratique, mais aussi au niveau culturel, artistique.' In the interviews the younger generation has much less to say about the CCT; they talk about it in terms of visits and concert-going but do not make reference to its value in sharing and preserving oral traditions and Kanak cultures. This difference in perspective may well reflect a decrease in the usage of their own languages on the part of younger people; that attitude was also perceptible in our interviews.

Different visitor responses from local and global points of views serve to highlight the paradoxes represented within the Centre itself. The global cannot be separated from the local here, nor the colonised from the coloniser, nor the troubled past from a future that will inevitably involve change. The Centre attracts visitors from all over the world because of its spectacular architecture and location; it also attracts more Kanak visitors than would have been possible in the 1980s. As pointed out by Emmanuel Kasarhérou, former cultural director

5 'The Centre is a window onto the Kanak people.'

of the CCT and now head curator at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, which displays Indigenous art and culture from all over the world:

*In New Caledonia many people think that a museum must keep the past but should not exhibit it. Another explanation of our difficulties in attracting Kanak visitors is their fear of entering a place where artefacts of the past are displayed. They feel as if they were entering a cemetery where devils live. The matter however must not be forced, attitudes will change gradually. The only thing to do is to explain why it is important for the future of our cultures to have a museum. We must explain why museums did not exist in the past and why they are important nowadays. (Message 2006: 151)*

When Kylie Message published her book about new museums in 2006, the mission statement of the CCT read as follows: 'The CCT may be seen to provide an official site for testing and holding dialogue and debate over what kinds of images and ideas may be appropriate signifiers of a renewed cultural identity for New Caledonians as the country continues to negotiate its future direction' (Message 2006: 150). The CCT-ADCK's website no longer contains such an explicit aim but there is no doubt that this cultural institution continues to play an important role by being forward looking about preserving and developing Kanak cultural traditions, and in negotiating new forms of cultural identity for a multiethnic and multilingual 'state.'

As the 2018 referendum approaches, many changes, both symbolic and concrete, have taken place in New Caledonia and France. Education in the local languages was one of the main demands of the independence movement in the 1980s, but it was only in 2006 that the first school curricula adapted to New Caledonia were introduced that included Kanak languages. This situation was despite the fact that the 1998 Nouméa Accord provided for Kanak languages, along with French, to be the languages of teaching and culture. Also, in 2006, the Maison de la Nouvelle Calédonie (N.d.), which was created in 1998 following the Matignon Peace Accord with the two-pronged aim of promoting New Caledonia to the French and offering help to Kanaks living in France, moved to a more prominent position and a bigger space in Paris. An important exhibition, 'Kanak: L'art est une parole' (Kanak: Art is a Word), curated by Emmanuel Kasarhérou and Roger Boulay, opened at the Quai Branly Museum in October 2013, before moving to the CCT in March 2014. Kanak languages could be heard throughout this exhibition. The exhibition's opening in Paris with customary representatives from many tribes participating spontaneously in the opening events and Kasarhérou giving the opening speech in his ancestral language of Ajië was made even more poignant by the fact that the site of the museum had been used for several colonial exhibitions, including the exhibition of 1931, when Kanak people had been displayed as exhibits from the colonies (Mwà Vée 2014).

## Conclusion

The present study represents stage two of a wider investigation on how New Caledonians are sustaining their languages and cultures as the country transitions towards an independence referendum expected to be held by the end of 2018. This study focussed on the following three areas: language practices, perceptions and attitudes towards ancestral languages and cultures, and challenges to their preservation in multilingual spaces such as the Centre Culturel Tjibaou. Results show a difference between the language practices of older and younger generations of New Caledonians of Melanesian descent. French is well-established and perceived as the lingua franca by all. And yet English is becoming more used and valued than ancestral Melanesian languages by the younger generations who participated in the

study because it is associated with international mobility and access to the English-speaking Pacific. Language perceptions and attitudes revealed that traditional Melanesian and migrant Polynesian and other languages in New Caledonia's ecosystem are identity markers, since they are associated with the ancestral languages and cultures of specific ethno-linguistic groups. The case of French Creole Tayo is an exception as it is considered by the Tayo speakers as a language group and differentiating marker. The interview data on perceptions and attitudes towards the iconic Tjibaou Cultural Centre, which as mentioned previously houses a Research and Heritage Department, revealed a discrepancy between older and younger generations of Melanesians. Whilst the older generations perceive the Centre as a symbolic space for Melanesian traditional art and culture, the younger members of the community view it more as a modern place associated with contemporary music and outdoor performances. The small size of the sample from rural areas in the second stage of the study points to the need for a third stage to be carried out in a synchronic manner in urban Nouméa, the rural north as well as the Loyalty Islands. This synchronic study fieldwork would allow the continuation of the study of language habits of New Caledonians with an emphasis on how local languages and cultures are being maintained with the country's yet to be determined future.

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