

## Language use and language attitudes in New Caledonia with particular reference to French Creole Tayo

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### Abstract

New Caledonia has an unusual language dynamic in comparison to other French overseas territories. In most of these islands, a French Creole is usually the lingua franca and has a lower status than French. In contrast, in New Caledonia the French Creole, called Tayo, is a minority language and comes in contact with French, English and 28 Indigenous languages (also called Kanak languages). The 2014 census population revealed a multi-ethnic and multicultural New-Caledonian population. It did not, however, record the rate of multilingualism in speakers. Results from a recent sociolinguistic study on patterns of language use and language attitudes revealed that French is perceived as the 'cement language' that binds all Neo-Caledonians. English on the other hand, is considered the global language of the Pacific, and as such is more valued than Indigenous and migrant languages by the younger generations. In contrast, Creole Tayo, the only French Creole in the Pacific, acts as an identity marker and 'code' amongst its small group of speakers when they do not want 'outsiders' to know what they were saying.

**Keywords:** New Caledonia, French, English, Kanak languages, Tayo, language attitudes

### Introduction

New Caledonia was established as a penal colony in 1853. Other French settlements in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, where a Creole language has also developed, were established as plantation colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries. In most of these islands, French Creole is the lingua franca but has a lower status than French. In contrast, the New Caledonian French Creole, Tayo, is not the lingua franca. It is mainly spoken in the village of Saint-Louis outside the New Caledonian capital, Noumea. As a minority language, it comes in contact with French, English, Indigenous Melanesian (Kanak) languages and other migrant languages. Tayo is the only French Creole in the Pacific.

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The 2014 census population revealed a multiethnic and multicultural New-Caledonian population. It did not, however, record the rate of multilingualism. In their discussion on language ideologies and policies in multilingual societies where French has an official and dominant status, linguists Lüdi (1992) and Sallabank (2015) suggested a number of directions for future research. These included language attitudes and identity in places where the dominant language is not the first language of the majority of the population, such as New Caledonia. This article emerges from a study that contributes towards addressing this gap by investigating language practices of New Caledonians as well as their attitudes towards various languages present in their environment. The main objectives of the study were:

- i. to investigate daily language use of New Caledonians in a variety of contexts in order to find out to what extent they were multilingual;
- ii. to discover the attitudes and aspirations of New Caledonians towards the three languages in contact: French, English and Kanak/non-Kanak ancestral languages with a special emphasis on Tayo as the only French Creole in the Pacific;
- iii. to find out whether speakers foresee any risk to the status of French in the event of a ‘yes’ vote in the forthcoming independence referendum to be held in November 2018, and to discuss the implications of the referendum for French, Indigenous Kanak languages and English in the future.

As a short analytical piece, the present article focuses on patterns of language use and attitudes of New Caledonians towards the languages present in their environment on the eve of the independence referendum. The first section gives a brief social history of the language situation in New Caledonia with reference to the controversial debate surrounding the origins of Creole Tayo. The second section describes the methodology for data collection and the third analyses the results with an emphasis on national attitudes towards Tayo.

## **Social history and language situation**

### ***Social history***

New Caledonia became a French penal colony in 1853 when Napoleon III wanted to secure France’s presence in the Pacific Ocean where Britain had colonised Australia and New Zealand. New Caledonia already had a Melanesian Indigenous population when it was settled by France and other European migrants and missionaries in the nineteenth century. As the European population increased, Indigenous Kanaks were suppressed. Free settlers were encouraged to migrate, and indentured labourers from the Pacific islands, South-East-Asia and Japan were imported to work in mines, agriculture, fishing and domestic service in New Caledonia between 1864 and 1939 (Shineberg & Foster, 2017).

The 1980s were marked by the rise of the Kanak independence movement as well as 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 Ouvéa 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 Noumea Accord. This Accord stipulated that the referendum on self-determination should be

deferred and decided between 2014 and 2018, failing which the French State must convene a referendum by the end of 2019.

Since 2004, New Caledonia has had 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).

### ***Language situation***

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).

There are 28 Kanak languages (Nocus et al. 2013: 85) and they are currently spoken along with a handful of Polynesian and Asian languages. The Kanak languages belong to the Southern Oceanic Subgroup of the Central-Eastern Oceanic Group within the Austronesian language family and they are mutually unintelligible (Corne, 1999: 19). Kanak languages as well as Creole Tayo are mostly used in informal situations, such as the home domain, with members of the same community or tribe, and have a lower status than French. The relationship between these languages and French is one of diglossia, where French has a higher status.

English is also present in the New Caledonian linguistic landscape. Although an English Pidgin had been present on the island since the nineteenth century (Hollyman, 1976: 43, quoted in Ehrhart, 2012: 88), it is nevertheless not used by most New Caledonians in everyday life. Deliberate education policy introducing English at primary and secondary school, in an effort to enable closer associations with the Pacific region, is leading to changes in the New Caledonian multilingual landscape.

According to the 2014 census, the population of New Caledonia including the North and South provinces on the main island 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 capital Noumea and its suburbs. The census asked New Caledonians to indicate the community with which they most identified. The data revealed a multicultural and multiethnic population with the largest community identifications being Kanak (39.1%), followed by European (27.1%) and a minority of Polynesian (10.3%) and Asian (2.7%). A small minority identified with several communities (8 %) and as 'Caledonian' or mixed race (7.4%). An even smaller percentage (2.5%) did not identify with any community in particular. The census did not ask, however, which language(s) New Caledonians most frequently used to record the rate of bi/multilingualism of the population.

### **Linguistic controversy surrounding the origins of Creole Tayo**

Tayo, also known as Patois de St-Louis, is mainly spoken in the village of Saint-Louis and parts of the Mont-Dore district situated in the greater Noumea region (Siegel et al. 2000). Saint-Louis was established by French Marist missionaries in 1860 as a village for new converts and catechists (Corne, 1999: 19). During the first 20 years of settlement, a French Pidgin developed as the lingua franca from the contact between the missionaries and local Kanak tribes (Siegel et al, 2000: 76). This Pidgin became a Creole language, known as Tayo, and it became the first language of children who were born in Saint-Louis in the 1920s who may or may not also have acquired their parents' first language.

Research on the origins of Tayo in New Caledonia continues to divide linguists into two camps. On the one hand, linguists such as Corne (1999) and Ehrhart (1993, 2012) contend that Tayo was born in the village of Saint Louis through contact between the speakers of various Kanak languages, the French and missionaries. On the other hand, linguists Chaudenson (1994, 2008) and Speedy (2007a, 2007b) have argued that Tayo has its origins in Réunionnais Creole brought by sugar cane workers from Réunion island in the second half of the nineteenth century. The discussion of who is right and who is wrong is outside the scope of this study. In this article, Ehrhart's revised view (2012: 172) that Tayo was born in the Saint-Louis area from language contact between Kanak language speakers, missionaries and French settlers is adopted since it takes into account the range of languages that have influenced the formation of Creole Tayo. The next sections deal with the methodology of data collection in the study.

## **Research methodology and data collection**

The methodology used to collect data on the ground was a structured multi-response questionnaire. The follow-up interview to the questionnaire asked participants to expand on their choices and attitudes to allow qualitative data to be compared with quantitative data.

Data was collected in two stages on two different samples. The first stage, carried out in 2013 in urban Noumea, involved thirty participants (15 male, 15 female). The participants were all volunteers and were contacted through academic and administrative members of staff at the University of New Caledonia, where the author's students go on exchange. Out of the thirty volunteers, twenty-four also participated in the oral interviews.

The second stage of the study took place in 2015 in rural areas. Again, contacts at the University of New Caledonia were used to contact the Customary Senate in Noumea and arrange visits to the rural areas outside of Noumea such as La Conception, Bouloupari and Yaté. Twenty-eight respondents (14 male, 14 female) from rural areas voluntarily participated in the study and twelve of these also took part in interviews.

The next section deals with data analysis and results regarding language use in a variety of contexts on the outskirts of Noumea and surrounding regions, with an emphasis on contemporary views of New Caledonians on their own multilingualism and on attitudes towards Creole Tayo.

## **Data analysis and results**

Data analysis was carried out for the whole sample as the aim of this study was to show general trends rather than individual variations. Percentages did not always add up to one hundred since this was a multi-response questionnaire in which participants could indicate the variety of languages they spoke on a daily basis.

### **Patterns of language use in urban New Caledonia**

In the 2013 urban sample, 73% of the participants were from urban Noumea and 27% from rural areas. Twenty-three percent of the sample identified as students while the remaining three quarters cited employment in education (13%), hospitality and catering (27%), tourism (20%), information technology (IT) (7%), and self-employment (7%). The ethno-linguistic profile can be said to be representative of the multiethnic population, since 37% of the sample claimed European ancestry,

43% had Melanesian ancestry, 7% were of Polynesian descent, 10% were of Asian descent and 3% claimed they ‘did not know’ their ancestry.

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 seen from results in Table 1 below, French is the language most frequently used in all four contexts (94%) followed by Kanak languages (22%) and ‘other’ ancestral languages originating from Polynesia and Asia (14%). English was not used in the home context (0%), but was a language learnt in school by the majority of participants (90%). English was mainly used at work by those participants who work in IT (13%) or with foreign colleagues (17%) and tourists (37%).

**Table I: Language(s) most frequently used on a daily basis (%)**

| <b>2013 Sample<br/>(N=30: 15 Male<br/>&amp; 15 Female)</b>                         | <b>Home<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Work<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Friends<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Strangers<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Average<br/>(%)</b> |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| English  | 0                   | 13                  | 17                     | 37                       | 17                     |
| French   | 80                  | 100                 | 97                     | 100                      | 94                     |
| Kanak  | 43                  | 10                  | 27                     | 7                        | 22                     |
| Other (Futunian,<br>Wallisian, Tahitian,<br>Bislama,<br>Vietnamese,<br>Indonesian) | 17                  | 7                   | 17                     | 13                       | 14                     |

### **Patterns of language use in rural New Caledonia**

The ethnolinguistic profile of the rural 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 descent.

Results (in Table 2 below) also revealed that French was the language most commonly used in all four social contexts (88% on average) followed by ‘other’ ancestral languages originating from Polynesia and Asia (11%), and then Kanak languages (9%). Tayo (7%) was mostly used in the home context and not at work. English, on the other hand, was used by those who worked in IT and in the tourism industry in the Noumea city centre (25%) (as was the case in the first sample). In the interviews, the majority of participants (90%) said they had learnt English in school as a foreign language.

The most striking difference between the urban and rural samples was the presence of Creole Tayo as can be seen in Table 2 below. In the urban sample, there was only one participant who spoke Tayo, and that was when visiting family living in Saint-Louis (Bissoonauth 2015: 282). Low percentages of use of Kanak languages may be due to a language shift towards French, particularly in the home context as was confirmed by some of the participants in the interviews. Further investigation needs to be carried out to find out whether this is a widespread phenomenon across rural areas in New Caledonia.

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

| <b>2015 Sample<br/>(N=28: 14 Male<br/>&amp; 14 Female)</b>                            | <b>Home<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Work<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Friends<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Strangers<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Average (%)</b> |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 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,<br>Futunian, Tongan,<br>Bislama,<br>Réunionnais<br>Creole, Spanish) | 25                  | 4                   | 4                      | 11                       | 11                 |

### **Language attitudes with an emphasis on Creole Tayo**

As the analysis of language attitudes in New Caledonia has been dealt with in greater detail in Bissoonauth (2015) and Bissoonauth (2017), this section will summarise the main results from both samples with a focus on attitudes towards French Creole Tayo.

Results from both samples confirm that French is accepted by the majority of New Caledonians as the dominant language of New Caledonia. French represents a linguistic heritage from a common past which cannot be changed and, most importantly, is the ‘cement’ that holds New Caledonians and non-New Caledonians together regardless of their ethno-linguistic communities. Participants who were born outside New Caledonia and who grew up speaking their first language at home were determined to pass on their ancestral languages to their offspring to keep them alive. English, on the other hand, is increasingly present in the New Caledonian linguistic ecosystem, and is perceived as the dominant global language which needs to be further promoted at all levels of education.

As already mentioned, in the urban sample of 2013, there was only one male speaker of Tayo whose family lived in Saint-Louis. He described Tayo as ‘du mauvais français [...] sur lequel on a rajouté des mots kanak’ (bad French [...] on which Kanak words have been added). In his view, it would be more useful for New Caledonians to speak English in an English-speaking Pacific while keeping the French language for historical reasons.

In the 2015 sample, eight participants said they understood Tayo but only three of them claimed to speak it (one male and two females). All three Tayo speakers lived in Saint-Louis village. The male Tayo speaker was a senator who was over 60 years old. One of the female speakers was a student under 20 years of age and the second one was a museum community liaison officer in her forties.

In the interview question about views on multilingualism, the male senator who spoke French, Drehu (the Kanak language of Lifou Island) and Tayo rated French as more important than Tayo. In contrast, the two female speakers rated English, French and Tayo, as equally important. This contrast may indicate a difference in attitudes between generations and genders that merits further investigation.

In interview, the older Tayo female speaker stated that when she was in school she was not permitted to speak Tayo because it ‘deformed’ French. Another participant, who understood Tayo, stated that his father was hit if he used his Indigenous language at school. Another told of schoolgirls’ hair being cut off if they did not express themselves in standard French. Confirming Fillol and Vernaudeau’s (2004) observations, another participant emphasised that children were obliged to speak ‘good’ French in order to do well at school.

Although these few responses cannot be considered representative of the entire community of Tayo speakers, they do nevertheless reveal New Caledonian society as a diglossic society where negative attitudes towards non-dominant vernaculars such as Tayo continue to prevail, especially when these are used alongside their genetic parent language perceived as prestigious with a higher social status.

These findings on Tayo corroborate results by Ehrhart (1993: 24) and Siegel et al. (2000: 76) that increased education and social mobility may be responsible for the decline of Tayo in the younger generations of New Caledonians. Ehrhart in her fieldwork on Tayo in the 1990s found that the language was most fluently spoken by elders and by young children of the village who had been raised by grandparents who had had the least contact with French in their schooling (Ehrhart, 1993: 33).

## Conclusion

This article focussed on patterns of language use and language attitudes of New Caledonians with an emphasis on French Creole, Tayo. Results show that French is well-established as a vehicular language in a variety of contexts by the majority of participants in the study. English is mostly learnt in school as a foreign language and is increasingly present in the education system as well as the labour market (in IT and tourism). Fewer people spoke Kanak languages in rural settings than in urban settings. This phenomenon requires further investigation to find out whether this is a localised or general trend across New Caledonia. In addition, Tayo, the French Creole, which was virtually absent in the urban sample, was present in the rural sample.

Language attitudes revealed a diglossic relationship between French and English on the one hand and Indigenous ancestral languages on the other. French is the vehicular language associated with social mobility and academic success. English on the other hand, is more valued than ancestral languages because it is associated with international mobility and access to the English-speaking Pacific. Nevertheless, ancestral languages were considered identity markers for the participants since they were associated with ancestral cultures of specific ethno-linguistic groups.

The case of French Creole Tayo was an exception resulting from the paradoxical attitudes held by Tayo speakers themselves. Tayo is considered ‘bad French’ both by non-Tayo as well as Tayo speakers. However, Tayo was also used as a kind of code to exclude outsiders from ‘insider’ conversations. Whether Tayo speakers will maintain their ‘linguistic bubble’, keeping it separate from their Kanak identity, is difficult to predict as the country transitions towards the independence referendum planned for November 2018.

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