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► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Leblic. Chapter 10. What future for Kanak Languages? Size and geographic distribution. Matthias Kowatch; Simon Batterbury. Geography of New Caledonia-Kanaky Environments, Politics and Cultures, Springer Nature, pp.163 - 174, 2024, 978-3-031-49140-5. <10.1007/978-3-031-49140-5\_13>. <halshs-03776292>

**HAL Id: halshs-03776292**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03776292v1>**

Submitted on 9 Oct 2024

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# What Future for Kanak Languages? Size and Geographic Distribution

# 13

Isabelle Leblic

## Abstract

New Caledonia has 28 Kanak languages in addition to the languages brought by colonial immigration. There is remarkable linguistic diversity, and the recognition of Kanak languages has always been central to independence claims. Since the mid-2000s, about ten of them have been taught from primary school to university (about ten of them are taught as options in primary schools and only four in universities), and it is important to ask what future Kanak languages have among today's younger generations. The heavy impact of the colonial system, and the Nouméa Accord of 1998, means questions of language are still relevant today. Kanak languages and cultures are at the centre of the decolonisation process.

## Keywords

Kanak languages · Linguistic diversity · Geographic spread · Decolonisation · Teaching

## 13.1 Introduction

80.3% of Kanak people aged 14 and older indicate that they fluently speak one or several Kanak languages, 12.6% that they do not speak but understand at least one language, and 7.1% that they neither speak nor understand a Kanak language. (Rivoilan 2020, p. 5)

After nearly 170 years of colonisation and domination of Kanak languages, they still exist. What are the reasons for this? And how will they continue to find their place in Kanaky-New Caledonia of tomorrow? This overview of Kanak languages should allow us to answer these questions.

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## 13.2 Recognition of Kanak Languages and Pro-independence Demands

The above excerpt from the first available analysis of the latest general population census, in 2019, shows that Kanak languages are still very much alive (92.9% of all Kanak people over the age of 14 have knowledge of at least one language), even though these claims are purely declarative. This shows that Kanak people wish to keep their languages alive and consider them a very strong symbol of their identity, especially as the political debates over self-determination continue. There are indications that the vernacular languages on the whole are vibrant, with 28 languages spoken by over 75,000 people, out of a total of 271,407 inhabitants (2019 Census). In fact, Kanak languages have always been at the heart of pro-independence activism, notably during the last quarter of the twentieth century, and more particularly in the 1980s, during the revolutionary period known as the “*Événements*” [Events]—which began with the boycott of local elections and the Lemoine status on 18 November 1984. Notably, this led to the boycott of so-called colonial schools and a movement in favor of Local Kanak Schools (EPK, *Écoles Populaires Kanak*) between February 1985 and 1988, the first real attempt to provide instruction in Kanak languages.

No language policy favourable to the Kanak was developed before the colonial order was challenged in modern times. (Rivierre 1985, p. 1691)

If we take up in a few lines the colonial history in connection with Kanak languages, the prohibition of their use at school goes back to the decree of Governor Guillain in 1853. This prefigured “the constant attitude of the authorities: the refusal to grant rights to local languages, their banishment from teaching and public life” (Rivierre 1985, p. 1693). As a result, as early as 1921, a decree forbade all use of indigenous languages, even in school playgrounds. According to Rivierre (1985), these repeated bans (the last one in 1923) had little real effect on the daily life of Kanak

people, who nevertheless continued to speak their languages and pass them on to their children. If Kanak children have had access to the French language, it was for a long time only through missionary action, Catholic or Protestant, and this, only after the first world war (more than 70 years after colonisation).

In this context the use of vernacular languages as the first language of instruction for young children was one of the Kanak demands within the pro-independence movement FI (*Front indépendantiste*) and then by FLNKS (*Front de libération nationale kanak socialiste*) to obtain recognition of their cultural legitimacy and their right to independence. Experiments in Local Kanak Schools (EPK) beginning in February 1985 made use of the vernacular languages for teaching the “traditional” and “school” knowledge that all Kanak children should know (see Chap. 14 by Wadrawane in this book). In contrast to so-called “colonial school,” the children learned through participation rather than observation. Nevertheless, Nechero et al. (2015, p. 82) note: “The movement quickly started losing steam: out of the 40 EPK that were set up after school started in 1985, only nine were left 3 years later, following the signing of the Matignon-Oudinot Accords. Only two schools remained in the 1990s.”

This demand for local language instruction nonetheless served to ensure that Kanak languages and cultures were factored into the political agreements that followed (the Matignon-Oudinot Accords in 1988, and then the Nouméa Accord in 1998) and established their importance in the school curricula in New Caledonia (Salaün 2017). We will return to this issue after presenting the Kanak languages.

### 13.3 Linguistic Diversity and a Remarkable Geographic Spread

The numbers of languages spoken in New Caledonia over time are difficult to quantify. According to Moyses-Faurie et al. (2012, p. 119; see also Baudchon 1997), there are currently upward of 30. In addition to the Kanak languages, there are those of people who migrated as part of colonization or settlement (Wallisian, Futunian, Tahitian, Indonesian, Javanese, Vietnamese...). There is also Tayo, a Creole language spoken in the region of La Conception Saint-Louis, in Greater Nouméa (including the municipalities of Nouméa, Mont-Dore, Dumbéa, and Païta), developed by Kanak populations from various regions attending the Marist Roman Catholic mission station, mostly from the main island Grande Terre. French became the only official language upon colonisation, but the diversity of Kanak languages has endured. These languages are as much a marker of Kanak identity,

reaffirmed to a greater or lesser extent depending on the period in colonial history, as they are a means of communication (see also Vernaudon 2013). Across the New Caledonian archipelago, which includes the main inhabited islands of Grande Terre (450 km long and 50–70 km wide), the Loyalty Islands (Lifou, Maré, Ouvéa and Tiga), the Bélep Islands, Isle of Pines and Ouen Island, about 30 languages were noted at the beginning of colonisation (Leenhardt 1946a, p. XIV).<sup>1</sup> According to Ihage (2014), there are currently 40 languages and dialects spoken in New Caledonia. Among them, 28 languages are divided into three main groups. Twenty-four languages on Grande Terre and four in the Loyalty Islands thus still exist after more than a century and a half of French presence (see also Rivierre 2003). The number of speakers remains high: 75,853 speakers in 2019<sup>2</sup> as compared to 70,428 in 2009, with between 36,309 and 40,115 speakers, respectively, within their own linguistic area, that is, nearly half (47.87%) or three fifths (56.96%). Therefore, the proportion of speakers outside the linguistic area of the languages has increased (see Tables 13.5 and 13.6 and Fig. 13.1).

According to Rivierre (1985, p. 1689), “there are no natural borders between languages and the linguistic communities are closely linked through matrimonial and political alliances. Their social and geographic proximity maintains multilingualism which is more or less pronounced depending on the region.” Rivierre (2003, p. 347) specifies: “This linguistic fragmentation can be explained both by the fact that settlement took place over 3000 years ago, and by the structure of traditional Kanak society, broken down into multiple ‘chiefdoms’ and political configurations striving to be distinct.”

Rivierre (2003) establishes a finely grained geographic distribution of the Grande Terre Kanak languages. This served to inform our ISEE map of Kanak languages based on the 2014 general population census data (see Fig. 13.1), the details of which are provided in Table 13.1.

Of remarkable diversity and complexity as compared to other Oceanic languages, these 28 Kanak languages belong to the Austronesian language family (Oceanian subgroup of the eastern Malayo-Polynesian branch). They have grammars

<sup>1</sup>Based on inquiries carried out before the 1930s, Leenhardt (1946b, p. X-XIV) listed 36 languages, although he notes that forty languages or dialects are currently spoken in the New Caledonian archipelago by 29,000 indigenous people. Four have been set by translating the bible (De’u on Lifou 1890, Iai on Ouvéa 1901, Nengone on Mare, 103, Ajié on Houaïlou [...] 1923 [...] 1939). I have respected the author’s spelling.

<sup>2</sup>For 2019, a number of people who declared speaking a language did not say which one; thus, in Table 13.6 below, there are only 66,122 speakers, of which 36,309 are located in their own linguistic area and 29,813 outside.



**Fig. 13.1** Distribution of the Kanak languages by customary area, municipality and number of speakers. (Based on the ISEE 2014 Census “Les langues kanak,” completed by Leblic based on data on the geographical distribution of languages established by Rivierre 2003)

that are almost as differentiated as their phonological systems.

All [Kanak languages] belong to the “New Caledonia and Loyalty Islands” sub-group, directly stemming from distant Proto-Oceanic, with the exception of Fagaueva which belongs to the “Nuclear Polynesian” sub-group, a language which was introduced to Ouvéa a few centuries ago following east-west Polynesian migrations from various islands, most probably Wallis, Samoa, Futuna, and Tonga according to oral traditions and the comparative study of the Polynesian languages. (Moysse-Faurie et al. 2012, pl. 26, 120)

Generally speaking, Kanak people were multilingual. Many of them could understand their close neighbours’ languages, and alliances beyond their linguistic area made it easier for the children of mixed parentage to speak the languages of both parents and even those of the grandparents if different. Today, the situation is no longer so clear-cut, French having become for many the priority language of communication. The data available from the New Caledonian census nonetheless attest the ongoing importance of local languages.

### 13.4 Comparative Analysis of Data Contained in the General Population Census (from 1996 to 2019)

The 1996 general population census totalled 86,788 Kanak people (44.1%) and 67,151 Europeans (34.1%), out of a total population of 196,836. According to this census, New Caledonia had a total of 53,566 speakers of vernacular languages, with slightly more women than men and roughly half belonging to the 15–34 age group. The languages with the highest number of speakers were Drehu (a Lifou language) with 11,338 speakers, Nengone (a Maré language) with 6,377 speakers and Paicî (a central Grande Terre language) with 5,498 speakers.

The data in Table 13.2 show constant growth in the number of speakers, probably proportionate to demographic growth,<sup>3</sup> but with two significant increases, 14.5% between 1996 and 2004 then 10.9% between 2014 and 2019. These

<sup>3</sup>Unfortunately, I do not have information on speaker population changes by age group.

**Table 13.1** Geographic language distribution (see Rivierre 2003)

Areas <sup>a</sup>	Languages	Geographic distribution
Hoot ma Waap	Nyelâyü	Balade, Arama, Bélep Islands (dialect)
	Nixumwak	Koumac
	Nêlêmwa	Poum
	Caac	Pouébo
	Yuanga	Gome, Bondé, Paimboas
	Jawe	East coast: region between Colnett and Tchambouene; inland: Ouayagette, Pangou
	Nemi	Variant in the Ouaième valley and the upper Hienghène valley
	Fwâi	Hienghène
	Pijé	Tiendanite and Tipindjé valley
	Pwaamei	Témala
	Pwapwâ	Boyen
Paici-Camuki	Voh-Koné: Bwato, Haeke, Haveke, Hmwaveke, Hmwaeke, Vamale (Waamwang) dialects	Voh-Koné region Vamale, a variant of Hmwaveke, is spoken in Téganpaik and Tiouandé, on the East coast dialects
	Paicî	Ponérihou, Poindimié, villages in the Koné region
Ajie-Aro	Cèmuhi	Touho, Tyé and on the West coast a high proportion of Netchaot village
	Ajië	Houilou region, Poya, Bourail
Xaracuu	Arhâ	Poya region
	Arhö	Poya region
	‘Ôrôê	Bourail region
	Neku (Sîshëë)	Bourail region
	Xârâcùù	Nakéty, Canala, Thio
	Tîrî	La Foa region
Djubea-Kapone	Xârâgurè	Thio, Borendi
	Drubéa	Ounia, Paita
	Numèè	Goro, Touaourou, Ouen Island (dialect)
Nengone	Kwényii	Isle of Pines
	Nengone	Maré
Drehu	Drehu	Lifou
Iaai	Iaai	Central region of Ouvéa
	Fagauvea	North and south of Ouvéa

<sup>a</sup>in the official spelling of New Caledonia)

languages continue to be spoken, with variations depending on the language and the year.

Today, according to the 2019 census, the number of speakers varies from a few (ten for Sîchëë (Sishë), a language spoken in the centre of Grande Terre) to several thousand (Drehu with 15,875 speakers is still the most widely spoken Kanak language).

Now that a large number of Kanak people live in Greater Nouméa (see Chap. 11 by Pantz in this book), approximately

one out of three speakers (1996–2009) to approximately two out of five (2014–2019) live in the capital or its suburbs, outside their original linguistic area (see Table 13.3). Indeed, Greater Nouméa is where most jobs are found. Regular trips back to the community for school vacations have prevented language loss in favour of French among children. Some Kanak children don’t speak their languages properly, but I have the impression that once they are adults their mastery is sufficient to ensure the future of these vernacular languages. And the fact that for the past 20 years, many Kanak languages have been introduced in school teaching in Greater Nouméa, although for a very few hours (wholesale 1/2 hour per week), means that many children could be introduced to Kanak languages and culture. Is this enough to make them fluent in the mother tongues? Nothing is less certain.

Jacqueline de la Fontinelle (2014, p. 8) notes: “The disinterest of a generation signals the disappearance of a language. Can the disappearance announced for the Sishë language be further postponed?”

This is indeed a question that arises regularly with announcements about the extinction of Kanak languages, but the evidence suggests that it is premature. I have witnessed this on the Isle of Pines and around Goro upon returning 20 years after my first fieldwork, and also in Ponérihouen. It is true, however, that some languages are officially endangered (see the documentation of endangered languages at [www.sorosoro.org](http://www.sorosoro.org)).

Some 84.6% of Kanak between the ages of 14 and 29 declared, in the 1996 Census, continuing to speak a vernacular language, as compared to 94.9% for those over the age of 30. Certainly, in community areas—there are 341 Kanak communities where 28.7% of the population resides—the language spoken daily at home is usually the vernacular language of the region, even if one of the parents if one comes from a different linguistic area. Even though French is used at school, children nonetheless continue to speak their language outside school. Similarly, in daily life, as I observed in Ponérihouen, Kanak people mainly speak to each other in their local tongue. It is only on occasions bringing together people from different linguistic areas that French is used as a lingua franca.

There were 18,528 Kanak language speakers in 2019 in Nouméa, rising to 33,505 if one takes into account the metropolitan area of (Greater Nouméa). This equates to 44.2% of all the territory’s speakers declared in the 2019 general population census. By comparison, back in 2009, Greater Nouméa was already home to 90% of Kanak language speakers living outside their linguistic area. The Loyalty Islands languages (Drehu, Nengone, Iaai, and Fagauvea by number of speakers) are a majority with 12,432 speakers in Greater Nouméa. The high number of speakers of Kanak languages outside their linguistic area is noteworthy, and in the 2019 Census, they still amounted

**Table 13.2** Changes in the number of speakers aged 14 and older per vernacular language

		1996	2004	2009	2014	2019
	Number of speakers per language spoken <sup>a</sup>					
Extreme Northern group	Caac	800	1,005	1,165	1,072	847
	Nyelâyu	1,522	1,694	1,956	2,005	1,871
	Nêlêmwa-Nixumwak	847	739	1,090	946	798
	Yuanga	1,992	2,124	2,401	2,504	1,975
Northern group	Jawe	729	635	990	892	746
	Nemi	768	911	908	845	825
	Pwapwâ	16	84	39	79	27
	Fwâi	1,131	1,550	1,859	1,690	1,561
	Pwaamei	219	210	292	299	223
	Pijé	161	184	183	160	114
	Voh-Koné dialects	993	980	1,212	1,081	952
Central group	Cèmuhi	2,051	2,139	2,602	2,400	2,234
	Paicî	5,498	6,056	7,252	6,866	6,530
Southern group	Ajië	4,044	5,051	5,358	5,019	4,449
	Arhâ	35	59	166	135	19
	Arhö	62	264	349	291	186
	‘Ôrôê	587	355	490	429	373
	Neku	221	320	125	86	115
	Tîrî	558	481	619	472	393
	Sichëë	4	3	19	20	10
	Xârâcùù	3,784	4,816	5,730	5,287	5,645
	Xârâgurè	566	632	758	751	589
Extreme Southern group	Drubéa	946	1,154	1,211	1,268	1,022
	Extreme Southern dialects	1,814	1,582	2,184	1,943	1,618
	Tayo	609	376	904	1,033	1,052
Loyalty Islands group	Nengone	6377	7,958	8,721	8,940	9,356
	Drehu	11,338	13,249	15,586	15,949	15,875
	Iaai	1,562	2,464	4,181	3,821	3,714
	Faga uvea	1,107	1,614	2,219	2,062	2,066
Total number of distinct speakers		53,566	62,648	65,510	67,589	75,853
Changes in number			9,082	2,862	2,079	8,264
Changes in %			14.50	4.37	3.08	10.89

Source: New Caledonia population census, INSEE-ISEE, data updated on 28 September 2021

<sup>a</sup>A single person may declare speaking one or several languages. Furthermore, some people declared speaking a Kanak language without specifying which one, which is why the total per language does not necessarily correspond to the total number of distinct speakers

to 88.1% in Greater Nouméa. And, as in 2009, speakers of Loyalty Islands languages are more numerous in Greater Nouméa than on their islands of origin: 59.1% for Drehu, 56.2% for Iaai, 55.6% for Fagauvea, and 52.9% for Nengone. But this is not the case for Grande Terre languages.

Analysis of data provided by successive censuses shows that the proportion of 15 years and older peoples who declare speaking or understanding a Kanak language is increasing (Table 13.3). The last census (2019) establishes that 97.7% of Kanak people from the Loyalty Islands (95.5% of men and 95.9% of women) speak or understand a Kanak language. The figures are 76.2% in North Province (76.6% of men and 75.9% of women) and 31.7% in South Province (30.9% of men and 32.6% of women). In total, 92,794 people declare that they speak or understand a

Kanak language, that is, 44% of inhabitants aged 15 and older. The percentage was 38.8% in 2014, 41.3% in 2009 and in 2004, and 37.9% in 1996. Should this revival of vernacular languages of people aged 15 and over be linked to political demands for independence? This is a question that must be asked in light of the recent history of Kanak claims and the results of the 2018 and 2020 referendums (see Leblie 2022).

### 13.5 The Use of Kanak Languages in Teaching

Before specifying the use of Kanak languages in the school system (Anonymous 1989), we should recall that French remains the main language of instruction in schools.

**Table 13.3** Changes in the number of speakers of a vernacular language aged 15 and older per municipality

	Municipalities	1996	2004 <sup>a</sup>	2009	2014	2019
North Province	Bélep	586	612	607	582	665
	Canala	1,888	2,267	2,240	2,484	2,555
	Hienghène	1394	1710	1597	1596	1724
	Houaïlou	2,320	2,708	2,402	2,313	2,276
	Kaala-Gomen	885	922	904	935	824
	Koné	1,512	1,713	1,785	2,197	2,533
	Kouaoua	708	857	779	767	776
	Koumac	566	539	802	832	820
	Ouégoa	982	996	1,035	1,249	1,078
	North Poya <sup>b</sup>	951	936	1093	1135	1093
	Touho	1,201	1,224	1,327	1,127	1,274
Voh	858	1063	1042	1154	1138	
Total North Province		15,847	15,547	17,622	18,385	18,775
Loyalty Islands Prov.	Lifou	5,970	6,291	5,559	6,194	6306
	Maré	4,042	4,703	3,484	3,195	4,023
	Ouvéa	2,366	3,038	2,304	2,172	2,363
Total Loyalty Islands Province		12,378	14,032	11,347	11,561	12,692
South Province	Bouloupari	391	522	491	539	584
	Bourail	988	1,020	1,094	933	1,075
	Dumbéa <sup>c</sup>	1,686	2,777	3,859	5,538	7,324
	Farino	18	36	34	29	58
	Isle of Pines	992	1,053	1,207	1,074	1,200
	La Foa	492	455	673	570	607
	Moindou	200	178	220	190	187
	Mont-Dore <sup>c</sup>	2,155	2,465	3,083	3,590	4,549
	Nouméa <sup>c</sup>	11,577	14,206	16,523	16,039	18,528
	Païta <sup>c</sup>	818	1,328	2,290	2,208	3,104
	Poindimié	2,285	2,615	2,611	2,741	2,857
	Ponérihouen	1,486	1,684	1,426	1,437	1,431
	Pouébo	1,394	1,518	1,551	1472	1,479
	Pouembout	239	282	448	514	500
	Poum	654	626	749	715	761
	South Poya <sup>b</sup>	951	936	1,093	1,135	1,093
	Sarraméa	252	339	268	229	273
Thio	1,078	1,207	1,202	1,102	1,147	
Yaté	632	758	821	737	741	
Total South Province		28,288	34,005	39,643	40,792	47,498
Total Greater Nouméa (***)		16,236	20,776	25,755	27,375	33,505
Relative number of speakers in Greater Nouméa (°)		30.3%	33.2%	39.3%	40.5%	44.2%
New Caledonia		53,566	62,648	65,510	67,589	75,853

Source: New Caledonia population census, INSEE-ISEE, data updated on 29 October 2020

<sup>a</sup>Population 14 and older (see Table 13.4 for an example of breakdown by age in 2019)

<sup>b</sup>Total for Poya municipality

<sup>c</sup>For municipalities part of Greater Nouméa

**Table 13.4** Breakdown by age of Kanak population (2019)

Community	Under 10	10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80 and above
Kanak total	17,488	18,763	18,520	17,402	15,429	11,855	7,475	3,671	1,253

Source: 2019 Census

Table 13.5 Number of speakers aged 14 and older per Kanak language and place of residence

Linguistic area Kanak languages Municipalities	Extreme Northern Group					Northern Group					Central Group					Southern Group					Extreme Southern Group					Loyalty Islands Group					Total
	Caac	Nyeldiyu	Néle-mwa, moxumwak	Yuangra, zuungra	Jawe	Nemi	Pwap wii	Fwail	Pwanamei	Pije	Dialect Vob- Koné	Cemahi	Paiet	Ajle	Arhó	Arhó	Ohé	Néku	Tiri Jauca	Stchéé	Xárikáú	Xárikáú	Xárikáú	Dialect Extr Sud	Tyvo	Nengo ne	Drehu	Iani	Fáig- avca		
Belep	0	630	4	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	639
Camala	2	5	2	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	4	16	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	208	0	8	6	0	10	14	5	4	2342
Hirigahine	0	9	2	4	167	373	1	1061	4	89	11	11	4	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	1	1	1	0	1	7	4	3	1758
Houailou	5	4	7	13	4	17	1	13	0	0	3	18	44	2208	0	9	10	0	4	0	36	2	3	2	4	35	57	19	8	2526	
Kaia-Gomen	3	8	14	778	18	9	0	2	11	0	8	3	10	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	4	2	1	20	27	11	2	945	
Konoua	9	5	9	13	6	16	0	24	4	3	240	432	954	55	1	3	0	2	3	0	39	1	13	9	1	31	118	19	6	2016	
Kouaoua	2	0	0	1	3	1	0	2	0	1	14	492	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	177	0	0	0	0	7	7	4	0	913	
Koumassa	24	46	424	127	8	13	0	20	2	0	19	11	29	10	3	0	0	0	0	0	22	2	6	4	1	32	35	15	2	857	
Osagea	23	101	3	866	40	0	0	4	1	0	3	1	18	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	0	2	2	0	8	4	1	1086	
Pouéhidjé	15	12	7	14	7	13	0	26	0	1	2	527	2150	48	0	4	0	0	0	0	39	1	1	6	1	17	66	11	4	2972	
Pouéribouen	3	2	2	1	1	3	0	6	1	1	2	9	1242	193	0	2	1	0	5	0	14	0	4	0	3	8	6	1	1514		
Pouébo	644	253	13	77	543	4	0	17	0	0	0	5	12	8	0	0	1	0	1	0	6	1	4	8	0	10	10	5	1	1623	
Pouembout	8	11	6	13	4	5	0	15	2	0	13	31	240	46	2	2	0	2	0	2	6	1	4	4	0	16	17	8	1	482	
Poum	5	261	433	27	0	2	0	1	0	0	4	2	8	15	0	2	0	0	2	0	13	0	0	0	0	34	18	5	3	835	
Poya North *	3	2	4	9	7	5	0	6	2	0	114	9	547	334	133	8	0	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	0	3	12	22	4	8	1248
Toulou	4	18	4	4	8	18	0	34	3	47	110	1033	60	24	0	1	0	0	2	0	8	0	0	1	3	16	15	3	2	1418	
Véhi	1	5	2	20	21	195	32	14	192	0	486	2	51	13	0	0	0	0	1	0	24	0	1	1	0	18	25	4	3	1111	
Lifou	0	2	1	3	3	0	0	6	0	1	0	2	8	15	0	2	0	0	0	0	6	2	0	3	0	143	5569	27	9	5803	
Maré	3	3	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	11	6	0	2	0	0	0	0	10	0	1	5	0	3544	109	15	0	3715	
Ouvéa	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	7	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	24	34	1524	996	2601	
Boulouparis	9	4	1	21	1	0	0	21	0	1	20	22	24	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	327	8	21	5	3	6	19	13	2	533	
Bourail	16	16	4	13	24	7	0	13	4	0	14	16	72	279	3	172	441	38	7	0	39	1	11	18	3	41	41	19	10	1322	
Dumbéa *	74	70	32	81	20	37	2	108	14	2	29	47	260	191	1	21	1	11	7	2	190	21	35	87	52	530	1637	341	148	4051	
Fatimo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	5	0	0	1	3	0	0	39	
Be-des-Pins	2	6	1	2	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	3	7	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	6	1174	4	14	10	3	2	1245	
La Foa	2	3	2	9	1	2	0	9	1	0	2	7	21	35	2	2	0	0	0	96	0	477	0	16	13	2	7	12	16	6	743
Maridou	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	4	39	0	24	10	41	105	10	20	3	0	1	0	4	6	0	1	273	
Mont-Dore *	66	147	24	20	12	12	0	48	4	6	21	38	181	177	2	7	0	10	13	0	157	17	53	95	726	396	728	157	94	3211	
Nouméa *	203	287	82	251	82	128	3	339	36	28	85	272	992	860	10	79	12	11	39	7	818	84	191	348	77	3529	6441	1691	771	17756	
Paita *	38	39	6	21	7	42	0	58	8	3	18	85	224	182	10	8	6	11	12	0	173	10	429	42	19	204	489	121	126	2391	
Poya South *																															
Sarraméa	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	3	11	1	0	2	0	83	0	177	1	5	0	1	3	2	1	0	292	
Thio	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	1	8	20	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	628	589	15	5	0	8	12	5	3	1326	
Yaté	0	0	0	4	1	5	0	2	0	0	3	3	17	9	1	0	4	0	0	0	31	10	374	333	0	5	20	18	2	842	
New Caledonia	1165	1955	1090	2400	990	908	39	1858	292	183	1203	2602	7252	5356	1666	349	490	125	596	19	5729	758	1211	2184	904	8721	4078	2219	70428		
Speakers inside linguistic area	644	1245	857	1848	710	568	32	1051	192	136	849	1992	5244	3506	133	172	441	79	483	10	3856	589	1082	2037	726	3544	5569	1524	996	40115	
Grand Nouméa	381	543	144	373	121	219	5	553	62	39	153	442	1657	1410	23	115	19	43	71	9	1338	132	708	572	874	4659	9295	2310	1139	57	
North Province	749	1372	936	1971	834	673	34	1234	224	141	1026	2098	5389	3011	136	34	12	2	30	0	2491	11	54	55	16	256	450	123	49	23411	
Loyalty islands Province	3	6	1	6	4	1	0	8	0	1	0	4	26	29	0	2	2	0	1	0	19	2	1	8	1	3711	5712	1566	1005	12119	
South Province	413	577	153	423	152	234	5	616	68	41	177	500	1837	2316	30	313	476	123	565	19	3219	745	1156	2121	887	4754	9424	2389	1165	34898	
Total speakers /language	847	1871	798	1975	748	825	27	1561	223	114	952	2234	6530	4449	19	186	373	115	393	10	5645	589	1022	1618	1052	9356	15875	3714	2066	75853	

Source: Data from the 2009 ISEE Census

Note: an individual may speak two languages. \*Blue colour blue includes municipalities of Greater Nouméa. \*Poya North (North Province) and Poya South (South Province) are not separated. The data for the municipality of Poya appears in Poya North. Figures in bold red type indicate the speakers of each language in the linguistic area





**Figs. 13.2** Teaching of Kanak languages and cultures in public secondary schools as of 14 March 2018 (the 2022 map is currently available on the following website, but is less clear). (Source: <https://www.ac-noumea.nc/spip.php?article3161>)

Up to 1984, the Kanak languages were “officially excluded from the educational system” (Moyses-Faurie et al. 2012, p. 122). Following the Matignon-Oudinot Accords in 1988 and the previous EPK experiments, the Deixonne law<sup>4</sup> entered into force in New Caledonia (decrees of 20 October 1992) at the end of the 1990s (May to August 1998). This sanctioned some teaching in local languages—and some are now even taught in high school, for example, Drehu, Nengone, Ajië, and Paicî. Article 1.3.4 of the Nouméa Accord signed on 5 May 1998, stipulates that Kanak culture must be valued, and Deliberation No. 106 of 15 January 2016, on the future of the Caledonian school system specifies in Article 10.1 that “teaching of the fundamental elements of Kanak culture must be compulsory for each student” and thus enjoins the school system to include them in the curriculum (see also Chap. 14 by

Wadrawane in this book).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Article 10.2 requests New Caledonian schools, enriched by the country’s cultures, to train students at all levels in the values and practices of citizenship in order to promote the development of living together in the spirit of the Nouméa Accord.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the structuring of the teaching of Kanak languages and culture (LCK) has aimed to establish compulsory teaching of the fundamentals of Kanak culture as well as an offer of teaching Kanak languages in LV2. To do this, resources and teaching tools for the LCK were produced to create a documentary fund. The last point is the improvement of LCK teacher training with the implementation of the authorization and certification processes (2018).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Law 51-46 on teaching regional languages and dialects (Official Gazette, 13 January 1951).

<sup>5</sup><https://denc.gouv.nc/ressources-pedagogiques/ecole-maternelle-domaines-dactivites/langues-et-culture-kanak-ecole>.

<sup>6</sup><https://denc.gouv.nc/sites/default/files/documents/deliberationpenc.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>[https://denc.gouv.nc/sites/default/files/documents/charte\\_dapplication-papage-2.pdf](https://denc.gouv.nc/sites/default/files/documents/charte_dapplication-papage-2.pdf).



**Figs. 13.3** Teaching of Kanak languages and cultures in private secondary schools as of 14 March 2018 (the 2022 map is currently available on the following website, but is less clear). (Source: <https://www.ac-noumea.nc/spip.php?article3161>)

Since 1992, four languages can be chosen as electives for the Baccalaureate (the French high school diploma): Drehu, Nengone, Ajië and Paicî. In 1997, six vernacular languages were taught in middle school and high school: Iaai and Xârâcùù, and then, from 2013, Djubéa (23 in public middle school in 2013) and Fwâi (in 2013 and 2014 at the Hienghène middle school), and Yuanga with a single pupil in private middle school in 2012 at the Baganda middle school in Kaala Gomen. Therefore, beyond the six main vernacular languages, the others are only taught sporadically and are localized within their geographic area. Depending on the year, the total number of pupils receiving instruction in vernacular languages varies from 3014 in 2005 to 1879 in private establishments, that is, two thirds, with 655 in high school and 2359 in middle school to 778 in 2011, in public schools only (data from private schools being unavailable), and rising to 3365 in 2005. Out of these, 2931 were in middle school and 434 in high school, and in total, 1537 pupils or almost half were in private establishments.

The New Caledonia territorial government acquired jurisdiction over teaching in private primary schools and in public and private secondary schools on 1 January 2012.

The fact that at least four Kanak languages are taught in New Caledonia, from primary school to university, supports the view that the loss of indigenous languages is premature. Moysse-Faurie et al. (2012, p. 122) highlight: “The public primary school curricula in New Caledonia [since 2000], voted in 2005, provides the teaching of Kanak languages and cultures to students whose parents have expressed the wish, in the amount of 7 hours weekly. [...] In 2009, about 1900 pre-elementary public school pupils (out of 9200 pupils at this grade) received instruction in a dozen of Kanak languages.” But there is a wide variation. According to data collected for the New Caledonia Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (ISEE), sourced by the Vice-Rectorate in 2005 and between 2010 and 2015, ten Kanak languages were taught

over the period. These were Ajië, Drehu, Iaai, Nêlêmwa (in 2005 and 2010 with slightly over 130 pupils at the Boaouva Kaleba private middle school in Poum), Nengone, Paicî, Xârâcùù, and then, from 2013, Djubéa (23 in public middle school in 2013) and Fwâi (in 2013 and 2014 at the Hienghène middle school), and Yuanga with a single pupil in private middle school in 2012 at the Baganda middle school in Kaala Gomen. Therefore, beyond the six main vernacular languages, the others are only taught sporadically and are localized within their geographic area. Depending on the year, the total number of pupils receiving instruction in vernacular languages varies from 3014 in 2005 to 1879 in private establishments, that is, two thirds, with 655 in high school and 2359 in middle school to 778 in 2011, in public schools only (data from private schools being unavailable), and rising to 3365 in 2005. Out of these, 2931 were in middle school and 434 in high school, and in total, 1537 pupils or almost half were in private establishments.

Teaching locations in the New Caledonian archipelago are also diversified (see Figs. 13.2 and 13.3). For teaching Kanak languages and cultures, various pedagogical materials have been developed, for example, a webpage for primary schools to learn Nengone,<sup>8</sup> a textbook “I learn A’jië/Drehu/Nengone/

<sup>8</sup><http://nengone.univ-nc.nc/>.

Paici” for middle school students (first level) and a comic book “*P’ti mec*” by Bernard Berger in Numèè and Drehu, in collaboration with the mining company Vale NC, the ALK (Academy of Kanak languages) and Tetemba Production. There is also a document designed for teachers of high school seniors presenting the four notions to be covered with pupils: myths and heroes, areas and trade, places and forms of power, the notion of progress, with, for each of the four themes, bibliographical references and online resources.<sup>9</sup> One must also note, following the Nouméa Accord in May 1998, the official creation of ALK, under the aegis of Déwé Gorodey, Minister of Culture at that time, as a public New Caledonian establishment charged with “setting the rules of usage and participating in the promotion and development of all Kanak languages and dialects” (deliberation n° 265 of 17 January 2007, on the creation of the ALK). Their website<sup>10</sup> offers downloadable documents on 32 languages and dialects, and at the request of the government of New Caledonia, the ALK provides subjects for the civil service examinations (Ihage 2014). It thus promotes Kanak languages and cultures alongside the rectorate, the university and the Tjibaou cultural center (CCT, see below). The Matignon-Oundinot Accords specify that the ADCK must promote Kanak cultures “namely by capitalizing on our heritage – whether cultural, artisanal, archeological or linguistic. Languages are at the heart of our missions, because they are one of the privileged instruments for the transmission of oral traditions” (Tjibaou 2014, p. 5; see also Salain 2017).

Since 2002, in partnership with the Customary councils, the CCT department for Heritage and research has been collecting oral data, namely, clan narratives, from some 15 languages, as well as putting them in writing (Tjibaou 2014). These local institutions add to the research that has been carried out since the second half of the twentieth century by teams of linguists and ethnolinguists, namely, from the CNRS LACITO research unit in France, beginning with the foundational works of André-Georges Haudricourt (see, e.g., Leblic 2020). Many recordings made of these languages are available online in the Pangloss Collection and in speech corpora.

But in fact, according to the hourly volume specific to each level of education, which breaks down as follows, this teaching of the fundamental elements of Kanak culture is very limited. No real recommendations for kindergarten and elementary schools, 1 hour per fortnight in sixth grade of middle school starting in 2017, gradually extended to other grades from 2018. Indeed, the reform of the secondary schools provides for compulsory interdisciplinary practical

teaching (EPI) on the fundamental elements of Kanak culture, in the cycle four course (fifth, fourth, and third grades).

In the general and vocational training high schools, it is recommended to have 1 h fortnight in the second grade of secondary school starting in 2017, which will be progressively extended to other levels in 2018 (first grade or junior) and 2019 (last grade or senior); in vocational training high schools (CAP), 1 h fortnight in first year, which will be extended to second year in 2018. However, the lack of qualified teachers for these courses means that there is often a big difference between the norm and the practice. Therefore, French remains, almost exclusively, the language of instruction at all levels.

### 13.6 Conclusion

In the field of Kanak languages, as in many others, demands of Kanak people led to changes to the legal framework for language instruction and recognition. Languages that preceded colonisation by France persist, even though their speakers have been displaced in the past, or today because greater movement is possible and often linked to occupational opportunities. The constant increase in the number of speakers shows that Kanak languages, including the “languages of culture and teaching,” present in the Nouméa Accord initially as a symbolic recognition, are persistent (Leblic 2022). This is despite the various macroeconomic effects and socioeconomic readjustments which fall far short of being ideal arrangements for nurturing different cultures and languages (Leblic 2018). Although the long colonisation period favours French in terms of effective linguistic practices in society as a whole, it no longer necessarily impedes to the use of the Kanak languages, thanks to the fact that Kanak people themselves have taken an interest in the matter, and also to research carried out over more than half a century on Kanak languages and cultures (Leblic 2022). Today, this has been taken over by local institutions, among others by the Academy of Kanak languages and the Tjibaou cultural centre, in conjunction with academics from metropolitan France. It is too early to say however whether this growth tendency of Kanak languages will endure.

**Acknowledgments** This article partially reproduces, with significant updates and the addition of more recent data, a manual I wrote for the *Agence universitaire de la francophonie* in 2000 (Leblic 2000). For more linguistic data, which I do not delve into here, see among others Moysse-Faurie et al. (2012) and the research by the linguists at the CNRS LACITO: Isabelle Bril, Françoise Ozanne-Rivierre, Jean-Claude Rivierre, Claire Moysse-Faurie. I thank the ISE for allowing me to use their map, which I added to the chapter, and Jacques Vernaudeau and Caroline Graille for personal communications. I also thank Margaret Dunham for the translation from French into English and Martha Macintyre for English proofreading.

<sup>9</sup>[https://www.ac-noumea.nc/IMG/pdf/cycle\\_terminal\\_lck-final.pdf](https://www.ac-noumea.nc/IMG/pdf/cycle_terminal_lck-final.pdf).

<sup>10</sup><http://www.alk.gouv.nc/portal/page/portal/alk>.

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