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# School and linguistic diversity in French Oceanian Collectivities

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## Abstract

Whereas the French colonial education system advocated the eradication of local specificities with a view to promoting French linguistic and cultural assimilation (francisation), the contemporary educational systems in place in France's Oceanian Collectivities have each made a commitment, according to their respective schedules, to implementing a process of plurilingual reform from nursery school level up. Although French remains the main language used in the schoolroom, the primary school syllabus already includes one to seven hours of native language teaching per week. However, implementation of this reform continues to give rise to a number of concerns. This article explores the issues and constraints involved by reviewing the current situation in terms of the legal frameworks and measures in place in the three Collectivities and by instancing the results of a longitudinal study designed to evaluate the effects of a bilingual French/Kanak teaching program in New Caledonian state primary schools. It also presents a research program funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (French National Research Agency), launched in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and French Guyana in 2009, which extends the scope of previous studies by assessing, firstly, the acquisition of bilingual writing skills at school and secondly, the conative dimension (self-concept and languages).

## Key words

Linguistic diversity, plurilingualism, school/education, Oceanian languages, French-speaking, evaluation, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna are renowned for their wealth of biodiversity, their equally remarkable linguistic diversity or glottodiversity (from the Greek *glôtta*, meaning "language") is less universally known; thirty seven native languages are spoken throughout the French Oceanian Collectivities by a total population numbering fewer than five hundred thousand inhabitants. Some of these languages, which are all recognized as "languages of France" [1], have gradually been integrated into the curricula of a French overseas education system, modelled on the French national education system, which once advocated the "French in everything" principle. We will briefly outline the issues and constraints involved in this plurilingual reform process, which is not a simple matter of course, by reviewing the legal frameworks and measures in place in the three Collectivities and by instancing the results of a longitudinal study designed to evaluate the effects of a bilingual French/Kanak teaching program in New Caledonian state primary

schools (2003-2005). We will then present a research program funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (French National Research Agency), launched in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and French Guyana in 2009, which extends the scope of previous studies.

## 2. A HERITAGE UNDER THREAT

New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia form part of a vast cultural and linguistic continuum which encompasses two oceans and stretches from Madagascar in the west to Easter Island in the east and from Taiwan and Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south. The languages spoken by the first nations to people the three Collectivities belong to the Oceanian group (~ 500 languages) of the Austronesian family (~ 1000 languages) and have all evolved from a single linguistic ancestor, the Proto-Austronesian language, thought to have been spoken by inhabitants of the coastal regions of South China and of Taiwan 5,500 years ago. In the light of available linguistic and archaeological data, researchers have identified the Bismarck Archipelago, a group of islands off the north-eastern coast of New Guinea, as the geographical area where the Oceanian group of languages became distinguished from the rest of the Austronesian languages, around 3,500 years ago. At that time, the Bismarck Archipelago was already peopled by non-Austronesian settlers of far greater antiquity (oldest known occupation sites are radiocarbon dated to ca. 36,000 years ago) [2]. The culture complex emerging in this region at that period, identified by archaeologists as "Lapita", was therefore the result of a fusion between Austronesian migrants and non-Austronesian natives. Following this stage of development in Near Oceania, human groups belonging to the Lapita culture complex continued to expand towards Far Oceania (i.e. beyond the islands of San Cristobal and Rennel to the Salomon Islands) and settled these heretofore uninhabited insular areas. Contemporary Oceanian languages represent the traces of this past heritage and are the vectors of a treasure-house of knowledge built up over several thousands of years spent in the Pacific Ocean and Island environment. According to most recent estimates, New Caledonia was first settled 3,300 years ago. Twenty eight native Austronesian languages, the Kanak languages, are currently spoken in New Caledonia. There is also a local French substratum dialect spoken in the Mont-Dore area. According to the 2004 census, 62,648 people aged over 14 spoke a Kanak language (the total population is officially estimated at 230,789 inhabitants). Eleven of the Kanak languages are spoken by over one thousand native speakers, with five of these being spoken by over four thousand speakers. This linguistic division was amplified by marked geographical dispersion linked to forced population movements during the colonial era and is now intensified by internal migration attributable to economic factors. Although the

Kanak languages are descended from a common linguistic ancestor, there are very marked differences between the languages themselves, both in syntactic and in lexical terms. Although Drehu and Ajië may once have competed with French as a lingua franca in the Kanak community during the evangelization of the Main Island, French now holds a virtual monopoly in this respect [3].

French Polynesia, as it is today, was first settled around 2,000 years ago [2] and presents a less diversified linguistic landscape. Seven Polynesian languages are spoken, some of which bear more resemblance to dialectal variants. According to the 2007 census, out of a population of 259,706 inhabitants, 143,274 people aged 15 and over said they could speak, understand, read and write a Polynesian language, namely 75% of this age group. Tahitian is the most widely spoken language; speakers of other Polynesian languages number only a few hundred or a few thousand. The diversification of Polynesian languages is less marked and their syntactic and lexical similarities are far greater than those of New Caledonia's native languages. Tahitian and French are both used as a lingua franca.

The Collectivity of Wallis and Futuna (Uvea mo Futuna) shows the greatest degree of linguistic homogenization. The earliest settlers arrived between 900 and 800 BC [4]. Two Polynesian languages are currently spoken in Wallis and Futuna and are linked to two distinct insular spaces. Less than 3% of the population is non-Polynesian and almost all the 14,967 inhabitants<sup>1</sup>, 10,088 of whom live on Wallis and 4,879 on Futuna, speak one of the two native languages and Rensch [5] comments that "knowledge of French remained an exception until the 1940s". French is the sole official language of these three Collectivities.

The first upheaval in the transmission of the Oceanian languages occurred when Pacific population numbers plummeted during the 19th century as a result of epidemics of diseases introduced by Western seafarers and traders [6]. It is easy to imagine the repercussions of this depopulation process, whose principal victims were the young and old, on the transmission of languages and knowledge reliant on oral tradition.

During the missionary period which began in the second half of the 19th century, a number of local languages achieved prominence by being used to teach literacy and Christian dogma. By contrast, the linguistic policy espoused during the colonial period pushed Oceanian languages out of the schoolroom and the public sphere. In accordance with the monolingual ideology bequeathed by the French Revolution and applied in every region of France, the corollary of French cultural and linguistic assimilation ("francisation") of local populations should be the eradication of their languages [7].

However, Pineau-Salaün stresses the consistently ineffectual character of colonial period linguistic policy which, while regularly reasserting the overriding need to impart French language and culture to native populations, failed to assign adequate resources to achieve this end (school segregation, little or no teacher training, no teaching supervision, no assessment, arbitrary interruption of the curriculum) [8]. The assimilation process therefore only became really effective in the wake of WWII. French citizenship was granted to the natives of the French Oceanian Territories; the early 1950s saw the gradual spread of

the democratization process and mass education. While one may rejoice at such social progress as the tangible expression of republican values, it cannot be denied that the "French in everything" ideology has persisted for a long time and has done little to encourage the survival of local languages.

### 3. A RETURN TO THE SCHOOLROOM

Subsequent to a process of political emancipation which began in the 1970s, New Caledonia and French Polynesia obtained the transfer of a number of non-sovereign powers, including education. Although the French overseas education system retains strong similarities to the French national education system in terms of organisation, syllabus content, teacher training and teaching supervision, such statutory changes have paved the way to an institutional recognition of local languages and the gradual introduction of these languages into school curricula.

Thus, the Noumea Accord (5 May 1998) ordains that:

"The Kanak languages are, together with French, teaching and cultural languages in New Caledonia. Their place in teaching and the media shall therefore be increased and shall be subject to in-depth review.

(...) to ensure that these languages find their rightful place in primary and secondary education, a significant effort must be made in respect of teacher training<sup>2</sup>.

The New Caledonia Organic Law<sup>3</sup>, constitutionalized, states more succinctly:

"The Kanak languages shall be recognized as teaching and cultural languages."

In fact, Kanak languages are now on the syllabus at all three levels of education. Four of them (Ajië, Paicî, Drehu, Nengone) have been recognized at Baccalaureat level since 1992 and have been taught at the University of New Caledonia since 1999. The New Caledonia state primary school curricula, approved by law in 2005, provide for Kanak languages and culture (LCK) teaching for children whose parents have requested such teaching, for seven hours a week at nursery school and five hours a week at elementary school. There is no exhaustive list of the Kanak languages which can be taught at primary school level. However, three conditions must be met before an LCK teaching program can be set up in a primary level school: there must be a sufficient number of children whose parents have requested such teaching, a teacher speaking the language must be available and the Province concerned must commit to providing funding and logistics. In 2008, around 1,600 children at pre-elementary state schools were receiving LCK teaching (out of a total of 9,300 children at this school level, i.e. 17%) in 10 Kanak languages (Ajië, Cemuhî, Drehu, Fwâi, Némi, Nengone, Numèè, Paicî, Xârâcùù, Yuanga)<sup>4</sup>.

The French Polynesia Organic Law<sup>5</sup> of 2004, extending in this respect the initial Statute of Autonomy of 1986, ordains that:

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<sup>2</sup> Noumea Accord, Guidance Document, chapter 1.3.3 Languages.

<sup>3</sup> Organic Law no. 99-209 of 19 March 1999 relating to New Caledonia, article 215.

<sup>4</sup> Sources : New Caledonian Department of Education

<sup>5</sup> Organic Law no. 2004-192 of 27 February 2004 on the autonomy status of French Polynesia (1). Consolidated version of 27 June 2008. Article 57.

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<sup>1</sup> 2003 census

“French, Tahitian, Marquisan, Paumotuan and Mangarevan are the languages of French Polynesia. (...)

The Tahitian language is a subject taught during normal teaching hours at nursery and primary schools, in secondary schools and in higher education establishments.

The Assembly of French Polynesia may rule that the Tahitian language be replaced in some schools or establishments by one of the other Polynesian languages.”

The teaching of Tahitian was officially introduced in primary and secondary schools as from 1982. It has been an optional Baccalaureat subject since 1985. The *reo mā'ohi*<sup>6</sup> (in fact, mainly Tahitian) have been taught at university level since 1990. Primary school curricula assign a quota of 2 hours 40 minutes per week to the teaching of Tahitian or another Polynesian language. Since 2005, the quota has been increased to 5 hours a week in twenty locations, as part of an experimental measure designed to increase the role of Polynesian languages and culture in the school curriculum. Around 1,500 students are concerned by this measure, receiving teaching in the following languages: Tahitian, Marquisan, Paumotuan, Raivavae, Tupuai and Magarevan.

In Wallis and Futuna, where school attendance has only been compulsory since 1961, education is placed under the authority of the French Local Education Authority (Vice-Rectorat). However, responsibility for primary level education has been granted by agreement to the Catholic Education Office, which ensures the organization and operation of the national curricula (with the implication that literacy teaching is in French only). Although Wallisian and Futunan have been added to the list of French regional languages, they enjoy no specific statutory recognition. There is no reference to their status in the Organic Law relating to Wallis and Futuna<sup>7</sup>. The two languages are not recognized as Baccalaureat subjects, nor are they taught at university level. However, efforts are being made to adapt primary school curricula to take local linguistic realities into account. In Wallis, teaching in Wallisian is given in all nursery schools according to a staggered system: in the lowest age-group section, 90% of teaching is in Wallisian and 10% in French, in the middle section, the ratio is 50/50 and in the higher section, the ratio is 10/90 in favour of French. After the “Cycle 1” is completed (i.e. during the final year at nursery school), teaching is exclusively in French. This system also applies to teaching in Futunan at some schools on the island of Futuna.

#### 4. FAVOURABLE FACTORS

In addition to skills transfers which bring teaching decision-making centres closer to field realities and concerns and make significant adaptation of school curricula possible, three factors tend to convince us that native language teaching initiatives in the three Collectivities are not just a cyclical phenomenon but part of a lasting and fundamental movement for change.

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<sup>6</sup> Literally *native language(s)*: designates all the Polynesian languages of French Polynesia or, in the singular and with a more qualified acceptance, the Tahitian spoken in the Society Islands. The term is also used in local French with both accepted meanings.

<sup>7</sup> Law no. 61-814 of 29 July 1961 granting the islands of Wallis and Futuna the status of overseas territory.

- 1) Native peoples are more or less actively contesting assimilation and globalization and are demanding that their linguistic and cultural heritage be recognized, promoted and passed on. However, the Oceanian communities do not reject exogenous cultural influences. They are even keen to use them to promote their own process of renewal. On the other hand, the glottocentric<sup>8</sup> and glottophagic attitude, which went hand-in-hand with francisation, is strongly resented. Modern Oceanians are anxious to preserve a functional bilingualism situation where languages co-exist in complementary usage contexts. Furthermore, attitudes and views which were once diametrically opposed, namely resistance to colonial France's linguistic imperialism on the one hand, and the enthusiastic affirmation that the supremacy of the French language tangibly expressed a sense of belonging to the French Republic on the other, are converging towards the valuing of linguistic diversity with French as a shared *lingua franca*, as specified by the Organic Laws of New Caledonia and French Polynesia.
- 2) A significant percentage of more recently formed migrant communities are expressing their sense of belonging to a local tradition by assimilating cultural and linguistic elements from the first nation peoples. Demands for the advancement of local languages and cultures, initially voiced by native intellectuals, have been taken up by a network of individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who have settled permanently in Oceania [9].
- 3) Finally, psycholinguistic research has gradually modified views about plurilingualism in early childhood. Studies have regularly confirmed the positive effects of educational programs promoting the mother tongue of children taught in a second language [10]. Experiments conducted in New Caledonia have shown positive results at local level identical to those obtained elsewhere in the world (cf. *infra*). The education system is gradually assimilating such scientific data and is beginning to see bilingualism in early childhood as an asset to be developed rather than a handicap [11].

#### 4) INITIAL ASSESSMENTS

In February 2002, the New Caledonia Government launched an experimental scheme designed to introduce Kanak languages and culture (the LCK scheme) at state primary school level. The following targets were defined for this action research program: enable the trial run of a training program for Kanak language teachers, gradually introduce Kanak language teaching at state primary school level and assess the impact of such teaching on pupils' school results [12].

Between 2002 and 2004, eight teachers speaking Drehu, Nengone, Ajië and Xârâcùù taught in 10 schools, giving lessons to the three nursery school age-group classes (*petite, moyenne and grande*

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<sup>8</sup> In sociolinguistic terms, glotto-centricity is a concept equivalent to ethno-centricity and characterises an attitude of exclusive focus on one's own language at the expense of languages spoken by other people.

sections – PS, MS, GS) and elementary school year one (Cours Préparatoire – CP). An external assessment system comprising a sociolinguistic constituent and a psycholinguistic constituent was used to assess the impact of experimental Kanak language teaching. The psycholinguistic constituent was designed to verify whether the introduction of LCK (Kanak language and culture) teaching helped children to consolidate their linguistic skills in Drehu (mother tongue) and was beneficial to their initial acquisition of oral and written skills in French (second language). Sixty one children at nursery school middle level (MS) and 82 children at nursery school higher level (GS), all speakers of Drehu, took part in the study, either as members of the experimental group (the children who received LCK teaching) or of the control group (those who did not). We first checked that members of both groups possessed equivalent initial non-verbal cognitive skills. Both groups came from family backgrounds where Drehu, their native and mother tongue, was used to different degrees. Assessment testing was carried out twice during the school year: at the beginning of the year (March and April 2004) and at the end of the year (October 2004). All children (experimental and control groups) were assessed in Drehu by two Drehu-speaking examiners and in French by two French-speaking examiners. In assessing French language skills, we conducted individual checks using five tests taken from the Khomsi ‘Évaluation du Langage Oral’ (ELO – Oral language assessment) series of tests [13], designed to assess the children’s vocabulary and morphosyntax abilities in comprehension and production. To these was added a phonology test taken from the GSM-CP [14] series of assessment tools, which measures children’s capacity to identify rhymes. For assessment of Drehu language skills, we created five individual tests designed to assess, similarly to the French language tests, both the comprehension and production aspects of oral language. At the end of the year, we added a further test relating to recognition of letters, words and non-words which provides an initial indicator of future writing skills. Furthermore, some of the nursery school higher level (GS) students were also tested on starting their elementary school year one and assessed in the domains of oral language ability, written language ability (reading and writing) and transversal skills. On completion of the study, we were in a position to conclude that Kanak language and culture teaching had a positive impact on Drehu language skills, both at MS and at GS level. At both school levels, the experimental group performed statistically better than the control group, based on results for all Drehu language production tests (vocabulary in terms of both reception and production, and morphosyntactic production). Moreover, there was no measurable negative impact on French language skills at either MS or GS level, since the overall linguistic performance of children in the experimental groups was equivalent to that of children in the control groups.

Finally, the results indicate that at the end of GS level, the experimental group children achieved better results than the control group in recognizing written letters and words in French. Furthermore, at CP level, the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group in terms of three of the chosen indicators (transversal skills, reading and writing) and in oral language tendencies. These results confirm that exposure to the mother tongue at nursery school helped children to achieve a better grasp of transversal and written skills in their second language at CP level and, secondarily, in second language oral language skills. On this count, the supposition that LCK teaching would have a medium term impact on French language skills was

confirmed. Moreover, statistics (regression analyses) showed that Drehu language performance results at GS level gave a strong indication of performance results in French reading skills at CP level. These results corroborate Cummins’ hypothesis [15] concerning the impact of bilingualism on high level cognitive skills such as reading [16]. Sociolinguistic assessment also revealed that Kanak parents were enthusiastic about the LCK class, seeing it as a means of preventing a break with their children’s “roots” and fostering their children’s development by turning their personal experiences to advantage. Whereas family linguistic habits are characterised by a mingling of languages, LCK teaching at school acts as a balance by simultaneously emphasising the legitimacy of both the French language and the native language, thereby breaking with the former practice of imposing the first by forbidding the second [17].

A similar assessment project was launched in French Polynesia in April 2006 and completed in April 2008. The project was designed to test a Polynesian languages and culture scheme (“Langues et culture polynésienne” – LCP) set up by the French Polynesia Government and focussing on one language (Tahitian) taught at three school levels (nursery school lower, middle and higher sections). The same methodology was used and the scheme targeted 541 nursery school children at PS, MS and GS levels, attending 13 nursery schools in Tahiti and Moorea. Two groups were formed per level: an experimental group receiving LCP teaching starting in January 2006 and a control group which did not receive LCP teaching.

The two groups came from family backgrounds where Tahitian, their native or mother tongue, was used to different degrees. They were matched in terms of age, gender, non-verbal cognitive ability and socio-economic background.

The LCP scheme proved effective as regards Tahitian at all three school levels. More specifically, given the same cognitive level, although both groups made considerable progress between April 2006 and April 2007, the experimental group’s progress significantly outpaced that of the control group in all Tahitian assessment test results (vocabulary and morphosyntactic skills in reception and comprehension).

Moreover, the experimental group, which achieved results significantly lower than those of the control group in the French language tests (particularly in lexical production and utterance production), in phonology and in mathematics over the five assessment sessions held with GS and CE1 (elementary school year two), caught up with the control group by the end of the CE1 year and achieved the same results as the control group in the CE2 (elementary school year three) assessment tests held in 2008.

## 5. NEW RESEARCH PROJECT

A new research project extending the scope of these initial studies, entitled Ecole Plurilingue Outre-Mer (ECOLPOM – Overseas Plurilingual Education) and funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (French National Research Agency – project no. ANR-08-BLAN-001-02) was launched in 2009. The project is headed by Isabelle Nocus of the Laboratoire Education Cognition et Développement (Labécd) at Nantes University and brings together three other laboratories: Centre des Nouvelles Etudes sur le Pacifique (CNEP) at the University of New Caledonia, Centre d’Études des Langues Indigènes d’Amérique (CELIA) (UMR CNRS-IRD-Paris7-INALCO) and Institut de recherche interdisciplinaire sur les enjeux sociaux (IRIS) (UMR EHESS-CNRS-INSERM-Paris 13). This research program will

extend over three years, from 2009 to 2011, and will be carried out simultaneously in three Collectivities, New Caledonia, French Polynesia and French Guyana. The aim is to assess the effectiveness of bilingual French/local language programs at two school levels, elementary school year one (CP) and year two (CE1), and the study will once again comprise two complementary aspects, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic.

The psycholinguistic aspect will assess the global impact of the bilingual programs on pupils' language skills, both in the local language and in French, and on their school behaviour and academic performance and their personal development. The sociolinguistic aspect will determine whether increased native language teaching at school modifies language practices, encourages positive evolution of linguistic perceptions concerning native languages and French and helps to foster closer contact between parents and schools.

Whereas previous assessments targeted nursery school classes and focussed mainly of assessing oral skills, this time the focus will be on the simultaneous acquisition of reading and writing skills in two languages. The conative dimension (self-concept and languages) will also be explored; in previous studies, the children were too young to answer questionnaires concerning these parameters. Furthermore, sample groups will be extended to include pupils whose native tongue is not the local language taught.

A total of around 400 schoolchildren will take part in the study; half will receive bilingual teaching and the other half will act as the control group. Their performance in French and in local languages will be assessed at three elementary school stages: beginning of CP, end of CP (Year 1) and end of CE1 (Year 2). Sociolinguistic testing will be carried out at the beginning and end of the research program and will assess the evolution of language perceptions and practices within families and teaching teams.

This research program will, inter alia, enable Cummins' developmental interdependence hypothesis to be rigorously tested in a French-speaking environment. The findings of the study will provide the political and educational authorities of the Collectivities concerned with evaluation tools designed to optimise the development of schoolchildren's language and academic skills and performance in a plurilingual and multicultural context. Such experimental data will also enrich knowledge in a theoretical field where increased in-depth research will be needed if we are to build a European multilingual education area.

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