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The languages of New Caledonia

Suzy Bearune

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Suzie BEARUNE

University of New Caledonia, ERALO

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New Caledonia is a multi-ethnic and multicultural archipelago with, according to 2019 census figures, a population of 271,407. It forms one of the Oceanian archipelagos where languages belonging to several families co-exist but are not all acknowledged or even treated in the same way. The Kanak languages form part of the subgroup of Oceanic languages (along with the Polynesian and Micronesian languages) belonging to the Austronesian language family. They are all languages of oral tradition – the only example of a writing system in the whole of Oceania is *rongorongo*, discovered on Easter Island –; reading and writing were introduced by Europeans. During the colonial period, the public education system completely disregarded these local languages, and they were prohibited at school in New Caledonia. Monolingualism was imposed during this period and French, deemed to be the only official language, is nowadays perceived by some Oceanian communities as the language of the elite and the language of success. Accordingly, addressing the issue of languages in New Caledonia is often seen as an assertion of identity and even of politics. But a language is defined as a system of communication shared within a community, symbolizing cultural identity and sense of belonging. Language is the carrier of the culture and also the thinking of a community, its specific comprehension of the world. Culture or, more broadly, cultural practices are transmitted through language. It is also crucial to understand that each language expresses a very particular vision of the world and functions in its own way. Enforced monolingualism can therefore be seen, to some extent, as an obstacle to personal thought, self-expression or, quite simply, living life to the full.

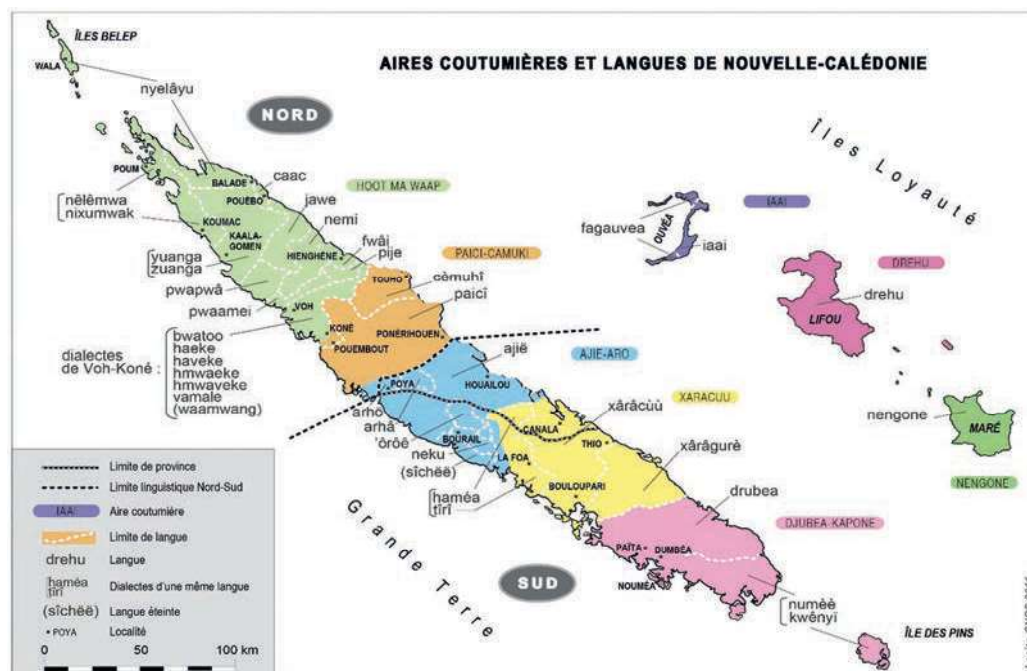
Yet New Caledonia is a country in which choices as regards political, social and even linguistic destiny are judged in the light of a particularly weighty colonial past. In political terms, several kinds of status have been considered and developed but have failed to prevent periods of serious unrest. Such periods of conflict have led to a general recognition that all communities must work together and accept each other to achieve their full potential. The coexistence of communities and especially the need for populations to show great adaptability has always been central to the intrinsically Oceanian (or Austronesian) conception of the world. It is a way of life that has meant that communities have co-existed for decades in islands, each community having distinct activities, methods and social systems capable of adapting to suit the environment. But the forcibly imposed European colonial vision indirectly established a hierarchy between peoples which, of course, changed the relationships between communities: the Kanak considering themselves as the first people and other peoples from recent settlements as not being first peoples, whereas all Pacific Islanders (including the Kanak) and Asians (particularly Indonesians and Javanese) are descendants of the original Austronesian peoples. It can be stated at this point that European colonization laid the foundations for a very real imbalance between the peoples living in New Caledonia.

Today, the country is engaged in a process which seeks to bring together the entire wealth and diversity of its peoples' cultures and languages. Could a language policy based on New Caledonia's linguistic diversity be envisaged? What future lies ahead for all these languages in a country moving towards a common destiny? These are all questions which underline the need for a review of the situation as regards the languages of New Caledonia, and a review would appear all the more crucial if we are to understand the language policy choices which will determine the fate of these languages. Indeed, the transmission and preservation of these languages are issues which must be addressed in order to safeguard linguistic diversity, the precious value of which is sometimes disregarded. Work done by linguists is essential in ensuring a language is preserved. Such research helps us to describe a language, understand how it functions, identify key strengths and characteristics, and draw out what it shares with other languages or, conversely, what sets it apart, thus contributing a more comprehensive study of linguistic typology. But a language still needs to be spoken for it to survive.

I. OVERVIEW OF THE LANGUAGES OF NEW CALEDONIA

New Caledonia is currently home to forty languages belonging to different linguistic families which can be traced back to various waves of migrant settlers. The first goes back 3,000 years, and the Kanak population alone, linked to this migration wave of Austronesian peoples from Southeast Asia, shares 28 languages dispersed as shown in map no. 1 below.

Map no. 1, Lacito-CNRS, 2011



A. Language families in New Caledonia

Two Indo-European languages were then introduced in the 19th century during the process of colonization: French and English. English did not make as much impact since it was mostly taught and spoken in the Loyalty Islands by London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries evangelizing the people of Lifou, Ouvéa and Maré during the colonial period. Traces are still found today in Kanak words borrowed from English, for example, in Nengone (Maré) *balaigetr* meaning a covering, derived from *blanket*, *Sipun* (Nengone) derived from *spoon*, and *shuga* from *sugar*, etc.

New Caledonia has provided a setting for settlement colonization since 1860. Colonial policy was behind several migrations from Asian countries (Javanese, Tonkinese, Chinese and Japanese), designed to supply labour requirements for work in New Caledonia's nickel mines as from the 1870s.

Other Oceanian populations arrived during the nickel boom in the 1960s and, as stated by Isabelle Merle (2013):

The settlement project launched in the 1860s had an undoubted impact on New Caledonia's history, and appears to be repeated from one period to the next. The nickel boom in the 1960s attracted representatives from the Pied-Noir community (French colonial settlers) fleeing a newly independent Algeria, together with a community of labourers from Wallis and Futuna.

Population migration necessarily entails the introduction of new languages: Javanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Wallisian, Futunan and Tahitian, etc. are now therefore included in the languages spoken by the people of New Caledonia, in addition to the Kanak languages. All these languages currently represent a range of linguistic families: Indo-European (English and French); Austronesian, which includes several languages belonging to two subgroups: the Oceanian subgroup which includes the Polynesian languages (Wallisian, Futunan, Tahitian, Marquesan, etc.) and the Melanesian languages (in addition to the Kanak languages and the languages of Vanuatu), and the subgroup of Western Malayo-Polynesian languages such as Indonesian, Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese. As regards Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese, also spoken, these are Asian languages, each of which belongs to three distinct language families. In addition to French Caribbean Creole, also spoken in New Caledonia, there is another typically New Caledonian Creole, Tayo, spoken by a group of people of Kanak origin based in St. Louis (a tribe created by Marist missionaries in 1855)¹ in Greater Noumea. Tayo made its appearance in the early 20th century, a language born of the mixing of Kanak languages (such as Drubéa, Gaac, Cèmuhi, etc.), Creole (spoken by Reunion Islanders) and French.

Thus, five families of languages are represented in this multifaceted archipelago of many colours, constituting a significant wealth of linguistic diversity. However, this linguistic abundance does not only derive from the number of languages, it is also linked to everything which goes to make up a language, i.e. phonology, morphosyntax and lexical field. Here, we will primarily present the main linguistic characteristics of the Kanak languages, and their highly diverse phonological and morphosyntactic systems.

1 K. Lévy, 2018: <https://information.tv5monde.com/culture/francophonie-le-tayo-un-creole-en-nouvelle-caledonie-251717>

B. The specificities of Kanak languages

Languages are differentiated as much by their phonological systems as their grammatical properties. First and foremost, the phonological richness of the Kanak languages is made evident by the great variety of their consonant and vowel systems. Examples: Drehu (language spoken in Lifou) has 28 consonants (including voiced retroflex plosives *vs.* apical alveolar stops); Pije (one of the four languages spoken in Hienghène) has 35 consonants (including the opposition between voiceless nasals *vs.* voiced nasals and voiceless lateral fricatives *vs.* voiced lateral fricatives). Conversely, Polynesian languages have simple phonological systems: for example, Wallisian has twelve consonants and Futunan has eleven. But Fagauvea (spoken in Ouvéa, a language with the same roots as the previous two) and a Polynesian outlier language, possesses, besides these twelve consonants, a series of voiced stops /b/, /d/, /g/. Through coming into contact with Iaaï, a Kanak language spoken in the same region, Fagauvea has expanded its consonant system. This characteristic is not unique to Fagauvea, it is shared by Polynesian outlier languages spoken in Melanesian areas. Connections between languages lead to some of their characteristics being enriched and to others being impoverished.

Evidence attests to co-articulated or complex consonants existing in the languages spoken in the North and Far North of New Caledonia:

- aspirated consonants opposed to non-aspirated consonants (p ≠ ph, m ≠ hm, etc.), such as in Nyelâyu: *pe* “skate/ray (fish)” ≠ *phe* “whetstone”; *ta* “mount” ≠ *tha* “bald”; *maak* “mango tree”; ≠ *hmaak* “footprint”;
- these languages also feature post-nasal consonants (e.g. pm, tn, etc.), rarely found in languages worldwide, which tend to remain as a nasalized vowel preceded by an aspiration in other languages belonging to this area.

	Nemi	Fwâi	Nyelâyu
‘wealth’	<i>tnoot</i>	<i>thôôt</i>	<i>hnoot</i>

We can cite Xârâcùù, spoken in the Canala and Thio areas, as an example of a language possessing an abundance of vowel sounds: Xârâcùù has 34 vowel phonemes, while Nââ Drubea, spoken in Unya (Yaté) and Païta, has 24 vowels (short and long). Linguists such as Haudricourt, Moïse-Faurie, Rivierre and Ozanne-Rivierre have identified some characteristics of the Kanak languages: languages spoken in the North of the Main Island are rich in consonants, while those spoken in the South are rich in vowels.

Some other Kanak languages, such as Paicî, Cèmuhi and other Kanak languages spoken in the South of the Main Island, reveal innovative features compared to other Oceanic group languages, such as the appearance of register tones, lower or higher, to distinguish between words. The Cèmuhi language has three tones _ high, medium, low _/tîi/ ‘destroy’ *vs.* /tîi/ ‘harvest’ *vs.* /tîi/ ‘write’; /pún/ ‘yellow, wilted’ *vs.* /pùn/ ‘head’ *vs.* /pùn/ ‘blue, dark green’.

Furthermore, the Kanak languages also possess grammatical particularities which deserve mention. These languages have a system of highly developed personal pronouns: there are three degrees of number (singular, dual, plural) and a contrast between inclusive or exclusive for first persons where dual and plural pronouns are concerned. The languages spoken in the North differentiate between several pronouns according to function, as does French with “je” (subject), “me” (object), “mon” (possessive). In these languages, a personal indicator

forms part of the verbal group, expressed at the head of the phrase, followed optionally by an object, and also a lexical subject coreferential with the personal indicator. This lexical subject is preceded by a marker which can vary depending on whether it refers to an animate or inanimate being.

Other notable particularities of the Kanak languages include:

- the expression of possession having complex constructions with, in addition to an opposition between alienable possession and inalienable possession, different classifiers depending on what one possesses;
- the linguistic system of space orientation combines topography-centred markers which are either absolute, based on prevailing wind direction (and not on fixed cardinal points) and which are used for moving about in a large space, or are relative and linked to the earth/sea axis for moving about in a small space. Kanak languages also possess demonstrative and directional particles situating the action both in space in relation to the speakers or the characters portrayed in stories, and also in time to highlight the stages by which the action develops over time.
- number systems are quinary and vigesimal (except Fagauvea, which uses a decimal system). There are also number systems with specific classifiers depending on what is being counted (long or round objects, plants, piles of yams, bundles of fish, etc.);
- New Caledonia is thus a country with a rich linguistic heritage and a complex colonial history, and the language issue remains omnipresent at a time when the country's future path is very much in the balance.

II. LANGUAGE POLICY IN NEW CALEDONIA

The first Europeans who landed in New Caledonia were bewildered by the great many languages they heard spoken, particularly the Kanak languages with their diverse sounds (vowels, consonants). Early linguists found New Caledonia a particularly rich field of research and it remains so today. New Caledonia's Kanak peoples have always been multilingual, well in advance of the colonial period. According to Haudricourt (1961)², at that time, egalitarian multilingualism³ was prevalent. Colonization then reinforced Kanak multilingualism but, above all, disrupted language status by introducing linguistic hierarchy. The missionaries were obliged to learn Kanak languages and began teaching the reading and writing of the Kanak languages spoken in the Loyalty Islands, such as Drehu (Lifou) and Nengone (Maré). Some of these languages, such as Ajië (spoken in the Houailou region), were also used to preach Christianity and were therefore favoured by the missionaries, Ajië in particular, in comparison with other languages spoken on the Main Island.

However, while the reading and writing of Kanak languages prospered in missionary schools in the Loyalty Islands, in 1863 Governor Guillain issued a decree prohibiting the use of Kanak languages in all schools. As a result of this prohibition, French became the only official

² A.-G. Haudricourt, 1961, Richesse en phonèmes et richesse en locuteurs, *L'Homme*, Vol 1, no. 1, 5-10.

³ An individual or community situation where several languages are used in various contexts: for example, neighbouring populations (Kanak or Oceanian), in contact with each other, using three or more languages for trading and matrimonial relationships. All languages were used regularly in various contexts.

language and the only language used in schools, the French language serving as an instrument of the French government's totalitarian colonial policy. This policy was reasserted in a decree dated 3 August 1905, article 12 of which stated, regarding primary schools, that "French will be the only language used in school". Since that time, Kanak languages and other languages introduced later by communities from Asia, for example, have been used only within the family circle or at cultural and customary events (in the case of Kanak communities, in tribal villages). Outside such contexts, their use remained strictly prohibited. The same rules applied to Oceanic languages such as Wallisian, Futunan and Tahitian, introduced during New Caledonia's economic boom years.

It was not until the 1970s, a century after the Guillaud decree, that an upsurge of political and cultural demands led to language usage being reviewed and language issues put back on the agenda. An Office for Vernacular Languages was set up at the Centre Territorial de Recherche et de Documentation Pédagogique (CTRDP) to develop teaching materials to enable these languages to be taught in secondary schools. A climate of political instability reigned during the "Events" (1984-1985), and Écoles Populaires Kanak (EPK) were established in some regions following a political decision by the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste - FLNKS). These schools were designed to counterbalance the "colonial" schools regarded by the indigenous population as the product of an elitist system dedicated to negating Kanak culture. The EPK schools placed the focus on Kanak identity and culture by teaching classes using Kanak languages. At the time, they were the only schools to acknowledge not only Kanak identity but also Kanak culture and languages.

When powers were delegated to the three Provinces in the 1990s, some Kanak languages were taught in weekly courses. In 1992, in application of the Deixonne Law⁴ in New Caledonia, four languages (Ajië, Drehu, Nengone and Paicî) were offered as options at Baccalaureat level.

A. Research into languages

A national language policy, especially decisions and regulations relating to the vitality of languages, their status and social functions, enables the desired relationship between language and society to be determined. In the case of New Caledonia, the country's complex colonial history and the colonial injustices which are part and parcel of that history mean that the language issue is often bound up with political and identity-based demands. Moreover, as far as the Kanak population is concerned, languages form an integral part of their oral heritage. Languages are the channel through which customs (relating to marriage, mourning, adoptions) and their entire oral and intangible heritage – dances, songs, art, etc. – are passed from generation to generation. Learning and transmission always take place by the younger generation observing how the oral heritage is practised and performed by their elders. And so it is crucial to gain a better understanding of how Kanak languages are used in New Caledonian society: are they omnipresent, are they visible in urban and rural areas? Do social stakeholders take these languages into consideration?

⁴ Law no. 51-46 of 11 January 1951 relating to the teaching of local languages and dialects. It was named the Deixonne law after Maurice Deixonne, who was at the time Rapporteur for the Parliamentary Commission on education, and who introduced the bill. The law had two purposes: to defend the French language and to protect regional languages.

The Noumea Accord (1998) served as a milestone in the acknowledgement of these languages, in fact, clause 1.3.3 states: “The Kanak languages are, along with French, the languages of education and cultural expression in New Caledonia. Their place in school curricula and in the media should therefore be increased and extensive thought should be given as to how to achieve this.” This provision of the Accord was given legal effect in Article 205 of the Organic Law of 19 March 1999 relating to New Caledonia, which states that the Melanesian languages are recognized as languages of instruction:

- 1) *In order to promote its cultural development, New Caledonia, having consulted the Provinces, signs a special agreement with the French government. This refers, in particular, to the Kanak cultural heritage and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre.*
- 2) *The Kanak languages are recognized as languages of education and cultural expression.*

The language policy having thereby been given legal effect, implementation of these political decisions began the following year with the introduction of a degree course in Regional Languages and Cultures at the University of New Caledonia (in 1999) where four Kanak languages (Ajië, Drehu, Nengone and Paicî) are taught. The University of New Caledonia, as part of its performance agreement, is currently fully engaged in scientific research in the field of indigenous languages; among its six research laboratories, three of them are focussing on linguistics issues: the Troca team’s mission is to shed light on the issue of languages in relation to Kanak society and, more broadly, Oceanian social structures in anthropological, literary and historical (including archaeological) terms; the Eralo research team covers the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, socio-educational and geographic contexts; the Lire team focusses on language teaching. Indeed, New Caledonia’s linguistic diversity represents a key field of study for research professors, who spare no effort in raising awareness amongst all New Caledonia’s communities of the rich learning experience offered to all children by linguistic diversity within the education system. There is no doubt that the linguistic diversity of New Caledonia’s population plays a particularly powerful role in the acceptance of a common destiny and in the possibility of living it to the full.

The establishment of the Kanak Languages Academy (Académie des langues kanak – ALK) in 2007 was another very significant step forwards in the recognition of Kanak languages in New Caledonia. The Academy’s missions include laying down rules of usage and promoting the development of these languages. At present, proposals for creating a written form of eight of New Caledonia’s 28 Kanak languages have been published. Moreover, since 2009, the ALK has diversified its work, adopting an editorial policy encompassing various forms of publication: themed dictionaries, collections of texts, grammar books, etc.

B. Teaching languages

As stated above, language is the carrier of a community’s culture and also of its thinking, the specific way in which it views the world. Teaching a language therefore involves teaching a people’s culture, their way of being, of inhabiting the world, of thinking. As long as a language is spoken, it remains a living language so it is equally true that speaking and using the language keeps it alive. Thus, from every viewpoint, the teaching of languages is fundamental; in societal terms, it represents one of the essential means of transmission and evolution.

Currently, four Kanak languages (see above) out of the 28 existing in New Caledonia are being taught from first grade to university level. However, first grade Kanak language teaching remains optional, the decision resting with the children's parents. Unlike Oceanic languages (Wallisian, Futunan, Tahitian, etc.), Asian languages are not included in New Caledonia's education project (2019 reform).⁵ Since 1st January 2000, the date on which responsibilities in the education sector were transferred, the three Provinces (Loyalty Islands, North and South) of the country each have their own policy as to the teaching of Kanak languages in primary schools. Responsibilities for secondary school education were transferred on 1st January 2012; Kanak languages also remain optional in secondary schools, they are offered as a Modern Language 3 option, as are Japanese and Latin.

In line with New Caledonia's education project (Decision No. 106 of 15 January 2016), the aim of the New Caledonia Department of Education (Direction de l'Enseignement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie – DENC) is to “develop the identity of New Caledonian schools”. Since 2018, it has therefore made instruction in the basics of Kanak culture mandatory. As stipulated in the Noumea Accord, the primary aim of such instruction is to further the recognition of Kanak identity, as laid down by Article 1.3.4. It also aims to anchor schools within their cultural context. Such instruction can act as a springboard, particularly for Kanak or Oceanian students, by helping them to develop confidence and self-esteem. It also gives all students a better understanding of Kanak customs, practices and ways of life. In Greater Noumea, some Kanak children (and even Oceanian children from Wallis, Futuna, etc.) no longer speak their language (or speak it very little). Teaching the basic elements of Kanak culture can act as a catalyst and encourage some Oceanian and Kanak children to learn or relearn their language, or perhaps to discover the languages spoken in the places they live.

As regards higher education, the University of New Caledonia currently includes a degree in Oceanic Languages and Cultures (licence de langues et cultures océaniques – LCO) in the university's degree courses: the same four Kanak languages being still taught at the university (see above). These four Kanak languages were selected on the basis of the number of speakers: Drehu has around 15,000 speakers, Nengone around 10,000, Paicî around 7,000 and Ajië around 5,000.⁶ LCO degree course students also acquire language skills (oral and written skills in a Kanak language), they follow an introductory course in an Asia-Pacific region language (Polynesian or Asian), they learn about safeguarding and passing on the linguistic and cultural heritage of Oceania, etc. The course is not however reductive since it gives students an opportunity to not only acquire but expand their knowledge of the languages and cultures of Oceania. The course also helps to boost fluency in French and English, to promote the teaching of French as a second language and, above all, to cherish and cultivate New Caledonia's linguistic diversity.

The aim is to provide students with the tools they need to achieve mutual acceptance, knowledge and recognition, or simply to accept the reality of linguistic, social and cultural diversity, so that the common destiny brokered by the Noumea Accord proves a positive experience.

5 <https://denc.gouv.nc/textes-de-referance/la-reforme-de-2019>

6 According to Institute for Statistics and Economic Research figures for 2014.

Moreover, the crucial issue of language vitality must be addressed to identify the best approach to the preservation of endangered languages. According to UNESCO criteria assessing the vitality and endangerment of languages, sixteen Kanak languages are considered as endangered languages with fewer than a hundred speakers. To keep languages alive, they need to be passed on and teaching is one of the ways of passing them on. Linguists can also contribute to linguistic descriptions (grammar, vocabulary, dictionary, etc.), etc.; but the speakers of a language have a central role. They are the actors who must play their part by starting the process in their home environment: parents or grandparents must pass on their language to young people and children. Language is the carrier of a human culture, a civilization. In keeping with New Caledonia's language policy, assessing language vitality reveals how languages are used in social contexts. Their use in a variety of contexts (public or private) helps to promote language transmission and preservation. Perpetuating values, cultures and therefore Oceanic languages is a fundamental priority for a country like New Caledonia, a country facing the challenge of substantial change.

CONCLUSION

Under New Caledonia's language policy, only the Kanak languages, along with French, are taken into consideration; but only four of these Kanak languages are being taught. This means the Kanak languages are not given an equal footing and leads to differences in status, differences which also apply to all the other languages spoken in New Caledonia, some of which are completely overlooked. From the standpoint of pro-independence Kanak, making their languages a priority is justified by the Kanak status as first occupant, therefore these languages should be the primary concern of the language policy; the Oceanic languages (Wallisian, Tahitian, Futunan) and Asian languages (Indonesian, Javanese, Vietnamese, etc.) being represented in their countries of origin. But French is not treated in the same way as these languages because it is the lingua franca and the official language inherited from New Caledonia's colonial past. Currently, the predominance of French obscures New Caledonia's rich linguistic diversity. This situation is clearly the legacy of colonial concepts of language usage resulting in a dominant language holding sway over other dominated languages.

Moreover, for a country moving towards a common destiny, celebrating the social worth of the country's other Oceanic languages is essential. The concept of "living together" is not utopian, it must be achieved in practical terms and through the acceptance of the cultures and languages of other communities constituting the common wealth.

Consideration could be given to a balanced language policy rooted in a socially responsible approach encouraging community initiatives to raise awareness and appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity. Addressing the issue of language vitality is inextricably linked to changes in society, so that social usage and, given this diversity, the resilience shown by the languages spoken in New Caledonia can be assessed. Work in collaboration by cultural, social and linguistic stakeholders would be of use in identifying how to balance this diversity in a pluralistic country to accomplish a common destiny. Finally, art mediation would also represent one of the avenues to be considered by New Caledonia's board of education with a view to facilitating access to cultural diversity.

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