



LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT

Kwényi (New Caledonia) – Language Snapshot

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ABSTRACT

Kwényi, a Far Southern-Eastern Oceanic language spoken on the Isle of Pines in New Caledonia, is a member of the Far Southern subgroup of New Caledonian languages. It has been described as a tone language, though tone has more recently been observed as minimally present. With approximately 2000 speakers, it is under threat from French as the official and dominant language in the society. Kwényi was first studied as part of a larger survey of New Caledonian languages from the 1940s to the late 1970s, but a close and current examination of the language's phonetics and phonology, tone and morphosyntax is lacking. The author's recent PhD dissertation (Soon 2023) at the University of Sydney was undertaken to address this gap.

Keywords: Kwényi; New Caledonia; Oceanic; tone language



RÉSUMÉ

Nââ kwényi est une langue océanienne parlée sur l'île des Pins en Nouvelle-Calédonie, qui appartient au sous-groupe des langues de l'Extrême-Sud de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. Il a été décrit comme une langue à tons, bien que l'on ait plus récemment constaté que ces tons n'y sont que très faiblement présents. Avec environ 2 000 locuteurs, il est menacé par le français, langue officielle et dominante au sein de la société. Les premières études consacrées au Nââ kwényi s'inscrivaient dans une vaste enquête sur les langues de Nouvelle-Calédonie menée des années 1940 à la fin des années 1970, mais l'on ne dispose pas encore d'une analyse détaillée et contemporaine de la phonétique, de la phonologie, du système tonal et de la morphosyntaxe de cette langue. La thèse de doctorat récemment soutenue par l'auteure à l'Université de Sydney a pour objectif de combler cette lacune.

Keywords: Kwényi; Nouvelle-Calédonie; langues océaniques; langue à tons

LANGUAGE IDENTIFICATION

Language Name: Kwényi, Nââ Kwényi

Language Family: Southern, New Caledonia (Oceanic < Austronesian)

ISO 639-3 Code: kdk

Glottolog Code: kwen1247

Ethnologue link: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/kdk/>

Population: 2050 (INSEE 2025)

Location: 22.6149° S, 167.4817° E

Vitality rating: EGIDS 6b

1. LOCATION AND CLASSIFICATION

Kwényi or *Nââ Kwényi* (/na: k^wɛpi/ ‘the Kwényi language’) is a Far Southern-Eastern Oceanic language spoken by around 2000 people on the Isle of Pines in New Caledonia, a French overseas territory 1500 kilometres east of Australia in the Pacific Ocean. The Isle of Pines lies southeast of the *Grande Terre*, New Caledonia’s main island, as shown in the map in [Figure 1](#). Glottolog classifies *nââ Kwényi* along with *nââ Wêê* spoken on Ouen Island as a dialect of *nââ Numèè* (Hammarström et al. 2022). However, as Geraghty (1989) points out, the subgrouping of New Caledonian languages has generally been adopted without explicit evidential argumentation. By contrast, Rivierre (1973) describes *nââ Numèè*, *nââ Kwényi*, and *nââ Drubéa* as languages that through contact have diversified from a common root. The Kanak Language Academy groups these languages within the Drubéa-Kaponé *aire coutumière* ‘customary area’, a legally recognized region of New Caledonia that classifies the Kanak tribes of the far south and their associated languages together for language planning purposes (Académie des Langues Kanak n.d.b).

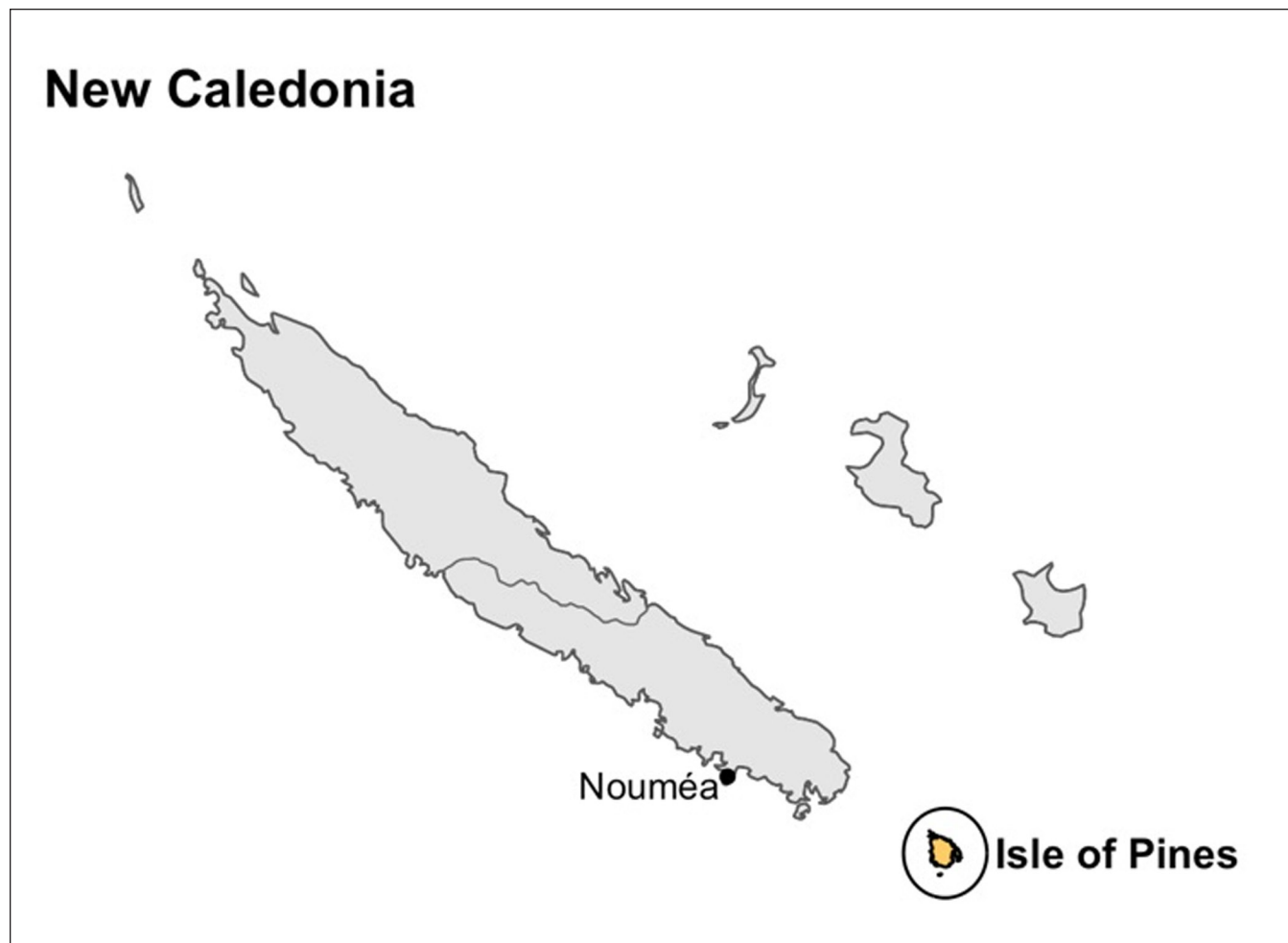


Figure 1: Location of the Isle of Pines in New Caledonia.

2. ETHNOLOGY

The term “Kanak” is derived from the Polynesian Hawaiian *kanaka* ‘person, human being’. In contemporary New Caledonia, it is used to refer to the Indigenous people of the archipelago and has been reappropriated as a positive marker of identity (Angleviel 2002). In the New Caledonian context, the French term *tribu* (‘tribe’) refers to a local Kanak residential community with its own customary chief and territory. The Isle of Pines is divided into eight Kanak “tribes” (Pantz & Roots 1990). The tribe is the basic unit of social organisation on the Isle of Pines as there is no word or concept equivalent for ‘family’. Within each tribe, the word *ce* /tʃə/, often translated as ‘family’, refers not just to the nuclear family but to a wider network of close kin (parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, etc.) belonging to the same tribal community. Historically, the people of the Isle of Pines are cultivators and navigators, and tribes are divided neatly into those that cultivate the land and those that navigate the sea.

Another essential part of societal life on the Isle of Pines is *la coutume* ‘custom’, an important theme in Kanak culture. Across Melanesia, anthropologists have analysed custom as a cosmopolitical system that links land, myth and social organisation (Missotte 1985; Leblic 1993), and as a key mechanism for maintaining social order and cohesion (Faberon 2016). As part of ‘custom’, gift-giving and the act of

faire la coutume ‘following custom’ during important social interactions and occasions create a constant flow of reciprocity as produce, especially yams, are exchanged. ‘Custom’ in Kanak culture also extends to the understanding of time and seasons. On the Isle of Pines, the cycle of yam planting governs the pace and priorities of life. Indeed, Haudricourt (1964) refers to the region as a ‘yam civilization’ (Haudricourt 1964: 93), highlighting the central cultural importance of yam cultivation in social and cultural life.

Cheyne & Shineberg (1971) note that before missionaries arrived on the island, the islanders appeared to worship many gods and engaged in traditional ritual and spiritual practices such as the prohibition of intercourse during yam or agricultural cultivation, on fishing excursions, and before and during war. Archaeologist Louis Lagarde’s (2012) research on the history of settlement in the Isle of Pines shows that prior to European contact, local beliefs consisted of a coherent cosmology centred on clan ancestry, sacred sites, and ritual authority. Through archaeological excavation and historical ethnography, Lagarde (2012) discovered that complex mortuary rituals were practiced throughout late prehistory and into the early colonial period, indicating a worldview in which ancestors, land, and ritual power were closely interlinked.

Protestant missionaries maintained a presence on the island from 1797 to 1842 (Pisier 1969). When Marist missionaries arrived from France in 1848, they brought about mass conversion to Catholicism between 1856 to 1858 and remained active on the island thereafter. By 1864, the whole island was considered Catholic. Today, a sculpture of Saint Maurice, a martyr punished for refusing to offer sacrifice to idols, stands at Vao and is surrounded by wooden totems representing the tribes of the island. It symbolizes the island’s acceptance and incorporation of Catholicism into their culture.

3. LINGUISTIC VITALITY

New Caledonian languages fall under the Central-Eastern Oceanic grouping of the Austronesian family’s Eastern Malayo-Polynesian branch. While documentation of most New Caledonian languages is sparse and only a handful of these Kanak languages (e.g., Xârâcùù, Drehu, Nengone) have over four thousand speakers (ISEE 2019), Kanak languages have persevered despite the suppressive influence of the colonial language, French. Though no Kanak languages have held the role of a lingua franca between communities (Vernaudeau 2013), pre-colonial New Caledonia enjoyed an egalitarian bilingualism (Haudricourt 1961).

French is at present the only official language of New Caledonia. Under the 1998 Noumea Accord, a political agreement that increased New Caledonia’s autonomy and formally acknowledged Kanak identity, Kanak languages are recognized as languages of education and culture. A diglossic (or even pluridiglossic, in the sense of Colombel & Fillool 2009)—situation persists in New Caledonia, with several languages coexist and are assigned to different, hierarchically organised social roles and domains of use. In New Caledonia, French and Kanak languages are associated with different “semio-cultural worlds” (Cunningham et al. 2006: 9) in which French is linked to education, economic activities, and political participation, while Kanak languages are used in informal situations and confined to the home domain and traditional life. As a result, Kanak languages are attributed a lower status than French, which is generally regarded as the superior language of success (Vernaudeau 2009). These factors contribute to Kanak languages’ lack of intergenerational transmission (Bissoonauth & Parish 2017). According to Veyret and Gobber (2000), only 33% of parents declared a Kanak language to be their primary language, and 70% of sixth graders reported that they did not know or speak any Kanak language.

Some efforts have been made to introduce Kanak languages into the education system. The Noumea Accord and the New Caledonia Organic Law established in 1998 ordained Kanak languages as “teaching and cultural languages in New Caledonia” and called for their place in schools and in the media to be increased (Vernaudon 2013: 115). The Academy of Kanak Languages was created in 2007 to preserve the “cultural identity of linguistic communities”, with standardization and provision of orthographies for Kanak languages a priority (Académie des Langues Kanak n.d.a). Since 2008, Kanak languages have also been recognized by the French government in the French Constitution as part of the *patrimoine linguistique de la France* ‘linguistic heritage of France’. This recognition has resulted in support for the production of dictionaries, grammars and school materials now available in several Kanak languages (*Mission aux Affaires Culturelles*, n.d.; *Ministère de la Culture*, n.d.).

Nonetheless, many obstacles remain for the transmission efforts of Kanak languages, as many lack written materials and teachers who can teach them. These common problems are faced by the speakers of Kwényi too. The publication of Gouraya et al’s (2011) *Propositions d’écriture du nâ kwényi* by the Academy has been instrumental in helping students and teachers write and teach in Kwényi. And the teaching of Kwényi in a private local school, Saint-Joseph of Vao, under the *Direction Diocésaine de l’École Catholique* ‘Diocesan Office for Catholic Education’ only began around ten years ago (Wacalie 2013). However, linguistic resources such as a grammatical description, a dictionary, and pedagogical tools to teach the language are scarce. Islanders have taken it upon themselves to form a language committee to discuss language-related matters monthly to consolidate linguistic knowledge and produce standardized vocabulary lists for students.

There are currently two main registers of spoken Kwényi. The high standard form of Kwényi is used in ceremonial and religious domains and is mainly spoken by chiefs and elders during important gatherings. It contains no loanwords and is devoid of external linguistic influence. I heard this form of Kwényi used on one occasion (Soon 2023) in the opening speech of *la fête des ignames*, the yam festival. Ritual speech registers of this kind are common among Austronesian language communities in the Pacific (Kuipers 2013). A lower colloquial register spoken in everyday life incorporates French and English loanwords and is less standardized. Younger informants describe divergence in the way Kwényi is spoken, distinguished by speakers’ age and the amount of French influence on the syntax and lexicon, such that some varieties may even be mutually unintelligible. The matter deserves further study.

4. TYPOLOGICAL SUMMARY

Kwényi is a Far Southern New Caledonian language. While it varies from verb-initial Austronesian (and other New Caledonian) languages in terms of word order and clause structure, its SVO word order fits the typology of Far Southern languages. Its nominative-accusative argument structure is typical of Oceanic languages (Ross 2004). As in Numèè, a dialect of Kwényi (Wacalie 2013), grammatical relations are marked by syntactic order.

Kwényi has a very rich vowel inventory, a phonological characteristic it shares with other Far Southern languages. In an earlier work, Rivierre (1973) analyses Kwényi as having 17 vowel phonemes: 10 oral vowels and 7 nasal vowels. By contrast, Gouraya et al. (2011) proposes a larger system of 18 vowels for Kwényi, including the addition of the vowel /ɪ/ that is not commonly found among New Caledonian languages. The present author’s (2023) study finds an inventory of 15 vowels, 9 oral and 6 nasal. Front vowels /ɪ/ and /ø/ and rounded nasal vowels /ỹ/ and /õ/ that were present in Gouraya et al.’s (2011)

account appear to have either been lost in the variety documented or merged into an unrounded central vowel /i/.

Rivierre (1973) and Gouraya et al. (2011) describe 25 and 27 consonants respectively, with the latter including the lateral /l/ and the labialised velar /^ŋg^w/. My (2023) description finds 26 consonants, reflecting the loss of retroflex consonants /ŋ/ and /ɽ/ but adding the trill /r/. The palatal plosives /c/ and /^ɲj/ noted in earlier descriptions are now realised as affricates /tʃ/ and /^ɲdʒ/. The language is unusual in having six consonant clusters that are prohibited in all other New Caledonian languages. Vowel sequences are attested in Kwényi, as with most New Caledonian languages, e.g., in Belep (McCracken, 2012) and Nyelâyu (Ozanne-Rivierre et al. 1998), yet it is an outlier in having diphthongs as well.

Rivierre (1978) already noted that the tonal contrasts in Kwényi appeared unstable and Gouraya et al. (2011) described tone in Kwényi as “vague”. If we follow Hyman’s (2006:229) broad definition of tone as the involvement of pitch in “the lexical realization of at least some morphemes”, my research suggests that tone is minimally present in Kwényi (see the monosyllabic minimal pairs shown in Table 1).

	Low tone	High tone
Nu /nu/	‘island’	‘knife’
De / ^ɲ də/	‘grown coconut’	‘sugarcane’
Ne /nə/	‘leaf’	‘daughter’

Table 1: Tonal minimal pairs.

5. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Early Protestant missionaries attempted to translate the Gospels into Kwényi in 1847 and managed to publish a list of words in 1861, but it was Father Goujon’s translation and publication of a catechism using a partly Gallicized orthography (see Figure 2) that marked the scientific study of the language in 1888 (Pisier 1969). Linguistic studies of Kwényi were later carried out by Leenhardt (1946) and Grace (1955) as part of a larger survey of New Caledonian languages, followed by the more detailed studies of Far Southern New Caledonian languages by Rivierre (1973) and Dubois (1977). The Pangloss Collection preserves a Kwényi narrative recorded in 1967, *Story of Mâgênîîî* by Kotere Bénédicto (Kotere 1967), offering valuable evidence of the language as it was spoken in the mid-20th century. A proposed orthography for the language was published by the Academy of Kanak Languages in New Caledonia (Gouraya et al. 2011), and Wacalie (2013) provides an updated description of a closely related Far South Kanak Language, nââ Numèè. The Académie des Langues Kanak has continued to publish thematic lexicons and stories in Kwényi, and a language promotion programme funded by the mining company Goro Nickel has sought to produce trilingual nature-themed posters in Numèè, Kwényi, and Drubéa along with other teaching tools (Wacalie, 2020). Until recently, a close and up to date examination of Kwényi’s phonetics and phonology, tone and morphosyntax was lacking. This gap has now been partially filled by the author’s University of Sydney PhD research, published as *Kwényi: A Sketch Grammar from a Historical Perspective* (Soon 2023).

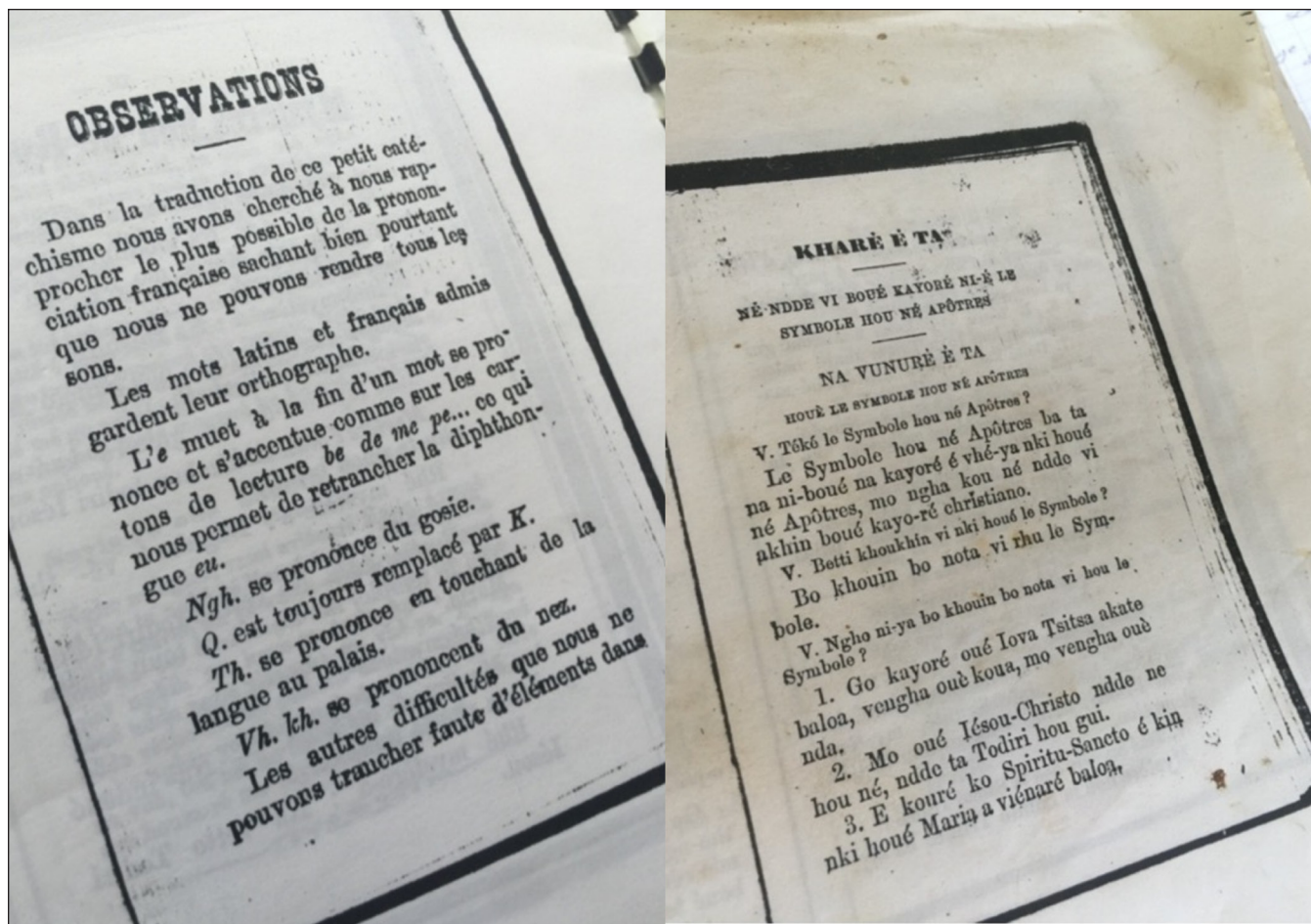


Figure 2: 1888 Kwényi catechism.

6. CURRENT RESEARCH

The author carried out approximately four months of fieldwork over two trips to New Caledonia between 2018 and 2020, with the latter unfortunately disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The main consultants were two men and one woman above the age of 60 who were elders on the local language committee, with data comprising recordings of conversations with local elders, word list elicitations, and Catholic hymns in Kwényi. The work draws comparative conclusions about Kwényi from a historical perspective by tracing processes of sound change and tone change through comparison with descriptions in the existing literature. The data from the project are currently being prepared for deposit in PARADISEC, an open-access archive for endangered languages of the Pacific. Once metadata and community permissions are finalized, the data set will be made publicly available through this repository. A future goal is to complete an in-depth study of Kwényi's tone to uncover the origins and changes in the language's tonal system. It is hoped that a full synchronic description of Kwényi will one day be available to inform and aid in the language's future transmission.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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