



Paicî (Central mainland, New Caledonia) – Language Snapshot

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LANGUAGE SNAPSHOTS



ABSTRACT

Paicî, a Central-Eastern Oceanic language of the South Pacific, is a member of the Central subgroup of Northern Mainland languages of New Caledonia. Paicî is a tone language, which is unusual for Oceania, although less so for mainland New Caledonia. Spoken by around 6,500 people, it is one of the most vital of the approximately 30 Kanak (New Caledonia Melanesian) languages and is used at various levels of education. Nevertheless, like all mainland New Caledonian languages, it is under severe threat from French, the language of colonization. Increasing numbers of children are growing up with French as their dominant language. Colonization has also resulted in the erosion of some traditional cultural practices. General surveys of New Caledonian languages between the 1940s and early 1970s included early documentation of some aspects of Paicî. The French linguist J.-C. Rivierre produced a dictionary (1983) and examined tone (1974), research subsequently furthered by F. Lionnet (2019, 2022). Substantial collections of Paicî texts have been published by Rivierre and others since the 1970s. However, a detailed examination of its morphosyntax has not yet been undertaken. To fill this void, one of the authors of the present article has begun Ph.D. research on the topic; the other is working on a pedagogical grammar.

RÉSUMÉ

Le paicî, langue du groupe océanien du sud, est membre du sous-groupe central des langues du nord de la Grande Terre de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (Pacifique du Sud). C'est une langue tonale, chose rare en Océanie (bien que pas unique en Nouvelle-Calédonie). Parlée par environ 6 500 personnes et utilisée dans l'éducation primaire et secondaire, elle se trouve parmi les langues qui se portent le mieux de la trentaine de langues néo-calédoniennes. Comme les autres langues du pays, elle est néanmoins gravement menacée par le français, la langue colonisatrice, qui devient la langue dominante pour un nombre croissant d'enfants. La colonisation a également entraîné l'érosion de certaines pratiques culturelles traditionnelles. Des recherches générales sur les langues néo-calédoniennes des

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années 1940 au début des années 1970 fournissent quelques renseignements sur le paicî. Par la suite, le linguiste J.-C. Rivierre a publié un dictionnaire (1983). Son étude de la tonalité du paicî (1974) est renforcée par Lionnet (2019, 2022). Des recueils importants de textes paicî ont été publiés par Rivierre et d'autres depuis les années 1970. L'examen détaillé de la morphosyntaxe du paicî reste à faire. Pour combler ce vide, l'un des auteurs du présent article a entamé un projet de recherche doctorale; l'autre entreprend une grammaire pédagogique.

Language Name: Paicî; Cî (autonym)

Language Family: Central, North Mainland, New Caledonia (Oceanic)

ISO 639-3 Code: pri

Glottolog Code: paic1239

Ethnologue link: www.ethnologue.com/language/pri

Population: ~6,500

Location: -21.10, 165.15

Vitality rating: EGIDS 6b

1. LOCATION

Paicî (IPA /paicî/) is a Central-Eastern Oceanic language spoken in New Caledonia (NC), a French-speaking dependency in the western South Pacific (Figure 1). Paicî is spoken by around 6,500 people in a 40 km-wide band across the center-north part of the mainland (Figure 2), bordered



Figure 1 New Caledonia in the South Pacific.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. Cropped and circle added.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Oceania_UN_Geoscheme_-_Map_of_Melanesia.svg

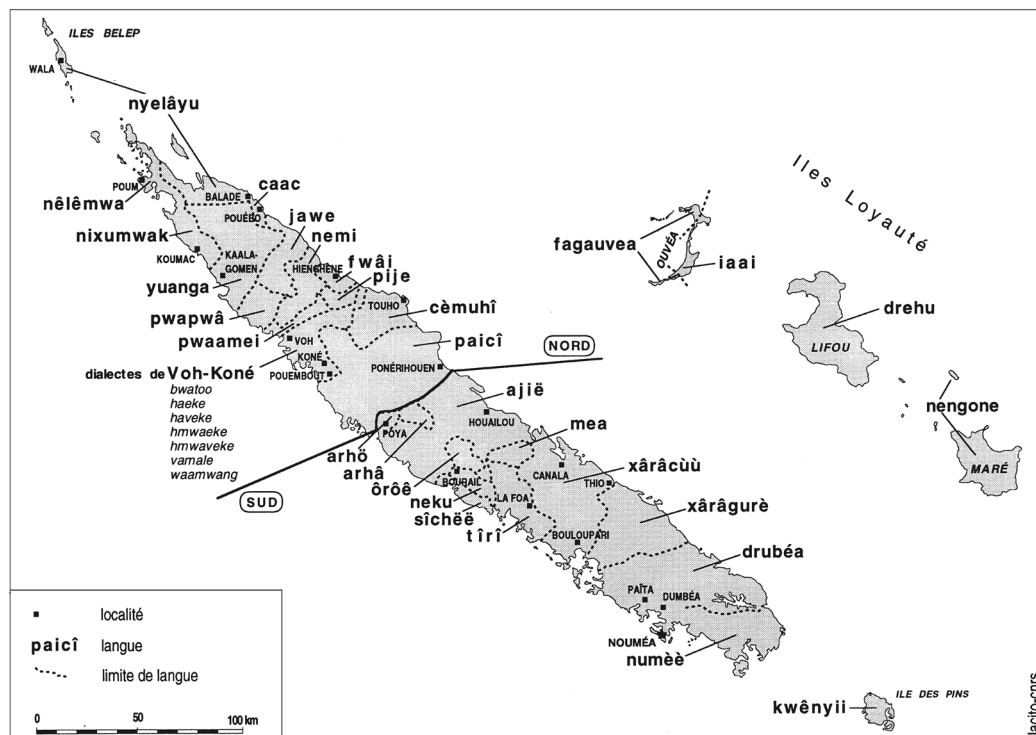


Figure 2 Languages of New Caledonia (Source: Ozanne-Rivierre 2000: 84).

roughly by the towns of Poindimié (not shown on map) and Ponérihouen on the East Coast, and Koné and Poya on the West Coast.¹ Paicî has the greatest number of speakers of the indigenous mainland NC languages.

2. ETHNOLOGY

Paicî society shares fundamental ethnological features with other NC Melanesian (Kanak) communities. Key among these is that “social organization is based on clans (groups consisting of several families) gathered within a chiefdom” (Cauchard 2014: 14). However, Paicî society is almost unique in NC in that it is traditionally a moiety system, with most clans belonging to one of two intermarrying groups. This system is followed somewhat less in practice than in theory (see Leblic 2000), and there has been some erosion through contact with Western culture and other Kanak groups, however it is still important. In common with other Kanak groups, social relationships are governed by a set of unwritten protocols called *la coutume* (literally ‘custom’) in NC French, in which reciprocal ritual gift-giving accompanied by oratorical exchanges plays a key role.

Traditionally, Kanak society depended on subsistence agriculture, with cultivation of the yam (*dioscorea* spp.) being particularly important, along with manioc (cassava), taro, banana, and sweet potato. This was, and is still, supplemented by fishing and hunting.

After over 160 years of French colonization, many elements of a Western lifestyle have been introduced into Kanak society: children attend French-medium schools from the age of 3; one or more members of most extended families have a paid job; and traditional food is supplemented by Western food bought in shops and supermarkets. Today, almost all Kanaks have access to Western technology and media. French is the primary language used for social media posts and texting, although there is some limited code-switching with Paicî.

Paicî language use and a traditional Kanak lifestyle are maintained to a greater extent in the villages located in the hills and valleys more distant from towns and main roads.

¹ The 2019 census (see ENL 2021, a spreadsheet showing Kanak language speaker numbers from the last five censuses), gave the number as 6,530, but this excludes children under 14 years.

3. GENETIC AND AREAL AFFILIATIONS

New Caledonian languages are part of the NC Linkage, a subgroup of the Central-Eastern Oceanic Linkage of languages. Within the NC Linkage, Paicî is classified, along with its closest neighbor Cemuhi, in the Central subgroup of the Northern group of Mainland NC languages (Ozanne-Rivierre 1995, 2000, based on Leenhardt 1946 and Haudricourt 1971).²

4. TYPOLOGICAL SUMMARY AND PLACE WITHIN NEW CALEDONIAN LANGUAGES

Paicî is a nexus between Southern and Northern NC Mainland languages. Typologically Northern, it has an unmarked VOS word order and shares Northern changes in the place of articulation of consonant sets. However, the authors observe that unlike other Northern languages, Paicî currently shows no traces of ergative-absolutive marking.³ Paicî also shares key phonological features of Southern languages, such as loss of final consonants and a very rich vowel system (the latter being rare in Oceanic languages).⁴ Another characteristic of Paicî that is highly unusual in Oceanic languages is that it is tonal, something it shares with its other Central neighbor, Cemuhi, and the languages of the Extreme South of NC.

5. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The first attempts to document Paicî were as part of general surveys of New Caledonian languages, conducted between the 1940s and early 1970s. Leenhardt (1946), Grace (1955), and Haudricourt (n.d., 1963, 1971) include word lists and occasional brief notes. The seminal descriptive linguistic works on Paicî are by the late Jean-Claude Rivierre of France's *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS). Rivierre (1983) is a ca. 3,500-word Paicî–French dictionary. Rivierre (1974) is the first examination of tone in Paicî.

Florian Lionnet has more recently furthered the analysis of Paicî tone. Rivierre originally identified three tones, which he called H(igh), M(id), and L(ow). Lionnet (2019) relabels these as H, L, and downstep (ˀ), respectively; he also re-examines Rivierre's data through the lens of Optimality Theory to argue for the *colon* as a separate constituent in the prosodic hierarchy intermediate between the foot and the word. Lionnet (2022) explores Paicî downstep and notes several typologically unusual features.

The discussions and orthography proposals in Haudricourt et al. (1979: 53–57), Bouchet et al. (1984), and ALK (2013) contain lists of consonant and vowel phonemes and some minimal pairs. Gordon and Maddieson's 2004 work explores the acoustic properties of Paicî vowels using formant analysis.

Aspects of Paicî's morphosyntax have been mentioned in a number of works, mostly in passing, but occasionally in slightly more detail. Apart from Leenhardt's (1946) and Haudricourt's (1971) initial surveys of NC languages, significant among these are the five-page sketch in Bensa and Rivierre (1976) and several papers (co-)authored by the CNRS linguist Claire Moyse-Faurie examining aspects of Oceanic morphosyntax (for example, Moyse-Faurie 2012).

Rivierre's ethnologist colleague, Alban Bensa, collaborated with Rivierre and others to publish various collections of Paicî texts (Bensa & Rivierre 1976, 1983, 1994; Bensa & Goromido 2005; Bensa et al. 2015). Many of Rivierre's recordings, including some not otherwise published, are

² *Cemuhi* is also spelt *Cèmuhi* in the literature. The authors use the simplified orthography approved in 2013 by the elders of the two districts of Touho (Cemuhi area).

³ The authors' observations are that Paicî's syntactic alignment is split between a nominative-accusative system for arguments referring to persons and a direct or neutral system for impersonal arguments in which Agent, Subject and Object are all unmarked. The details are beyond the scope of this introductory paper but will be explored in the authors' forthcoming research.

⁴ Paicî has 16–17 vowel phonemes in total, including 6–7 nasal vowels. (The imprecision in the count is due to the synchronic uncertainty of the phonemic status of one of the nasal vowels.)

also accessible through the online CNRS Pangloss archive of material on endangered languages: <https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/>. The New Caledonian language academy (ALK) website also has written and recorded materials in Paicî: <https://alk.nc/>. The Paicî New Testament (TP 2012) as well as various smaller works published in Paicî in hard copy or online over the last 15 or so years provide a corpus of additional Paicî texts.

There is reference to Paicî culture and concepts in a number of other types of mostly non-linguistic literature. Notable among these are the 15 or so papers written by the ethnologist Isabelle Leblic, and a similar number of novels and poetry collections written by the late Déwé Gorodey, a prominent Paicî politician and author (e.g., Leblic 2000; Gorodey 2012). The use of Paicî in such works is restricted to occasional words or short phrases, although some of Gorodey's work has been subsequently translated into Paicî and made available online.

Despite the significant mention of Paicî in literature, both linguistic and otherwise, a thorough systematic exploration of Paicî morphosyntax is yet to be undertaken (see, e.g., the comments in Lionnet 2022: 2). The first author of the present article, Ian Flaws, has just begun a Ph.D. research project at The University of Waikato (Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato), New Zealand, to help fill this void; the other, Jacques Pourouda, is a Paicî language advocate and educator who intends to write a pedagogical grammar for Paicî speakers.

6. SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION

Paicî has one of the highest vitality ratings among Kanak languages, and it is taught as a subject at ten junior high schools and two senior high schools on the mainland, as well as at the University of New Caledonia in Nouméa. There remains, however, a lack of educational resources and coordination between different groups working on the language. Despite its educational status, Paicî, like all Kanak languages, is under severe threat from French, the official language and NC lingua franca. Informal observation by the authors and others is that increasing numbers of Paicî children are growing up with French as their dominant language.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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