

MISSION-EDUCATED GIRLS IN 19th CENTURY SAINT-LOUIS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF TAYO

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Abstract

Between 1860 and 1920, a creole language, Tayo, emerged as the community language of Saint-Louis a former Marist mission in southern New Caledonia. This article briefly introduces the demographic history of Saint-Louis and the arrival of Melanesian neophytes from different ethno-linguistic areas of the colony before discussing the influence of education on the development of Tayo, the Pacific's only French-lexified creole language. It closely examines the role played by the mission-educated Saint-Louis girls in the formation of this language of intra-village communication, exploring the teaching conditions at Saint-Louis at both the boys' and girls' schools and comparing these with other mission schools in New Caledonia. Highlighting the exceptional nature of the linguistic ecology of Saint-Louis, it considers the reasons why a French-based creole evolved in Saint-Louis as opposed to an indigenous language-based creole or the adoption of one of the Kanak languages spoken by the neophytes as a vehicular language.

Keywords

Tayo, creole languages, Saint-Louis, New Caledonia, Mission schools, sociolinguistics

Introduction

The Pacific archipelago of New Caledonia is situated some 1200 kilometres to the east of Australia. The ancestors of the local Melanesians began arriving in the islands in small groups from about 4,000 to 5,000 years ago. Polynesians from Samoa, Tonga and Wallis Island formed a much later group of migrants. Europeans entered into contact with the indigenous inhabitants from the 18th Century. The early 19th Century saw increasing contact through whaling, the sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber) trade and then, from 1840, the installation of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries. France took possession of New Caledonia in 1853 and colonisation began. In addition to French and other European colonists, the agricultural and mining ambitions of the Administration led to the importation of labourers from many countries including India, Reunion Island, the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), Vietnam, Indonesia and Japan. In 1864 New Caledonia became a penal colony. The indigenous Melanesian or Kanak population suffered greatly under French colonisation. European diseases and harsh repression under the Indigenous Code saw numbers decrease dramatically until they began to rise again slowly from the 1930s. Kanaks did not gain French citizenship until after World War II. Under the Noumea Accord of 1998 New Caledonia's status changed

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from that of an overseas territory to a special collectivity of France. The transfer of power from metropolitan France to New Caledonia is ongoing.

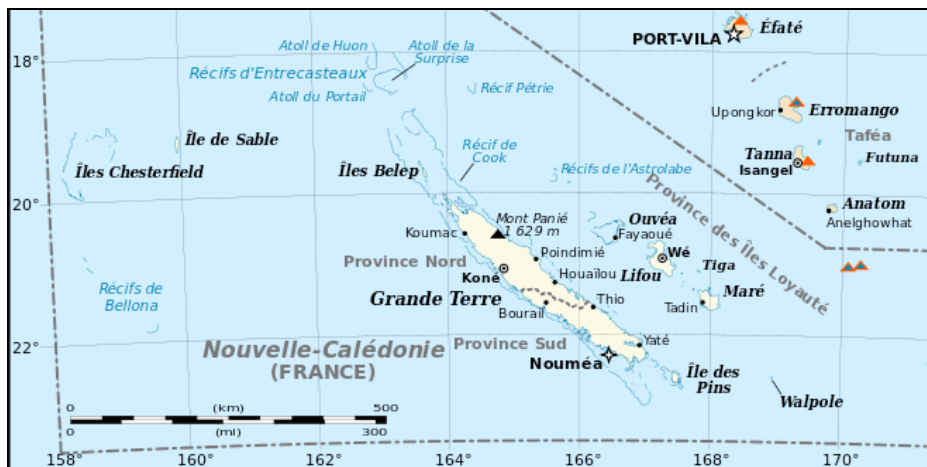


Figure 1 – Map of New Caledonia and Vanuatu (Source: Eric Gaba, Wikipedia, 2009)

Tayo is the only documented French-based creole language in the Pacific. It functions as the community language of the village of Saint-Louis, a former Marist *réduction*,¹ located approximately 15 kilometres from Noumea in the commune of Mont-Dore, New Caledonia. This language, which evolved *in situ* in conditions somewhat akin to those of the plantation societies of the Indian Ocean or the Caribbean, had input from a variety of Melanesian languages spoken by the Kanak neophytes and villagers as well as the French of missionaries and convicts, the Reunion Creole of sugar workers and the *bichelamar* of New-Hebridean labourers.² This article considers the role of education in the development of Tayo. Why were the Saint-Louis mission-educated girls regarded as key players in the formation of this language? How did conditions on the *réduction* compare to those of other Marist missions in 19th Century New Caledonia? What made the educational experience at Saint-Louis different from the rest of the colony? And to what extent did the Saint-Louis education and conditions at the *réduction* have influenced the creation of a language of intra-village communication?

Creole in Saint-Louis

Before exploring the questions as to why and under what conditions a creole developed on the Saint-Louis Mission in New Caledonia, it is useful to define what is meant by the term 'creole language'.³ In very simple terms, creoles are contact languages that evolve in situations where speakers of mutually unintelligible languages are brought together, often under duress, and need to develop a new community language. The classic scenario for creole genesis involved slave colonies where large numbers of (mostly African) slaves speaking mutually unintelligible languages worked labour-intensive crops such as sugar or cotton on plantations. Their limited access to the language of power (the variety of whatever European language was spoken by the slave owners) led to a process of creolisation (abrupt or gradual), or the evolution of a new creole language.

These creole languages are said to comprise elements from ‘superstrate’ (European) languages, ‘substrate’ (African) languages as well as ‘universal’ features.

This simplified explanation does not, however, inform us of the complexities of language contact, nor does it account for the development of creole languages in colonies where there were no slaves or where substrate languages were not African.⁴ Indeed, most of the theories of creole genesis that I briefly sketch below do not adequately explain the existence of creoles in the Pacific (Tok Pisin, Solomon Islands Pijin, Torres Strait Broken, Bislama, Norf’k, Tayo etc.). Nonetheless, it is important to outline the main theories so that we can critique/tweak them as necessary in order to understand the dynamics of language development in Saint-Louis.

Theories of creolisation

Linguists have taken an interest in creole languages since the late 19th Century. Out of the early descriptions of ‘bastard languages’, defective and inferior to their European lexifiers, have emerged a large number of competing theories of creole genesis based, for the most part, more on scientific observation and socio-historical research than on colonial ideologies.⁵ Traditionally, these theories have been broadly categorised as follows: the superstrate hypothesis, the substrate hypothesis and the universalist hypothesis. The superstrate hypothesis highlights the important role of dialectal varieties of the lexifier in the development of a creole language. Superstratists generally acknowledge some contribution of substrate languages to creoles, which are structurally different from overseas varieties of the lexifier (ie Canadian French, New Zealand English, Brazilian Portuguese etc.), but see the non-standard varieties of the European input languages as the main source of features in the emergent creole.⁶ In the classic scenario, according to superstratists, slaves were targeting versions of the superstrate which, as slave numbers increased and the economy moved from small-scale farming to large plantations, became further and further removed from the language of the masters. In other words, the newcomers’ access to the language of power decreased and therefore their approximations of this language moved structurally further away from the European varieties (Chaudenson, 1992, 2003).

The substrate hypothesis argues that creoles owe most of their grammatical features to African (or other substrate) languages. The extreme version of the substrate hypothesis is the relexification theory (cf Sylvain, 1936; Lefebvre, 2005). Under this scenario, substrate speakers are said to relexify their native tongues. The vocabulary of the new creole is thus largely drawn from the European language while the grammar is based on the substrate language(s). To counter the fact that slaves did not represent a homogeneous linguistic group, there is some consensus that this type of transfer was more likely when substrate languages were sufficiently similar so as to share certain grammatical structures and it was these “cryptotypes” (cf Manessy, 1989) that made their way into the creole. When there was convergence with European structures, the transfer of the substrate grammatical structure was even more probable (Corne, 2000b).

In terms of universal theories, Derek Bickerton’s language bioprogram hypothesis has been very influential in creolistics circles.⁷ For Bickerton, who based his theories on his studies of Hawai’i Creole, creole languages were formed by children who tapped into their ‘universal grammar’ to nativise their parents’ pidgin, a language that was perceived of as inadequate for the needs and purposes of a first language. Bickerton’s theories

have been adapted by others to allow for the role of adult second language acquisition (SLA) in the development of a new community language.⁸ While there is evidence that, in some cases at least, creoles did evolve from pidgins that were subsequently nativised by children, this is not the only possible scenario for creole genesis. Superstratists, for instance, see creolisation as more of a process of basilectalisation than the elaboration of a more complex first language from a pidgin. The complementary hypothesis (cf Mufwene, 1996, 2001; Baker and Corne 1996; Corne 1999) favours a more holistic approach to understanding creole development that takes into consideration the roles of the superstrate, substrate and universals as well as a paying greater attention to socio-demographic histories in creolophone communities. Mufwene (2001, 2002) has elaborated a theory of creole genesis which uses genetic or biological metaphors and analogies, seeing the ‘founder population; ie the first arrivals in a given colony (slave and free) as important contributors to a ‘feature pool’ where linguistic features compete for selection into a nascent creole. Intuitively, this hypothesis is appealing but critics such as McWhorter (1998, 2008) demonstrate that it too has flaws as an all-encompassing theory of creole genesis.

How, then, can we best approach the question of creole genesis in Saint-Louis? In my view, it is very important to have as clear an idea as possible of the socio-demographic history and the social dynamics of any given creole-speaking community (Speedy, 1995). Establishing not only who was present at the time of creole genesis but also how different groups interacted, the social status afforded certain groups and the degree of movement within and without of the community etc. are all crucial for understanding the dynamics of creole genesis. While general theories of creolisation are helpful for us to comprehend the forces involved in the creation of a new community language, it is important not to get lost in debates that offer a single, universal explanation for the development of new languages that evolve under very particular circumstances. As Annegret Bollée says about the somewhat atypical development of Reunion Creole, “chaque creole a son histoire à lui” (‘every creole has its own story’) (Bollée, 2007: 133).⁹ Taking an ‘ecological’ approach (cf Mufwene, 2001; Mühlhäusler, 2011) to the question of creole genesis allows us to consider all of the factors (historical, social and economic) that came into play when the language was developing. This approach is especially pertinent for creoles that do not conform to the classic scenarios. Tayo, which evolved on a Marist Mission among Melanesian neophytes, is a case in point.

A brief history of Saint-Louis

In 1860, Marist missionaries set up a Mission at Saint-Louis, some 15 kilometres from Nouméa. The Marists had been granted a large land concession in the sparsely populated Far South in 1857. This was a time when their activities were encouraged by the local authorities.¹⁰ The *réduction*, which would eventually comprise a church, boarding schools for boys and girls, a missionary training school, a seminary and a printing works, was seen as an important instrument in the ‘civilising mission’.¹¹ The Marist *réductions* differed from the more usual type of implantation of missionaries within indigenous ‘tribes’.¹² The *réduction* was designed as a place of education, training and indoctrination. Targeted individuals, young people and children for the most part, were separated from their home environment and instructed, not only in the Catholic faith, but also in European ways. Indeed, the Marists believed that by moulding the Kanaks on the French peasantry they would be able to raise them from their

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“degraded state” (Delbos, 1993: 101). Father Rougeyron, describing the Kanaks of Saint-Louis, wrote:

Our Christians, separated from the pagans, live in their village like the good peasants of Auvergne live in their mountains. None go to bed without having read their three dozen Ave Marias. They are happy and I with them. (ibid)

The purpose of the *réduction* was also to provide training for future Kanak missionaries who, once their devotion and zeal were assured, were to be sent back to their tribes to convert their brethren (Brou, 1982: 2).

The Marists thus brought in neophytes, converted Catholics from different regions who spoke structurally related yet mutually unintelligible Melanesian languages, to Saint-Louis. The majority of the first Melanesian arrivals in Saint-Louis were from Touho.¹³ These converts accompanied the Marists from La Conception, where they had been living.¹⁴ The Touho, who established a village at Saint-Louis, spoke Cèmuhi, a Centre-North language. They were soon joined by Kanaks from Yahoué, Mont-Dore, l’île Ouen and Païta who spoke Drubea and Numèè, languages from the Far South group. These Kanaks settled around the Touho village but remained separated from the Touho. Over the next few years the settlement grew, with Kanaks from other areas joining the community and pupils from the school settling there rather than returning to their tribes. In 1880, after the Franco-Kanak war of 1878, refugees arrived from Bouloupari. They spoke Xârâgurè and Xârâcùù, languages from the South group (Corne, 1999: 20).

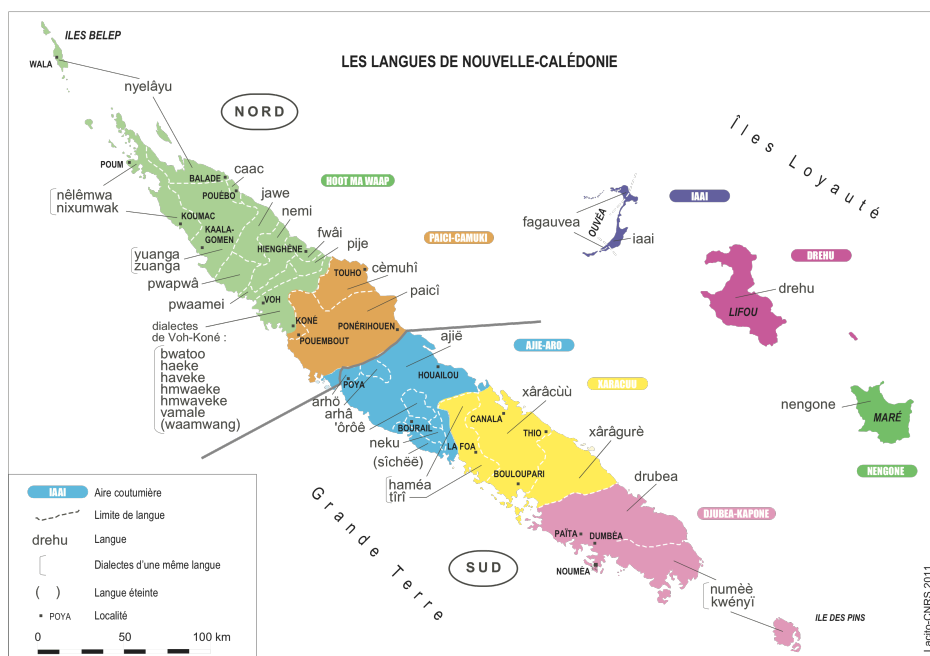


Figure 2 – Map of New Caledonian Languages (Source: Académie des langues kanak © LACITO-CNRS, 2011)

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The village of Saint-Louis developed along ethno-linguistic lines, with the emergence of four distinct quarters (St-Paul, St-Thomas, St-Jean and St-Tarcicius) each with its own distinct and mutually unintelligible ancestral language. According to oral histories, these Melanesian languages, albeit varieties 'contaminated' by French, were spoken in the village until about 1920. Children born after this time generally spoke Tayo as their first language and had only a passive knowledge of ancestral languages (Corne, 1994, 1999 and 2000a).

Saint-Louis – an agricultural centre

In addition to religious activities, Saint-Louis was a very important agricultural centre. Numerous food crops were planted on the Mission lands and the missionaries built a sawmill, a hydraulic wheel and a grain mill. The Marists also specialised in sugar production and, alongside the sugar plantations, a sugar mill was erected in 1868 followed by a rum distillery in 1875 (Brou, 1982).¹⁵ In order to provide food and clothing for the burgeoning numbers of neophytes and school pupils on the Mission, more and more labour was needed. The neophytes themselves provided much of the labour with children spending only half a day at school and the rest of the day in the fields. Adult villagers spent most of their time working in the fields (Brou, 1982; Ehrhart, 1992).

For the Marists, this was all part of their plan to 'civilise' the indigenous population. In a letter to his niece in 1867, Father Rougeyron wrote:

*What we are doing here is what monks used to do back in France. We group people around us and get them to clear the land. We teach them how to work and to be good Christians. You really should see them – how happy they are!*¹⁶

The huge labour demands of sugar production, however, saw the Marists turn to more specialist sugar workers. Malabar and other sugar workers from Reunion Island, speakers of Reunion Creole, were working in Saint-Louis from 1869 (Brou, 1982, Speedy, 2007a).¹⁷ Convict labourers and workers from Vanuatu (*les Néo-Hébridais*) arrived soon after.¹⁸ Kanaks from Saint-Louis came into contact with these workers, and the variety of languages that they spoke, in the fields as well as in their daily affairs. These languages have naturally left a trace in Tayo.¹⁹ Yet, as we have seen, different languages spoken by imported workers were only part of the multilingual situation in Saint-Louis.

Given the strong hierarchical nature of the Mission and the fact that Kanaks were taken to Saint-Louis as converts for the purpose of education (religious or technical), we must assume that the target language for the community was French, the language of power, prestige and 'civilisation'. In 1863, Governor Guillaïn decreed that French would be the only language of instruction permitted in the colony's schools and, in Saint-Louis at least, the law was upheld. The Marists employed indigenous *moniteurs* (instructors/teacher aides) with ethno-linguistic backgrounds different from those of the children so they would not use Kanak languages to communicate with the children and they would in turn ensure that the children did not speak Kanak languages in school (Ehrhart, 2012: 134). Punishment for speaking ancestral languages in school included restricting food rations and increasing the amount of labour required out of school.²⁰

Some neophytes then, especially the children and those training at the seminary, would have had relatively frequent interactions with the Marists and the French-speaking indigenous *moniteurs* and thus would have had a reasonable opportunity to learn their French. The majority of Melanesians at Saint-Louis, however, were required to work in the fields and thus would have had limited access to the French of the Marists. The Kanaks of Saint-Louis were therefore mostly engaged in second language learning. For some (school pupils), this was guided SLA, for others (field workers) this was unguided SLA. Social conditions resembled plantation society conditions in slave colonies and were thus conducive to the development of a creole language. Indeed, the grouping together of people with such diverse linguistic backgrounds meant that a community language was needed and Tayo was the result.

Why did a French creole develop as the community language of Saint-Louis rather than a creolised indigenous language?

The need for the Kanaks of Saint-Louis to communicate with each other and with others in the community seems the most likely motivation for the emergence of Tayo. While Melanesian languages undoubtedly played a strong role in its development, it is not exclusively a Melanesian creation. It is not relexified Drubea as some locals have claimed (cf Ehrhart, 1993).²¹ Rather, it contains numerous grammatical features common to Melanesian languages, some innovations as well as grammatical and lexical structures from the varieties of French and other languages spoken at Saint-Louis.

That French was a target language for the neophytes was determined by the important founding role played by the Marists. It was solely because of the activities of the Marists that Kanaks from all over New Caledonia found themselves living in Saint-Louis. The Marists, like slave-owners in other creole colonies, held the power in the community and their language (French) was used to teach in the schools. It is important to note, however, that the adult neophytes were willing participants in the Mission activities. While the plantation conditions at Saint-Louis were similar to those found in the Caribbean or Indian Ocean colonies (linguistic diversity, agriculturally-based society, large numbers of workers compared to 'masters'),²² the Kanaks were not slaves. Most of the adult converts had gone there of their own accord and apparently accepted the lifestyle of the *réduction*. This is one factor to consider when accounting for their incentive to target French, rather than an ancestral language. It could be argued that if the sole objective was to create a language for inter-ethnic communication, the Kanaks of Saint-Louis could have targeted Cèmuhi, the language of the first arrivals, or Drubea, the language of the local Kanaks, both of which enjoyed a certain prestige. Yet this would imply that they had a free choice in this decision. The reality of the situation was that they were at the mission to be 'civilised' and a very important step towards civilisation, according to the colonial discourses of the time, was the eradication of 'barbarous' tongues and the adoption of the French language.²³ Children and young people at the Saint Louis schools, indoctrinated from a young age and with greater access to French, would reinforce this movement away from Kanak languages towards the creation of Tayo.

Despite losing their ancestral languages, the Kanaks of Saint-Louis ultimately created a new language of their own, one which reflects the diversity of the make-up of the new 'tribe' and serves as a language of identity for their community. One Tayo speaker described the language as follows:

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It's unique in New Caledonia and you can even say it's unique in the world. The whole history of New Caledonia is reflected in this language. Language is a consequence of history. (in Ehrhart, 1993: 54)

If we accept, then, that French (or varieties of French, including second language varieties) was a target language, we need to consider how this was possible under the peculiar social conditions of the *réduction*. It is important to note that there were very few Marists living permanently on the Mission. There were usually only one Marist Father, one or two Marist Brothers and two Sisters living at Saint-Louis at any one time. In order for French to become a realistic target, other French speakers must have played a role in its transmission. In my opinion, the mission-educated Saint-Louis girls took up this role and thus became instrumental in shaping the emerging local creole.²⁴

The Saint-Louis girls' boarding school

The Saint-Louis girls' school enjoyed an excellent reputation as the largest and best mission school for girls in New Caledonia. Conceived solely to educate indigenous girls and *métisses* (girls of mixed Kanak-European descent), it attracted Catholic pupils from all over the colony (Delbos, 1993). While the government schools set up by Governor Guillain resorted to force or coercion in the recruitment of pupils, it is unclear what methods were employed by the Marists to 'recruit' their pupils.²⁵ But, as a boarding school for young primary-school aged girls, it was to play a central role in the civilising mission, severing its pupils from traditional Kanak society and culture and separating many from their families. The school opened in 1863. It was closed for a year in 1864 due to Governor Guillain's persecution of the mission schools. Once Sister Marie de la Croix obtained her teacher's certificate, a requirement for all schools under Guillain's 1863 decree, it reopened in 1865.²⁶

Life for the girls at the Saint-Louis school revolved around work. Part of the Marists' plan for the civilisation of the indigenous population was to teach them to live like Europeans and, as such, work featured high on the agenda.²⁷ While the boys spent much of their time working in the fields and in the workshops, the girls were schooled in the 'domestic arts' (cooking, sewing, washing, ironing etc.), subjects that were seen as very important at school and were obviously also essential for the upkeep of the *réduction*.²⁸ In addition, religious activities (prayers, mass etc.) took up much of the girls' time. Despite this, the girls apparently developed good skills in reading and writing fairly rapidly.

French – the language of instruction at Saint-Louis

While the teaching in Kanak languages was formally outlawed by Governor Guillain's 1863 decree, it was not always possible, at least in the beginning, to teach entirely in French, although it would soon become the only language of instruction at Saint-Louis. Caroline, a young catechist from the *île des Pins*, wrote of arriving in Saint-Louis in 1865 when she noticed that there were a number of pupils who spoke her language and who did not know their catechism. She volunteered to teach them as well as the women in the village in her own language (Ehrhart, 1993: 60). While this would have worked for some of the women, not all of them, given their diverse origins, would have known the

île des Pins language. Because of the strong tradition of societal multilingualism in New Caledonia, however, the women would have been able to translate among themselves.²⁹ We can assume that things progressed like this, among the village women and also, perhaps, among the girls in the school, for a short time at least.

For some of the girls at the school, French was a language that they already knew. Some were likely bilingual in a Kanak language and French. This would have been true of some of the girls of mixed Kanak-European ancestry who had been sent to the mission school by their fathers for a European-style education. Some of the fathers, for the most part settlers living in proximity to Saint-Louis, maintained contact with their daughters. Numa Joubert, local landowner and sugar planter, for example, was the father of one of the future matriarchs of Saint-Louis, Marie Wamytan (*née* Joubert). He gave his consent to her 1882 marriage to Joseph Wamytan and signed the marriage register as a witness (Speedy, 2007b: 181-182). Vianney Wamytan, grandson of Marie, described the extraordinary linguistic ability of his grandmother. She spoke a variety of 'Frenches' – from *le petit français* (pidgin or emerging Tayo) to very good French that she spoke (and wrote) in her dealings with the Marist Sisters. She also spoke Drubea and had at least a passive knowledge of Cèmuhi. In addition, she prayed and sang in Latin (Ehrhart, 2012: 134).

From very early on in the school's history, there are records of letters written by the mission schoolgirls in French.³⁰ Most of the letters are said to have been written in surprisingly good French for girls who had had only a few months of instruction in the language. According to linguist Sabine Ehrhart (1993: 59-60), this was likely the result of much rewriting. As was standard practice in teaching at the time, the Marist Sisters made their pupils write and rewrite letters over and over until the French was "impeccable" with "the personality of the writer disappearing behind the authority of the teacher" (ibid: 60). There were a few letters, however, that escaped this rigorous process. These letters had been written and sent directly by the pupils to their recipients. Significantly, these letters show a more direct style with errors and anomalies in spelling and grammar that reflect features present in Tayo (ibid) and probably more accurately represent the French spoken by the Saint-Louis girls.

By the 1870s, the quality of the French spoken (and written) by the girls at Saint-Louis was receiving compliments from a variety of sources. Father Villard, a visitor to the *réduction* wrote of the astounding progress made in reading, writing and grammar among the pupils of the Saint-Louis schools, observing that the girls were "much more advanced than the boys" (ibid: 62).³¹ School inspectors, colonists and soldiers also noted that the pupils had a good grasp of French and in 1879 Father Rougeyron wrote to his nieces:

*In my parish I have two Marist Sisters to bring up the young girls. Many of the girls can read and write and all of them can sew and iron like you. Not to mention the catechism and prayer – that's the first thing they learn - and they are also very well behaved.*³²

Les Petites Filles de Marie

One of these Sisters, Sister Marie de la Croix (Phélippon Pélagie), originally from Rocher-sur-Yon, had quite an influence over the girls. She had been in New Caledonia

since 1858, opening the colony's first Catholic girls' school at La Conception in 1859. After teaching at the *île des Pins* school, she returned to the mainland in 1864 to run the Saint-Louis girls' boarding school. In 1875, she founded *Les Petites Filles de Marie* (PFM), a religious order for indigenous girls (Angleviel, 2004: 18). Many of the Saint-Louis mission school girls joined the PFM. Indeed, Sister Marie de la Croix had formed the religious order at the request of her young charges. She single-handedly trained the first Kanak girls who were to don the famous 'blue habit' of the PFM (Angleviel, 2004: 18). Despite its popularity, most of the girls did not stay in the religious order for terribly long. Rather than return to their tribes, they left to marry men from the village of Saint-Louis. Their skills in housekeeping and the French language meant that they were considered ideal wives for the Marist neophytes (Ehrhart, 1993: 64; Corne, 1995).

The movement towards the creation of a new tribe, *les Saint-Louis* as they would become known, started with the decision of the school pupils, the girls in particular, to set up homes in the village, rather than attempt to reintegrate traditional tribal society. After such a long separation from their families and tribes and a 'successful' indoctrination and (partial?) deculturation by the Marists, many girls may not have felt able to return to their home tribes. For orphans or some of the *métisses*, a 'return', when there was no place to call home, was impossible.

Language and Saint-Louis couples

The diverse origins of the neophytes at Saint-Louis meant that often first generation couples did not share the same ancestral language. In traditional Melanesian society, this was not unusual. Women usually moved to the husband's clan and had to learn his language to function within their new society. According to Maurice Leenhardt, women would nevertheless carry on the tradition of societal multilingualism by teaching their own mother tongue to their children (1946: xvi).³³ In Saint-Louis, however, in the space of a few generations, we see a breakdown of this traditional type of societal multilingualism. Instead of teaching their children a Kanak mother tongue and adopting the husband's Kanak language as the family (and then community) language, many of the Saint-Louis couples used an interlanguage or second language variety of French as their means of communication. Some shared a Kanak language or had access to one but still preferred to speak to their children in the French interlanguage. Vianney Wamytan's parents, for instance, (second generation Saint-Louis) both spoke Drubea (it was a third language for his mother). They occasionally used Drubea to communicate between themselves when they did not want their children to understand, otherwise they used "*le petit français*" together and they always spoke this (the emerging creole) with their children (Ehrhart, 2012: 144-145). The third generation of Saint-Louis children thus had the emerging creole as their first language (Corne, 1994: 284-285).

As we have seen, the Saint-Louis women spoke relatively good French. Some of them were already bilingual before arriving in Saint-Louis, they remained in the company of the Sisters throughout the day as they carried out their domestic duties and they also extended their intimate contact with the Sisters by enlisting in the PFM once their schooldays were over. The boys, on the other hand, worked in the fields or workshops and were more exposed to other types of 'French' (including Reunion Creole, dialectal and second language varieties) and continued to speak, at least in the first two generations, varieties of Kanak languages (Corne, 1994: 284). Oral tradition recounts the

role the first generation women played as interpreters for their husbands in their dealings with the local authorities (Ehrhart, 1993: 64).

The women's language (French or second language varieties thereof) was seen as more prestigious in the very particular social context of Saint-Louis society. Moreover, it was the only language common to everyone, in that all people living in Saint-Louis had some level of access to it. Kanak languages were also undoubtedly subject to stigmatizing colonial discourses on the part of the Marists in their civilising quest. There was thus more motivation to use a French interlanguage in the family unit than an ancestral language. Melanesian languages were still spoken, mainly by men, in certain circumstances until around 1920 when the community language, Tayo, had taken on the role of first language for all Saint-Louis children (Corne, 2000a). This represents a noticeable shift away from Kanak tradition. The women's language served as a model or target for the entire community, starting from within her own family. Ironically, instead of being the vehicles of societal multilingualism, the women of Saint-Louis drove the creation of a new singular community language, one lexically based on the language of power but which still retained a very Melanesian 'flavour' in its underlying grammatical structures and worldview.

Some examples of Melanesian substratal influence on Tayo include lexical items such as 'nunu' (grandfather) and 'wa(wa)' (grandmother) from Drubea 'nrúnruú' (grandfather) and 'úwa' (grandmother)³⁴ (Corne, 1999: 26) or 'tchibwi' (rat) from Cemuhî 'ciibwi' (Corne, 2000a: 79), phonological features shared with Kanak languages such as pre-nasalised stops and a lack of a voiced/unvoiced contrast with most fricatives (Corne, 1999: 22) and a number of syntactic or grammatical structures that resemble Kanak structures but do not usually replicate one in particular, usually demonstrating the "highest common factor" between Cèmuhi, Drubea and sometimes Xârâcùù and showing less complexity than the substrate forms (Corne, 1999: 41). The pronominal system which, unlike French, includes a set of dual pronouns as well as "dependent and independent pronouns, marked and unmarked subject indexing pronouns, and post-posed possessives" (Corne, 1999: 22) clearly works along Melanesian lines. The morphology of the pronominal system, however, is French in origin. So Tayo duals 'nude', 'ude' and 'lede', for instance, (from French 'nous deux', 'vous deux' and 'les deux(-là)) reflect Kanak conceptions of understanding the world. Yet, the obligatory distinction between inclusive and exclusive in the dual that is found in both Cèmuhi and Drubea is absent from Tayo, indicating a simplification of the ancestral system (Corne, 1998: 15). Other Kanak-inspired (though often showing congruence with French) structures in Tayo include some relativisation and thematisation strategies, some interrogatives and imperatives, aspects of the Tense-mood-aspect system and some causatives (Corne, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999; Kihm, 1995).³⁵

Exceptional Saint-Louis

Saint-Louis, it must be pointed out, was exceptional among the Marist missions in New Caledonia. It was the only one where such large numbers of ethnically and linguistically diverse groups of people were brought together in one place and who then settled in a multi-ethnic 'artificial' tribe or village. This represented a language contact situation that was not to be found on any other mission station. On most of the other missions,³⁶ the Marists drew their converts from local tribes. Their numbers were smaller and not all members of the tribe necessarily converted (Delbos, 1993). In such a situation, the Kanaks were able to maintain their culture and language to a far greater degree than

those who were moved to a *réduction*. As everyone spoke the same language, there was no need to create a new community language. While French was learned, it remained a second language for most Kanaks on the other New Caledonian missions. Moreover, while Saint-Louis quickly moved to teaching exclusively in French, many of the other mission stations, much to the ire of the local government, used Latin or Kanak languages to teach their indigenous converts. In 1880, Henri Rivière³⁷ described the linguistic situation in other missions:

What is quite strange is that the missionaries teach only a little French or none at all to the Kanaks. In some places they do not even seem to want them to learn it. However, they do teach them prayers and the mass in Kanak languages and in Latin... At Canala, it is the Marist brothers... who teach the Kanak children. The chiefs are obliged to send children to school and they send a few, always less than they are asked for, just so they'll be left in peace (Rivière, 1880: 91).

How can we explain the 'genesis' of Tayo?

According to linguist Salikoko Mufwene, the founder population of a colony (or, in the case of Saint-Louis, a Mission) plays the most significant role in determining the social, cultural and linguistic development of the new society (Mufwene, 1996). The languages spoken by the first peoples form part of a 'feature pool' from which the linguistic construction material of the emergent creole language is selected. In this biological model, there are mechanisms of evolution, competition and selection at work within the feature pool. Essentially, so Mufwene argues, grammatical structures retained from the target language are those that have the most congruence to (or similarity with) structures in other languages in the feature pool. When the different languages share certain structures, these are the ones that are most likely to make it into the new contact language. When unguided second language learners restructure the target language, they need to accommodate each other and these accommodations between speakers lead to the formation of a new community language (Mufwene, 2001).

Whether or not we necessarily accept this paradigm in its entirety with all of its scientific jargon, some of the ideas behind it seem valid. Basically, we need to consider all of the languages spoken in a community as possible input languages into an emergent creole. We also need to take into consideration the extent to which some languages share certain worldviews and how these may influence the direction in which the creole develops. The Melanesian languages spoken by the founder neophytes of Saint-Louis are not mutually intelligible but they do share both underlying grammatical and syntactic structures and cultural conceptualisations. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of these features, especially those that had added congruence with the varieties of French spoken at Saint-Louis, made their way into Tayo.³⁸

In addition to these matters, we also need to take into account social factors, such as the prestige of certain languages and groups of people and, more generally, how the society functioned. Saint-Louis was a hierarchical society with the Marists firmly at the top of the social scale. Their language, French, the target language of school pupils, catechists and converts, held prestige in the community. So too did the ancestral languages of the founder Kanaks; Cèmuhî and Drubea and, for a short while,

bilingualism or multilingualism was maintained. This situation facilitated the transfer of Kanak patterns into the structure of Tayo.

Access to the French of the Marists was good for certain sectors of Saint-Louis society, the mission-educated girls in particular. The girls learned French (or already spoke it prior to arriving) and used it both within the community and with their families. Other Kanaks at the Mission were primarily field workers whose access to the French of the Marists was limited. Instead, they had more contact with convicts and their varieties and/or dialects of French, speakers of Reunion Creole and pidgin-speakers from present-day Vanuatu. As the Kanak population grew (there were 600 Kanaks in Saint-Louis in 1872), the distance between the top and bottom of the hierarchy grew and Kanaks had less and less access to the French of the Marists. In some respects at least, Saint-Louis resembled a *société de plantation* and conditions were therefore right for a creole language to emerge (cf Chaudenson, 1992).

The fact that Tayo, a French lexifier creole, became the community language of Saint-Louis owes much to the socio-historical circumstances surrounding its inception. And within this hierarchical Mission society, the Saint-Louis girls took on an unusual and quite exceptional role. In addition to bolstering the use of French in the village, they also transferred, through their second language varieties of it, Melanesian grammatical and conceptual features. The girls' letters that escaped the censorship of the Sisters, for instance, demonstrate structures that would later appear in Tayo (Ehrhart, 1993: 60). As (mostly) second language learners, they undoubtedly participated in the early transfer of Melanesian "cryptotypes" or shared structures into the new community language, reinforcing those transferred by the men. These transfers from the substrate were most likely structures that had perceptual salience and congruence between Kanak languages (Drubea and Cèmuhi in particular) and the girls' French (cf Siegel et al, 2000: 82).

Conclusion: the importance of the Saint-Louis girls in the story of Tayo

While the linguistic ecology of Saint-Louis was highly complex and there were many factors that contributed to the formation of Tayo,³⁹ I would argue that the mission-educated girls were an essential part of that framework. Their role as language go-betweens and negotiators in the new village context was quite remarkable and different from their traditional role in Kanak society. Consciously or not, they ensured that the emergent creole was lexically French based. At the same time, they also influenced the underlying 'Melanesianess' of Tayo's grammatical structures, thus facilitating its adoption by their menfolk.

Culturally uprooted, separated from their families and drilled in European ways, the Saint-Louis girls, despite the best efforts of the Marists, nonetheless succeeded in maintaining a part of their Kanak identity. This is evident in the role they played in the creation of a new language of identity for their new community. Readers, writers and cultural and linguistic transmitters of both superstrate and substrate features into Tayo, the story of the Saint-Louis mission-educated girls is but one of the many narratives that combine to form the Tayo story. It is, however, an important one that deserves to be heard.

Endotes

¹ There is no English equivalent of the French *réduction* so I will use the French terminology in this article. Corne (1999: 19) describes a *réduction* as “a settlement for new converts and training centre for catechists”.

² For detailed information on the social history of Saint-Louis and the formation of Tayo, see: Speedy (2007a, 2007b) and Brou (1982). For linguistic analyses of Tayo, see for example: Ehrhart (1993), Corne (1995, 1997, 2000a).

³ Whether or not creole languages constitute a typological class is currently the subject of robust debate in the creolistics literature (Bakker et al, 2011). Some creolists argue that creoles represent a break in transmission from their lexifier and share certain traits that stem from their development from pidgins. They argue that creole is a valid synchronic term. See, for instance: McWhorter (1998, 2001). Others argue that creoles are no different from ‘ordinary’ languages (Mufwene, 1996, Chaudenson, 1992) and result from gradual transformations of the lexifier. Creole is thus a socio-historic term, rather than a linguistic one. Others argue against “creole exceptionalism” on the grounds that it is inherited from 19th century racist ideologies (DeGraff, 2005). In the case of Tayo, since it became known in the linguistic community in the late 1980s (Corne, 1989), it has been referred to as the Pacific’s sole French lexicon creole language. For this reason, I will call it a creole throughout this publication, while remaining mindful of the above debate.

⁴ Not to mention the numerous creoles whose lexifiers are not European.

⁵ But see DeGraff (2005) for an eloquent critique of the underlying racism that the field of creolistics has inherited from colonial discourses on racial hierarchies. Comparing two quotes (one by Julien Vinson in 1889, the other by Nicolas Quint in 1997) discussing creole languages, DeGraff notes that both authors’ writings “illustrate the long-held and popular view that associates ‘creolization’ with some extremely impoverishing form of simplification whose maximally degraded and primitive output, namely a ‘Creole’ language, is to be evaluated with the European target language as the sole yardstick. Both authors explicitly consider Creoles to be vastly inferior to the corresponding European ‘civilised’ languages” (2005: 538).

⁶ Due to geographical and social differences in the origins of the Europeans in the colonial world, the varieties of the European languages spoken were far from homogeneous and nowhere near the standardised ‘national’ languages of today. Many white settlers, indentured servants, convicts etc. spoke dialects and it was in the colonies themselves that levelling of these dialects occurred and new overseas varieties of English, French, Spanish and Portuguese were born.

⁷ See Bickerton (1981, 1984).

⁸ The role of unguided SLA by adults in the formation of a creole language has quite wide acceptance among creole scholars, superstratists, substratists and universalists alike. There is some cross-fertilisation between the fields of creolistics and SLA. See, for instance, Anderson (1983), Siegel (2008) and Plag (2008a, 2008b).

⁹ This and all other translations are my own.

¹⁰ This relationship would change when the anti-clerical governor Guillain arrived in the colony in 1863 (cf Saussol, 1969: 116).

¹¹ See Brou (1982) for a description of 19th Century Saint-Louis.

¹² While the word *tribu* (tribe) is in common use in New Caledonia, it is actually a European construct. Traditional Kanak society was built around the clan.

¹³ Some were also from Balade and Pouébo in the North.

¹⁴ La Conception was also a Marist *réduction* established in 1855 and situated a few kilometres from Saint-Louis. The soil quality there was poor, however, so the Marists wished to establish an agricultural centre at Saint-Louis. The first attempt in 1856 failed and everyone returned to La Conception (Brou, 1982: 45).

¹⁵ See Speedy (2007a, 2007b, 2008 and 2009) for details on the sugar industry in New Caledonia and at Saint-Louis.

¹⁶ Letter from Father Rougeyron to his niece, 2 July, 1867. Copie de la correspondance du Père Rougeyron Nouvelle-Calédonie à sa famille 1843-1900, MSS 525/9. I consulted Father Rougeyron's correspondence at the Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer in Paris in 2008. All subsequent references to his letters come from this same file.

¹⁷ See Speedy (2009, 2012a) for a discussion on the ethnic heterogeneity of the Reunionese sugar workers in New Caledonia.

¹⁸ Later, labourers from Vietnam, Java and Japan also worked at Saint-Louis (Corne, 1990: 6)

¹⁹ See Speedy (2007a, 2007b, 2012b) for information on the contribution of these languages to Tayo.

²⁰ Sabine Ehrhart (personal communication, January 16th, 2013).

²¹ Kihm (1995) makes a case for this but in-depth linguistic analyses by Corne (1994, 1995, 2000b, for example) show that the grammatical patterns in Tayo reflect general Melanesian patterns but are not evidence of relexification of one ancestral language.

²² In 1872, for instance, the Saint-Louis population comprised 20 Whites, 30 Indians and 500-600 Kanaks (*Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 3 July 1872, n667).

²³ In Governor Nouet's letter to the Minister of the Marine and Colonies calling for the Native Code to be applied in New Caledonia, he writes:

When the Kanak can speak, read and write French, I will be more inclined to facilitate his access to naturalization and grant him the most extensive rights. At the moment, he is absolutely incapable of fulfilling them, unlike the Arab and the Annamite, he does not even have a common language or writing system through which we can enter into dialogue with him... We cannot reasonably be expected to grant political rights to a people who are so undeveloped (Nouméa, 15 November 1886). Fonds ministériels, Série géographique NCL//45, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence.

²⁴ While both Corne, in his various publications on Tayo, and Ehrhart (1993) both mention the French-speaking abilities of the Saint-Louis girls and their role as interpreters in first-generation couples, neither elaborate on how this might have contributed to the development of Tayo.

²⁵ Governor Guillain was strongly anti-clerical and he opposed the Marists' activities in the colony. Seeking to wrest the control of the indigenous population away from the Church, he began opening government schools in Nouméa, Canala, Wagap, Lifou and Gatope. The pupils were sourced from local tribes: a few were sent by their chiefs, many were sent only after Guillain visited the tribes and put immense pressure on the chiefs to send pupils. Some of the pupils at the Noumea school for interpreters and apprentices were known as the little 'hostages', sons of rebellious chiefs who were taken from their tribes to guarantee their fathers' submission (Delbos, 1993: 146). However the pupils of the mission schools came to be recruited, they were not necessarily all happy to be there. Some had been sent by their tribes at a very young age and most likely suffered horribly from this early separation. Prior to the setting up of Saint-Louis, children, who had been taken prisoner by the Kanaks of La Conception who in 1857 had joined government troops and participated in the repression of local tribes, were taken to the *réduction* to be brought up by "Christian families" (Dauphiné, 1995: 31).

²⁶ This was the *Arrêté réglementant l'instruction publique* of October 15th 1863. This decree also outlawed the "study of New Caledonian idioms" (ie Kanak languages) in all schools, insisting on the use of French. This mirrored French policy in the Metropole, which saw all dialects banned from French schools. Any child who spoke a dialect at school was publicly humiliated.

²⁷ Father Rougeyron wrote of his neophytes, "they are dressed, have utensils, tools and beautiful European-style houses. They plant crops, cultivate their fields and look after their poultry yard. They then sell their goods to the colony and thus make a little income that covers their basic needs" (Delbos, 1993: 101).

²⁸ Vianney Wamytan, an 'ambassador' of Saint-Louis and one of Ehrhart's principle sources for Saint-Louis oral history, described the typical school day for a Saint-Louis boy: school started at 7am, classes until 8am, then working in the fields until 11am. From 1.30pm-3.30pm school, 3pm-5pm working in the fields, 5pm-6pm food then prayers in Latin with only the rosary and a hymn at the end in French (Ehrhart, 2012: 135-136).

²⁹ See Ehrhart (1993: 60-61) for a more detailed discussion about Caroline's linguistic services.

³⁰ These letters are mentioned by Ehrhart (1993: 59-60). Unfortunately, I have not seen these letters and so I must rely on Ehrhart's description of their expression and style.

³¹ The letter was dated June 10th 1870.

³² Letter dated May 13th 1879.

³³ Leenhardt notes that this was important preparation for the sons' journey to the land of their maternal uncle (1946: XVI).

³⁴ This lexical transfer would have been reinforced by the similarity of these words with the Xârâcùù lexical items 'nûnûû' and 'yaaya' (grandfather and grandmother respectively) (Corne, 1999:26).

³⁵ See Corne (1999: 40-66) for a summary of all the comparative research that had been done on Tayo and Kanak languages to that point in time. Since then, very little has been added to the corpus.

³⁶ While La Conception was also a *réduction*, conditions were not the same as at Saint-Louis. There was less linguistic diversity than at Saint-Louis and the community was not based around agricultural pursuits. A creole language did not emerge at La Conception.

³⁷ Henri Rivière was a naval officer who participated in the repression of the Kanaks of La Foa following the 'insurrection' (Franco-Kanak war) of 1878.

³⁸ See Corne (1999) for a discussion of the "Kanak patterns" evident in Tayo. Concerning the lexicon, he notes:

The proportion of Kanak contributions to the Tayo lexicon appears to obey a hierarchically-ordered set of criteria. These are: (a) the prestige of the language and its speakers, a prestige based on (i) tribal association with the land of St-Louis and the Far South, (ii) date of arrival (primacy of settlement), and (iii) conditions of arrival (convert, student, refugee, etc.); (b) proximity to and frequency of contact with the ancestral homeland; and (c) number of speakers (1999: 22).

³⁹ Many of these factors have not been discussed here, but see (Speedy 2007b, Speedy 2012b) for details.

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