

The place of Vamale (New Caledonia) in a multilingual environment - Attitudes towards it and differences across time and space

This paper will describe the status of Vamale in its regional context, while offering an explanation for the variation. Vamale is an endangered North New Caledonian language (Austronesian, South Oceanic) whose speakers were displaced from their homeland during the 1917 colonial war, and taken in by neighboring villages closer to the coast. Depending on where they arrived and in which numbers, Vamale's status varies, but follows similar rules.

The multilingual Hienghène area hosts at least five related Kanak languages. Traditionally, speakers there will use their own if they don't know the other's language, and if they are of higher status. Otherwise, they will try to use the other's language. This is a reflection of the formerly widespread habit to speak other people's languages (Guiart 1963:93), especially when talking to superiors or when visiting ("chief in your own home") (Salaün 2010). People speaking their respective languages to each other is a common, but waning phenomenon (field recordings of the 29-11-2017, 15-11-2017, 30-11-2017), as is mastering several languages. French is a spreading alternative.

In Hienghène, Vamale is recognised as a cousin language, a respected neighbour and guest. Vamale speakers in Hienghène are scattered across several tribes, at least one of which included the language at the council of clans in the past (source: field recordings of the 15-11-2017).

Touho, the area south of the Vamale-speaking villages, is almost exclusively Cèmuhi-speaking. There is a completely different, more negative attitude towards Vamale. Efforts to speak or understand it are mostly confined to the past. This may be partly explained by the different confessions and historical background (Guiart 1963:98), but also by the monolingual setting.

Between the two areas, Vamale is a majority language. Its status compared to Pije, the former majority language of the area, varies depending on the tribe. Téganpaïk and Ouanache have installed Vamale as the de facto legitimate language, while Tiouandé resents and contests its relatively dominant presence.

One important parameter which affects language status in Kanak country is linguistic indigeneity. The language passed down through the father's side, belongs to the territory, with certain exceptions (Guiart 1992:89,92). Most clans of a tribe share one language (Saussol 1979:29, 118), though mixed-language tribes in frontier territory are common (Saussol 1979:81). This conveys a low status to Vamale as a foreign language. However, the number of languages spoken in an area, and the relative number of their speakers influence the importance of said parameter. This paper will present and compare the three areas and explain the differences culturally, historically, and linguistically.

References:

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