Finding a frame in a competitive market: English, Japanese and Kanak in New Caledonia’s Linguistic Landscape

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A peripheral part of the wider French-speaking world, the island of New Caledonia (Fr. Nouvelle Calédonie) has been a territory of France since the middle of the nineteenth century. Equidistant from Australia and Fiji, New Caledonia’s many indigenous languages, referred to collectively as Kanak languages, have been marginalised, especially in terms of the written varieties, as the island succumbed to the aggressive gallicisation processes witnessed elsewhere in the French Empire. With a population of 250,000, almost all of whom are francophone, the island also welcomes approximately 100,000 visitors per annum, largely from Australia and Japan. As a consequence, the public space across New Caledonia is the locus for multilingual exchanges between French, as the official language, English, as an international lingua franca, Japanese, for the tourist market, and the Kanak languages which seek to find a place in a highly competitive linguistic market. Based on linguistic landscape (LL) fieldwork undertaken in 2013, this paper will assess how these four languages (introduced onto this market at different periods over the island’s history) compete in specific visual frames. This paper privileges the written form of these languages as they appear in the public space, and explores the extent to which the length of contact time on the island plays a part in their visibility in the LL. As a francophone island and de jure part of France, New Caledonia’s LL is unsurprisingly dominated by written French; English, Japanese and Kanak barely mark the public space from a quantitative perspective. It is when we examine the visual frames in which these languages appear that we detect specific spaces for these other languages, such as the natural world for Kanak.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, French, multilingualism.