

Attitudes towards languages in Mauritius with particular reference to Kreol in education: preliminary results

Anu Bissoonauth, University of Wollongong, Australia

Introduction

The population of Mauritius is multi-ethnic, from African, Indian, Chinese and European backgrounds. According to the last population census in 2011 the population was 1.2 million and the three religions followed by the main ethno-linguistic groups were Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. The language ecology on this small multilingual and multicultural island is complex resulting from its colonial history and fifty years as an independent nation. English is the official language, but is more a written than a spoken language. French, on the other hand, is dominant in the workplace, media and education. A French-based Creole, (known as Kreol morisien)* is the lingua franca of the island taught in primary schools since 2012. However, it does not have official status. Twelve Asian languages listed as 'language of forefathers' in the last census are also currently spoken.

Since the 1980s, the language education policy of successive Mauritian governments has been to encourage the teaching of ancestral languages as part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of Mauritians. Besides English and French, taught throughout the primary and secondary curricula, Asian heritage languages are offered as optional languages in schools. Since 2012 Kreol is offered as an additional optional language in primary education alongside the Asian languages and in 2018 Kreol was introduced at secondary level. This paper analyses preliminary results from fieldwork carried out in schools in 2018 to find out perceptions and attitudes of young Mauritians on Kreol in education and whether putting Kreol on par with Asian languages, already taught as heritage languages, was encouraging Mauritians to study Kreol at school.

The first section provides a brief overview of the social history and the current language situation. The second presents the methodology that was used to collect data in the field. The third discusses preliminary results on language perceptions and attitudes of Mauritians in secondary education with a focus on attitudes towards Kreol in education. The findings are compared with results from a previous study carried out in the mid-90s (Bissoonauth, 1998) on attitudes towards the study of Kreol in education by the younger generations. The conclusion explores possible implications for Kreol in education and its role in shaping contemporary Mauritian identity.

*In this paper, the term *Kreol* is used to refer to the variety of Mauritian Creole

1. A brief overview of the social history

Mauritius, a member of the Commonwealth, since its independence in 1968 and also a permanent member of the *Francophonie* is unique in many ways. The linguistic diversity on this small island of 1,865 square kilometres is the result of its colonial history: French occupation in the 18th century and British in the 19th until its independence. Under French occupation, slaves were brought mainly from the East coast of Africa and the island of Madagascar to work on sugar cane plantations to develop the production of a sugar-based economy. Creole language in Mauritius is said to have been born '*in situ*' through the interactions between the slaves and their French plantation owners. In the eighteenth century, the multilingual situation involved three types of languages: African- mostly from East Africa, Madagascar and Mozambique- (Baker, 1976:21), French and Creole.

One of the reasons why there is a stigma attached to the status of Creole languages is because of the social and historical conditions that created them. Until recently, Creole languages were considered as 'corrupted' and 'incorrect' versions of their genetic parents (Sebba, 1997; Siegel, 1999; Coulmas, 2005), which in many cases are the European languages associated with colonial expansion (French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese). As such, they are perceived by the speakers themselves as low status languages, when compared with their genetic parent.

In the early nineteenth century during the Napoleonic wars, France lost Mauritius to Great Britain. During British colonisation, waves of indentured labourers from India were sent to various parts of the British Empire to work on sugar plantations. Those who were sent to plantation islands such as Mauritius, Trinidad and Fiji were mainly from North East India and their mother tongue was Bhojpuri. From 1834-1912, Mauritius imported the highest number of Indian immigrants (over 453,000) in comparison with other colonies (Biltoo, 2004: 179). There were also Chinese migrants from Hong-Kong and mainland China who emigrated to Mauritius during that time.

The arrival of the Indians and Chinese in Mauritius added Oriental multiculturalism and multilingualism (Hookoomsing, 2009: 119) to the island with a whole range of Indian and Chinese languages to the already present European languages (French and English) and Creole. The multilingual situation in Mauritius resulting from its colonial history is complex and has been described by linguist Calvet (2015: 2) as a '*bigarrure*', where paradoxes prevail and predictions made by linguists have not occurred.

2. A complex language situation

The last population census carried out in 2011 listed twelve groups of 'languages of forefathers' or ancestral languages as currently spoken on the island. These were in alphabetical order: Arabic, Bhojpuri, Chinese Languages, Kreol, English, French, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and 'Other

and not stated'. It should be noted that although Arabic was recorded as being currently spoken in the language census, it is in fact not a heritage language in Mauritius and its use is mainly confined to education and religious domains.

Although English is the official language of state institutions, it is nevertheless more a written than a spoken language in Mauritius. French, on the other hand is frequently used in the workplace, media and education. Kreol as the lingua franca of the island has been used increasingly in the media and government administration since the 1990s. Nevertheless, the relationship between French and Kreol is one of diglossia with Kreol having a lower status and French a higher status.

Since 2012, Kreol is offered as a school subject in primary schools, where there is a minimum enrolment of five students and it is taught as another optional heritage language alongside Asian languages. The official standardised orthography (Grafik- larmoni) was devised by linguists at the University of Mauritius in collaboration with the Mauritius Institute of Education (Hookoomsing, 2004). It should be noted that in the Mauritian context, the Asian heritage languages refer specifically to the following Indian languages –Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Telugu and Tamil- and Chinese languages: Cantonese, Hakka and Mandarin. Since these languages were spoken by the first Indian and Chinese migrants, they are also referred to as language of forefathers or ancestral languages.

The fieldwork that provided the data analysed in this paper was carried out in August-September 2018 as a follow-up to two previous studies completed in the last two decades (Bissoonauth, 1998; Bissoonauth, 2011; Bissoonauth, 2012; Bissoonauth, 2014,). As such, the present investigation was designed to find out:

- (i) the changing patterns of language use and language choice of young Mauritians ;
- (i) the perception and attitudes towards Kreol in education of Mauritians in secondary education;
- (ii) language aspirations of the younger generation of Mauritians some of whom will be the future leaders of the country.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

In a similar way to the previous studies, a multi-response questionnaire complemented by a face-to-face interview were used to collect data in schools. Secondary schools were chosen since they are the best place to gather a representative sample of the younger generations. The schools were selected from the four educational zones on a quota basis. Following official authorisation from the Ministry of Education, the author contacted the schools to arrange for the school visits. Information sheets as

well as participant consent forms were distributed with the assistance of school rectors and teachers to ensure participants were informed about the research and that the parents provided permission for their children to take part in the study on a voluntary basis.

Twelve secondary schools (three from each zone) were visited between August and September 2018. The sample consisted of students from all types of schools (state and private schools, rural and urban schools, single sex and mixed schools). The study involved 179 respondents (75 boys and 104 girls) out of whom 59 (24 boys and 35 girls) participated in the interviews, which followed the questionnaire, thus allowing qualitative data to be integrated with quantitative data from the questionnaire.

The data collected from the questionnaire were pre-coded so that they could be computer-analysed. The questionnaire for collecting the data was in English and the interviews were carried out in the language of choice of the participants (English, French or/and Kreol).

This article focuses on results obtained from questions on perceptions and language attitudes of young Mauritians towards Kreol in education with particular emphasis on Kreol as a subject of study and Kreol as the medium of instruction in schools. A comparison will be carried out with results from a survey in the mid 1990s (Bissoonauth, 1998) in which one of the questions dealt specifically with the use of Kreol in the education system.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Perceptions and attitudes towards Kreol in education

From 2018, Kreol is offered in secondary schools although it is not available in all schools. While at the primary level there needs to be a minimum of 5 enrolments for Kreol to be taught as a heritage language, at the secondary level however, Kreol is being taught on an ad hoc basis because of a lack of trained teachers according to Dr Rughoonundun-Chellapermal (personal communication, 31 October 2018).

Results to question 14 (table 1 below) as to whether Kreol was being taught in the schools that were visited showed that there were four schools out of the twelve visited, where Kreol was being offered in grade 7. The data indicate that students studying Kreol language are relatively small. Although it is early days to make an evaluation, it may be that as Kreol becomes more available at secondary level and more teachers are trained, more students may want to study it formally.

Kreol taught in school	Yes	No
Q14 Is Kreol taught in your school?	25.7% (46)	73% (131)
Q15. Are you studying Kreol in school?	24% (study Kreol out of the 46 who said Kreol is taught in grade 7 in their school)	75% (168)

Table 1 responses to Questions 14 and 15 on Kreol in school

Question 17 asked students whether they would like to study Kreol as another subject in school while question 18 elicited responses on whether students would like to have all their subjects taught in Kreol in school. Responses to questions 17 and 18 are summarised in table 2 below. Results reveal that while students would like to study Kreol as a subject (47%), the majority would prefer not to have the curriculum taught in Kreol (66%). The questions were left open for participants to express their personal opinion as secondary school students.

Kreol in education	Yes	No
Q17. If you are not studying Kreol, would you like to study it in school?	44.6% (94)	52.5% (80)
Q18. Would you like to have all subjects taught in Kreol in school?	32% (57)	66% (118)

Table 2 Responses to questions 17 and 18 on Kreol in education

An analysis of the interview data reveals that attitudes towards the Creole language are related to its historical development and that it is still considered as a low status language, since 'it is disgusting to speak to the teacher in Kreol' and that 'it is a derivative of French'. More generally, students thought that 'it will confuse me with my studies'. Other attitudes highlighted the feeling of insularity associated with Kreol because 'English and French are important languages and can be used internationally compared to creole'.

Those who were in favour of Kreol as a school subject thought that they 'would be able to understand better the subjects since the majority speak Kreol in real life', and more importantly 'it would be easier

to give our answers during exams’. Other views revealed that having Kreol as another subject would provide ‘a more diverse choice’ of subjects and an opportunity ‘to know how to write it’. Other views clearly relate to a national identity based on the Creole language, since Kreol ‘is my mother tongue’ and ‘part of our culture’.

4.2 A comparative analysis with results from the 1990s on Kreol in education

The previous study (Bissoonauth, 1998) involved 200 pupils (102 boys and 98 girls) from a representative sample of the secondary school population and the methodology for data collection and analysis was similar to the present one. Participants were asked whether they would like to learn Kreol in school, have Kreol as a medium of instruction and have Kreol as the main language in Mauritius.

The results in table 3 below show that 78% of the sample were against learning Kreol in school and that 73% were against having it as the medium of instruction. Two thirds (66%) were against having Kreol as the main language in Mauritius thus suggesting that English and French should also be part of the main languages of the island.

A comparison between both sets of data shows that attitudes towards Kreol in education are changing, albeit slowly, as nearly 50% of students in the 2018 sample (see table 2) were in favour of studying it as another subject in school. Although, the majority of participants in both samples was and still is against the adoption of Kreol as the medium of instruction, there is nonetheless, a slightly higher number (32%) in favour of being taught in Kreol in the 2018 sample in comparison with 24% in the 1998 sample. It needs to be pointed out that this previous study was intended to reflect a general trend in patterns of language use and choice in the younger section of the Mauritian population (Bissoonauth, 1998: 142).

whole sample %	Would you like to learn Kreol in school?	Would you like to be taught in Kreol in school?	Would you like to have Kreol as the main language in Mauritius?
No	77.8	72.7	65.6
Yes	18.4	23.9	29.4
Other	3.8	3.4	5

Table 3: Breakdown of results for the whole sample (Bissoonauth, 1998: 336)

5. Conclusion

This paper analysed preliminary results from a fieldwork carried out in schools in 2018 to illustrate how trends have evolved in the last two decades, and most importantly perceptions and attitudes of young Mauritians towards Kreol in education as it is being taught in primary schools since 2012.

Preliminary results show that while there is an acceptance of Kreol as a subject in school with almost one student in two in favour of it. There was nonetheless two thirds of the sample, who thought that English and French were more appropriate as a medium of instruction, since they are the two languages associated with university education internationally and to the job market.

Attitudes towards languages reveal a pragmatic approach towards languages present in the daily environment in the same way as in the previous surveys (Bissoonauth, 1998, 2011). A significant shift noted was the generally positive attitude towards Kreol, in the present sample of young Mauritians, who are more accepting of and have integrated Kreol in their daily lives more than their counterparts from previous studies.

The results suggest a hierarchy between European, Kreol and Asian languages, where English & French are preferred and have more prestige. These attitudes illustrate a situation of multiple diglossias, as described by Fishman (1967) in his expanded model, where European languages have the highest status and are associated with academic success, good employment prospects and social mobility in comparison with Kreol and the Asian heritage languages. The shift between Asian heritage languages towards Kreol illustrates another level of diglossia since the ancestral languages most of which are standard languages except for Bhojpuri, are not considered as useful enough to be maintained in the home domain, as already discussed in Bissoonauth (2011: 430).

As far as the link between language and identity is concerned, an analysis of the interview data would suggest that acceptance of Kreol as the mother tongue of Mauritians is a reality for this section of the population. Further research is needed in the future, when Kreol will have been introduced in the secondary sector, to evaluate whether the situation of diglossia due to the stigma attached to Creole languages will continue to persist or whether Mauritians will be including Kreol in their daily multilingual experiences as one of the main formal languages in Mauritius.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Mauritian Ministry of Education for providing me with formal authorisation to carry out my fieldwork in schools during term time. My thanks equally go to the school rectors, deputy rectors and the teachers who provided me with help and assistance during the busiest term in the Mauritian academic calendar. Last but not least, I am grateful to all the students who participated in this study during their school hours.

References

- Baker, P. 1976 Towards a social history of Mauritian Creole. BPhil dissertation, University of York.
- Biltoo, A.K. 2004 Language maintenance and language shift in Mauritius: A Sociolinguistic investigation into the language practices of Bhojpurias. PhD thesis. University of York, UK.
- Bissoonauth, A. 1998 Language use, language choice and language attitudes among young Mauritian adolescents in secondary education. PhD thesis, University of Nottingham.
- Bissoonauth, A. 2011 Language shift and maintenance in multilingual Mauritius: the case of Indian ancestral languages, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 32:5, 421-434.
- Bissoonauth, A. 2012. Attitudes towards English in Mauritius: linguistic paradox or cultural pragmatism? In *Crafting Identities, Remapping Nationalities: The English-Speaking World in the Age of Globalization*, edited by T. Harris and C. Coquet-Mokoko, 87-102. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bissoonauth, A. 2014 Language attitudes of Mauritian youth in secondary education: some preliminary results. *Actes du XIII^e colloque du Comité International des Etudes Créoles (pp. 247-266). Mauritius: Arnaud Carpooran/Creole Speaking Union.*
- Calvet, J. 2015. Préface. In *Ecrits sur les langues*, edited by Asgarally, I. Port-Louis, Super Printing Co Ltd.
- Coulmas, F. 2005. *Sociolinguistics. The study of speakers' choices*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 2008 edition.
- Fishman, J, A. (1967) Bilingualism with and without diglossia; diglossia with and without bilingualism. *Journal of Social Issues* 23: 29-38.
- Hookoomsing, V.Y. 2004 Grafi-larmoni: A harmonised writing system for the Mauritian Creole language. Le Réduit, University of Mauritius Press.
- Hookoomsing, V. Y. 2009 Regards croisés: La créolité version mauricienne, ou le triomphe du multiculturalism. In *Multiple Identities in action. Mauritius and some Antillean parallelisms*, edited by Hookoomsing, V.Y, Ludwig, R and Schnepel, B., 117-123. Frankfurt.
- Sebba, M. (1997) *Contact Languages: Pidgins and Creoles*. Basingstoke, Macmillan.
- Siegel, J. (1999) Creoles and Minority Dialects in Education: An overview. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural development*, 20 (6): 508-531.