

# Language Choice in Multilingual Mauritius

## — National Unity and Socioeconomic Advancement

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### 1. Introduction - Language Issues in Postcolonial Nations

Postcolonial nations are often caught in a thorny dilemma between the use of indigenous languages and that of the languages of colonial rule (Baldauf & Kaplan, 2004; Bolée, 1993; Kamwangamalu, 2008). The use of the native language as a medium of instruction appears to pave the way for the decolonisation of education, which consequently liberates young generations from the hegemony of colonial languages. UNESCO's model (1995) also affirms the efficiency of vernacular education in comparison with education through the medium of a foreign language. The use of the mother tongue reinforces national unity and furthermore creates a sense of pride in the people of their own country, culture and traditions, as well as in themselves. Nevertheless, the indigenous language often serves domestic functions only and hence does not lead to the socioeconomic progress that developing countries strive for.

Prestigious European languages are often preferred as the medium of instruction as it equips the nation with a communication tool to make headway toward socioeconomic advancement and participation in today's interconnected global society. Multilingualism is generally perceived as quixotic and unrealistic in local society since survival of the fittest is also the way of the language world: hegemonic European languages as well as those that are regionally dominant are steadily taking over minority languages. The official adoption of the colonial language can, however, reduce the tension between ethnic rivalries in a region where the preferential treatment of one

tribal language will all too soon break the equilibrium of local ethnic groups. That is one of the main reasons why English remains an official language of many former British colonies. However, there are also an increasing number of reports from countries such as Uganda and Kenya (Mazrui, 2002) suggesting that many students, even at the university level, are functionally illiterate in English, which has led to their overall poor academic performance. In postcolonial Africa, educational and intellectual capacity building has been an important national target, which requires careful research-based strategies.

In this survey-based paper, we will look at the use of and attitudes towards colonial languages, an indigenous language and ancestral languages in multilingual Mauritius. How do Mauritians differentiate the use of languages in various social circumstances? What images do they have of each language? How do they feel about the introduction of their mother tongue, Creole,<sup>1)</sup> as a medium of instruction in the school system and in religious practices? What languages do they want to promote for the future of Mauritius? These issues involve not only linguistic issues but also historical and sociopolitical conflicts.

## **2. Multilingualism in Mauritius**

The Republic of Mauritius is a postcolonial multilingual island nation in the southwest Indian Ocean, about 800 kilometres east of Madagascar. Mauritius, which has no record of an indigenous population, was first occupied by the Dutch in 1598. After the introduction of sugar cane and slavery, along with the extermination of the dodo, the problems of maintaining this small island in the tough climate forced the Dutch to abandon it in 1710. It was then colonised by the French (1715), who eventually succeeded in establishing a slave-plantation society based on sugar production. French colonists enjoyed a prosperous economy out of the hard labour and deprivation of slaves from the African

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<sup>1)</sup>The Mauritian Creole language goes by several different names, such as Kreol, Morisyen and MCL (Mauritian Creole Language).

continent and Madagascar. It was around this time that a French-lexified pidgin, which was soon turned into a creole, was developed between a master and slaves, creating a diglossia situation in which French was used as the High variety and Creole as the Low (Ferguson, 1959). The predominance of slaves over French-speaking settlers at that time accounts for the glaring linguistic disparity between Mauritian Creole and the standard French (Sebba, 1997). In the Napoleonic Wars, Mauritius was handed over to the British (1810), who accepted under the Treaty of Capitulation to preserve its social structure and the use of French language and the law of France. The abolition of slavery in 1835 necessitated the importation of indentured workers or coolies from different parts of India to maintain and further develop the island's economy as the leading cane producer in the British Empire. These Indians brought a variety of languages, including Bhojpuri, Tamil and Telugu, along with their religion and culture. Chinese traders also came from the South of China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The country attained independence in 1968 and has been a stable and democratic nation since then.

Mauritius is a rapidly developing nation, moving from colonial sugar cane production to a diversified economy with strong textiles, seafood, tourism, BPO and IT industry sectors. The government's efforts to attract foreign investment have been largely successful, attracting more than 32,000 offshore entities targeting commerce with India, South Africa and China (CIA, 2009). Per capita income has risen tremendously, from US\$260 in 1968, at the time of independence, to US\$5,570 in 2007 (The World Bank, 2008) and Mauritius is now considered to be one of the most economically successful countries in Africa. Since bilingualism in English and French is one of the appealing points of Mauritian corporations in the global market, bilingual speakers can command better jobs with higher wages. Economic globalisation, whether it is a disguised colonial legacy or not, is certainly at work in favour of "international" language use in Mauritius.

Its colonial history made Mauritius a multiethnic and

multilingual society with about 1.2 million inhabitants, of which 68% are Indo-Mauritians (Hindus and Muslims), 27% Creole (Afro-Mauritians and mixed population), 3% Sino-Mauritians and 2% Franco-Mauritians (CIA, 2008). Rajah-Carrim (2005) classified the eleven main languages in Mauritius into three groups: colonial languages (English and French) and language of everyday communication (Creole), and ancestral languages (Indian and Chinese languages) which are used on limited occasions. Now let us look at each language group in more depth.

## **2.1 Colonial languages**

French and English are the main colonial languages in Mauritius. Although English is considered to be the only official language in Mauritius, as few as 0.3% of the whole population speak English at home (Central Statistic Office, 2000). Its use, especially in the form of everyday oral interactions, is limited, due partly to a historical background in which few British settlers in Mauritius were assimilated to the French culture and way of life (Stein, 1982). Since English is not identified with a specific ethnic community, it is politically readily accepted as the language for parliamentary, judicial, administrative and educational purposes. Because of this limited access, the use of English suggests a high level of education and consequently a higher social status.

It is much more common for people of any ethnicity to speak French in everyday interactions, particularly for formal occasions. Newspapers, TV programmes, films and fiction books are available much more readily in French than in English (Foley, 1995). In recent years, the active promotion of French language and culture by *L'Alliance Française*, coupled with little such interest by the British, has been working more in favour of French (Eriksen, 1998). However, French has strong historic ties with the white Franco-Mauritians and upper/middle class mixed population, and therefore many upwardly mobile Indians and Chinese prefer more global and ethnic-free English. Mauritius has observed a marked tendency for Indo-Mauritians to

seize power in politics due to their numbers in the population, whereas Franco-Mauritians remain strong in the economic sector. Indo-Mauritians have been exercising political power to prevent French—widely-used—from becoming an official language, to maintain the equilibrium in ethnic relations.

## **2.2 Ancestral languages**

Ancestral languages such as Bhojpuri, Hindi, Gujerati, Kutchi, Mandarin, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu are connected to ethnicity and religion (Baker, 1972; Eriksen, 1998; Rajah-Carrim, 2004; Stein, 1982). Except for a small segment of the population using Bhojpuri in the home, few Mauritians speak the language of their forefathers any longer other than in religious practices. Yet the majority still associate their historical and cultural identity with that language. Analyses of the population census carried out in 1983 (Eriksen, 1998), 1990 (Bissoonaath & Offord, 2001) and 2000 (Rajah-Carrim, 2005) reveal the strong link between the language of forefathers and ethnicity.

Claiming the ownership of a particular ancestral language can be political in Mauritius, where politicians are typically elected on the basis of their ethnic identity, and financial support is allocated on the basis of their numbers in each ethnic group. Since 1955, the government has been promoting the learning of ancestral languages in formal education. Although the policy is based on the sound pedagogical target of maintaining languages and language communities and of raising children's awareness and understanding of the cultural heritage of their ancestors, it is also clearly based on political grounds (Sonck, 2005).

## **2.3 Creole**

A French-lexified Creole developed through contact with French, West African languages such as Wolof and Bambara, Bengali, Tamil and Malagasy. Although Creole is originally the mother tongue of Afro-Mauritians and part of the mixed populations who are locally called the Creoles, nowadays approximately 70% of Mauritians with

various ethnic backgrounds consider Creole as their mother tongue (Central Statistic Office, 2000). It is also widely used for informal everyday conversations by all ethnic groups. It can be said that Creole acts as “the language of solidarity” (Rajah-Carrim, 2004, p. 365) and “an ‘unofficial’ national language” (Eriksen, 1990, p. 14) in Mauritius. Despite the fact that it serves as the lingua franca of the island, it is still considered by some as a French patois, not a language per se, due partly to its connection with the Creoles, a socioeconomically deprived group, and partly to the absence of a standard orthography. Although Creole is in practice no longer the possession of one ethnic group but rather shared by the whole nation, some still see a dark image haunting the language.

Although it officially limits itself to the spoken medium, nowadays some Mauritians, especially upper/middle class young people, playfully invent spelling in individual and innovative ways, especially when using SMS on a mobile phone or in email/chatting online (Hookoomsing, 2004; Rajah-Carrim, 2008). Several individual attempts have been made to codify and standardise Creole (Baker, 1972; Baker & Hookoomsing, 1987). There are also two non-official writing systems, one promoted by the left-wing group *Ledikasyon Pu Travayer* (LPT) and the other one by the Church and a local linguist, Dev Virahsawmy. Each variety can fit into a continuum where the system can be, at one extreme, etymological (based on French orthographic convention), or, at the other, phonemic (based simply on the sounds of words, e.g., *resevwar* for *reservoir*) (Rajah-Carrim, 2008).

### **3. Politics over Languages in Education**

Primary education is compulsory and free to children from five to eleven years old in Mauritius. English is used as the medium of instruction throughout, which has often been criticised for the high failure rate—30 to 40 % of those sitting the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) exams, which pupils take at the end of elementary school to be admitted to secondary school (Sonck, 2005). This means

the end of any formal education for the dropouts, who then have to go to vocational school or apprenticeship, or are simply left without a future. At the same time, due to the impracticality of conducting classes solely in English, it has been reported that teachers use French or even Creole more often than English to introduce new topics and concepts (Bissoonaath & Offord, 2001; Foley, 1995).

French and English are also compulsory subjects to study along with Mathematics, Science, History and Geography. The seven oriental languages, i.e., Arabic, Hindi, Mandarin, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu, are offered as optional subjects to primary school students. The learning of these ancestral languages purports to maintain the cultural and communicative bonds with communities and people of like origin. Franco-Mauritians, Afro-Mauritians and mixed groups, who do not have associations with any of these languages, take an alternative Christianity-based religious class.

In multiracial and multilingual Mauritius, languages in education can become a highly political issue owing to its influence on the nature of nation-building and the chance for an individual's socioeconomic success. Politicians often try to promote one or more particular languages in order to gain support from specific ethnic groups. One such controversial issue involves the status of the Creole language, which has been associated with socialist movements. From independence in 1968 until 1982, the left-wing opposition party MMM (*Mouvement Militant Mauricien*) promoted the use of Creole as a potential official language of the newly-independent nation, in competition with the use of French, which symbolises a small number of a privileged class occupied by Franco-Mauritians. The UNESCO mission of 1974 also recommended the use of a mother tongue such as Creole and Bhojपुरi in education. However, once elected to power in alliance with the PSM (*Parti Socialiste Mauricien*), the MMM made a rather hasty and dramatic decision on the introduction of Creole as the medium of TV, where French had historically been dominant. This change met with fierce opposition by the PSM, which forced the MMM to hold back on the policy; it was eventually defeated in the

following election (Foley, 1992; Miles, 2000).

Currently the government is engaging in a new plan to introduce Creole as a written language to be learnt and as a medium of instruction to study general subjects in primary school. In March 2004, the coalition government of the MMM and the MSM (*Mouvement Socialiste Militant*) charged linguists and educators from the University of Mauritius and the Mauritius Institute of Education to codify and standardise Mauritian Creole. Although the report on the orthography *grafi-larmoni*, “orthography of harmony”, was submitted to the government (Hookoomsing, 2004)—and the new political leaders of the *Alliance Sociale*, who came to power in 2005, are also committed to the promotion of Creole—no clear development has taken place since then.

Hookoomsing’s report also argues that the introduction will require a number of preparation steps: developing the school curriculum, syllabus, teaching materials such as grammar books and dictionaries and the training sessions for teachers. Since new concepts and words are constantly being created, a systematic approach to borrowing and coinage has to be established. Moreover, prior to adopting such a major change, the possible risks should be carefully assessed. One undoubted problem of introducing Creole into primary education is that it may increase the cognitive burden on children, who already seriously suffer from having to cope with too many languages simultaneously, i.e., English, French and an ancestral language, in their early years. Furthermore, the emphasis on the indigenous language can accelerate the inequality between the majority who receive public education and the small number of elite children who continue to focus on European languages in private school, the parallel here being to apartheid Bantu Education in South Africa (Kamwangamalu, 2003). It is not an easy task to seek a way in which children can gain maximum benefit from education and eventually become competent enough to ensure a secure future for the country.

Another hotly debated issue is the introduction of ancestral languages to the CPE. When Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth



advocated a reform plan to make oriental languages an obligatory part of the CPE in 1995, it fueled anger among the Creoles, who believed it would serve as an obstacle to prevent them from climbing the social ladder, as the notion of a *malaise créole* is well established. Having also failed to gain substantial support from the Indian and Chinese communities, Jugnauth's MSM/RMM (*Renouveau Militant Mauricien*) government suffered a defeat in the following election.

However, the same issue reappeared, after an interval, in 2004, when ancestral languages became examinable subjects for the CPE. Since the choice of language is ethnically based, Afro-Mauritian and mixed parentage children do not have their own language but Creole. As their Indo- and Sino-Mauritian counterparts have easy exposure to their ancestral languages, the linguistic needs of these children should be considered. Some pro-Creole groups, such as the *Front Commun* and the *Mouvman Bienet Kreol Roche-Bois*, see this situation as unfair and have appealed for the educational reform (Rajah-Carrim, 2007).

The consequence of these political battles has turned out to be an educational catastrophe. Despite the fact that several reports, such as the aforementioned 1974 UNESCO Consultants' report, the 1979 Richards Report and the report by Rodney Phillips at the Mauritian Institute of Education (Hookoomsing, 2004), have already pointed out that too many languages were being taught at the same time through an inefficient teaching approach, proposals for the necessary change have been rejected for political reasons, as a result of which a large proportion of Mauritian children are still suffering from general academic failure or even illiteracy.

This paper will examine Mauritian people's attitudes towards the use of languages, particularly the use of Creole in education. Although there is a strong tendency for administrators and scholars in postcolonial nations to be keen to raise the social status of indigenous languages vis-à-vis the language of the former colonisers, the general public may not share the same enthusiasm towards this cultural issue, aiming rather to acquire the international languages, which facilitate socioeconomic success. For instance, Kistoe-West's survey (1978)

showed that parents are much more in favour of the use of English (40%) as a medium of instruction from the beginning of primary education than headteachers (13%). The results were consistent in terms of the parents' strong wish for their children to study English and French, which would be useful for the success of their future careers.

In Rajah-Carrim's interview-based study (2007), out of 79 respondents, only 18 (23%) agreed to the introduction of Creole as a subject in school, whereas 44 (56%) objected to it. The latter's claim becomes even stronger when considering categorical analysis: 'parent' and 'student' who would be directly affected by the policy reacted more negatively towards the introduction of Creole in school than 'grandparent'. Those who were against it argued that Mauritian youth should spend time on learning international languages, which could open up the world to them, rather than insular Creole. Many also felt that Creole, which is naturally acquired through everyday interaction by most Mauritian children, would not require a place in formal education. Creole was considered, by some, to be inappropriate as a subject due to lack of a standard form. One respondent even believed that Creole, as the language of the disempowered, was being used by the dominant group as a political tool to prevent the general public from making socioeconomic progress, whereas their own offspring, who speak English or French at home, would continue to enjoy the prestige of dominating society. If the use of Creole is allowed, it may even serve as an obstacle, as feared by some, to children when tackling the more useful but more challenging European languages.

Although supported by only a minority, three reasons were presented to encourage the teaching of Creole as a subject: (1) a better understanding of subject content<sup>2</sup>; (2) a boost for the standardisation of Creole; and (3) an identity marker for Afro-Mauritians and people of mixed population. In the concluding remarks, the researcher

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<sup>2</sup> This first reason indicates some confusion between Creole as a medium of instruction and Creole as a subject of study. Although the researcher intended to ask about the respondents' opinions regarding the latter, it was difficult for them to make a clear-cut distinction.

highlighted the wide-spread Eurocentric view that English and French are “better” than an indigenous language, and this served as a principal engine to preserve colonial language policies in education.

## **4. Survey Study**

### **4.1 Methodology**

The data are based on a survey administered in January and February 2009. Fifty participants in this study were contacted through friends and acquaintances. Although this “snowball” approach is limited in its validity to represent the attitudes of the general Mauritian population, it has been frequently used to obtain a flavor of language attitudes in Mauritius (Rajah-Carrim, 2004; 2007; 2008). The main variables used in this study were ethnicity, age, education and gender. Table 1 shows the breakdown of respondents in terms of these variables. It has to be noted that although efforts were made to collect responses from all ethnic backgrounds, it was difficult to mirror the proportion of ethnic groups in Mauritius: Indo-Mauritians were under-represented while the mixed population and Sino-Mauritians were overrepresented. Although 14.4% of the population were reported to be illiterate, with the highest degree found in women aged 60 and above residing in rural areas (Central Statistic Office, 2000), illiteracy was controlled in this study in order to examine Mauritians’ attitudes towards the languages used in the classroom. All our respondents were educated insofar as their received education ranged from secondary to postgraduate studies. Our participants can be said to represent an academically successful group in Mauritian society.

**Table 1. Participants by ethnicity, gender, age group and education**

		<19	20-39	<40	Total	secondary school	under- graduate	post- graduate	Total
Indo-Mauritian Hindus (19)	Male	4	9	1	14	6	5	3	14
	Female	0	5	0	5	0	1	4	5
Indo-Mauritian Muslims (3)	Male	0	3	0	3	0	1	2	3
	Female	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sino-Mauritian (7)	Male	3	4	0	7	2	4	1	7
	Female	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Afro-Mauritian (2)	Male	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Female	0	2	0	2	2	0	0	2
Mixed Population (17)	Male	0	5	2	7	3	3	1	7
	Female	0	5	5	10	5	1	4	10
Franco-Mauritian (2)	Male	0	2	0	2	2	0	0	2
	Female	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		7	35	9	50	20	15	15	50

## 4.2 Results and discussions

### 4.2.1 The use of languages in everyday life

Out of 11 languages generally spoken in Mauritius, participants were asked to tick: all the language(s) that they know were spoken by their ancestors; the language(s) they usually speak (a) to family and relatives, (b) to neighbours, (c) to close friends, (d) to school teachers, (e) to colleagues, (f) to a boss, (g) in a market, (h) in a public (government) office, (i) when they pray, (j) when they email and/or chat; and then (k) their mother tongue and (l) all the languages they can speak “without difficulty”. When a condition did not apply to their personal circumstances, they had the option of ticking “not applicable”.

A comparison between ancestral languages and languages spoken on various occasions (see Table 2) shows that most of the oriental languages spoken by ancestors, particularly Bhojpuri, are rarely used nowadays except for some limited use of Chinese languages and Hindi. Most of our respondents are trilingual in Creole, English and French, which is in accordance with the previous literature (Baker, 1972;

Stein, 1982). Our respondents can speak two or three languages (on average 2.83 languages per person) without difficulty although they attach themselves to one or two mother tongues (1.33 languages). The language-respondent-ratio in specific circumstances varies from the lower end of 1.35 in the market and 1.44 among neighbours to 2.39 for email/chat and 2.14 for school teachers. Mauritians switch from one to another based on social field and addressee.

As is claimed in the literature (Baker, 1972; Eriksen, 1998; Rajah-Carrim, 2007; Stein, 1986), Creole is the one and only language spoken without difficulty by all respondents. It is used most frequently on informal occasions such as in the market (93.8%), and with close friends (86%), neighbours (85.7%) and family (84%), while its use is limited when addressing people in senior positions such as schoolteachers (39.5%) and bosses (44.4%). Although higher education enabled our group to speak French (91.5%) and English (80.9%) far better than the general public, the use of these languages is fairly restricted and specific to formal occasions or writing mode: French is frequently used when talking to schoolteachers (95.3%) and bosses (84.4%), in writing emails or chatting (86.4%), or in a public office (76.6%); English is used much less than French but its use is very high in emails/chats (90.9%) and with schoolteachers (74.4%).

This kind of questionnaire, like census data, has to be read with caution because what they believe they speak may be more associated with what they would like to speak rather than what they actually speak (Stein, 1986). Although we may anticipate that the languages of prestige such as English and French may be overrepresented to some degree, whereas the languages with social stigma such as Bhojपुरi and Creole are understated, the results illustrate the richness and complexity of language usage in Mauritius.

Table 2. Ancestral language(s) and language(s) usually spoken on various occasions

	ancestral languages	family	neighbours	close friends	school teachers	colleagues	boss	market	public office	praying	email/chat	mother tongue	spoken "without" difficulty
(1) Arabic	1 (2.0%)	0	0	1 (2.0%)	1 (2.3%)	0	0	0	0	5 (12.2%)	0	0	0
(2) Bhojpuri	15 (30.6%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
(3) Chinese languages	7 (14.3%)	3 (6.0%)	2 (4.1%)	0	0	1 (2.2%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (2.1%)
(4) Creole	39 (79.6%)	42 (84.0%)	42 (85.7%)	43 (86.0%)	17 (39.5%)	34 (77.3%)	20 (44.4%)	45 (93.8%)	29 (61.7%)	20 (48.8%)	27 (61.4%)	31 (79.5%)	47 (100%)
(5) English	31 (63.3%)	14 (28.0%)	6 (12.2%)	19 (38.0%)	32 (74.4%)	21 (47.7%)	21 (46.7%)	5 (10.4%)	10 (21.3%)	6 (14.6%)	40 (90.9%)	4 (10.3%)	38 (80.9%)
(6) French	36 (73.5%)	28 (56.0%)	22 (44.9%)	30 (60.0%)	41 (95.3%)	35 (79.5%)	38 (84.4%)	14 (29.2%)	36 (76.6%)	22 (53.7%)	38 (86.4%)	16 (41.0%)	43 (91.5%)
(7) Hindi	13 (26.5%)	1 (2.0%)	0	1 (2.0%)	1 (2.3%)	0	0	1 (2.1%)	2 (4.3%)	7 (17.1%)	0	0	3 (6.4%)
(8) Marathi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (2.4%)	0	0	1 (2.1%)
(9) Tamil	6 (12.2%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
(10) Telugu	2 (4.1%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
(11) Urdu	5 (10.2%)	0	0	1 (2.0%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (2.6%)	0
Total language/ Total respondent (ratio)	158/50 (3.16)	88/50 (1.76)	72/50 (1.44)	95/50 (1.90)	92/43 (2.14)	90/44 (2.05)	80/45 (1.78)	65/48 (1.35)	77/47 (1.64)	61/41 (1.49)	105/44 (2.39)	52/39 (1.33)	133/47 (2.83)

#### 4.2.2 Perceived images towards languages

Participants were also asked to write the images they have toward English, French, Creole and ancestral languages. Since the format was one of free writing, the responses varied in style and nature. The researcher extracted and grouped key words and adjectives as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. The list of perceived images towards languages

<b>English</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ international, global, world, universal</li> <li>■ official, legal, formal, rigid</li> <li>■ business, the Internet, education</li> <li>■ useful, helpful, important</li> <li>■ elegant, positive</li> <li>■ basic, simple</li> <li>■ arrogant</li> </ul>
<b>French</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ international, media and newspaper</li> <li>■ business, education</li> <li>■ useful, helpful</li> <li>■ complicated, tough, limited</li> <li>■ refined, posh, polite</li> <li>■ creativity</li> </ul>
<b>Creole</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ home, family, intimacy</li> <li>■ our country, among Mauritians, feeling of belonging to the nation</li> <li>■ social, harmony, mixture, popular</li> <li>■ informal, natural, easy, comfortable</li> <li>■ vulgar, gross, not very elegant,</li> <li>■ too much swearing, jokes</li> <li>■ generally spoken, spoken with friends</li> <li>■ used by the poor, the lower class</li> </ul>
<b>Ancestral languages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ traditional, culture, keeping in touch with one's roots</li> <li>■ forgotten, rarely spoken, unimportant, not popular</li> <li>■ beautiful, warm, friendly</li> <li>■ prayers, religious</li> <li>■ communalist, used as a political weapon</li> </ul>

To sum up, English represents the *international* and *global world*, and so does French, to a slightly lesser extent. They are not only *helpful* languages used in *business* and *education* but also aesthetically *elegant* and *refined*. English is grammatically *simpler* than French but can sometimes give an *arrogant* impression. Creole stands at the opposite pole: it represents *home, family* and the *nation*. Just as the history of the language does, it symbolises *Mauritius*, the *natural mixture* of different cultures in *harmony*. However, ambivalence can be observed, as it is also related to *poverty* and the *lower class*. Creole, which is used mostly for *informal* conversation such as *swearing* and *jokes with friends*, is also considered, at least by some, as *vulgar* and *gross, not very elegant*. Images of ancestral languages are disparate, too. Some positively connect them to *their roots* and *traditional cultures*, whereas others view them as *unimportant* and *forgotten* languages. Ancestral languages also remind them of *religious* practices. Since each ancestral language is associated with a different *community*, it can be used as a *political weapon* by politicians and therefore be a potential threat to the unity of country.

The results become even more interesting when compared with the normative and alternative connotations of French-Creole diglossia proposed by Eriksen (1998, see Table 4). Since the colonial era, French as a High variety has enjoyed prestige, power and positive connotations, whereas Creole as a Low variety, on the other, has been associated with negative images and the low esteem of the colonised. Independence in 1968, however, triggered the radical postcolonial cultural movement of the MMM and reevaluated Mauritian heritage including Creole and *séga* music<sup>3)</sup>. Until 1982, national sentiment was developed to view French as the language of the colonisers with strong hostility attached, and this led to create the alternative connotations for French-Creole diglossia: French was seen as the language of oppression and Creole as the language of justice. Nevertheless, after the fall of the short-lived MMM campaign, the movement for linguistic decolonisation faded somehow. Current practice tells us that French remains an important

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<sup>3)</sup> *Séga* music, a blend of French *chansons* and African rhythm, was originally developed by slaves.



international language and Creole still a spoken language without any real place in school.

The present study confirms that even today Creole has not been totally unshackled from the chains of colonial constraint: Some still link Creole with *vulgarity*, *jocularly* and *the lower class*, which can be contrasted with the *refined* and *powerful* image of French. Yet a strong sense of *comradeship* is now attached to Creole. Images such as *our country* and *feeling of belonging to the nation* underpin the notion that Creole is now considered to be the language of all Mauritians to unite diversified ethnic groups with a sense of shared nationalism.

**Table 4. Normative and Alternative Connotations of French-Creole Diglossia**

Normative connotations of French-Creole diglossia		Alternative connotations of French-Creole diglossia	
French	Creole	French	Creole
power	impotence	oppression	justice
abstract thought	practical tasks	snobbery	comradeship
steak & salad	<i>kari masala</i>	stratification	equality
wine & whisky	rum & beer	false consciousness	true consciousness
whiteness	blackness		
refinement	vulgarity		
responsibility	carelessness		
religion	superstition		
education	ignorance		
literacy	illiteracy		
seriousness	jocularly		
<i>bonne société</i>	<i>milieu populaire</i>		

(Adapted from Eriksen, 1998, p. 88, 90)

### 4.2.3 Creole as a medium of instruction

Participants were asked what language(s) were used as a medium of instruction to teach general subjects such as mathematics and history at school, and then whether they were satisfied with the choice of language and why. Although the majority claimed the medium was solely in English, additional use of French and Creole was not uncommon (see Table 5). Seven respondents went to private schools where instruction was given only in French. Most people were satisfied with the choice of language at school, with a few exceptions. Those who received English or French instruction appreciated the opportunity to

practice these internationally important language(s), which they can now exploit to achieve socioeconomic success. For those who answer “no”, dissatisfaction was attributed to the absence of the use of a mother tongue based on direct observation of some of their peers being completely left out. They would have preferred the use of more than one language. When the medium of instruction was a mixture of English/French or English/French/Creole, all of our respondents were satisfied, owing to the fact that they understood the subjects better using all the knowledge resources in hand, and in addition, it meant teachers had chosen the language they were most fluent with, which will have made their teaching more efficient.

**Table 5. Participants’ satisfaction with language(s) used as a medium of instruction**

		language(s) used as a medium of instruction				Total
		English	French	English/ French	English/ French/ Creole	
Are you satisfied with the choice of language?	Yes	29	6	4	5	44
	No	3	1	0	0	4
Total		32	7	4	5	48

An interesting point here is that out of 32 respondents who claim English as the sole medium of instruction, only 23 report to have used English to address the teacher, while 28 used French and 11 Creole. In fact, 95.3% of our respondents talked to the teacher in French (Table 2). This disparity between policy and practice is reminiscent of a classroom scene described by Rajah-Carrim (2007, p.54): “In a typical biology class, for instance, the teacher first explains in French (or even Kreol), and then possibly dictates notes in English. Students generally ask questions to the teacher in French but in Kreol to their classmates and answer examination questions in English!” In spite of this linguistically distorted situation, a comparison between languages spoken in various situations (Table 2) and languages used as a medium of instruction (Table 5) clearly illustrates that the education

system has had decisive effects on the languages people use in later life. There is also a stark contrast between languages used as a medium of instruction and languages learned as a foreign language: English and French became an important tool for everyday communication, whereas the use of ancestral languages is limited.

Subsequently, the participants were asked whether they thought Creole should be used as a medium of instruction at school. Irrespective of the language(s) they experienced as the medium of instruction, their opinions are evenly divided (see Table 6). Most interestingly, however, further analysis led us to find a significant correlation between the education level and the opinion ( $P=.002$ , Cramer's  $V=.405$ , see Table 7): The higher the education level is, the more likely they object to the introduction of Creole as a medium of instruction. Among those who went no further than secondary education, 12 approved of its introduction and 8 opposed it; among those who completed postgraduate studies, only 3 approved and 11 opposed it.

**Table 6. Participants' opinions on whether Creole should be used as a medium of instruction by language(s) used as a medium of instruction**

		language(s) used as a medium of instruction				Total
		English	French	English/ French	English/ French/ Creole	
Should Creole be used as a medium of instruction?	Yes	17	3	1	3	24
	No	16	3	3	1	23
Total		33	6	4	4	47

**Table 7. Participants' opinions on whether Creole should be used as a medium of instruction by education level**

		education level			Total
		secondary	undergraduate	postgraduate	
Should Creole be used as a medium of instruction?	Yes	12	10	3	25
	No	8	4	11	23
Total		20	14	14	48

As for qualitative aspects of their positions, information was provided in free writing. Some proponents unconditionally supported the idea of using Creole in school:

A1) Creole as a mother tongue helps some pupils understand new concepts better.

*“Often children use Creole as the main medium of communication at home and are completely left out when they join primary school where they are taught in French or English.”* [Mixed, 20-29, female, Roman Catholic, undergraduate]<sup>4)</sup>

Others specified a few conditions:

A2) Creole should be used as a secondary medium as an auxiliary measure to help those who have difficulty in understanding European languages.

*“Because English is the most important language in the world. But I think that having Creole as a secondary medium of instruction would be better, as some people tend to have difficulty understanding English well.”* [Sino-Mauritian, 13-19, male, Roman Catholic, undergraduate]

A3) Creole may be used to explain complicated matters orally, but should not be written.

*“The mother language is always most frequently used in everyday life. However, Creole should only be used to explain but not to write. It is much more complicated to write Creole compared to French and English.”* [Memans, 20-39, male, Muslim, undergraduate]

These ideas presume that Creole is inferior to English and French as a formal language in education, although its undoubted value of providing equal opportunities to every child was acknowledged.

Those who disagreed with the introduction of Creole claim the following:

B1) Creole is not a language but a dialect.

*“We should practice English and French more to perfect ourselves but keep Creole to talk generally in informal settings. Creole is and will always be our dialect.”* [Hindu, 20-39, male, Hindu, postgraduate]

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<sup>4)</sup> [ethnicity, age group, gender, religion, education]

B2) Creole is a vulgar and impractical language to read and spell.

*"Because, with all due respect to my fellow compatriots, I've always found Creole to be a very gross, vulgar and difficult-to-read-and-spell language."*

[Hindu, 20-39, female, Hindu, postgraduate]

B3) Creole will demotivate students from practicing more difficult but more useful European languages.

*"Such [an] act will certainly encourage students to speak more Creole in school, thus reducing the use of English and French language."* [Tamil, 20-39, male, Hindu, secondary]

[Hindu, secondary]

Those who completed postgraduate studies also tend to give reasons related the absence of international value:

B4) *"Because it is an insular language with no international recognition or usage."* [Calcuttias, 20-39, male, Muslim, postgraduate]

B5) *"It is not a skill that has a global reach."* [Mixed, 20-39, male, Roman Catholic, postgraduate]

It is very common for well-off young Mauritians to go to English- or French-speaking countries to obtain a degree, particularly at a postgraduate level, as did the majority of our participants. Clearly, their experience abroad has further developed the appreciation for English and/or French proficiency.

The following question was on whether the orthography of Creole should be standardised. Once again, the opinions are divided. Supporters view the standardisation as a stepping stone in making Creole officially recognised as the language of Mauritius. One writes that each country should have its own language and orthography. Developing its own writing will raise the profile of Mauritius as a country. Another simply complains about the difficulty of decoding the spelling because people construct words and abbreviations on an ad-hoc basis. These respondents support the importance of standardisation in order to enhance the status of a language as part of language planning, and consider Creole as a symbol of Mauritian unity and identity. The other half, however, have reservations.

**Table 8. Participants' opinions on whether the orthography of Creole should be standardised**

Should the orthography of Creole be standardised?		
Yes	No	Total
21	22	43

Objectors can be divided into four categories:

C1) functional and intrinsic limitations of Creole

(“*Creole is a dialect as far as I know. Had it been a language too, students would face problems when going overseas.*” [Hindu, 20-39, male, Hindu, undergraduate]);

C2) impracticality of setting up a new spelling system

(“*It would be next to impossible to come to a fully satisfactory standardised orthography. It'll take years, centuries even, before Mauritians get fully used to it.*” [Franco-Mauritian, 20-39, male, Roman Catholic, secondary]);

C3) protection of the creative part of the language

(“*Because it is a free language, where anyone writes as it pleases. This makes it really cool :p*” [Sino-Mauritian, 13-19, male, atheistic, secondary]);

C4) fear regarding the increasing burden for children

(“*I don't want it to become a bother for me to learn.*” [Sino-Mauritian, 13-19, male, Roman Catholic, secondary]).

The first group does not attach much value to Creole since it is a dialect and is limited to domestic use. Creole suffers from its low social status vis-à-vis standard French and is considered not to be self-contained enough as a language per se, which Rajah-Carrim calls an “intrinsic limitation” (2008, p. 215). Mauritians, especially those who received education of the same sort of level as our participants did, tend to share a strong upward aspiration, and prefer using a High variety (French). They do not appreciate a Low variety with low prestige. Furthermore, lack of international value, described as a “functional limitation” (Phillipson, 1992; Rajah-Carrim, 2008, p.215), led this group to see no point in investing in its development. They even consider the promotion of Creole as an obstacle impeding the

advancement of the younger generation in this globalised world. Since Mauritius is a small island, Mauritians are conscious of the need to be in touch with the world and are afraid of becoming an isolated ghetto on their own.

The second group argues pessimistically that the difficulty of getting used to the new spelling system may become a source of social confusion. These people may be conscious of the MMM's hasty decision regarding the promotion of Creole after independence. As Hookoomsing (2004) suggested, careful preparatory steps have to be made for its gradual introduction at the levels of government, school and private sectors (see Section 3).

The next group has a positive attitude toward Creole: As long as there is no standardised orthography, Creole will remain flexible, creative, accessible and "free". Their objection comes from the desire to maintain these features of the language. These people feel attracted to Creole because of its unique nature to allow them to imagine, invent and play—a valuable feature that other languages, e.g., French and English, which are rigidly learnt through formal education, do not possess. However, they should bear in mind the fact that standardisation does not restrict them from inventing their own spelling if they wish. In fact, humans have always invented and changed language and spelling, and computer-mediated communication has boosted this freedom, as in *BTW send me msg b4 u log* (=By the way, send me a message before you log out).

The last group consisting of young people fears that the standardising of its orthography will mean that it is going to be transformed into a subject to learn, which is a hassle and a bother. This is an institutional limitation the government has to handle with caution. The introduction of Creole may solve the problem of unfairness related to ancestral languages currently offered only to Indo- and Sino-Mauritian children. Instead of their current religious class, Franco- and Afro-Mauritians and mixed parentage students could study Creole, which in fact enables ancestral languages to be a compulsory part of the CPE to further promote these languages. Nevertheless, as declared

with a sense of unease by some of our participants, cramming even more languages into the heads of five-year-old children does not seem plausible considering the current high failure rates. It will actually worsen the conditions separating the small number of elite children in a favourable environment from the remaining majority, who will be in danger of slipping between the cracks of society.

#### **4.2.4 Use of Creole in religious practices**

Participants were asked whether their religion was associated with one or more languages, and if yes which one. As seen in Table 9, most Muslims and Hindus answered yes. Islam is associated with Arabic and/or Urdu. Hindu services are conducted in a wider variety of ancestral languages, such as Bhojpuri, Hindi, Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu. While it was reported that the increasing number of Islamic and Hindi priests preach partly in Creole (Delval, 1979, cited in Foley, 1992), it was not considered as part of their religion. One thought-provoking outcome is that while about the half the believers in Roman Catholicism answered that their religion was associated with French and/or Creole, the other half did not see the link. This must be because the use of French and Creole is unmarked in Mauritius, unlike ancestral languages whose usage is restricted to religious practices. It is therefore more difficult to identify the association. Creole has been used as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century by both Roman Catholics and the Anglican Church because the majority of Afro-Mauritians and people of mixed population are Christian. The correlation between religion and their answer was significant, with a strong effect size ( $p=.014$ , Cramer's  $V=.603$ ).



**Table 9. Participants' response to whether their religion is associated with one or more languages**

		Is there one language/languages that is/are associated with your religion?		
		Yes	No	Total
Religion	Muslim	6	1	7
	Hindu	15	1	16
	Roman Catholic	6	7	13
	Protestant	0	1	1
	Buddhist	1	0	1
	Other	0	1	1
Total		28	11	39

The following question was whether they would agree with the use of Creole in religious practices. There is a general tendency towards positive flexibility, with Hindus presenting a slightly higher proportion of negative answers. The two main reasons for the agreement come from accessibility and intelligibility: since many young people are not familiar with the language used for religious practices, it is difficult for them to understand and appreciate its essence. The use of Creole, i.e., the mother tongue of many, will help them to have communication with their deity/deities, feel closer to him/them and foster the spirit of sharing. Their open attitude is well presented in the comment “*God understands every language.*” [Sino-Mauritian, 20-39, male, Protestant, postgraduate]. Still, the opposing voices of the traditionalists should not be neglected. Those who hold negative views on Creole feel “*That'd be an insult to the prayers, as Creole is way too vulgar a language in my opinion.*” [Hindu, 20-39, female, Hindu, postgraduate]. Although she does not understand the Sanskrit associated with Hinduism, the intelligibility of Creole does not override the sacredness of the Sanskrit prayers. One Muslim states it would be impossible to translate the Koran into Creole with sufficient accuracy. Another Hindu even worries that the use of Creole might create disorder and conflict between people. All in all, however, our group exhibits a more open attitude to using Creole in religious practices than in education. This may be because religions are

related to their inner world, whereas education has a direct impact on their future career and materialistic world.

**Table 10. Participants' response to whether they agree with the use of Creole in their religious practices**

		Do you agree with the use of Creole in your religious practices?		
		Yes	No	Total
Religion	Muslim	4	1	5
	Hindu	11	3	14
	Roman Catholic	13	1	14
	Protestant	1	0	1
	Buddhist	1	0	1
	Other	1	0	1
Total		31	5	36

#### 4.2.5 Future of languages

Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent to which the use of English, French, Creole and ancestral languages should be promoted (5 on the scale), discouraged (1 on the scale), or kept to their current status (3 on the scale) in Mauritius, and state the reasons for their judgment. There was also the option "not applicable" if a participant had no opinion. A comparison of mean scores shows that educated Mauritians aspire to English ( $M=4.80$ ), closely followed by French ( $M=4.64$ ), to be the languages of the future in Mauritius. Creole scores the lowest ( $M=3.44$ ), even lower than ancestral languages ( $M=3.64$ ). A Frequency Table (Table 11) clarifies the fact that a majority marked the maximum encouragement, i.e., 5 on the scale, for English and French, with no voting for discouragement, whereas Creole should be kept, according to the majority's belief, as it is, or even discouraged. As for ancestral languages, opinions are divided.

**Table 11. Participants' opinions on the future of languages in Mauritius**

	discouraged			encouraged			M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	Total		
English	0	0	4	1	40	45	4.80	.588
French	0	0	6	4	35	45	4.64	.712
Creole	3	2	23	6	11	45	3.44	1.119
Ancestral language	4	3	13	6	16	42	3.64	1.322

The results coincide with Rajah-Carrim's interview-based study (2007), where linguistic hierarchies emerged based on a language's value for socioeconomic advancement in a globalised world: English > French > Ancestral languages > Creole. Language in Mauritius is multi-faceted: it symbolises their ethnicity and cultural roots; it creates a sense of solidarity and Mauritian identity; it also serves as a communication tool to achieve socioeconomic success and career advancement. We can see that the last aspect has the strongest impact on people's language choice. It also has to be noted that there was not a single comment about the postcolonial past or any attempt to reject the language of colonial rule. This result is in accordance with the recent literature, which stresses the importance in establishing a solid link between language and the economy in efforts to promote African languages (Kamwangamalu, 2004, 2008; Walsh, 2006). Unless an indigenous language, as a commodity, has value for an individual actor to invest his time and money in, it is difficult to create incentives for studying it or using it. In order for the Mauritian government to succeed in promoting Creole or ancestral languages, concrete measures have to be taken to attach socioeconomic values to these languages, such as a better chance for employment and higher wages, skills to move up the social ladder and access to social power. Without such efforts, the promotion of these languages will remain no more than a mere political game to win votes from certain ethnic groups.

## 5. Conclusion

This study underlined the historical, political and economic influence over language choice in multilingual Mauritius. The survey-based study with 50 educated Mauritians revealed the multifaceted roles of the various languages of Mauritius. Creole was spoken without difficulty by all participants and its frequent use occurred on informal occasions such as in the market or with close friends and family. The use of French and English was, on the other hand, limited to formal occasions, e.g., when addressing people in senior positions, or to writing, e.g., emails and SMS-style chatting. Ancestral languages were rarely used except when praying in, for instance, Arabic and Hindi.

Despite the fact that Creole was most widely spoken, its standing proved to be ambivalent: it carried inferior and subordinate connotations related to vulgarity, jocularly and the lower class, though it was also associated with a sense of comradeship and belonging. This contrasts sharply with the positive and international images attached to the languages of colonial rule. The images towards ancestral languages were also disparate, relating to tradition on the one hand to lack of importance on the other.

The issue of which language to use as the medium of instruction is very significant, as it has direct influence on the future of the languages, culture and power structures of communities. In our study, the majority of those who received education through English were content with the choice of the medium used, appreciating the opportunity to practice an international language that would facilitate their career development. At the same time, the absence of vernacular education brought a certain dissatisfaction. On the issue of the use of Creole as a medium of instruction, a significant correlation was found between the level of education and their opinion: the higher the education level, the more likely they are to object to the introduction of Creole as a medium of instruction. Although proponents advocated mother tongue education for reasons of efficiency, opponents considered Creole to be an impractical dialect with low prestige. Those

who completed postgraduate studies rejected the use of Creole based on its lack of global reach. The opinions on whether Creole should be standardised were equally divided. Enhancing the status of the language and nation was the major reason for support, whereas the reasons for objections varied: the functional and intrinsic limitations of Creole; the impracticality of establishing a new spelling system; the protection of the creative aspects of the language; and fear regarding increasing the burden for children.

The use of Creole in religious practices was largely welcomed by all religious groups, though this was tempered by a certain degree of rejection by Hindus. People were much more cautious about the use of Creole in education than in religious practices. However, with regard to the question of the future of the languages, a clear linguistic hierarchy emerged based on a language's perceived value for socioeconomic success: English > French > ancestral languages > Creole. This result supported the claims of language economics: people's language choice is influenced by a balance between required investment (time, fees, etc) and the value of products (better jobs, high wages, etc) in the linguistic market.

It is certainly worth paying attention to the question of why it is the language of the colonised, not that of the colonisers, which still suffers from social stigma and prejudice. It may be a reflection of the fact that, although Mauritius obtained its political independence decades ago, a large part of the nation is culturally not yet free from the imperialistic domination of the ex-suzerain states. Alternatively, supposing that they are well aware of colonial injustice and unfairness, they may be determined to succeed in the modern global economy, which is still largely governed and controlled by the same western countries. In order to achieve this goal, while being aware of their own cultural identity, they may be willing to look beyond and choose to be assimilated to the languages and cultures of hegemonic countries, even if that involves playing down that identity. In that sense, they may be called victims of neocolonialism.

Let us now return to the issue of the postcolonial dilemma

we introduced at the start of this article: Should Mauritius choose national unity (by using the indigenous language) or socioeconomic advancement (by persevering with a colonial language)? If this was a question of all or nothing, our answer would be clearly the latter. However, with Mauritius being a multilingual nation, both indigenous languages and colonial languages can mix and co-exist together in education as well as in religious practices and other fields. Although Creole may not bestow economic advantage, its role as a social cement to bind people from different backgrounds together is indispensable in a multilingual country. We shall see whether politicians eventually succeed in standardising Creole and introduce it as a medium of instruction—perhaps even make it an official language. If they do, it will be most interesting to see how that will affect Mauritians' attitude towards languages and linguistic hierarchies.

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