



**Sambajee, Pratima (2016) The dynamics of language and ethnicity in Mauritius. International Journal of Cross Cultural Management, 16 (2). pp. 215-229. ISSN 1470-5958 , <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1470595816660123>**

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# **The dynamics of language and ethnicity in Mauritius**

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# **The dynamics of language and ethnicity in Mauritius**

## **Abstract**

The link between ethnicity and language is well established in research but its contextual, perspectual and variable nature demands that this connection be re-examined in each attempt to understand a nation. This paper is about Mauritius, a postcolonial context where French and British colonisation has left salient features which continue to influence the dynamics around language and ethnicity in the country. By describing its demographic characteristics and its linguistic and political situation, I draw on the case of Kreol, the unofficial national language to examine the dynamics of language and ethnicity in a country where two colonial languages continue to dominate ideology. To compensate for the lack of appropriate theoretical framework in existing research on Mauritius, I use Homi Bhabha's and Ashis Nandy's postcolonial theoretical framework to uncover various forms of resistance and their impacts for organisations.

## **Keywords**

Ethnicity, language, Mauritius, postcolonial theory, resistance

## **Introduction**

Ethnicity and language are central to humankind in that they are the basic elements of identity and individuality. Literature on the two dimensions and the connection between them is fragmented (see for example Daftary and Grin, 2003; Fishman and Dow, 1991; Fishman, 2000; Fought, 2006). On its own, ethnicity refers to the character of an ethnic group (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975). Early work defined the ethnic group as human groups that hold subjective belief of a common descent as well as common ancestral, cultural and racialized traits (Weber, 1968). Initially associated with qualities that were unrefined and undesirable as

per its initial Greek definition, the term has now come to 'signify the macro-group of 'belongingness' or identificational dimension of culture, whether that of individuals or of aggregates per se' (Fishman, 1989:329, emphasis in text). More recently, emphasis has been placed on defining both ethnicity and the ethnic group as subjective and situational entities in order to reflect their complex nature. For example, Eriksen (2012) defined ethnicity as an aspect of social relation instead of the property of a group. Similarly, Jenkins (2008) described an ethnic group as being what people within and beyond it believe or think it to be. This echoes with Mitchell et al (2001) who stated that the construction of ethnic identity is both imposed by others and self-directed. The earlier work of Cohen (1978) also advanced for a necessary friction between groups in highlighting and defining ethnicity and ethnic groups.

In this shift towards a more community-oriented and situational approach in defining ethnicity and ethnic groups, a number of researches have questioned the role of language in the construction of ethnic group and ethnicity. For instance, in recent years, language has been deemphasised due to the growing existence of trans-ethnic languages in many societies (Safran, 2008). Consequently, it is now widely accepted that in some cases language is the prime indicator of ethnicity while in others, it is detachable. Scholars pertaining to the former view describe language as primordial in the construction of ethnic groups and ethnicity (Fought, 2006). This is driven by the conception that people must also be able to speak collectively to facilitate group formation. Contrary to Weber who claimed that by itself, language does not constitute an ethnic group although, Fought argued that individuals living in multi ethnic communities draw on a number of linguistic resources in indexing their ethnic identity for example their heritage language (see p.21-23 for a detailed discussion). While a language can spread over more than one ethnic group, the member of an ethnic group

can adhere to more than one language. However according to Safran (2008) language is acquired early enough in life to provide the relevant framework for ethnic identity formation in many cases.

Therefore, language can be used as a boundary for an ethnic group. However, Safran argued this will depend on the context and the population in which it is situated. The language-ethnicity link can also be rendered more complex by the history of the context under analysis. Such is the case of Mauritius, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural country previously colonised by French and British empires. The current demography of the country presents a scenario where local languages are coexisting with colonial languages. My aim is to provide a critical theoretical analysis of the language situation in the country and to identify implications for organisations and their employees. Given that several studies have previously confirmed that language is commonly used to index ethnic identity in Mauritius (see for example Bissoonauth 2011; Eisenlohr, 2004; 2010; 2011; Eriksen 1990; Owodally and Mooznah, 2011; Rohatgi 2013), it is inevitable that my analysis will ultimately cover the dynamics of both language and ethnicity. The above studies have clearly laid a foundation view of language and ethnicity, however they all lack a theoretical lens sensitive to the context. Previous research found that one leading complex influence on organisations and societies in ex-colonies is its colonial legacy or post-colonial context (Ahluwalia, 2001; Jackson, 2012). So far, both existing research on language and ethnicity as well as organisations in Mauritius have given this paramount reality limited attention. Therefore, my second aim is to use postcolonial theory and its conceptualisation of resistance in order to better understand the dynamics of language and ethnicity in this context. For this, I will borrow dimensions from the work of Homi Bhabha and Ashis Nandy.

The paper is structured as followed: firstly, I describe the context, present my key arguments in relation to language and ethnicity and highlight the key objectives of this paper. In the second part, I discuss my theoretical framework and its appropriateness for the context. This is followed by a discussion of how the unofficial national language (Kreol), its ethnicisation and hierarchisation against the two colonial languages, has led to a situation of unequal power relations in the country. I then further discuss the implications of these relations for organisations and their employees. In part four, I conclude over my paper stating the key contributions of this work, areas of further research and the relevance of postcolonial theory in researching such contexts.

### **Contextual analysis**

#### *The population and language situation*

Located in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius was a Dutch colony from 1638 to 1710. During this time, the first slaves were brought from Madagascar to work on the island. Following a number of natural calamities and difficulties in managing the slave population, Dutch colonisers abandoned the island in 1710 leaving behind legacies still salient in the country's population and landscape. One of these is the slave population which remained on the island after their departure. When French colonisation commenced in 1767, there was already a well-established form of communication between these slaves. Later exposure to French lead to what is termed today as a French-based Creole (Kreol). In 1810, France lost Mauritius to Britain who colonised the country until 1968 when it got its independence. Despite 158 years of British rule, English never became the language of the land. During the handing over of the island to the British, the 1810 Act of Capitulation and the 1814 Treaty of Paris Stated that the inhabitants could retain their religion, customs, property, laws and language which existed under French rule. English was only to be used within judiciary matters. This

resulted in the continuation of both French and Kreol under British rule. Following the abolition of slavery in 1833, British colonisers brought indentured labourers from India to work on the sugar cane plantations followed by Chinese petty merchants. Between 1842 and 1912, it was estimated that nearly half a million indentured immigrants came to Mauritius (Sohodeb, 2009). According to the most recent 2011 Census report, the population of Mauritius is approximately 1.2 million with two-thirds of Indian origin (Indo-Mauritian), followed by one-third of African descent (Creoles) and the remainder of Chinese (Sino-Mauritian) and French (Franco-Mauritian) origin.

Given that majority of Indo-Mauritians came from Bihar, Bhojpuri, the local Bihari dialect also joined the country's language repertoire. Recent research shows that its use has receded and it is now mostly spoken by the older generation as well as in rural regions (Sambajee, 2011). On the other hand, Kreol is unquestionably the language most spoken in Mauritius. Furthermore the two colonial languages, English and French have also remained post-colonisation. The 2011 census reported a) an increase in the use of Kreol from 70.1 % in 2000 to 84%, b) a decrease in the use of Bhojpuri from 12.1% in 2000 to 5.3% and c) a slight increase in the use of French from 3.4% in 2000 to 3.6%. Miles (2000:217) described the case of Mauritius as '*a four-part harmony of Mauritian languages*': a context where Kreol is the lingua franca of the nation, French is the language of social and cultural prestige, English as the language of education, law and administration and a mixture of Asian languages dominated by Bhojpuri. Furthermore, according to the national government's portal, 'English is the official language. French is extensively used and Creole is widely spoken. Asian languages also form part of the linguistic mosaic'. Strikingly, the use of English was not measured in the 2011 census surveys despite being the official language. The most recent data from the year 2000 Census report accounts for 0.3% of people who spoke English only.

Furthermore, it is worth noting the measurement of language use in the last two Census surveys. In both, data on the use of ‘one language only’ was collected (see section 16 of population census report and section 6 of the 2011 report). This clearly overlooks the reality of language contact in Mauritius where monolinguals are rare (Sambajee, 2011). The mix and match of languages including French and English can be depicted in areas such as administration, work and education. This practice is also endorsed by article 49 of the Mauritian constitution where English is the official language of the Assembly but members can address the chair in French.

### *The economic and political situation*

On the global economic scale, the country was ranked first from 2007 to 2011 on the Index of African Governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2011). The 2012 Doing Business report ranked Mauritius 24th out of 183 economies for overall ease of doing business, placing it at first position in Africa (Doing Business, 2012). The country’s social and human capital development has also been ranked in the top tier of the continent (AfDB-OECD, 2012) and it has been described as a middle income country. Since independence in 1968, Mauritius adopted a multiculturalism policy (Aumeerally, 2005) in an attempt to ‘mauritianise’ its people. It has a constitution whereby elections are by the First-Past-the-Post System (FPTP) but with elements that promote a power-sharing democracy such as a multi-member constituency, electoral districts and the Best Loser System for underrepresented minorities. Eriksen (1998) argued that political parties in Mauritius had always reflected the country’s ethnic divisions. For example the Labour Party had for long been favoured by Hindu Indo-Mauritians due to its association with Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, the Hindu nationalist also known as the father of the nation and thereafter Sir Anerood Jugnauth, a Hindu political leader. On the other hand, the Mauritian Militant Movement (MMM) and the Mauritian



Social Democratic Party (MSDP) were mostly favoured by the Creoles due to their non-Hindus leaders. Kasenally (2011) claimed that ethno-religious considerations were common at election times, where candidates were often chosen more for their communal identity than on the basis of their merits (Kasenally, 2011). So far, Mauritian politics has remained multifaceted to the point of being paradoxical. For instance, on the one hand, the features of the political parties illustrated inclusion of all ethnic groups through its 'rainbow-nation alliances' and on the other hand, there was evidence of ethno-sectarianism whereby supporting 'one's own kind' was prime. Kasenally rationalised ethno-sectarianism as a pre-independence mechanism via which Indo-Mauritians began to classify themselves as Muslims, Tamils, or Hindus due to the growing population of Indians in the country. Since then the political system greatly influenced Mauritian society to become highly ethnicised (Jahangeer-Chojoo, 2010). However the recent 2014 general elections informed of a change in the voting behaviour of Mauritians whereby ethnicity and/or religion may no longer be a fundamental consideration for the population. This remains to be further investigated and is beyond the scope of this paper.

### *Ethnicity and religion*

The symbolic dimensions of ethnicity based on race and religion are primordial in Mauritius (Jahangeer-Chojoo, 2010; Owodally and Mooznah 2011). According to the 2012 Mauritian International Religious Freedom Report, 48% of the population are Hindus, 26% are Roman Catholic Christians, 17% are Muslims, 6% are classified as 'other' Christians and 3% include Buddhists and other minority religions. The demography of the country shows a strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity. For instance, Indo-Mauritians are mostly Hindus and Muslims while Afro-Mauritians (Creoles) are mostly Roman Catholics. Eisenlohr (2010) Stated that ethnicity and religion are strongly institutionalised in Mauritius

and are used by the government to promote and privilege the public celebration of ancestral cultures and languages which are both linked to separate religious traditions. Deerpalsing (2002) also found that most Mauritians still felt the need to preserve the memory of their ancestors and maintain their ethnic identity. With political parties formed along ethnic lines even after four decades of independence, national identity has not developed (Boswell, 2005; Callikan, 2001; Jahangeer-Chojoo, 2010). Moreover, Eriksen (1994) claimed that despite the universal practice of Kreol language, government supported cultural centres for each ethnic group instead of national institutions will continue to hinder national identity from developing. Furthermore, communal solidarity emerged after independence as political power was transferred to the Hindus leaving the Creoles feeling marginalised (Hollup, 1994; Teelock, 2014). However, Carroll and Carroll (2000) found that although ethnic boundaries remain strong in the private lives of Mauritians, in the public realm there is a greater deal of inter-ethnic interaction. This denotes a shift from essentialist interpretations of ethnicity into more hybrid perspectives. However Boswell (2005) argued that in the case of Mauritius, ethnic hybridity is perceived as a threat to group integrity and identity. The focus is more on origins and devaluates hybridity. The 1999 riots between the Hindus and the Creoles are symbolic of this tension. However Boswell also noted that the situation is changing as younger generations adopt different views of identity and create new spaces characterised by some sort of cultural and social hybridisation. Eriksen (1992) echoed this stating that Mauritius was becoming a post-ethnic society where processes of modernity are leading to non-ethnic forms of self-identification. However research conducted in 2008 showed that ethnic boundaries persist in certain regions and among certain ethnic groups (see Sambajee, 2011).

**So what?**

Mauritius is a case where language, ethnicity, religion and politics interplay to create a complex yet interesting context. Their coexistence with colonial languages and other remains of colonialism call for further analysis of the power relations arising from different forms of contact. While not all of these are observable, the introduction of Kreol in schools in 2012 provides a relevant example to rationalise the arguments that will be made thereafter in this paper. Following criticism from experts that the use of English as a medium of instruction is the possible cause of high rates of failure in Mauritian primary and secondary schools, Kreol was introduced as an optional language. This provoked country-wide dissatisfaction (Le Mauricien newspaper, 2012). Despite being the language spoken by over 70% of the population, people reported several reasons for rejecting Kreol in schools among which a) its low status vis-à-vis French and English, b) its lack of contribution to academic success, higher studies abroad and access to job opportunities, c) its creation of confusion between French and Kreol and d) it not being the official language of Mauritius (Le Mauricien, 2012). Previous research reported that the Mauritian education system denigrates Kreol by rewarding use of French and English in speech and writing while punishing use of Kreol (Rajah-Carrim 2007). Furthermore Rajah-Carrim confirmed that rejection of Kreol is undeniably linked with its association with the ethnic identity of Creoles. Contrary to Safran's (2008) claim that continued use of colonial languages in the aftermath of colonisation deemphasises the role of language in the formation of ethnic identity, in the case of Mauritius, the ethnicisation of language was maintained (Eisenlohr, 2004, 2010). Previous research on Haiti and Louisiana, where a similar French-based Kreol exists have found that the status of the language remains low vis-à-vis French, its superstratal language (Dejean, 1993; Valdman, 1988, 1997). Therefore, several questions arise from the above, however I will only raise three for the purpose of this paper: first, how are colonial languages maintaining their status in this multi-ethnic and multi-lingual context? Second, how does

Kreol coexist with the colonial languages? And third, what impact does this have on Kreol as a mode of communication in organisations and their employees? Drawing on Chomsky's view that 'questions of language are basically questions of power' (1979:191), I will analyse the relations between Kreol and colonial languages in Mauritius by looking into the unequal power relations that exists between them. As the three have coexisted for over two centuries, resistance becomes a necessary concept to understand how colonial languages remained in the aftermath of colonisation as well as how Kreol maintained its position as the *lingua franca* of the nation. This perspective will then be used to identify the implications for organisations and their employees.

### **Resistance within postcolonial contexts**

Amid the multiple ways of theorising resistance in different contexts, that of postcolonial societies is undoubtedly complex. It requires the identification of non-traditional forms of resistance in spaces which are characterised by unequal power relations (Bhabha, 1994; Kalonaityte, 2010; Mir et al, 2003; Prasad, 2003). Jackson (2012) identified postcolonial theory as useful in understanding the more subtle implications of power in postcolonial contexts. Its discourse whereby colonial practices and ideologies are viewed as still influencing the way ex-colonies are managed (Ahluwalia, 2001; Wood and Brewster, 2007) provides the relevant grounding to theorize non-binary and non-western models of thought, agency and resistance (Kalonaityte, 2010; Prasad, 2012). As it is difficult to determine one general postcolonial theory (Young, 2008), in this paper I will draw mainly on the work of Homi Bhabha and Ashis Nandy. Their conceptualisations of resistance within postcolonialism are unquestionably the most appropriate for the Mauritian context as will be discussed below.

Bhabha (1990) distinguished between the pedagogical and performative temporalities. The former focuses on a linear national narrative whereby linear chronological histories are used as instruments of national identity. In postcolonial contexts, the pedagogical narrative is informed by the idea that the West is morally and intellectually superior and where people are treated as static representations of national essence. On the other hand, the performative temporality views people as agents who are able to resist the homogenising intent of the pedagogical. Through performativity, they either search for new boundaries or invent new national symbols to maintain hierarchical relations between cultures or they subvert the notion of cultural purity through a *mise en scene* whereby they stage cultural difference through a set of actions. According to Bhabha, resistance in postcolonial contexts are hidden in the performative narratives of its people. Mimicry is an example used by Bhabha to describe a process through which the colonisers attempts to force the colonised to act like them to facilitate colonial domination. While this strategy renders the colonised more controllable, it also forces the colonised to import from the coloniser. However as posited by Bhabha (1984), mimicry in postcolonial discourse emerges as a representation of difference with a desire for a reformed and recognisable Other but where the desire for authenticity becomes a final irony of partial representation only that is “a subject of a difference, that is almost the same, but not quite the same” (p.126). While mimicry produces a space of resistance, it also leads to positions and feelings of in-betweenness and ambivalence (Pal and Dutta, 2008) resulting in a *third space*.

Bhabha (1994) argued that this *third space* opens up hybrid spaces where different identities can be held together without entertaining differences or imposed hierarchy. Hybridity thus becomes an essential outcome of colonialism where identities are constantly on the move. Pal and Dutta added that it is a process of cultural assimilation that is never

complete. Hybridity allows the colonised to find its voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy (Bhabha, 1996). However for the coloniser, hybridity destabilises the hierarchical relations of power and purity, creating a space that lies outside binary oppositions and offering a potential site for resistance and autonomy (Lomba, 1998). Hybridity causes the nature of colonial power to be questioned and displaced and subverts the notion cultural purity. Furthermore, Bhabha used the concept of intentional hybridity to argue how hybridity “reverses the effects of the colonist disavowal, so that the other ‘denied’ knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (1994, 156, emphasis in text). This produces a situation where entities operate against each other.

While Bhabha conceptualised resistance within postcolonial discourse by drawing attention to performativity, on the other hand, Nandy emphasised more on the psychological forms of resistance within the colonised mind. Drawing from his work on the presence of British Empire in India, he argued that imperial hegemony was based on two polarities a) masculinity versus femininity and b) adulthood versus childhood. The victims of colonisation were criticised for not having the attributes of the coloniser (masculinity and adulthood). Apart from the appropriation of economic and political power, the coloniser’s goal was also to colonise minds creating a colonial consciousness which does not usually end when the colonisers depart from the colony (Nandy, 1983). A critical point put forward by Nandy is that colonialism forces its victims to split their self-image and reconstitute it by showing one part of the image to be false. This part will usually strive to identify with the masculine and adult valours of the colonised. While it satisfies the coloniser’s homogenising/colonising intent, the other half of the self defies the polarities and pushes the colonised to seek a different language for expressing itself. Nandy claimed that psychological defences were often used to resist the psychological colonisation intent of the coloniser. These could take

the form of defiance which were not always self-conscious, instead it is ‘an obfuscation, it blurs the lines between the violent and the non-violent, the victorious and the defeated, the past and the present, the material and the non-material’ (Nandy, 1983, p.98). However, Nandy also noted that the more the colonised strived to differ from the West, the more it bound irrevocably to the West. Thus, the end of colonisation also necessitates a form of psychological decolonisation. Nandy’s work draws our attention to the emotional and cognitive forms of resistance which do not appear in Bhabha’s work but provide scope for understanding those blurred forms of defiance through which the colonised simultaneously loses and recovers its self under colonialism.

The language situation in Mauritius is evidence that despite political freedom in 1968 colonial languages, French and English have remained embedded in the system. Their coexistence with Kreol raises questions of resistance from both the colonised and the ex-colonisers’ perspectives. It also raises concerns for the implications of such coexistence in other spheres of life such as the work place. To date, there is only one available study which looked at non-traditional forms of resistance in Mauritius (Sambajee, 2015). It focused on the Hindu Indo-Mauritians and their attachment to language (Bhojpuri) and religion. This theoretical paper is thus the first to analyse the case of Kreol’s coexistence with French and English from a postcolonial perspective.

## **Theoretical analysis**

### *Hierarchisation of languages*

With the exception of Franco-Mauritian families, neither French nor English are necessarily included in the language repertoire of Mauritians prior to entering formal education. Kreol is undoubtedly the language that everyone uses to communicate at this stage. This also means

that in their day to day lives, Mauritians do not perceived Kreol as an ethnic language pertaining only to the Creoles (Afro-Mauritians). Penetration of colonial languages begins at school where both are well established in the education system. The latter which is patterned after the British system, decreed English as a compulsory language to graduate from both Primary and Secondary education. Both French and English are taught as languages while French is commonly used as a medium of teaching. Previously Miles (2000: 215) argued that colonial languages are valued as they are 'foreign and ostensibly neutral tongues'. In the case of Mauritius, given the multi-ethnic and multilingual society, the inclusion of both French and English may be viewed as a necessary strategy to safeguard equality. However, Census statistics show that the multi-lingualism is on the fall with more people speaking Kreole. Moreover, despite inclusion in the education system, there is no evidence to date that both colonial languages are spoken on a day to day basis by majority of Mauritians. Hence, Miles argument does not hold anymore. A number of studies have criticised the education system for undermining Kreol as a medium of teaching and marginalising those who have poor mastery of French and English (see for example Aumeerally, 2005; Bissoonauth and Offord, 2001; Rajah-Carrim, 2007; Sonck, 2005). The argument that most Mauritians speak Kreol at home and learn English, French and one ancestral language in the first year of primary school, followed by more advanced levels of French and English in secondary school has been strongly criticised. It has been all successive governments' prime initiative to maintain colonial languages in the education system in an attempt to maintain its developing country status in Africa. Replicating the British education system is one way through which the State has always sought to mimic its ex-coloniser. However, as Bhabha rightly noted, mimicry strives to produce something that looks the same but not quite the same. The introduction of Kreol in 2012 exemplifies this whereby local voices have opposed this long held dominance of colonial languages.



However, Auleear-Owodally and Unjore (2013) found that Kreol literacy in mainstream education remains unpopular. The language situation within the education system is clearly characterised by ambivalence. The existence of French and English in the curriculum and in the speech repertoires of Mauritians is not only symbolic of continued colonial presence in the aftermath of colonisation but also of status and position. In formal settings, language is often seen as a key indication of an individual's class, level of education and position. Thus, this denotes a desire for association with colonial languages and the statuses assigned to them to the detriment of Kreol. Post-independence, Mauritius failed to decolonised minds about the status of French and English. Instead, it remained representational of the institutional practices that enabled the colonizers to manage the country politically, sociologically and psychologically. The imposition of hierarchical rankings on languages by the State has successfully reinforced the low status of Kreol vis-à-vis French and English. As an emerging economy whose core strategy is geared towards inward foreign direct investment, knowledge of French and English has become a fundamental symbol of both linguistic and human capital. Thus, maintaining them in the system is a pre-requisite for a prosperous economic future. Thus, French and British colonisation have not only shaped but stratified the language situation through the persistence of their dominant ideology adopted by the Mauritian State. Colonial imposition of French and English is a clear example of how language acquisition became part of the process of imperialism –in this case linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1996). In his theorisation Phillipson refers to the Western countries of the centre as using language as one of the tools employed for the purposes of domination over the developing countries of the periphery. Post colonialism, linguistic imperialism has been perpetuated by political structures and also culturally sustained by ideologies that French and English are higher status languages and where the two colonial languages have been privileged at the cost of others (Muhlhausler,

1986). The hierarchisation of languages can in turn have significant impacts on power dynamics around individuals in different spheres. In the Mauritian society, language and speech repertoires have become symbolic of education attainment, position and social class.

### *Ethnicisation of Kreol*

Assigning a single ethnicity to Kreol is problematic. As the lingua franca of the nation, it is spoken by most Mauritians irrespective of their ethnic belonging. However as questions of status, attainment and position arise, ethnicisation becomes salient. Sebba (1997) argued that there is both a linguistic and ethnic reason for this. In the former, Kreol has low status as it is viewed as a broken non-standard language which is only appropriate for informal use while in the latter case Kreol has failed to become both an ethnic and a national language due to its association with the African descents as well as its low prestige in the Mauritian society (Eisenlohr, 2004; Eriksen, 1990). The stereotype that Creoles belong to the lowest class in Mauritius (Eriksen 1998) strengthens the idea that those who speak Kreol cannot perform well on the social and economic fronts (Rajah-Carrim, 2008). The State has played an important role in promoting this through its decentralization strategy borrowed from the British colonial system. Indirect rule conducted through the appointment of indigenous leaders was valued for the creation of post-colonial Statehood, but it has since been criticised for reinforcing ethnic consciousness and diminishing national consciousness (Njoh, 2000).

The country's political system and widespread acceptance of ethnic demarcations in society are both outcomes of this strategy. Thus, reinforced boundaries between ethnicities and the ethnicisation of Kreol to the advantage of colonial languages denote a deep colonisation of the mind together with an increased pressure to look more like the coloniser. But the performativity of successive governments also show evidence of ambivalence as they continue the promotion and inclusion of ancestral languages and Kreol in schools. Thus to

some extent, ethnicised political behaviour has contributed to destabilising the authority of the colonial languages and resisted its homogenising intent producing a highly contested and unstable space (Bhabha, 1994; Ashcroft et al, 1995). Political interests in maintaining the multiculturalism strategy has led to existence of other spaces of resistances. For instance, State support in preserving the boundaries between different ethnic groups has enabled performative actions of the population to become more ethnicised where both language and ethnicity play a significant role.

### *Hybridity as resistance*

The loss of prestige of one language as speakers favour one with more social status or where the one with less prestige borrows and absorbs structures from that with high status is known as ‘language death’ (Singh, 2000). In the case of Kreol, despite the homogenising intent of colonial languages through institutional impositions, it has persistently remained the most spoken language in the country. The destabilising intent of colonial languages and their hierarchical relations of power and purity have created a space which offers a potential site for resistance and autonomy (Lomba, 1998). Despite essentialist interpretations of ethnicity in the country, linguistic hybridity reigns in the country. Intentional hybridity allows Kreol to consciously ironize and unmask the other colonial languages depending on the situation. The growth in the number of Kreol speakers from year 2000 to 2011 is evidence of this. Moreover the introduction of Kreol as a language in schools, text books written in Kreol and other media coverages in the unofficial national language also exemplify this. Both Kreol and colonial languages carry on existing in the same context but depending on the situation the latter loses its authority over Kreol. This, as Bhabha (1996) puts it “reverses the effects of the colonist disavowal, so that the other ‘denied’ knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (p. 156).

Being able to shift languages this portrays what Nandy terms the split self-image. Mauritians negotiate their positions and power relations based on the image they want to portray. Use of the appropriate language according to the context denotes that colonial discourse has only been partially internalised. They are still able to shift back to speaking Kreol depending on the situation, making the process ambivalent. Thus the speech repertoire of many Mauritians consists of colonial languages as well as Kreol. This however depends on a number of factors such as social class, level of education and to some extent age, regional location and gender (see Sambajee, 2011). With urbanization and increased access to education, many now have a much wider speech repertoire making Mauritius a case of multilingualism where each language has its place. However it is important to note that despite hybridity, colonial languages retain their higher status over Kreol in all situations making the power relations between them and the local language highly unequal.

## **Impacts on organisations**

### *Networks*

The situational attachment to both language and ethnicity can invoke rival concepts of culture, society and social relations between individuals. For instance, collective behaviour based on ethnicity and language can lead to ethnic and linguistic networks (clusters). These networks could work in different ways. Drawn from network theory, the concept of structural holes posits that as individuals spend time together, they develop complex tacit knowledge which becomes sticky. Only members of the group can understand each other. Burt (2010) Stated that structural holes provide closure to groups as they act as 'boundary markers in the division of labour' (p.4). However structural holes can create competitive advantage for those whose networks span the holes. With the people of Mauritius holding strong values about both language and ethnic identity, the need to protect the group boundary can lead to cases

where individuals reduce interaction with other ethnic groups or those speaking other languages so as to insulate the group. In such cases, the emergence of language clusters becomes highly possible (Marschan-Piekkaria et al, 1999). These and the resulting ethnic clusters in organisations can be seen as dysfunctional especially when in-group norms are strong and resist organisational norms and values. Moreover, ties between members of the same group are reinforced while ties with others are further weakened. Network theory suggests that strong in-group ties can also mean that there is no novel information flow as members fail to form acquaintances with other networks and groups to supplement the diversity and quality of information (Granovetter, 2005). This could imply that certain ethnic groups could find themselves deprived of necessary information about work itself, job and promotional opportunities (Sambajee, 2011). Moreover supporting ethnic ideologies in the labour market could also lead to the wide practice of nepotism (Ramguttty-Wong, 2002). However, it is important to note here that if the ethnic group is in majority in the organisation, group insulation may not be required. Therefore, much of the negative impacts of ethnic and linguistic networking are likely to exist where the ethnic group is in minority and also where the minority languages exists in environments hostile to them (Brenzinger, 2009).

### *Training and development*

Another key challenge is the mode of communication through which training and development takes place in organisations. The historically institutionalised use of French and English in education compels Mauritian organisations to maintain the same in their training practices. As mentioned above, the education system has been strongly criticised for imposing colonial languages on individuals when they speak a different language at home. The outcome of this practice has seen many working class students leaving school without

the necessary qualifications and joining unskilled low paid jobs. A limited language repertoire can also have drastic impacts on opportunities in both internal and external labour markets. Becker's (1962) human capital theory and Sicherman and Galor's (1990) career mobility model can both be used to explain how inability to benefit from training initiatives influenced future mobility potential as well as real income for employees. Becker's theory recognised on-the-job training as a process of embedding resources into employees in order to raise future mobility. Therefore, if due to limited language ability, there is unequal access to relevant training, then organisations should rethink the language of delivery of in-house training to enable a fairer access to all.

### *Managing multilingualism*

While multilingualism can add value to organisations, it can also influence and differentiate the type of work occupied by employees. For example, in service industries where communication is key, language skills are prime. With French and English characterised as high status languages, employees who can only communicate in Kreol are more likely to be employed in lower skilled positions. Thus the ability to speak colonial languages can become an essential criterion for selection of employees in many organisations. In industries where language skills are essential, this does not represent an issue. However, in other cases where such skills are secondary, ability to speak colonial languages fluently can create a halo effect where selection of potential employees may be biased. Therefore, in organisations operating in postcolonial, multilingual contexts, human resource managers need to strive for equality and fairness during recruitment and selection processes.

Moreover, Thomas (2008) argued that in most organisations (especially multinational corporations), there is at some point the need to standardise the language in use, not necessarily in the traditional sense of language planning and policy but more to ensure

uniformity in communication throughout the organisation. This process is therefore further complicated as decisions are made as to which language/s to be used by the workforce. Rejection of certain languages can result in some groups of employees being left behind in lines of communication. Moreover, Luring and Tange (2009) highlighted the problem of ‘thin communication’ which can result from standardising language use. This means that employees who are not comfortable in the imposed language may restrain themselves from organisational social and communicative practice.

### *Diversity management*

Language and ethnicity are secondary dimensions of diversity in organisations (Mazur, 2010). As discussed above, such multilingual and multi-ethnic characteristics of a workforce can pose problems relating to group conflicts and resistance (in various forms). Therefore, the ability to manage such a diverse workforce is fundamental for any organisation operating in this context. An initial start would be to recognise that diversity includes acceptance and respect. The aim of managing diversity is to create and maintain a positive work environment where the similarities and differences in individuals are valued. This in turn facilitates both employees and organisations in reaching their potential and achieve the organization’s strategic goals and objectives.

However, there are multiple barriers to diversity management including discrimination, prejudice and ethnocentrism (Patrick and Kumar, 2012). In the case of Mauritius, many of these are embedded in the history, politics and overall culture of the country. Therefore, to overcome such rigid barriers, it will take time. Current literature proposes a number of strategies for managing diversity in organisations. These include a) designing customised diversity management programmes b) management training c) promoting regular collective participation in organisational affairs and c) improving the

organisations communicative practices. However, the extent to which these will be relevant to the context in this paper is yet to be researched.

### **Conclusions and contributions**

The case of Mauritius offers an interesting view of how language and ethnic diversity in postcolonial contexts are complex. Managing such complexity has somehow been successful so far due to the State's divide and rule strategy derived from its ex-British colonising system. However, these have created power relations which have hierarchized languages and ethnicities in a somewhat ambivalent way. Both the rulers (politics and the State) and the people demonstrate constant fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite. For instance, government policies evidence an agenda geared towards economic growth and foreign direct investment. As a country which is short of natural resources compared to the other Africa countries, Mauritius often prouds itself for its high literacy and human capital. Thus, the maintenance of colonial languages remains a priority on all education and language planning agendas. However, on the other hand, safeguarding ethnic boundaries also plays a fundamental role. As for the remaining population, the ability to speak French and English is symbolic of linguistic capital. There is no evidence that Mauritians want to eliminate the two colonial languages from their language repertoire, yet they actively speak Kreol as their unofficial national language. This tension is a hybrid displacing space which develops in the interaction between indigenous and colonial culture.

This paper contributes to the limited number of research on language and ethnicity within postcolonial settings. Although theoretical, it raises key arguments about power relations between languages in such societies and identifies potential impacts for organisations. Despite the growing number of research on multilingualism in organisations, this paper differs by the historical and socio-political nature of the context. Its discussion will



pertain to both local and multinational organisations who come to operate in this context. This paper will also appeal to readers and cross-cultural research on and from countries where a variety of Kreol is spoken such as in Haiti, Louisiana, Guiana, the Antilles and Indian Ocean countries such as Agalega, Reunion, Rodrigues and Seychelles. Another key contribution of this paper is its use of postcolonial theory and more specifically the notions of resistance. Most research done in postcolonial contexts remain dominated by Western ideology and this perhaps explains why analyses fail to provide a plausible explanation for social phenomena. In this paper, the shift towards using a more context specific theory has rendered certain features of the Mauritian linguistic and ethnic situation more understand. Overall this paper has strived to commence a new perspective on looking at language and ethnicity in postcolonial Mauritius but the debate on the link between the two dimensions remains ambivalent.

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