

Language strategies in La Réunion*

Abstract

This paper addresses the contextual use of Creole and French in the French multicultural Island of La Réunion in the Indian Ocean. It shows how the situational stakes automatically induce the usage of such and such language to communicate. The paper also stresses that the common association between language and culture is not always accurate. This is particularly obvious through the example of people originally from Tamil Nadu living in the Island who (if they have an endogamous descent) carry a value system close to that of their peers in South India although they do not practise the Tamil language anymore.

Key words: *multiculturalism, Creole, French, language, context, interaction, adjustments, Tamil, La Réunion, Mauritius*

Multicultural societies are generally societies where one culture induces and exhibits a main model. While members of this dominant culture generally speak only the official language of the society, members of subcultures frequently have to manage at least two languages, as the one they learn and practice at home may be different from that of the global society (Woolard 1985). Therefore the language can be used contextually, according to the social situation in which people are involved. At the same time as it allows communication between people, language also says something about the speakers. In multicultural societies, it reveals, among other things, one's ethnic and educational background and, sometimes, one's political engagement. The speech act is thus an important part of the organisation of meaning in complex societies.

The case of the Island of La Réunion, a small multicultural society in the Indian Ocean, offers an interesting example of cultural and linguistic complexity. Two hundred kilometres away from Mauritius, this island, previously a French colony, has been a French "department" since 1946. The continuous dialectic between language, culture and society is particularly obvious in this multicultural context.

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To understand the present linguistic situation on La Réunion, it is necessary to retrace briefly the “history of language” in this society. Like Mauritius, La Réunion was devoid of any inhabitants a little more than three centuries ago. At the end of the seventeenth century, the French State decided to establish a colony there to produce sugar (Leguen 1979; Scherer 1980). Before (and to a certain extent even after) Mauritius became a British territory, the history of these two islands, based on the same principles directed to the same goals, has been quite similar. Slaves were brought from Africa, notably Mozambique, and from Madagascar to work in the sugar cane plantations (Filliot 1974; Capela & Medeiros 1989; Fuma 1992).¹ The population of La Réunion was at first divided between two very different categories: the French landowners on one side, the African and Malagasy slaves on the other. The white masters spoke French and the subordinates rapidly lost their original language. Under very difficult living conditions, this latter population developed a culture of its own as well as a specific language called Creole.

Creole was — and still is — a mixed dialect based largely on the French language. It was the product of the verbal interaction between the white landowners and their slaves. However, despite the presence of numerous French words, Creole contains some characteristic words and sometimes a specific syntax. Creole also became the language of the white people who came too late to acquire lands and who had an economic status very close to that of the slave population. Though French was spoken by a small proportion of the population (the upper strata), it was from the beginning the official written language of the society and Creole was the adapted dialect for the lower population. French was the language of judicial power and Creole the language of subjection. A crucial characteristic of Creole is that it was a subsequent language largely created from French. This fact still has an imprint on the linguistic and social situation in La Réunion today (Nemo 1979).

The abolition of slavery took place in 1848 (Wanquet 1977). From that time, the majority of the emancipated slaves stopped working for the white landowners who had to find other labourers to work in their plantations. This situation put the Island in a crisis. Numerous Indian workers were progressively brought to La

¹ Some research has also found that some Indians and Malay were also in a kind of slavery on the Island (Gerbeau 1979).

Réunion to substitute for the slaves in the sugar cane plantations. The bulk of this population came from South India (notably the French settlements of Pondichery and Karikal in Tamil Nadu) (Lacpatia 1982; Gerbeau 1986; Marimoutou M. 1986). The labourers who went there under a five-year contract were mainly men. Despite their status as “free workers” they experienced a situation very close to that of their predecessors in the plantations. They had to comply to strong authoritarian behaviour and even to endure some bad treatment from the white landowners. Moreover, because of the French policy to “civilise” the populations under its control, Indian immigrants had to avoid any outward expression of their difference. Not only could they not practise Hindu rituals freely at the time of their introduction to the Island (something that their contract nevertheless authorised), they also had to go to church, to wear western clothes and to speak the language associated with their status (Benoit 1986; Barat 1989; Ghasarian 1991).

Ranked among the lower strata of the population, Indian workers had to learn Creole. It is important to indicate that although it was not the official language, Creole became then the most common spoken language of the colony. It was the first new language immigrants had to learn. The appropriation of Creole by this new population of Indian descent transformed this dialect as numerous Tamil words were added to the Creole lexicon that already contained words of Malagasy origin (Chaudenson 1974; Carayol 1976; Carayol et al 1984, 1989). Among the new words was the word *kari*, meaning ‘meal’ in Tamil. The entire population of the Island uses this word today to designate the daily meal based on rice. Since the masking of Indian patterns facilitated incorporation into the society, the use of the Tamil language (that was sometimes simply prohibited by the landowners) became less and less favoured and was eventually forgotten. This original language has only been maintained by a few people who began to act as priests in the Hindu temples, when the official practice of this religion was ultimately tolerated.

The use of Creole and the loss of Tamil by the immigrants and their descendants is linguistic witness of their adjustment into the pre-existing social structure of colonial society. Those who settled in the Island after the completion of their contract became part of the general population. At the end of the last century, immigrants’ children born on La Réunion were automatically French.

Like the majority of the population of the Island, they were French citizens speaking Creole as a first language.

An interesting anthropological fact about the loss of the Tamil language among this population of Indian origin is that this loss did not imply the disappearance of Tamil representations, forms of speech and practices. These have persisted, especially in the private sphere, even through the media of Creole and, in a smaller degree, of French. People whose ancestors are all Indians, still have numerous traditional ways of thinking, notably by proverbs and maxims referring to elders and their advice, in both of the two adopted languages. Notions such as cleanliness, purity, honour, protection, devotion, auspiciousness, sacrifice, fate, separation, propitiation, the evil eye, dependence and hierarchy are still constantly mentioned or implicitly referred to in daily life (Ghasarian 1991, 1993, 1997). This shows that a specific system of values and ideas can persist outside the context of its original language of expression. Multicultural societies often create this kind of disjuncture between language and culture (Shopen 1987).

At the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century some Chinese and Muslim Gujaratis were brought to the Island to do business (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1981; Nemo 1983). If the circumstances of immigration of these populations differ from that of the African, the Malagasy and the Hindu population, the Chinese and the Gujaratis still had to speak Creole to accommodate themselves to the host society. Their coming and integration did not change the basic linguistic stratification of colonial society. As for the Hindu population, the second generation, under the cultural pressure of the larger society, did not speak its ancestors' native language anymore. For almost all the non French immigrants in La Réunion, Creole has been the first language to learn and to practice. The loss of the original language among Africans, Malagasy, "Poor Whites" (*Petits-Blancs*), Tamils, Chinese and Gujaratis is also due to the numerous inter-marriages that occurred from the earliest days on the Island.

Historically French has always been the official language used notably by the administration and the church. Particularly since 1946, when the status of the Island changed from a colony into a department and when most of the infrastructures of France started to be developed in the Island, French has been the language of general education. However, even today, French is not spoken by the majority of people at home. It is a second language whose apprenticeship only

starts during the second socialisation when going to school (Lauret 1985; Cellier 1987). For most of the population in the Island, Creole, integrated during the first socialisation into the family, is the mother tongue. It is the language of emotion and is used among relatives and during informal interactions outside the household.

Being the official language of this French department, French is yet widespread in the society. In its written form, it is the language of the law and of everything that implies political power. It is also spoken in administrative arenas, in office work (except among workers in the fields and in the factories), on the radio, on television, etc. As French is learnt at school, its mastery demonstrates a level of education. Because the French language is in every institution of the society, everyone on the Island generally reads and understands basic French. Yet only a small fragment of the population can actually speak it (Techer 1984; Saint-Omer & Lauret 1986; Cellier 1985, 1986). The ability or the inability to speak French both establishes and expresses stratification in society. Everyday interactions and conversations operate with this implicit criterion. This linguistic feature explains why metropolitan French people, visiting the Island or living there, place themselves — and are placed by the native population of La Réunion — in an implicit position of superiority, just because they speak French fluently. Although this phenomenon is not quite fully and consciously experienced on both sides, it nevertheless operates as a distinctive pattern among people in the Island.

Since the beginning of settlement on the Island, French has been the language of political power. Its usage today places one in a valued position, especially when interacting with someone who does not manage the language very well (or at all). We thus have two kinds of population using the French language in La Réunion: a small proportion of people from metropolitan France (approximately five percent) who “naturally” speak French as a mother tongue; and the native Islanders who, with the exception of the very few families of French descent who have owned — and for a great part still own — the lands, and educated families (middle-class and upper middle class) who make a point of speaking French at home, hardly speak French outside the formal contexts in which they are involved in society. For this general population, French is a second language that, although it is present everywhere in the places of power and status in society, is not easy to manage because it is not practised very often.

It is among the members of the population who can speak French, notably because of a good training at school, that we find a frequent strategic utilisation of French. Depending on what is at stake in the situation, people who manage French can use this language when they want to place themselves in a position of superiority. Speaking French can thus be a matter of prestige among one's peers by revealing one's education and status.² This works for the interaction between native islanders but interaction with people born in France is different. Here, the practice of French cannot depict any superiority because it is the expected language of communication. It is important to stress that while visiting this French department or living there, French metropolitans (who are in a land officially called *La France de l'Océan Indien*) often do not realise how the practice of French can be a difficult exercise for the natives whom they spontaneously address in French.

It is interesting to notice that the linguistic situation is different in another French Island that does not have the status of a "Department" but that of a "Territory": Tahiti. Here, French is also the dominant and normative language but, because of a completely different colonial history, it has not the same aura of prestige among the Polynesian population. Except for the growing population of so-called *demis* (literally: 'half') who have a mixed origin, Tahitians still speak their vernacular language, that of their ancestors before the coming of the French. Not being able to speak French does not create a sense of inferiority. It is rather a matter of pride, the pride to have remained "Polynesian" without being too much infected by French culture. Indeed, the local politicians, although they are *demis*, make it a point to address their electors in Maori. The use of Maori allows easy and discrete criticism of aliens. French metropolitans living in Tahiti are unaware of this criticism unless they make an effort to learn the language.

On La Réunion, after few months of settlement, French metropolitans eventually become accustomed to the new sounds and the new syntax and are able to understand most of Creole. Yet, a psychological problem may occur when it comes to speak it. As Creole is close to French, it is relatively difficult for a native from France to speak it without having the underlying feeling of speaking a "little French", full of "mistakes". That cannot be the case with Maori in Polynesia.

² Among others, Pierre Bourdieu has remarkably shown how language can be used to express status (Bourdieu 1991).

Moreover, the colonial history of these two societies is quite different: there were people in Tahiti before the coming of the French but there was nobody in La Réunion before the French decided to establish themselves there three hundred years ago.³ Besides the entire population in La Réunion has its origins outside the Island. This explains why the dominant model (that of the colonial and neo-colonial power) is the one that is most valued. A manifestation of the valorisation of the French language and implicitly of French ways can be found in the effort that native middle class people in La Réunion often make to encourage their children to speak French at home, even if they do not manage this language very well and still speak Creole between themselves. Thus, for people who have learnt Creole during their early socialisation, French is the language of high status. With the same logic, the use of Creole in public contexts exhibits a certain deficiency.

Despite this ideological context, some local intellectuals have, since the seventies, been claiming a specific identity and advocating the use of Creole instead of French in everyday life in La Réunion (Armand 1983; Saint-Omer 1990; Marimoutou, J.-C. 1992).⁴ They revalidate Creole by writing about its literature (Cornu 1976; Armand & Chopinet 1984; Sam-Long 1989, 1990) and, for some, by using it during public settings (on television, on the radio, at the university, etc.). Before, the only place where the public use of Creole was not disparaged was in folksongs. These intellectuals, fully trained in French and for most of them in France (some teaching today French literature at the French University of the Island), also write novels and poetry in Creole. Their ideological position has progressively justified and revalued the usage of Creole in political discourse. Nevertheless, this usage is still often relegated to the last sentence of the discourse because too much Creole in a speech could be perceived by the electors as a sign of incompetence. Creole as a language is also used to define a “Creole identity”, distinct from the French one (Gauvin 1977; Chaudenson 1985; Cellier 1986; Marimoutou J-C 1988; Armand 1990). Local intellectual leaders consequently also advocate Creole at school. Meanwhile, and this is an interesting detail, most of people from La Réunion do not want their children to receive an education in Creole at school.⁵ This very issue expresses the gap between a new

³ At least, this is how historians see things until further archaeological evidence.

⁴ Some have been working to revalue Creole by writing dictionaries of this language (Baggioni 1987; Armand 1987). Interestingly, they have chosen to transcribe this spoken language in a spelling form that is as distant as possible from the French.

⁵ This position is expressed both in private and on radio talk shows on the islands.

generation of intellectuals and the larger population conditioned by the dominant ideology placing French above Creole. For most parents, the use of Creole at school would not favour a good educational training and, therefore, the acquisition of a higher status in society.

It should be emphasised that the debate that has taken place on the island is not between Creole and French speakers but between two categories of Creole speakers: one that manages French and advocates Creole and another that generally does not speak French very well but sees this language as an avenue for a better status and a better life (at least for their children). The metropolitan French (notably educated people) on the Island have an increasing tendency to respect Creole as a language expressing a specific identity.⁶ Yet, this attitude, which can even lead some of them to make the effort to speak Creole when interacting with natives, does not always produce the expected reaction.

The clash between the perspectives appears clearly in the following example. In a hospital in La Réunion, I saw an interaction between a nurse born in France and recently arrived on the Island and an old woman of Tamil descent. In a well intentioned manner, the nurse started the interaction by trying to address her Tamil patient in an adapted Creole to express intimacy and to put her at ease. She was a bit surprised to see this old woman, who was previously speaking Creole to her nearby daughter, answering her in the most cultivated French. This woman of Indian ancestry (third generation on the Island) did her best to act according to the norms of the situation in which she was involved. This was a situation where, in her definition of reality, she had to speak French. For her, being addressed in Creole by a French metropolitan was already devaluing because it implicitly assumed that she would not be able to speak French. Answering in Creole would have been accepting a fact of inferiority, something that would have afflicted her self-esteem even more. After the nurse's departure, she turned back to her daughter (fourth generation of Tamil descent, who happened to be a French teacher) and both of them went on talking in Creole... Different positions in a social situation imply different perspectives. Neglecting the necessity of understanding others' social position and motivations during the interaction can

⁶ This attitude has been encouraged by a empowerment of Creole at the French local university through French scholars. See Chaudenson 1974; Carayol 1976; Cellier 1987.

lead to cultural misunderstandings. Neither social roles nor what is at stake for people can be neglected when seeking to empower subjugated knowledge.

Linguistic adjustments are the daily experience of people practising a non dominant language in many multicultural societies. These linguistic adjustments require a psychological mindset allowing one to switch from one reality to another. They also express the riches of those who perform them. Not so far from La Réunion, Mauritius (another multicultural society) independent since 1968, offers another interesting example of continuous linguistic adjustments. Most of its inhabitants often use four languages in their everyday life. An individual may thus speak his or her mother tongue (Bhojpuri, Tamil, Gujarati, Cantonese, etc.) at home, Creole in the street, English at school and for other official affairs, and French in any formal situation. The construction of reality is thus a matter of social context. The speech act can also be a mixture of different languages the addressee is supposed to know; each word of a sentence belonging to such and such language being used as most appropriate to express a given idea. Cultural complexity also means complex identities.

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