A Survey on Seychelles English

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Introduction

English may be a universal language, but various different kinds of English fulfill the duty of communication around the world. The language prevailing locally is relatively normative at first; due to contact with other native languages, it is affected and consequently changed. As long as there is language contact, language change or language evolution will occur. We call this 'changes incurred by language contact'. Language contact, simply speaking, refers to the fact that an individual or a community uses more than one language. Many linguists emphasize that any language is bound to contact other language(s) to a certain extent in the course of their change and evolution. Language contact often (but not necessarily) leads to language change[1], for there is no evidence to prove that language evolves independently[2].

The birth of the well-known Singapore English, Malaysian English, Indian English and Philippine English in Asia, and South African English and Algerian English in Africa, are examples of regional varieties of English caused by language contact. This essay tries to research the English spoken in Seychelles, a country which is hailed as the pearl in the Indian Ocean and the last paradise on earth.

Profile of Seychelles

Seychelles, officially the Republic of Seychelles, is an archipelago and country in the Indian Ocean. The 115-island nation, whose capital is Victoria, lies 1,500 kilometers to the east of the mainland of East Africa. Other nearby island countries and territories include: Comoros, Mayotte (region of France), Madagascar, Réunion (region of France), and Mauritius to the south. With a population of roughly 92,000, Seychelles has the smallest population of any sovereign African country.

The islands of Seychelles were uninhabited throughout most of recorded history.

The earliest recorded sighting by Europeans took place in 1502 by the Portuguese. The earliest recorded landing was in January 1609, by the crew of the *Ascension* under Captain Alexander Sharpeigh during the fourth voyage of the British East India Company. The French began to take control starting in 1756 when a Stone of Possession was laid on Mahé by Captain Nicholas Morphey. During 1794 and 1810, there were battles between France and Britain for the islands. Britain eventually assumed full control upon the surrender of Mauritius in 1810, formalized in 1814 at the Treaty of Paris. Seychelles became a crown colony separate from Mauritius in 1903. Independence was granted in 1976 as a republic within the Commonwealth.

Language Use in Seychelles

French and English are official languages along with Seychellois Creole, which is primarily based upon French, yet nowadays is often laced with English words and phrases. Including second-language speakers, Seychellois Creole is the most-spoken official language in Seychelles, followed by English and French. 97% of the population speak Seychellois Creole, 60% speak English, and 30% speak French (2014 World Factbook).

Seychellois Creole is a typical creole language. At the beginning of the French ruling, Africans from southern Africa and east Africa were brought to the islands as slaves. In order to communicate and govern, a language based on French, and structured with Bantu languages, gradually came into being, and has evolved into the universal language of the people.

As Seychelles was ruled by Britain for over a century and a half, English is used mainly in the field of education, government and business. As for French, it was introduced before English, but receded upon the arrival of the English. Though few people use French in daily life, it still has its place as one of the official languages, and in the mass media, and this is attributed to the Seychellois French and the back-nurture of the French-based Creole.

In a multi-language country, language contact will lead to mutual effect, even changes, especially in those circumstances when, within a language community, an individual is a multi-language speaker; so the effect of each language on the other is much more obvious.

French

Among the three official languages, French gradually resigned from the leading position after it had been in use for about 50 years. At present, only 630 residents (2014 World Factbook) use French as their first language and these are mainly French Seychellois. About half of the population can speak and understand French as a second or third language. These will be people who have some French background or have received a good education. However, the effect of French is becoming weaker and weaker.

Creole

What is interesting is that the French-based Seychellois Creole, excelling all predecessors, imposes some impact on the English language in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. In fact, the use and development of Seychellois Creole is relatively limited. Firstly, it is only used within the country, though it can be understood between the Seychellois and Mauritians and Reunion islanders in some casual occasions. Though Seychelles is a tourism-oriented country, Creole is seldom used in this context compared with English and French. In addition, the few publications in Creole are mainly primitive course books and simple readings. There is little creative or documentary literature published in Creole, which restricts its use in the field of higher education. Besides its own limitations, the existence of Creole is also threatened by English.

There are over 60 countries where English is used as the official language, or universal language, which accounts for a quarter of all the countries in the world. There are 1.6 billion English speakers who use English in different forms, which accounts for a third of the world population. Over 80% of website pages are produced in English; over 80% of all digital data is stored in English; about 80% of emails, telegraphs and faxes are written in English; about half of all scientific periodicals are published in English; among the six working languages used in the United Nations, English is the one mostly used; and over 80% of the United Nations' documents are written in English[3]. In Seychelles, only less than 100,000 people use English in some way or other. The proportion is too small. The language homoplasy and simplicity caused by the trend of economic globalization enhances the threat to Seychellois Creole. For:

> *Whether a language or characters can survive or be substituted with other language or characters lies in the trade-off approach between the economic and cultural benefit and the cost brought and incurred by learning the language.*[4]

We have observed that some English words have penetrated into Creole gradually, such as biznes from business, expo from export, ekonomiks from economics, akawn from account and djam from traffic jam [5].

Acknowledging the potential decline of Creole, the Seychellois government, since independence in 1976, has come up with a series of policies to protect Creole and promote its status. These efforts have achieved some initial success [Statutory National Language. (2003). Constitution, Article 4(1)]. As mentioned above, to date, 98% of the population now use Creole. In fact, it has become the first national language of the country.

However, the effect caused by language contact is mutual. Although Creole is unable to step beyond its borders, it has left many imprints on its sister-language, English. English spoken in Seychelles can not be immune from the impact imposed by Creole. Although there is no relevant documentary literature to provide as reference, the author would like to share his own observations and findings.

Characteristics of Seychellois English

In 1814, the English took over Seychelles from the French. Then Seychelles was entrusted to the governor of Mauritius, which was an English colony. From then on, English language began to enter Seychelles indirectly. In 1903, when Seychelles became the crown colony of the British Empire, English was introduced directly. Before English was introduced, the French-based Creole was well evolved and had become the first national language. Therefore, when English began to enter, it could only be ranked third place after Creole and French. With the development of the English rule and the promotion of the English education system, the status of English was steadily on the increase. Meanwhile, it has been characterized with Creole and other languages in pronunciation, lexicon and grammar. During my three-year stay in Seychelles, I made some observations and surveys on the English spoken in Seychelles. I wrote down any differences in pronunciation, lexicon and grammar I heard on any occasion during that period; I also collected some script recordings and had some questionnaires completed by participants of different ages, professions, and levels of education. In addition, I carried out some interviews with various different groups of Seychellois people, and I consulted some experts in Creole and English. The following are my findings based on my observations and surveys.

Characteristics of Pronunciation

1)   Monophthongization. Some diphthongs and triphthongs are pronounced almost as monophthongs. For example, data is pronounced as ['detə] instead of ['deitə]; real is pronounced as [r i:l] instead of [riəl]; choir is pronounced as [kw a:] instead of [kwaiə].

2)   The lingua-dental consonant is replaced with a plosive or an alveolar consonant. For example, article 'the' is pronounced as [də] or [zə], instead of [ðə].

3)   Distinction is not clearly made between some voiced consonants and voiceless ones. For example, the following pairs of words will sound the same: tail-dale, tour-doer, pear-bear, time-dime. This is thought to be caused by the laziness of the speaker, which is a common concept in the field of linguistics. The phenomenon is called 'the principle of least effort' (PLE) [6].

4)   The mediacy-oriented trend of long vowels and short vowels. Some speakers do not make any difference between [i:] and [i], [ɔ:] and[ɒ], and [u:] and [u]. For example: the sound [i:] is pronounced a little shorter; on the contrary the sound [i] is pronounced a little longer. As a result, you will not identify any differences when the following pairs of words are uttered: sit-seat, hit-heat, bitch-beach.

The same thing happens to two other pairs of vowels. The sound [ɔ:] is pronounced a little shorter and wider; and the sound [ɒ] is pronounced a little longer and narrower. This means that no difference will be identified between the pairs of words such as: cot-caught; fox-forks.

The same thing happens to [u:] and [u]. The vowels in the following words are pronounced almost the same: room, look, full, fool, boot, book. This phenomenon is supposed to be caused by the effect of Seychellois Creole because there are only similar [i], [ɒ] and [u] in Creole, but no responding long forms.

5)   The schwa sound is overlooked in some cases. For example, when the vowel letter 'o' is located in an unstressed syllable, it would be pronounced as [u] or [əu] instead of [ə], such as: today [tu'dei] for [tə'dei]; tonight[tu'nait] for[tə'nait] ; correct [kəu'rekt] for [kə'rekt]; collapse[kəu'laps] for[kə'læps]. This phenomenon is probably caused by the fact that in the absence of the phonetic concept of syllable stress in Creole, speakers tend to pronounce every syllable with stress. The easier way is to pronounce the letters as their letter sounds.

6) The vowel letter 'a' is pronounced as [a] (shorter than [a:]) instead of [æ] or [ə] in some cases. Such as: bag [bag] for [bæg]; capacity [ka'pasiti] for [kə'pæsiti]; banana [ba'nana] for [bə'na: nə]; flag [flag] for [flæg]; battery ['batəri] for ['bætəri], and so on. This phenomenon may be due to the fact that there is no such sound as [æ] in Creole. It is natural and convenient for a speaker to use the sounds available in his/her mother tongue to substitute ones in the target language.

7) There is a trend that the Seychellois tend to make an addition of [ə] to the end of a word when the last sound is a consonant, especially [l], [ŋ]and[t]. For example, the word 'email' will be pronounced as [i'meilə] instead of [i'meil]; and the same thing happens to the following words: fool, full, boil, table, capable, soil, cool. As for [ŋ], the word 'ring' will be pronounced as [riŋə] instead of [riŋ]; and the same thing happens to the following words: sing, long, bang, hang. As for[t], the word 'wait' will be pronounced as ['weitə] instead of [weit]; and the same thing happens to the following words: subject, minute, sit , and so on.

Having searched for the cause of this in the Creole and French languages, to my surprise, I discovered that it is really caused by the effect of Indian English. As mentioned before, the Indians, together with other Asians, came to Seychelles as early as 1756, when the French were in control of Seychelles. This means that Indian English was around even before British English. Consequently, it is not strange that it has some impact on the evolution of Seychellois English [7].

8) Some silent letters are sounded. A typical case is: when the letter 'b' is at the end of a word with 'm' before it, 'b' is given the sound [b]. For example, the word 'climb' is pronounced as [klaimb] instead of [klaim]. The same thing happens to the following words: tomb, comb, lamb, dumb, thumb, limb, crumb.

9) There is a tendency to transfer the syllable stress to the last syllable. For example, the word 'professor' will be pronounced as [prəufe'sə:] instead of [prəu'fesə]. The same thing happens to the following words: tobacco, cabbage, Tuesday, library, business, classroom, blueprint, recognize, congratulate, investigate, and so on. This can be attributed to French directly or to Seychellois Creole indirectly. In addition, word stress can also be transferred with no rules at all. For example, the word 'away' is pronounced as ['əwei] instead of [ə'wei] for unknown reasons.

Characteristics of vocabulary

The vocabulary of Seychellois English is not much affected by Creole because the vocabulary of Creole is not as rich. If there are some features, it is nothing more than simplification of the use of words, which is a common tendency of language development.

1) *The overuse of small words*. Take 'finish' as an example. The word 'finish' is used in many and various ways, regardless of the part of speech, gender, tense and number. For example, in the market, if you ask the fisherman: 'Do you have any snapper?' If it is sold out, the answer would be: 'Finish'. During lunch time, if you ask your colleague: 'Have you had your lunch?', if he or she has had it, the answer would be: 'Finish'. When you find somebody has not come to work for some time and you ask his or her colleague: 'Where is he?', if he resigned, the answer would be: 'Finish'.

2) *Omission*. Only the first part of a compound word is used instead of the full word in order to save effort. For example, class is used to refer to classroom; plastic is used to refer to plastic bag; mobile is used to refer to mobile phone.

3) *Lending.* Bilingual speakers of Seychellois English also lend some Creole words to English, just like transferring something from the left hand to the right. Creole words used in Seychellois English include: moutia (a dance), bacca (local alcoholic brew), sega (also a dance), coco-de-mer (the famous double-lobed nut growing only in Seychelles), sandragon (a tree), badamier (Indian almond tree), cacatois (parrot fish).

Characteristics of grammar

1) Omission of articles in certain cases. For example, the sentence 'I am going to cinema.' is very common in speech, instead of 'I am going to the cinema'. This is another example of the Principle of Least Effort.

2) Plural form marker 's' is often added to uncountable nouns. For example: I lost all my furnitures. More examples are as follows: aircrafts, fruits, litters, and so on. This may be caused by Seychellois Creole too. Normally, the morphology of the Seychellois Creole word being written in plural does not change. What marks the plurality is the use of the word 'bann' or other markers of quantity. Without an analogy in the mother tongue, the speakers have to follow the English grammar rules and sometimes over-generalize them.

3) There is a tendency to use the present progressive tense instead of the simple

present tense. For example, 'I'm having a cold.' is often used instead of 'I have a cold. This is influenced by Indian English.

4) The answer to the tag question is the opposite in meaning in terms of grammar. Normally, in reply to the question: It did not rain yesterday, did it? When the answer is 'yes', it grammatically means it rained. When the answer is 'no', grammatically it means it did not rain. But in Seychelles, when you hear the reply 'yes', it means it did not rain. The breach of this grammatical rule must be related to logical thinking which needs further study.

5) Unnecessary prepositions, which have a similar meaning to the verbs, are added after transitive verbs. For example: 'My wife accompanied（with）me when I taught in Seychelles'; 'Congress has criticized new government measures to combat（against）crime'; ' He returned （back）the notebook to his jacket'. Grammatically, the prepositions in brackets are not necessary. This is possibly influenced by the Seychellois tendency to emphasize by using redundancies: e.g. I'n retourn ankor (He returned again).

6) With reference to tense, the future tense is used in the conditional clause instead of simple present tense. For example: 'If I will come, I will see you' (If I come, I will see you). This is a direct translation of the conditional in Creole: 'Si mon pou vini, mon a edo u.'

Past perfect tense is used instead of past tense. For example: 'I have been there ten years ago' (I was there ten years ago); 'I had given it to you yesterday' (I gave it to you yesterday).

Past tense is used instead of present perfect tense. For example: 'Did you read this book?' (Have you read this book?).

7) With reference to word order. Normal word order is used in special questions instead of inverted word order. For example: 'Why you took so many? (Why did you take so many?); 'Who you have come to see? (Who have you come to see?). In Creole speakers would say: 'Ou'n vin vwarlekel?' (You have come to see who?) It is obvious that linear word order is used in questions, which differs from English. Therefore, negative transfer seems to take effect. On the other hand, inverted word order is used in the objective clause instead of normal word order. For example: 'I wonder where is he' (I wonder where he is); 'I asked her where does she work (I asked her where she works). This is possibly the embodiment of

over-generalization.

8)   Over-use of the infinitive where standard English would use preposition plus gerund. For example: 'We are involved to collect poems' (We are involved in collecting poems); 'She was prevented to go alone' (She was prevented from going alone). No evidence has been found to account for this phenomenon. It is regarded as 'poor English' by Ms. Penda Choppy who is a linguist and director of the Creole Institute of Seychelles.

Epilogue

Reviewing what has been discussed above, we can conclude that all the Seychellois English changes in phonetics, lexicon and grammar are attributed partially to Seychellois Creole[8], and partially to the effect of other immigrant languages such as Indian English. Besides this, education, language environment, social status, and profession are other causes which cannot be overlooked. Last but not least, the principle of least effort in language change is the most influential factor. The system structure of human language and communication comply with this rule, on which linguists have agreed.

All live languages go through similar changes, that is, they tend to become simpler and simpler[9].Every language has gone through the process of evolving from complexity to simplicity, which is a natural trend[10].

This paper is based on the research and surveys I carried out while I worked in Seychelles for three years as a teacher of Chinese. There is very little documentation regarding Seychellois Creole and general language use in Seychelles. In fact there is, to my knowledge, nothing written about Seychellois English; therefore I am the first person to address this particular issue.

Seychellois English, another variety of English, is not normative. However, theoretically speaking, there is no such thing as normative English. We need to acknowledge and be tolerant of all varieties of English.

Recently, there has been a great increase in economic cooperation and cultural exchange. In order to enhance communication and mutual understanding, it would be wise and beneficial to acquire a greater understanding of this little-known variety of English – Seychellois English.

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