

Kreol in Mauritian Higher Education: A tale of grit and audacity

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Introduction

Globalization and the race towards economic prosperity have led to a world where every entity is viewed in relation to its contribution to a country's economic advancement. Language is thus also valorized according to the economic capital it bears. Consequently, international languages like English are prized to the detriment of local languages, many of which happen to be Mother Tongues or heritage languages. The multilingual island of Mauritius bears testimony to this fact. Paradoxically, while 86.5 % of locals acknowledge Mauritian Kreol (henceforth referred to as 'MK') as one of their home languages (Statistics Mauritius, 2011), the prevalent view is that this language is inferior to English and French, two languages commonly used and studied in Mauritius. The fact that MK is currently being offered as a subject at university level can be seen as a feat which merits our attention, more so given the number of countries where this is yet to happen. In this paper, we therefore explore the phenomenon of MK in the tertiary education sector by focussing on two individuals whose personal and professional journeys have, directly or indirectly, had a bearing on this achievement.

Overviewing the Mauritian linguistic landscape

The language situation in Mauritius is dynamic and idiosyncratic at the same time. It owes its dynamism to the fluid cohabitation of a number of languages that are used and learnt. As a result, three-year-old children beginning their pre-primary schooling may be exposed to up to three different languages daily: English, French, and Kreol – the most widely used language on the island. When the children join primary school, the number of languages may increase to four, with the inclusion of an optional 'ancestral'¹ language. However,

¹ With the abolition of slavery in Mauritius in 1835, successive waves of indentured labourers came from India to work on the island, bringing along with them languages like Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Gujarati. Known as ancestral languages, they are preserved by the State to help members of the Indian diaspora in Mauritius maintain linguistic links with their cultural roots. Most of these languages are also taught at school and they are commonly referred to as 'Asian Languages'. Modern Chinese is another school subject falling under this umbrella. It is taught for ancestral reasons, as descendants of Chinese immigrants make up around 2% of the Mauritian population (Statistics Mauritius, 2011). Even though it has no ancestral relevance for Mauritian people, Arabic is also taught in Mauritian schools. To explain this, the 2007 National Curriculum Framework for Primary (MoECHR, 66) explains that with the emergence of 'Arab countries as global economic players', knowledge of this subject constitutes a 'great advantage'.

English and French – vestiges from the island’s colonial past – occupy a privileged position in the school curriculum and are compulsory subjects from Grades 1 to 11. Besides being a key subject, English is also the medium of instruction (and, hence, of examination) both at primary and secondary levels for all non-language subjects, such as Mathematics, Science and History. It is also *the* administrative language par excellence.

French, which has conferred to Kreol the most significant part of its lexis, is commonly used formally and informally for socialization and enjoys greater relevance in cultural spheres and the media, for instance (Nadal and Anacoura, 2014). It is also predominantly used in the written press and on air.

Besides the educational and executive environments, English and French are the only two languages allowed in parliament, as mentioned in Article 49 of the Constitution of Mauritius (Republic of Mauritius, 2016). Two other articles (33 and 34) relating to qualifications and disqualifications for deputation also underscore the exclusive privilege enjoyed by these international languages domestically (Nadal and Anacoura, 2014). Actually, these three references to languages are the only ones that feature in the Constitution and, as surprising as it may seem, nowhere is it formally stipulated in the Constitution which is the official language of the country.

Against such a complex backdrop stands Kreol, the Mauritian vernacular that is identified as the home language by an overwhelming majority of the population, sometimes alongside other languages or as the only language used (Statistics Mauritius, 2011). For long deemed fit only for oral interaction, the status of MK has experienced unprecedented uplifts over the last fifteen years or so (Nadal and Ankaiah-Gangadeen, 2018).

Unleashing a long-restrained force

Following the country’s accession to independence, more than 50 years ago, various individuals, organizations and political parties have pushed (and, in some cases, are still pushing) for the proper recognition of local indigenous languages like Kreol and Bhojpuri². However, it was events like the harmonization of the orthography³ of MK in 2004, and the production in 2009 of the *Diksoner Morisien* (literally: Mauritian Dictionary) – the first monolingual Kreol dictionary in the world – that really brought the language to the fore. The latter achievement in the field of lexicography represented a real linguistic breakthrough. Prior to the publication of this dictionary, mostly translation dictionaries

² A Hindi language that has made its way beyond Indian shores to places with a strong Indian diaspora, like Guyana, Suriname and Mauritius. The number of speakers of Bhojpuri in Mauritius is declining steadily, though, falling from 12.1% to 5.3% over roughly a ten-year period (Statistics Mauritius, 2011).

³ Prior to this, different individuals and organizations used different orthographies to write Kreol, which added to the confusion in the public and the popular perception that it is a difficult language to write.

had been produced in Creolophone countries, and attempts at producing fully-fledged dictionaries explaining in Creole all the words that exist in a particular Creole language had not yet come to fruition anywhere in the world.

This remarkable feat trail blazed the way to the announcement by the two major political alliances competing in the 2010 General Elections campaign that, in case of victory, they would each initiate steps in favour of the promotion of MK by introducing the language at school. However, these announcements were not really motivated by a genuine will or by pedagogical arguments in support of a mother-tongue-based approach to teaching and learning. Instead, it was mostly the political lobby, exercised by one sociocultural pressure group militating in favour of one local ethnic group – the Afro-Mauritians, also known as the ‘Creoles’⁴, and who constitute around 30% of the population – that brought about the introduction of MK as an optional language subject at primary level in 2012. Although MK is spoken by an overwhelming portion of the Mauritian population irrespective of ethnic appurtenance, claims that MK is the ancestral language of the Afro-Mauritian Creole community are often upheld by some of its members or prominent representatives.

The introduction of MK as a school subject led to the setting up of a Mauritian Kreol Academy by the Ministry of Education to elaborate reference documents for the orthography (Akademi Kreol Morisien, 2011b) and grammar (Akademi Kreol Morisien, 2011a) of the language in 2011. Undoubtedly, the ball had been set rolling with all these official strides being made to ‘equip’ the language with the resources needed for it to make its grand entry at school. It is in fact the remarkable and rapid evolution undergone by the academic status of MK that warrants attention. Compared to Seychelles for instance, where *Seselwa*⁵ was introduced in primary schools as far back as 1982 (Fleischmann, 2008) – i.e. 30 years before Mauritius – Kreol in Mauritius is now taught as a fully-fledged subject at secondary level, while in Seychelles it does not yet feature in the secondary curriculum as a subject (Nadal and Anacoura, 2014).

In anticipation of the subject’s entry at secondary level, which implied the need for qualified resource persons to teach the language at that level, the University of Mauritius launched a joint degree in French and Creole Studies in 2014, and the first batch of students graduated from this programme in 2017. Most of them are already in employment as secondary school teachers. In this paper, we precisely focus on the narratives of two people from the academia who have been very closely associated with the teaching and learning of MK at tertiary level, but prior to this section, we will proceed with a review of the literature on language use in international academic contexts, before narrowing our lens on Creole languages in particular.

⁴ We note the similarity between the name assigned to the main language of the island and the one given to an ethnic constituent of the population. This partly reinforces the identification of that particular ethnic group with the language.

⁵ Seychellois Creole.

Languages in the international higher education context

As a predictable consequence of the push towards multilingual education in lower spheres of learning, the literature on the suppression of the mother tongue in higher education is ever expanding. In different parts of the world, attempts are being made to include native languages – often side-by-side with English – in higher education language policies [see, for example, Agai-Lochi (2015) for Macedonia; Vázquez and Gaustad (2013) for Spain; and Zijlmans, Neijt and van Hout (2016) for the Netherlands]. However, there is still a long way to go for the complete democratization of the linguistic space in higher education.

In the South African context, for instance, the inadequacies of the current situation have been highlighted in several studies. For Tshotsho (2013), the move from two official languages (Afrikaans and English) to eleven in the post-Apartheid era has been merely symbolic, and the likelihood of seeing the widespread use of African languages at tertiary level remains very remote. Whilst it is true that universities that previously maintained an ‘Afrikaans only’ policy have now adopted English as well⁶, and all freshers at a university like that of KwaZulu-Natal now need to enrol for a compulsory isiZulu module⁷, the fact of the matter remains that government and institutions have until now been unable to comprehensively implement the new South African language policy (Zikode, 2017).

In most higher education contexts, therefore, English remains *the* undisputed lingua franca (Gonzalez, 1998) – especially as universities constantly try to improve their positions in world university rankings (Atabekova, Gorbatenko and Shoustikova, 2016). Offering academic instruction through English also represents a means to attract international students from all over the world. This explains why a growing number of universities from China or the former Soviet bloc, for instance, publicize the use of English as medium of instruction (MOI). It is now no longer necessary to learn the country’s language. The subsequent academic and/or professional prospects afforded by studies in English constitute further incentives for the use of English as MOI in higher education.

Languages in Creolophone higher education contexts

In Creolophone contexts as well, it is very customary to see international languages – such as English, French or Portuguese – being conferred more prestige than the local languages for teaching and learning in academia. In Mauritius, for example, with the exception of one public university that privileges the use of French on account of its partnership with a French university, all the other three public universities and a variety of other TEIs use English exclusively for teaching/learning and for administrative matters.

⁶ See du Plessis (2006) for a detailed discussion thereof.

⁷ See Khumalo (2016) for a discussion of other concrete attempts to dislodge language hegemonies at UKZN.

In the South Pacific region, however, Bislama – a Creole language that features among the official languages of the archipelago – is used at tertiary level even though ‘the language is not used in a structured manner in primary and secondary education’ (Migge, Léglise and Bartens, 2010: 16). The Ni-Vanuatu example constitutes an interesting case in point, because – while it is often the introduction of Creole at primary and secondary education levels that eventually brings about developments in the language’s status at tertiary level – the situation in this country tells a different tale. Bislama is indeed used for conferences and forums at the University of South Pacific, though the language is neither taught nor used as a medium of instruction at school (Jarraud-Lablanc, 2012).

As a subject of study, Creole has sometimes fought its way into academia in rather unsuspected ways. For instance, several German universities offer degree programmes in Creole Studies that focus both on linguistics and literature from Creolophone countries (Tortel, 2017). At the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Professor Ralph Ludwig leads the university’s research pursuits in Creole languages. The university’s goal, he avers, is to support the expansion of these languages that have for far too long been restricted to the domain of informal oral interactions (Tortel, 2017). The University of Bamberg also hosted pioneering research work in Indian Ocean Creoles, particularly Seychellois Creole, through Professor Annegret Bollée’s pursuits. Professor Bollée indeed helped lay the groundwork for the study of Seychellois Creole grammar, orthography and lexis as early as the 1970s.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, New York University offers courses in Creoles, in what seems to be a consonant move with the demographic realities of the city. French Creole indeed features among the top five home languages used in New York (<https://statisticalatlas.com>). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is also host to eminent scholarship in Creole Studies, particularly Haitian Creole.

Given the important Haitian diaspora in the USA⁸, a number of American universities, such as Duke University, Florida International University, and the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, offer courses specifically in Haitian Creole. Other universities from the North American continent offer courses in other types of Creole languages, such as Jamaican Creole at York University (Canada) and Cape Verdean Creole (a Portuguese-based language) at the University of Dartmouth (Massachusetts).

In Creolophone contexts, some of the most important advances in the study of Creole at tertiary level seem to have been effected in the French Overseas Departments and Territories. This follows the granting of the ‘French Regional Language’ (FRL) status in 2002 to the Creoles spoken in Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique and Reunion (Adelin and Lebon-Eyquem, 2009). Consequently, it became possible to read for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Creole in places like the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane, and the Université de la Réunion. These courses either lead to the

⁸ More than 900,000 people, according to the Migration Policy Institute report (2014).

obtainment of a Bachelor or Masters degree in Creole as a FRL or to qualifications in Modern Languages that incorporate the study of Creole.

In the context that is relevant to us here, namely Mauritius, the study of Creole in TEIs mainly concerns the Mauritius Institute of Education – where teachers are trained for the teaching of MK at primary and secondary levels – and the University of Mauritius, where a joint Bachelor degree in French and Creole Studies is offered. Following the introduction of MK as a school subject at primary level, the Open University of Mauritius also runs stand-alone courses in speaking, writing and reading Mauritian Kreol, essentially for foreigners and professionals. For the sake of this paper, however, we will focus on the University of Mauritius, the flagship university of the island, and how, through the sheer determination of key individuals, the university ‘had’ to offer a Bachelor degree in Mauritian Kreol, barely two years after the language had been introduced as a subject in Grade one.

Methodology

We opted for narrative inquiry as research methodology since, given the circumstances in which MK was introduced in higher education, it allowed us to better understand the experiences of individuals involved in this movement. Moreover, this is in line with the sociological approach to language, as it foregrounds individuals as users of languages instead of making of the language the focal point. We went for a deep examination of the forces behind two key persons who had brought about the recognition of MK in the local context: Professor Arnaud Carpooran and Melanie Pérès⁹. Professor Carpooran, the current Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and Personal Chair in French and Creole Studies at the University of Mauritius, played a significant role in paving the entry of MK at tertiary level. Melanie Pérès, for her part, had been in the first batch of students who enrolled on the joint degree programme in French and Creole Studies and is actively involved in the Creole artistic and literary spheres, in addition to her professional commitments as a teacher of MK at secondary level.

Another reason accounting for the use of narrative inquiry is that it is recognized as a methodology that gives a voice to minorities, subalterns, the stigmatized and the marginalized — basically, the ‘silenced’ (Glazzard and Dale, 2012; Hones, 1998; Kathard, 2009; and Stanley, 2008). It is also popular in studies related to the sociology of language (Barkhuizen, 2013; Carstens, 2015) and in the field of language education.

⁹ Consistent with the view that ‘when possible, qualitative research on activism should be designed to enable each participant to choose between using a pseudonym and one’s actual name’ (Mukungu, 2017, p.85), we gave the leeway to the two research collaborators to decide whether they would like their real names or pseudonyms to be used to refer to them. Both of them felt comfortable with the use of their real names and provided us with the ethical consent to do so.

Biographical interviews were the main method for data generation. After the interviews had been transcribed and the narratives written, these were sent to the participants for member-checking. Finally, the narratives were analysed, themes drawn and findings discussed.

The narratives

1. Professor Carpooran: Pushing boulders and boundaries

Foreword

As we turn left past the University of Mauritius (UoM) library to head towards the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, a plaque commemorating the silver jubilee of the faculty warrants our attention. It makes, among other things, mention of the Dean of Faculty, Professor Arnaud Carpooran, who holds a Personal Chair in French and Creole Studies. Knowing that, just a few months back, the first batch of students had graduated from the UoM with a Bachelor in French and Creole Studies, this conveyed a vague impression that Kreol might really be on the move at the leading university of the island. We're about to meet Professor Carpooran himself, as whatever has been achieved locally with respect to Mauritian Kreol at tertiary level seems to be inextricably linked with his personal and professional commitment to overthrow linguistic barricades.

Mapping one's route...

I joined UoM in 1993 with a background in Language Studies and with a fascination for French linguistics, especially phonetics and sociolinguistics. As I started to read for my PhD in 'Language laws and linguistic rights' at a French university, I became intrigued by the interest of researchers and academics from the northern hemisphere for the study of Creoles around the world, whereas in my own country, this field was hardly explored... In fact, 'intrigued' is not the right word here. Let's say things bluntly: I was upset and annoyed by this situation! It was a different stand from that of modern-day creolist academics in Mauritius. They join institutes of higher learning straight from university and with robust scholarly backdrops in their respective fields, but they may not readily venture into the trenches in defence of the language. As for me, I had since long promised myself that, upon completion of my doctoral study, research to advance the cause of Mauritian Kreol would be a priority in regard to my interest and energy as an academic. [...] That is how, in 2000, the great adventure really began...

***'Koz Kreol... Koz Kreol!'*¹⁰**

That same year, on 28 October, we organised at UoM the first commemoration of the International Creole Day, which we had called 'Créolophonie, créolofolies'¹¹. To many, this was absolute folly indeed, as we even had in our midst a local Rastafarian sega¹² singer who came to share the creative writing process with university students! As an illustration of how mentally conditioned I was, despite being a committed creolist researcher/academic, I started my welcome speech in French... The sheer thought of addressing a university audience in Kreol on such a formal occasion seemed unthinkable! But then, students started shouting 'Koz Kreol... Koz Kreol!' We were taken aback by this, and the subsequent intervenors, including the Faculty Dean, had no choice but to use Kreol! This was the first time ever that, for a formal function, a high official of the university was making an address in Kreol! Kreol had made a grand entry at the university...

There is no 'dictionary-less' language!

As we successively cleared obstacles in our quest to create more space for Kreol at the university, our endeavours came to a sudden stop when we were told that in the absence of a monolingual dictionary of Mauritian Kreol, no further initiative could be envisaged regarding the formal study of the language at tertiary level. At that time, only translation dictionaries from Kreol to English/French were available, but there had been no successful attempt anywhere in the world to produce a fully-fledged monolingual dictionary in Kreol. The problem, it was thought, was one of metalanguage, on the premise that there weren't sufficient words in any Kreol language to explain all the words that constitute the language's lexis.

So, spurred by the (potentially adverse) remark about Kreol being an 'incomplete' language with only translation dictionaries, I set out with a group of undergraduate and postgraduate language students of UoM to accomplish a world premiere: a monolingual Creole dictionary where all the words of a Creole language are successfully explained in Creole. We first produced a prototype version with just letters A-E in 2005, before publishing the complete version in 2009 and revised editions in 2011 and 2019. A group of unassuming researchers from a small island had pulled to pieces and turned on its head the long-held belief about the metalinguistic deficiency of Creole languages!

Overcoming Sisyphian labours!

As Professor Carpooran recounts the processes that led to the creation of a joint Bachelor degree in French and Creole Studies at the University of Mauritius, the image of the Sisyphian fall inexorably springs to mind...

¹⁰ The Mauritian version of 'Speak Kreol!'

¹¹ The word 'créolophonie' designates the group of people worldwide who share a form of Kreol as their mother tongue, whereas 'créolofolies' hints at the then crazy idea of celebrating creole culture at a solemn place like the UoM ('folies' being the French version of 'folly' or 'madness').

¹² The Mauritian folkloric dance inherited from the island's past into slavery.

It started with a 'stand-alone' course in Kreol open to the public... As for all other 'stand-alone' courses on offer at the university, one of the conditions was the critical mass of 15 participants. Believe it or not, I literally canvassed people and urged organizations militating in favour of Kreol to send representatives to follow this course... We ultimately reached 18 participants and the course was finally run... I say 'finally' because of all the administrative peripeteia that happened in between concerning the registration of students and which I don't wish to enumerate here!

After this, we managed to offer one Kreol module as an elective on the BA Humanities programme¹³ and this progressively became an extremely successful module – to the point that the whole class eventually opted for it – as students felt that they were going off beaten tracks through a module that afforded opportunities to research their mother tongue from unsuspected angles. From one week to the other, they moved from investigating swearing in Kreol as a phenomenon to the production of prototypical encyclopaedic entries in Kreol!

This is how we eventually came to the offer of a fully-fledged joint degree programme in French and Creole Studies in 2014... in that very same university where – less than two decades earlier – people were afraid to make official speeches in Kreol! You will, nonetheless, note that 'French' is mentioned before 'Creole Studies'. The same applies to my title at the University: 'Personal Chair in French and Creole Studies'. That's because, irrespective of my fascination for Creole Studies, I do not wish to forsake whatever I have done at the start of my academic career as a lecturer in French Studies.

The way forward...

We ask Professor Carpooran whether he foresees any other institutional hitch in the future that may potentially curtail further expansion of Mauritian Kreol at tertiary level. He does admit that this remains a plausible scenario, particularly in the light of his experience until now. However, what remains unwavering in his mind is the insistence that nothing can be done 'tan ki zafer-la pankor mir!'¹⁴

In my attempts to promote the status of Mauritian Kreol at university, I have gone through very trying times over the years... But somehow, I refuse to think that there was anything personal against me or against the language itself. Sometimes you need to let events follow their natural course, and when the time is ripe for something to happen, well... you just need to make sure that the right people at the right place do the right things!

2. Melanie: Driven by the urge to contribute to the uplift of Mauritian Kreol

Foreword

We meet Melanie at a prestigious high-demand confessional¹⁵ school, where she has been working for two months, teaching Mauritian Kreol and French. She greets us with a warm

¹³ A joint degree programme where students combine two areas from fields such as languages, history or sociology.

¹⁴ As long as the time is not ripe for something.

¹⁵ Confessional schools are owned by religious denominations and, for the most part, they form part of the national education system.

smile and, minutes later, triggered by our questions, reminisces about her journey with Kreol language.

Kreol and I: An ambiguous relationship

My home and schooling experiences of Kreol were constantly shifting and ambiguous. At pre-primary and primary school, Kreol was a prohibited language. We were simply not allowed to speak it! Even our parents were expected to promote French at home and thus, I was never interested to speak the language, even if my Dad composed and sang Kreol songs. Secondary schooling added to the ambiguity. At the school that I first attended, students came mostly from rural areas and the use of Kreol was prevalent. Since I spoke French, I was shunned as a 'gran nwar'¹⁶ and no-one befriended me. I thus started speaking Kreol. However, my second school was found in an urban area and had mostly French-speaking students. There, I was snubbed as a 'cholo'¹⁷.

I opted to study Creole at the university as an act of defiance towards my parents. It didn't strike me that I would form part of the very first batch of students studying the language at tertiary level. I was totally unimpressed by my lecturer, Dr Arnaud Carpooran, who was a central figure in the introduction of Creole in Higher Education. Deep inside, I resented being compelled to join the local university while my friends were going abroad... However, my parents supported my choice – unlike some of my relatives who believed it would lead nowhere as far as a career path was concerned.

Forging my identity through Kreol

As we listen to Melanie, we are curious to find out how Kreol shifted from being a highly paradoxical aspect to being a central feature and driving force in her life.

At the university, I attended several conferences. It was during a grandiose event on the occasion of the Festival Kreol¹⁸ that I realised I wanted to make a niche for myself in the sphere of Creole and contribute to the uplift of the Creole culture! The thought had crossed my mind for a fraction of a second but became deeply ingrained in me. My first step was, however, disastrous, as I was severely criticized for my presentation on the ravann¹⁹ on the occasion of Mother Tongue Day celebrations. But I was determined to strive harder and became associated with Kreol on multiple fronts. I must here point out that, during my schooling, I had worked closely with the well-known playwright, Henri Favory, and had even enacted in the Kreol play 'Nou traverse'²⁰. But as I got busy with my studies, I did not keep in touch with him. At university, I became the singer in a band called Flashback and composed my own songs. Not only did I perform on certain nights, but also released a Kreol album. I also participated in the first literary competition organised by the Creole Speaking Union... and

¹⁶ Kreol term that means 'excessively proud and haughty'.

¹⁷ Derogatory term to refer to people who are loud, unrefined and who indulge in a lot of merrymaking often in public and in an unrestrained manner.

¹⁸ A yearly national festival normally organized around the month of November to celebrate Kreol culture.

¹⁹ A musical instrument that looks like a tambourine and is used in the sega.

²⁰ Kreol term for 'The crossing'.

I won! I had never expected to win, more so as less than ten novels in MK have so far been published in the country! It was a highly emotional moment for me, since I had written the novel in a bout of defiance after having been challenged by a friend's dad. At that moment, however, it struck me that people would be reading my novel and that my name would appear in print! I must however point out that I did not neglect my studies despite all my artistic activities and, through sheer hard work, always scored top marks.

University as a shaping force

I must admit that university life developed grit and audacity in me. As students of Creole, we had to work twice as hard as others to prove the worth of the subject. We constantly had piles of assignments and fieldwork to carry out. I believe that our lecturers were preparing us to face the sort of hostility we would inevitably encounter in the outside world, because people tend to look down upon Kreol as an inferior language. Lecturers did it in a very subtle way: for instance, through their teaching, the tasks they gave us, the historical facts they exposed us to and the places they sent us to. Fieldwork was the most challenging. It required a lot of courage to ask people why they speak in a particular way or have a particular accent. It was even tougher to face outdated linguistic ideologies and the prejudice against Kreol. Once, at the Ministry of Arts and Culture, a woman told me that communiqués are also drafted in Kreol in that ministry because artists are not educated! Can you believe this? It was like being slapped in the face! Yes, being a student of Creole meant having to constantly carry a weight...

Nevertheless, nothing prepared me for the kind of battle I had to fight towards the end of my studies. We were shocked to learn that teachers already in employment were being solicited to teach Kreol in 2018 when the subject would be introduced in secondary schools. Until then, we had been told by the university staff that we would be the first batch of Kreol teachers to be recruited to work at secondary level. We were dismayed and disillusioned. We met the press, published communiqués and even wrote letters to the Minister of Education! I wrote on behalf of the class although I was not the class representative. Finally, the Minister informed us that we would be employed as teachers of Kreol. You can therefore imagine how I felt when I learnt that all my friends who had applied for the post of Supply Teacher²¹ had been called for an interview and had obtained jobs, while I had not! I was so disgusted that I set aside the whole idea of becoming a teacher. Eventually, I saw the advertisement for the job I currently have and applied for it in the same spirit of defiance, wanting to show that I did not need the Ministry!

‘Is that the end of your journey?’ we ask Melanie. She smiles and says:

My journey with Kreol continues. I will soon embark on an MPhil/PhD and will be supervised by Professor Carpooran. It will be in the domain of Kreol literature as, so far, no-one has specialised in that area.

²¹ A teacher who is not employed on a permanent basis but who is called upon to teach whenever there are vacancies in specific government colleges.

The pinnacle

Amidst all these ups and downs, what would be the apex of Melanie's experiences, we wonder.

The pinnacle of my achievements has to be the day I graduated. It was on the 23rd of April. I was nine months pregnant and could deliver any time, but still, I had to be at the graduation ceremony! An ambulance was waiting outside, just in case... I made it to the stage just in time to collect my 'First Class Honours' degree! Immediately after, I was rushed to the hospital and my daughter was born on the same day!

Findings

The narratives are quite revealing with regard to the factors that helped propel MK into the sphere of Higher Education in the Mauritian context, despite the presence of counter forces such as the tendency to link it with a particular ethnic group and the predominant perception of its inferiority. Both the narratives highlight the fact that it was a mix of personal character traits and external forces that led to this feat.

Character traits

Professor Carpooran emerges as a person who, having taken an initiative, staunchly sets out to achieve his aim, come what may. On realising that MK was not attributed its rightful value, he decided that to 'advance the cause of Mauritian Kreol would be a priority in regard to (his) interest and energy as an academic'. True enough, he overcame hurdles that obstructed his path by producing a MK dictionary – the first of its kind – and canvassing potential students to obtain a critical mass for the university to run a course in Kreol. What also stands out about Professor Carpooran is his reluctance to disown previous achievements in the field of French Studies. The fascination for Creole Studies has not, so to say, gone to his head... to the extent that he now denies the relevance of other languages.

Similarly, Melanie strikes one through her determination. While her engagement with MK was more the result of her artistic interests and adolescent rebelliousness, she constantly strove to achieve the targets she set, be it scoring the best grades, publishing a novel in Kreol or fighting for the rights of MK students when she believed that these were being vitiated. Melanie did not allow set-backs to stop her: 'My first step was ... disastrous, as I was severely criticized for my presentation on the *ravann* on the occasion of Mother Tongue Day celebrations. But I was determined to strive harder.'

It is thus, the innate grit and audacity that enabled both participants to strive forward in the face of adversity or challenges that came their way.

Initiatives to uplift Kreol

Another common element to both participants is their sense of initiative with respect to uplifting MK. Professor Carpooran's commitment was more overt as compared to Melanie's. His steps, upon noting that 'the interest that researchers and academics from the northern hemisphere had developed for the study of Creoles around the world' was not replicated in his own country, were deliberately undertaken to forge a way for MK to be offered as a part of a university degree programme. Thus, be it the production of the dictionary or the event organized to commemorate the International Creole Day, everything was done for the uplift of the language.

Melanie, on the other hand, was not fighting for a cause as Professor Carpooran. Her interest was ignited by a desire to 'make a niche for (herself) in the sphere of Creole'. Nevertheless, she contributed to the uplift of MK through her artistic and literary activities, such as her Kreol album and her landmark achievement of publishing a Kreol novel locally, and even her decision to focus on the unexplored field of Kreol literature at MPhil/Ph.D. level. The mere fact that she pursued studies in MK – often thought of as an area that offers no scope career-wise – and strove to score good grades, speaks volumes on the sense of integrity with which she pursued the route she had mapped out.

Mental conditioning from biographical experiences of language

It cannot, however, be said that the sociolinguistic context did not impact upon the participants during their journeys. Professor Carpooran's automatic use of French to deliver his welcome speech during the commemoration event reflects how the status of languages on the island influences language use. French, as mentioned earlier, being viewed as prestigious and being commonly used in social spheres, is automatically used in an academic milieu. Kreol, on the other hand, is considered as unbecoming. Professor Carpooran himself admits: 'As an illustration of how mentally conditioned I was despite being a committed creolist researcher/academic, I started my welcome speech in French on that day'.

Melanie too reveals a very common paradoxical attitude towards Kreol. Though the language formed part of her daily life and was even the medium in which her father composed and sang songs, she was 'never interested to speak (it)'. Melanie's narrative thus highlights how, in a society where multiple languages cohabit, the status (attributed or perceived) of languages determines how far they are used and even one's attitude towards them. Interestingly, we note that one can snub a language even while using it...

External impediments

In addition to the internal hurdles the participants had to face, a plethora of external factors impinged upon the uplift of MK. The most prominent one was the bias towards MK, so much so that it was overlooked by academics; not deemed worthy of being a subject for study on par with other languages, and considered a liability with respect to social status and career opportunities. This is seen in the way Professor Carpooran had to convince

people to join the first Kreol course. It is also apparent in the way Melanie was snubbed as a 'gran nwar' for speaking French or looked down upon and considered a 'cholo' for speaking Kreol; and even the fact that students of MK had to 'work twice as hard as others to prove the worth of the subject' and experienced 'hostility' in the field. Melanie's words (coming from someone who was linked to the language through her involvement in both the artistic and academic spheres) are indeed highly revealing of the social reality: 'It was even tougher to face outdated linguistic ideologies and the prejudice against Kreol. Once, at the Ministry of Arts and Culture, a woman told me that communiques are also drafted in Kreol in that ministry because artists are not educated! ... It was like being slapped in the face!'

Outside forces that helped promote Creole

The narratives however reveal that efforts to promote MK were aided by various external forces such as, in Professor Carpooran's case, students urging speakers to express themselves in Kreol during the commemorative event so that 'the subsequent intervenors, including the then Faculty Dean, had no choice but to use Kreol' and, later, the fact that the whole BA Humanities cohort opted for the Creole elective module, thereby showing that there was an interest in the subject at tertiary level and, more significantly, that linguistic biases were weakening. The latter instance is also seen in the way Melanie's parents supported her choice of subject when she joined university instead of being held back by fears of eventual unemployment.

Discussion and conclusion

Undertaken in a small multilingual island, the study has afforded an insight into the phenomenon. The findings that emanate from it clearly resonate with what has been observed on the international scene with regard to the introduction of Mother Tongues in higher education. For instance, we note that English has remained the lingua franca and language of academia par excellence in Mauritius, even though it is used much less than MK. Furthermore, we cannot dispute the fact that MK was introduced to redress an injustice²². As brought out in Professor Carpooran's narrative, the battle to introduce the language at university level was spurred by the realization that it was not being amply valued.

Nevertheless, the case of Mauritius is atypical in various ways. In the first instance, it appears that in the international context, the introduction of indigenous languages as medium of instruction for the learning of other academic subjects taught at university is a somewhat easier objective to realize for policy makers than the introduction of these indigenous languages as objects of academic study per se. In Mauritius, however, MK was introduced as part of a joint undergraduate degree, but there is little likelihood that its use

²² This was pointed out in the 'Truth and Justice Commission' report (Teelock, 2011).

as medium of instruction at university will be officialized in the near future, given the importance attributed to English locally. It cannot be denied that, as a developing small island state that counts exclusively on its human resources and links with other countries for economic advancement, it would be impractical to sideline English. What the country is gradually achieving is a more democratic and peaceful cohabitation of MK with European languages, and the understanding that each language has its value. Thus, Professor Carpooran insists that the title ‘Personal Chair in French and Creole Studies’ remains unchanged since French constitutes an integral part of his academic career.

Further, despite being initially offered as a stand-alone module, MK is now taught as part of the BA French Degree. This reveals weakening linguistic biases, as evidenced by the fact that students willingly opt for the subject which is offered as an elective module (cf., for instance, with a language like isiZulu, which is compulsory at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa) even if they are studying for a Degree in French. What further reinforces the notion that languages are starting to be viewed as entities in their own right rather than as manifestations of ethnic appurtenance and identity, is the fact that the ethnic and political dimensions that characterized the entry of MK in primary schools²³ are absent from its entry at tertiary level. Neither Professor Carpooran nor Melanie mention their ethnic affinity with the language. In fact, their attempt to uplift the language at no point appears to be a battle for an ethnic group.

What deserves to be highlighted is that the stories of Professor Carpooran and Melanie reveal how individuals can shape policies or force policies to change (often in unassuming and discreet ways). Whilst it is customary that institutions enact governmental policies – as seen in the case of South Africa (see Zikode, 2017) or even Reunion island, where it was the official promulgation of Creole languages as ‘French Regional Languages’ by the State that brought the languages to university (Adelin and Lebon-Eyquem, 2009) – in the case of Mauritius, it was personal initiatives by isolated individuals that allowed the Mother Tongue to be propelled at tertiary level. The successful introduction, spearheaded by a determined Professor Carpooran, was aided and sustained by disparate yet collective actions emanating from various quarters: academics, students, organisations, and even parents. Most of these protagonists contributed to this feat unconsciously but their acts remain significant.

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²³ The pro-Creole community lobby.

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