

A Review of the Recognition of Kreol as a National Language in Mauritius

Research Article

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The context of Mauritian Kreol

It would be firstly imperative to understand the context of Kreol as a language of communication in Mauritius. Based from the history of settlement of the country, Kreol was developed locally as in other

Abstract: This paper assesses the evolution of Kreol, a national vehicular language expected to gain its true recognition in the near future. It firstly explains the development of the language based from interpretations in the spoken form made by slaves from their masters in colonised Mauritius. It then explains the plight from local people to advocate the use and vulgarisation of the language in Mauritius. The article addresses past inhibitions towards the language and forwards how it gained more acceptance when it was recognised as a taught language by the Government of Mauritius since a recent past. The language is also broadly similar to Kreol used in the West Indies, Seychelles and Haiti where it is officially recognised. Such recognition is on the way in Mauritius and efforts have been made to popularise Kreol language. There has been a recent move to create translation opportunities between Kreol and English as a means of broadening access to learn and interpret Kreol in modern Mauritius. This review article analyses scholarly contributions in a historical way as well as a brief encounter on machine translation as a research project to sustain the importance of Kreol in the Mauritian society.

Keywords: Mauritian Kreol, Language, Evolution, Challenges, Recognition.

French-speaking colonies like Réunion Island, Haiti, Martinique and Guadeloupe, from French language spoken by colonists. Slaves were brought from Africa in particular Senegal, Ghana, Mozambique, Cap Verde, Madagascar, etc. to work for their masters. In this difficult time of history, communication was in French by the masters while slaves learnt to decipher the message in their own terms. This communication mode developed Kreol which, in the Mauritian context, as well as other Indian Ocean islands, was based on French in a differently reproduced language understandable to slaves. Initially all languages develop in the same way and become later standardised. Alsando et al (2007) state that Kreol is a language developed as any other one while De Graaf (2003) states Kreol as a separate language with nothing exceptional in linguistic terms. Kreol, which was spoken by slaves in the early years of settlement, became popularised in the local context when it became a mode of communication and messaging among the different communities embarking to Mauritius either to work on contract or settle.

Past inhibitions on native languages or pidgins

All new languages developing from a former established language can be termed pidgin or dialect. These exist among small and distinctive communities in various parts of the world. Since such spoken languages are not recognised as official national languages, they are referred to as dialects or pidgins. In the Mauritian context, this spoken mode is known as 'Kreol patois' relegating such language to a secondary and less formal one. Inhibitions against spoken languages might build up a difference in terms of perception like superior/inferior language, standard and informal language, thereby giving lesser importance to the said pidgin locally. Arends et al (1994) point out that the major difference between a pidgin and a creole is that the latter is the mother tongue for a group of individuals. Although the spoken languages are widely used in society, they do not gain recognition at the national

level. Even parents coming from middle and upper-middle classes show clear objection to using Kreol as a mode of communication at home with their children.

Acceptance of local languages

The acceptance of local languages comes from the plight of proponents of the native language. A first effort might come from the decolonisation of a nation. In the Mauritian case, since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1968, Kreol started to gain some recognition in the local context. Considering it to be spoken by most Mauritians and a means of expression that it is understandable to all Mauritian nationals, Kreol in the same way as Bhojpuri got initial recognition by the first government after independence. Today Kreol is the language spoken at home by 86.5% of Mauritians, while only 4.1% of Mauritians speak French at home and 0.5% speak English (Republic of Mauritius). In the first instance, the objective was to ensure the survival or preservation of the native languages that were in essence oral.

Recognition of Kreol

Recognition of Kreol in Mauritius has been a long and challenging battle for proponents or defenders of the language. There are several contributors in this context. Just after independence, Virahsawmy, a leftist politician, favoured the use of Kreol as a national language by considering it as the mother tongue, M1. Virahsawmy wrote several texts in Kreol along with poems, Shakespearian drama translated in Kreol like 'Zeneral Makbef', 'Abs le Manifik', etc. Mooneeram (2009) associates Virahsawmy's plight to invalidate the association between language and the ethnic group to ensure nation building. The Michel duo, Sylvio and Elie, brought their contribution by insisting Kreol to be used in the National Assembly and the media as from their stepping into politics in 1976. Commendable effort was undertaken by another leftist party, Lalit, as from 1982 with the tandem Collen and Seegobind, communicating both orally and written in Kreol. Two Mauritian dictionaries were published in the 1980s. Ledikasyon Pu Travayer published Mauritian Creole to English in 1984 followed by an addition of translation to French by Baker and Hookoomsingh in 1987 while Carpooran published the first Mauritian monolingual dictionary in 2009 (Baker and Kriegel, 2013)

Brief encounter of 'grafi larmoni'

There have been deliberate attempts to broaden the impact of Kreol in Mauritius. Firstly, the government decided in the early years following the millennium to give due importance to Kreol. In this context, 'grafi larmoni' was developed to ensure the standardisation of Kreol as people used to write it in whatever form they liked. There were punctuations very close to standard French and even words that were purely francophone. The 'grafi larmoni' was an attempt to develop a single and common form of writing Kreol. Hookoomsingh (2004) related 'grafi larmoni' to a harmonised orthography allowing language and orthography to evolve in a flexible and dynamic way. This would entail better acceptance of the language by all users with lesser difficulty of expression and greater convergence in using Kreol. A new dictionary favouring standard Kreol was created by Carpooran with new versions added on over the years to incorporate new words. There was also the introduction of Kreol as a taught medium in primary and secondary schools.

Vulgarisation of Kreol

Kreol needs to gain recognition in Mauritius as a national language as it is spoken by over 85% of the local population. Mauritius has made in-roads in advancing the cause for Kreol after a long history of over one and a half century where the language has been carving its way for recognition as an official language. In the Seychelles, Kreol is a national language which is used with English. In Reunion island, Creole réunionnais, is widely accepted but not formalised due to French occupation. In the Mauritian case, Kreol has gained recognition as it has been introduced as a taught course in both primary and secondary schools. It is noted that universities do favour the use of Kreol for teaching or clarifying explanations. Miller (2015) suggests that to moderate misguided concerns of many Mauritian citizens, it is important to explain the benefits of the mother tongue language education policy to gain Mauritian support for it. In the local press, quotes from interveners are in the native language as well as titles. So far, there is no national newspaper in Kreol although there is daily news on television and radio in Kreol, communiqués concerning key events and cyclone warnings as well as a dedicated channel ‘Senn Kreol’ for the promotion of Kreol as a language.

Slight similarities with Haitian Kreol, Seychellois and Rodriguan Kreol

Mauritian Kreol does not evolve in isolation or look to be distinct from Kreol spoken elsewhere. Generally, Kreol has gained foothold in island nations with descendants of slaves maintaining and consolidating its use. There are similarities both in the intonation and spelling of Kreol. Haitian Kreol comes close to Mauritian Kreol but Jordan (2015) claims that Haitian Creole enjoys a very high status in Haiti, as it is recognised as one of the two official languages of the country, the other being French in comparison with Mauritius. Kreol in Rodrigues could be termed as just similar to Mauritian Kreol with slight differences in tones and speech flow. Seychellois Kreol looks broadly similar as well with some sentences linked with English. In the three environments, Seychelles, Rodrigues and Mauritius, the level of mutual understanding in communication is quite high underlying the vulgarisation of the language in the Indian Ocean.

The way forward for machine translation

Haitian Kreol is already being popularised through the use of a portal dedicated to translating it into English and vice-versa. It originated from the work of Valdman et al (2017) as an online dictionary to a portal operated by websites like Google, imtranslator, translator2paralink, etc. This allows the language to be known internationally and have possibilities for translation in the most popular international language, English. The strategy behind developing machine translation of Mauritian Kreol is a commendable effort in fostering the development, advancement and recognition of a language that binds emotionally, socially and in a patriotic stance the Mauritian community which is still in search of ‘mauricianisme’, an ideal of bridging cultural differences among Mauritians and creating a sense of national identity.

CONCLUSION

This paper explained the evolution of Mauritian Kreol from a dialect into its recognition as a national language that can be used pedagogically with the possibility of vulgarising it as a national language. There are still impediments

like perception of inferiority, lack of fully-established grammar and format, the threat of foreign languages being widely used by parents and members of society. The recognition of Kreol in Mauritius has been an important stride in building 'mauricianisme', the need for a common and unified national culture. There have been efforts from government to formalise the learning and application of Kreol as a language of communication in Mauritius. Despite the challenges, Kreol has possibilities of emerging as a national language after decades for the plight of its recognition as a national language in Mauritius, 50 years after achieving its independence.

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