

Accounting for contact-induced changes in Mauritian Creole

Philip Baker

In this paper I discuss several features of Mauritian Creole for which a possible non-European source has been proposed. I relate these features to the peopling of Mauritius and also comment, where appropriate, on the positive contribution they made to the elaboration of this language. But first I need to describe the socio-historical situation in the island during the period of slavery.

The Dutch occupied Mauritius from the late 16th to the early 18th century. They lived mainly around Grand Port on the east coast. The settlement never had more than a few hundred people. The Dutch exploited the ebony trees but prosperity eluded them and, in 1710, they abandoned the island and moved to their flourishing Cape colony.

At that time, the French *Compagnie des Indes* already possessed at least five enclaves in India as well as Réunion island. It wanted to add Mauritius because it had two good natural harbours whereas Reunion had none. Its first attempt at establishing a Mauritius colony, between 1721 and 1725, was a complete failure, due to an incompetent plan and the unwillingness of anyone on Reunion to resettle there.¹ By the start of 1726 almost everyone present in 1722 had left. The only people remaining there were 30 Malagasy slaves, three Lazarist priests, two Swiss soldiers, and a few *Compagnie* employees. There was not even one settler, but the population had just been increased by the arrival of 100 French troops.

Lenoir, newly appointed chief of the *Compagnie's* Indian Ocean activities, stopped off at Mauritius in 1726 on his way to India. While there, he wrote to the *Compagnie* in Paris saying that they could not count on Reunion sending any settlers. He also made the following recommendations:

- send unattached young women from France. Soldiers who marry them will be given two slaves and some land to develop, and thus become settlers instead of soldiers.
- try to find skilled artisans with families and send them here.
- obtain slaves from all possible sources.

His ideas were accepted. The first group of 12 young women from Brittany arrived in 1728 and were all married within three weeks. More were arrive on several other ships in the next few years. Some *Compagnie* employees and artisans came from France but far more artisans were Tamils recruited in India on contracts. Slaves were brought from five different sources. See X1 (below) for details. By the end of 1730, slaves already outnumbered the French.

In 1731 it was decided that Port Louis on the northwest coast should replace Grand Port as the main harbour, making it the main centre of activity on the island thereafter.

¹ Just in case there is anyone still under the impression that Mauritian Creole derives from Réunionnais, let me say that all the evidence against that set out in Baker (1982a) remains valid, added to which the Réunionnais texts of P-A Caulier, written in the late 1760s and analyzed by Bollée (2007) clearly indicate that this vernacular was then at a very early stage of development. This in turn casts doubt on the authenticity of the short text relating to 1722 (Chaudenson 1974: 1147) which is in fact consistent with early 19th century texts.

By 1735, at least 55 former soldiers had married one of the "filles de la Compagnie" and acquired slaves and land concessions. These and all other land concessions had to be located well away from the ports, usually requiring two or more hours to reach on foot, the apparent aim being to ensure that settlers did indeed develop their land. Some *Compagnie* employees already housed in one of the port areas were also granted land concessions but it is not clear whether they played an active role in developing them.

X1 Non-Francophone arrivals 1727-1735

Already present at 1/1/1727	30 Malagasies
Arrived during 1727	20 Malagasies
Arrived during 1728	28 Indian slaves
Arrived during 1729	178 West Africans (from Juda) ^a
	230 Indians (140 slaves, 90 paid artisans)
Arrived during 1730	476 West Africans (from Gorée) ^b
	44 Indian slaves ^c
Arrived during 1731	29 West Africans (from Gorée) ^d
	18 Malagasies
	149 Indians (52 slaves, ^e 97 paid artisans)
Arrived during 1732	72 Malagasies
	- 9 Indian paid artisans returned to India
Arrived during 1733	151 Malagasies
	12 Indian paid artisans
Arrived during 1734	12 West Africans (from Gorée)
Arrived in 1735	195 Malagasies
	5 Indian slaves

- a) Juda = Ouidah/Whydah in what is now Benin. The ship had intended to obtain slaves at Gorée but the Dutch, who had earlier occupied this island, had just succeeded in ousting the French. The captain thus proceeded to Juda instead. The French won it back from the Dutch a few months later. No information is available on the language(s) they spoke but Yoruba is a possibility as well as one or more of the Gbe languages.
- b) There were in fact 508 arrivals, but 32 were sent on to Réunion later in the same year.
- c) In fact 45 but one, who had arrived earlier, left.
- d) The majority of slaves on this ship had died before reaching Mauritius.
- e) In fact 56, but 4 were subsequently sent to Réunion.

X2 Sources of slaves

arrivals to end 1735			imported 1736 - 1740		
Malagasies	486	33.5%	Madagascar	1176	48.4%
(Yolofs	452est	31.2%)	Mozambique	671	27.6%
(and "Bambaras"	65est	4.5%) ²	Senegal	300	12.4%
(Bengalis	105	7.2%)	Bengalis and Tamils	180	7.4%
(and Tamils	164	11.3%)	unknown	<u>102</u>	<u>4.2%</u>
from Juda	<u>178</u>	<u>12.3%</u>		<u>2429</u>	<u>100.0%</u>
	<u>1450</u>	100.0%			
(derived from Baker 1982a)			(based on Lougnon & Toussaint 1937)		

X1 and X2 summarize non-Francophone arrivals to the end of 1740. While the first Bantu slaves did not arrive until 1736, they were already established as the second main source by 1740. That continued until at least 1765 when they decisively overtook Malagasies.

By 1740, the total population had reportedly increased to almost 3,000 (Kuczinski 1948-49) with slaves outnumbering free citizens by 7:1. African and Asian immigrants

² 517 is the combined total; the split is based on the proportion of mentions of these two groups. Similar information is not available for 1736-40. At the time, the French appear to have applied "Bambara" to all the Manding peoples but those who came to Mauritius are likely to have come from the lower Gambia river and to have spoken Mandinka. Today "Bambara" is applied only to the Bamana people of Mali and their language.

had already outnumbered the French in 1730 and by 1740 formed 87% of the population. At least seven languages were represented: Bengali, Makhuwa (from Mozambique), Malagasy, Mandinka, Tamil, Wolof and whatever the slaves from Juda spoke. More than 1,000 of them are likely to have been based in Port Louis. Their numbers did not decrease after the harbour was completed, as X3 shows. In 1758, *Compagnie* slaves accounted for almost 20% of all slaves on the island.

X3 Slaves belonging to the Compagnie 1 September 1758

Guinée [from West Africa in general] ³	530
Malgaches	440
Mozambiques	245
Indiens	142
Macaos ⁴	<u>6</u>
	1432
enfants de tous ages	<u>242</u>
	<u>1674</u>

(Archives Nationales des Colonies C4, carton 86, liasse 1757/8)

For the vast amount and range of work that was completed in the city in the space of a few years there had to be a means of communication between all these people – and that includes the French since they had to be able to instruct slaves on the work they were required to do. The apparent solution was the creation of the pidgin which developed into Mauritian Creole. Strong support for that suggestion can be found in the example from a letter written in 1749 (see X4).

X4 Earliest Mauritian Creole text in a letter dated 1749

... they will direct their hand to the point where it [Madagascar] lies and exclaim, in their corrupted French,

ça blanc là li Ø beaucoup malin; li couri beaucoup dans la mer
 DEM European there 3SG.R COP ITR cunning 3SG wander much in sea

là haut; mais Madagascar li Ø là (Grant 1886: 166).
 there.high but Madagascar 3SG.R COP there

‘that white man [captain of the ship bringing slaves to Mauritius] is very clever; he changes direction a lot in the sea up there [pointing]; but [I know] Madagascar is over there [pointing]’

On the mainly small plantations run by a French couple and a few slaves, the situation might seem to have resembled that envisaged by Chaudenson (e.g. 1992), whereby the couple would address their slaves in French and the slaves would slowly acquire an approximation of French. As and when more slaves were acquired, the new arrivals would acquire an approximation of the approximations of French spoken by slaves who had arrived before them, leading eventually to a stable creole. I do not find this scenario credible because contacts between the different and often distant plantations were very limited and it would likely have taken several decades if not generations for a more-or-less homogenous vernacular to emerge. But Mauritius, and more particularly its capital Port Louis could not wait for that. Every plantation owner needed to visit the harbour area frequently in order to obtain a range of goods imported from France and India: wheat, rice, wine, cloth for making clothes and other things, cooking pots, tools, farm implements, etc. And the assistance of a couple of slaves to carry the goods on the long uphill journey back

³ The French use of this term appears to have been initially restricted to Lower Guinea but extended to cover most of West Africa in the second half of the 18th century.

⁴ The Portuguese are known to have taken Malay slaves to Macau. In the absence of any indication that there were ever any Chinese slaves in Mauritius, it seems likely that these were Malay slaves brought from Macau.

home would be required. While in the capital they would be exposed to the rapidly developing contact language and would probably adopt some of its features. It seems to me inescapable that the focussing of Mauritian Creole could only have happened in Port Louis, and that it – *la langue créole* - was what newly arrived slaves subsequently needed to acquire in order to cope with their new environment, as indicated in X5 (below). It could not have been formed slowly on the plantations; in my view it could only have been based on the speech of Port Louis, i.e. an urban creole gradually adopted by the plantations. I suspect that a somewhat similar situation may have applied on many Caribbean islands.

X5 Newspaper advertisement from 1773

Un jeune Négrillon Mozambique, nommé Favori, âgé de 13 ans, appartenant au Sr Pierre Maheas, habitant à la Montagne Longue, a disparu depuis le 31 Janvier. Comme ce jeune noir s'est probablement égaré & qu'**il n'entend pas la langue créole**, il n'aura pu dire le nom de son maître ni retrouver sa maison. On prie ceux qui en auront connoissance d'en donner avis audit Sr Maheas. *Annonces, affiches et avis divers pour les colonies des isles to France et de Bourbon*, 10 février 1773 (bold typeface added)

'A young Mozambican Negro youth named Favori, aged 13, belonging to Sr Pierre Maheas living at Long Mountain, is missing since January 31st. Since this young slave has probably got lost and does not understand the creole language, he would be unable to give the name of his master or find his house. We would ask those who have any information about this to inform the said Sr Maheas.'

Phonology and transcription

The French front rounded vowels are unrounded in Mauritian (as in other French Creoles) and don't exist in any of the immigrant languages. French has a minimum of seven peripheral vowels whereas Mauritian has only 5 (no mid-high, mid-low contrasts). Four of the immigrant languages also have 5 whereas Malagasy has just 4. Only Wolof has 7. Mauritian lacks the fricatives š and ž. Five of the six languages lack both of these, while only š is found in Bengali. The lack of all these French features is clearly due to their relative or total absence in the immigrant languages. Influence from non-French languages is responsible for the increasing frequency of č, j, and ŋ in Mauritian.

Mauritian is a stress timed language, in which one or more unstressed syllables or a very short pause occur between stressed syllable. This is also broadly true of Malagasy. I lack reliable information on suprasegmentals in the other immigrant languages.

Examples in modern Mauritian are written in bold italics. Contrary to normal practice, stressed vowels are here marked with the acute accent. Nasalized vowels are represented as vowel + **ñ** (**añ** = [ã], **eñ** = [ẽ], **oñ** = [õ]), enabling stressed nasalized vowels also to be marked with the acute accent, whereas **n** always represents the nasal consonant [n].

Reduplication of adjectives and verbs

Malagasy adjectives follow the noun, as do most French adjectives. Reduplicated Malagasy adjectives generally have an attenuative interpretation and this is also true of postposed adjectives in Mauritian:

fótsy 'white', *fótsyfótsy* 'whitish'

tsára 'good', *tsáratsára* 'tolerably good'

rúz 'red', *ruzrúz* 'reddish'

trís 'sad', *tristrís* 'a bit sad'

Preposed Mauritian adjectives can also be reduplicated but the interpretation is augmentative:

en gráñ lakáz 'a big house'

en gráñ gráñ lakáz 'a very big house'

en zóli rób 'a pretty dress'

en zóli zoli rób 'a very pretty dress'

Since Malagasy has only postposed adjectives there is no exact parallel but these can also have an augmentative interpretation if *día* 'very' is inserted between two occurrences:

fótsy día fóttsy 'intensely white'

tsára día tsára 'very good'

Reduplicated verbs in Malagasy also normally have an attenuative meaning as do Mauritian verbs:

kóze 'talk'

koz-kóze 'chat'

Variable Mauritian verbs (those which lose their final unstressed vowel in certain circumstances) must obligatorily lose the final vowel from its first occurrence in the reduplicated form. The final vowel of its second occurrence may also be dropped if the following item demands that.

li ti kóze 'he talked'

li ti kóz ar mwá 'he talked to me';

li ti koz-kóze 'he chatted'

li ti koz-kóz ar mwá 'he chatted with me'.

Most verbs can also be reduplicated for an augmentative reading. *Márse* 'walk' can also give us *márse márse* 'walk a long way and/or for a long time' contrasting with *mars-márse* 'go for a stroll/a little walk (with no particular destination in mind)'. Note the different stress patterns for each of these. These enable invariable verbs such as *kúd* 'sew' to have the same set of contrasts:

li nek kúd kúd gramáteñ ziska táñto

'she just sews from early morning till late afternoon'

li ti kúd en ríbañ pu so tífí

'she sewed a ribbon for her daughter';

li abítýe kud-kúd ler li pe gét tevé

'she often does a bit of sewing while watching TV'.

It seems clear that the reduplication of adjectives and verbs to give them an attenuative or augmentative interpretation was inspired by Malagasy but was developed further by Mauritian speakers. Note that this effectively doubled the adjective stock and tripled the verb stock without the need to acquire any additional lexemes, a remarkably useful development in a contact language.

Etymologically agglutinated French articles in Mauritian

Fon Sing's (2007) concordance of Mauritian texts from 1730 to 1930 contains almost 100,000 words. Listing all the more than 500 nouns attested at least five times, I found that all but two had an initial consonant. Many of these derive from French nouns with initial vowels which have corresponding Mauritian forms beginning with *l* from the reduced French definite article as in *laz* 'age' < *l'âge* or *z* due to liaison as in *zánfañ* 'child' < *(le)s enfants*. Similar examples occur in all French Creoles. I term this consonantal agglutination. Mauritian also has a great many nouns in which the unstressed initial syllable is wholly derived from one of the French articles *la, le, les, du, de l', des*. I call this syllabic agglutination. In Baker (1982b) I identified 471 such nouns in Mauritian, 112 in Haitian, and just 12 in Réunionnais. Syllabic agglutination is clearly a result of contact-induced change, but it is far from obvious why Mauritian should have more than four times as many as Haitian and almost 40 times more than Réunionnais. It occurred to me that this might have something to do with Bantu noun classes whereby the first syllable of every noun is a class prefix. The largest classes can include hundreds of nouns. I suggested that, while speakers of Bantu languages may not have identified initial *la-, le-, li-, di* as noun class prefixes, they would at least not have thought it odd that so many nouns shared the same first syllable. There are two related matters of particular interest.

First, mass nouns in Bantu languages generally either form a noun class on their own which has no singular/plural distinction or they belong to one of the other classes but only have a singular form. Mauritian has 36 mass nouns with initial *di-*. So far as I am currently

aware, no Caribbean French has even 5 *di-* mass nouns. This strongly suggests that *di-* was identified as some kind of marker of mass nouns in Mauritius.

X6 A selection of *di-* mass nouns

diblé 'wheat' (< *du blé*), *dibrí* 'noise' (< *du bruit*), *dibyén* 'wealth' (< *du bien*), *difé* 'fire' (< *du feu*), *difút* 'sperm' (< *du foutre*), *difil* 'thread' (< *du fil*), *dilár* 'lard' (< *du lard*), *dilwíl* 'oil' (< *de l'huile*), *dimún* 'person' (< *du monde*), *dimyé* 'honey' (< *du miel*), *dipí* 'pus' (< *du pus*), *disél* 'salt' (< *du sel*), *disóñ* 'sawdust' (< *du son*).

Second, all Bantu languages appear to have a diminutive prefix, either as a separate noun class or as a "pre-prefix" preceding one or more other noun class prefixes. Mauritian also has a diminutive prefix, *ti-* but, since this derives from the French adjective *petit*, I need to demonstrate that it is not an adjective. Mauritian does have an adjective, *píti*, corresponding to *petit* (with, rather surprisingly, stress on the first vowel whereas this is typically omitted in spoken French) but this occurs today far more often as a noun meaning 'child' than as an adjective.

X7 Diminutive *ti-*

Four reasons why *ti-* cannot be considered an adjective in Mauritian:

1. All adjectives, pre- or postposed, have one stressable syllable but *ti-* does not.
2. All adjectives can occur as predicates but *ti-* cannot: *lakáz-la Ø gráñ* 'the house is big' but not **lakáz-la Ø ti* 'the house is small'.
3. All adjectives can be modified by *plí* 'more' or *mwéñ* 'less', e.g. *plí bóñ* 'better', *mwéñ gráñ* 'not so big', but *ti* cannot be modified in this way.
4. Two preposed adjectives cannot co-occur in the same NP. Thus **en zóli gráñ lakáz* is not possible for 'a nice big house' but *ti-* can co-occur with any preposed adjective, e.g. *en zóli ti-lakáz*.

A selection of *ti-* diminutive nouns:

ti-drínk 'a measure of strong liquor', *ti-féy* 'cannabis' ('little leaf'), *ti-kálite* 'dwarf' [n] ('small kind'), *ti-láñbik* 'illegally distilled liquor' ('little distillery'), *ti-lekér* 'timid person' ('small heart'), *ti-mími* 'bowtie' ('little cat'), *ti-násyoñ* 'low caste Hindu' ('small nation'), *ti-séve* 'fuzzy hair' ('small hair'), *ti-vités* 'Madagascan hedgehog' ('small speed').

While the idea of possible Bantu involvement in Mauritian's lexicon was predictably denied by superstratists, they have failed to provide any alternative explanation to account for the far greater number of agglutinated nouns in Mauritian than in any of the French Creoles of the Caribbean. Whatever the explanation, the homophone avoidance which results from this merits a few words. See X8.

X8 Homophone avoidance? - from different etyma

<i>lafwá</i> 'faith' < <i>foi</i>	<i>lefwá</i> 'liver' < <i>foie</i>	<i>fwá</i> 'time(s)' < <i>fois</i>
<i>latúr</i> 'tower' < <i>tour</i>	<i>letúr</i> 'circuit' < <i>tour</i>	<i>túr</i> 'turn' < <i>tour (de rôle)</i>
<i>lamér</i> 'sea' < <i>mer</i>	<i>lemér</i> 'mayor' < <i>maire</i>	<i>mamér</i> 'mother superior' < <i>mère</i>
<i>latáñt</i> 'tent' < <i>tente</i>	<i>táñt</i> 'reed bag' < <i>tánty</i> Mgsy	<i>matáñt</i> 'old woman (pej)' < <i>tante</i> ⁵
<i>lasér</i> 'flesh' < <i>chair</i>	<i>masér/lesér</i> 'nun' < <i>soeur(s)</i>	<i>sér</i> 'sister' < <i>soeur</i>
<i>lakál</i> 'hold (of a ship)' < <i>cale</i>	<i>kál</i> 'chock' < <i>cale</i>	
<i>lakól</i> 'glue' < <i>colle</i>	<i>kól</i> 'collar' < <i>col</i>	
<i>lamús</i> 'froth' < <i>mousse</i>	<i>mús</i> 'fly' < <i>mouche</i>	
<i>lapés</i> 'fishing' < <i>pêche</i>	<i>pés</i> 'peach' < <i>pêche</i>	
<i>lapó</i> 'skin' < <i>peau</i>	<i>pó</i> 'pot' < <i>pot</i>	
<i>lasáñte</i> 'health' < <i>santé</i>	<i>sáñte</i> 'song' < <i>chanter</i> (verb)	
<i>latás</i> 'task' < <i>tâche</i>	<i>tás</i> 'stain' < <i>tache</i>	
<i>laví</i> 'life' < <i>vie</i>	<i>ví</i> 'view' < <i>vue</i>	
<i>likú</i> 'neck' < <i>cou</i>	<i>kú</i> 'blow' < <i>coup</i>	
<i>lisú</i> 'cabbage' < <i>chou</i>	<i>sú</i> 'cent' < <i>sou</i>	

⁵ The Mauritian word for 'aunt(ie)' is *táñtin*.

So far as I am currently aware, no Caribbean French distinguishes all three *fois* or *tours*. While the pairs may seem less impressive in that there are few contexts in which those in the first column might, if they lost their agglutinated article, be confused with those in the second, the very fact that they have retained their agglutinated article for more than two centuries does at least suggest that creole speakers found it convenient to maintain the distinction. Examples in X9 are perhaps more impressive since each pair shares the same etymon yet the members of each pair have very different meanings.

X9 Homophone avoidance? - from different etyma

<i>dibwá</i> 'timber'	<i>bwá</i> '(small) forest'	< <i>bois</i>
<i>labék</i> 'beak' ⁶	<i>bék</i> 'nib'	< <i>bec</i>
<i>labúzi</i> 'candle'	<i>búzi</i> 'spark plug'	< <i>bougie</i>
<i>lalán</i> 'tongue'	<i>lán</i> / <i>lán</i> 'language'	< <i>langue</i>
<i>lakót</i> 'coast'	<i>kót</i> 'rib'	< <i>côte</i>
<i>lapéñs</i> 'crowbar'	<i>péñs</i> 'pincers'	< <i>pince(s)</i>
<i>larég</i> 'ruler (for measuring)'	<i>rég</i> 'regulation; menses'	< <i>régle</i>
<i>lavvá</i> 'voice'	<i>vwá</i> 'vote'	< <i>voix</i>
<i>lekúrs</i> 'race, racing'	<i>kúrs</i> 'errand, journey by taxi'	< <i>course</i>
<i>lipyé</i> 'foot' anat.	<i>pyé</i> '12 inches'	< <i>pied</i>
<i>listwar</i> 'history'	<i>zistwar</i> 'story'	< <i>histoire</i>

I could have given 3 or 4 times as many examples. Are such contrasts just happy accidents or were creole speakers actively involved in creating or at least in maintaining these contrasts rather than adopting non-contrastive French forms?

The resumptive pronoun *li*

In modern Mauritian, the pitch rises slightly during the subject and falls during the predicate. However, if the subject is a pronoun, there is no rise; it is as if the pronoun forms part of the predicate. In the brief 1749 Mauritian text (see X4 above), there are two examples of subject NPs immediately followed by the 3rd person pronoun *li* (< *lui*). The apparently redundant use of this pronoun has been termed "resumptive". Sporadic examples of these can be found in texts from the 18th century to date. While superstratists have suggested that this might have its origin in "popular French", citing *ma soeur il chante* as an example, I believe that a Bantu source is far more probable.

In very oversimplified terms, in a Bantu language equivalent of *The man spoke*, the word for 'man' would have a class prefix indicating that the noun referred to a human being and the first element in the verb phrase would be a concord marker similar to or identical with the class marker. If the sentence was simply *He spoke*, it would consist of exactly the same verb phrase including the initial concord marker. So the speaker of a Bantu language might easily associate *li* as the equivalent of all third person concord markers representing humans, non-human animals, and inanimates.⁷

Examples from dockworkers in 1980:

disík li kumáñse depi lor táblismañ

sugar it start from on sugar estate

'sugar starts [its journey to the docks] from on the sugar estate'

en dimún li pa en masín

a person s/he not a machine

'a human being is not a machine'

⁶ Although masculine in standard French, this word is feminine in some dialects.

⁷ A comparable situation is found in Tok Pisin and is attributable to various Melanesian languages which behave in ways similar to Bantu languages.

Variable verbs

Variable verbs are those with a full form ending in unstressed *e* (in a few cases *i*) which drop this in certain circumstances. All transitive verbs omit the *e* before a direct object NP. Verbs of coming and going adopt their short form before locations, other verbs do not:

nu ti ál borlamér / Porlwí / lakáz 'we went to the seaside/Port Louis/home'; but

nu ti máñz kálbas 'we ate calabash(es)' vs *nu ti máñze Kálbas* 'we ate at Calebasses (village)'

Variable verbs are attested from 1805 but short forms were initially found mainly in texts representing slave speech and it was not until the 1880s that both forms occurred in all texts. This might suggest it has its origin in an immigrant language but no plausible source has been found. I am inclined to attribute this to stress-timed nature of Mauritian since the dropping of the unstressed vowel gives greater emphasis to what immediately follows. Note that the *e* can also be dropped before certain adverbs or PPs but the rules are complicated and not yet fully understood.

éna fútbol aswár? – wí, mo krwár li kumáñse néver. 'Is there football (on TV) tonight? Yes. I think it begins at 9 o'clock' (precise time not requested) vs *kí ler fútbol kumáñse? Li kumáñs néver.* 'What time does the football start? It starts at 9 o'clock' (precise time requested).

zot ti pe kóze lor lavaránj 'they were talking on the verandah' vs *zot ti pe kóz lor lavaránj* 'they were talking about the verandah'. Here it is only the contrast between long and short forms which determines the correct interpretation of *lor lavaránj* (*lor* < Fr *là-haut*).

An interesting consequence of the dominance of variable verbs is that final *-e* has increasingly been added to words of diverse sources to form new Mauritian verbs, e.g. *dibut/e* 'stand up' (< Fr. *debout* 'upright' + *e*; arguably superior to standard French *se mettre debout*), *kãz/e* 'to starch' < Tamil *kanči* 'rice gruel (formerly used as starch), and many English-derived verbs such as *ček/e* 'check' and *klok/e* 'clock in or out at the workplace'.

The dummy verb *ete*

A consequence of having zero copula is that Mauritian retained a few distinctly pidgin-like question structures until the late 19th century. *ki Pól* could mean 'which Paul?' or 'who is Paul?' but there was no way obvious way of asking 'who was Paul' because the past marker *ti*, like all TA markers, could only be placed before a verb. Somewhat similarly *kot Mádlen* might mean either 'at Madeleine's place' or 'where is Madeleine?'. And there would be no simple way of expressing 'where was Madeleine?'. A solution to these problems was found by adopting *éte* as a dummy verb in interrogatives in the 1880s. So while *ki Pól* and *kot Mádlen* could continue to mean 'which Paul?' and 'at Madeleine's place', respectively, only *ki Pól éte?* and *kot Mádlen éte?* would there-after mean 'who is Paul?' and 'where is Madeleine?'. Furthermore, past forms of these then became possible, e.g. *kot Mádlen ti éte?* 'where was Madeleine?'. This is of interest because the past marker was originally attested as *été*. The abbreviated form *té* is attested from 1816 but coexisted with *été* until at least 1837. *Ti* is found as an alternative to *té* from 1840 but it took a century for it to entirely replace *te*. The past marker *ti* and the dummy verb *ete* can now occur in sequence in the same VP without Mauritians being conscious that they share the same etymon.

So genitives

Traditionally the order was possessed possessor, as in *lisyéñ Sesíl* 'Cécile's dog' and *madám Klénsi* 'Clency's wife'. If more elements are involved in possessive structures they tend to become more difficult to process mentally: *sér madám mo kúzeñ* 'my cousin's wife's sister' or *káñpmañ frér Dokter Bénwa* 'Dr Benoit's brother's seaside bungalow'. In

the latter part of the 19th century an alternative structure emerged: possessor **so** ('his/her/its') possessed: *Sesil so lisyéñ, Klensi so madam*. The two structures can be combined: *sér mo kúzeñ so madám* 'the sister of my cousin's wife'. While it has been suggested that the **so** structure derives from the genitive suffix *-ke* in Bhojpuri, the main Indic language of Mauritius from the mid-19th century, Syea (1993) notes the same structure in the Creole French of both Karipuna and Louisiana and concludes that it is far more likely to be a case of what could be called 'language elaboration'. I cannot agree. Given that half the island's population formerly spoke an Indic language at a time when the **so** genitive was first attested, its introduction into Mauritian must owe something to Indic influence.

Concluding remarks

The social history of Mauritius during the period of slavery leaves me in no doubt that the norms of its creole were determined in Port Louis, its chief port and administrative centre, and definitely not on its plantations. While the historical circumstances no doubt varied from one creolophone territory to another, I am inclined to think that its administrative centre must have played a greater role in the focussing of each creole than its plantations.

Influence from all the languages of non-Francophone immigrants in the 18th century is evident in the phonology and vocabulary of Mauritian. However, the inspiration for most of the contact-induced changes comes from Malagasy and Bantu languages, the two groups which provided by far the greatest number of immigrants prior to the abolition of slavery over the longest period of time. In almost every case, these changes were further developed in ways which extended the potential of the creole.

A few additional points need to be mentioned. 1. The **so** genitive is the only change for which an Indic origin seems likely. 2. The resumptive pronoun, while clearly of Bantu origin, is the one contact-induced feature which cannot be said to enrich the language in any obvious way. 3. While initially favoured by slaves rather than whites, no substrate origin for variable verbs has been identified.

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