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The Politics of Language Equilibrium in a Multilingual Society

Mauritius

William F. S. Miles

Language is political. Yet the politics of language rarely determines elections or changes of government. In late 1995 rulership in one of greater Africa's two continuously performing democratic systems became unhinged over a proposed change in language policy. Ramifications of the fall of Anerood Jugnauth's government extend well beyond the Indian Ocean island nation of Mauritius. They highlight the delicate nature of linguistic balance in pluralistic, including democratically pluralistic, societies and the importance of language equilibrium. The Mauritian experience also sheds light on the danger in introducing linguistic and educational reform to achieve partisan ends, particularly in quasi-mandarin systems in which school certification is an indispensable condition of elite class status.

Language Policy in Developing Nations

Studies of language planning generally have normatively positivist overtones. Particularly when dealing with decolonized and developing nations, where indigenous languages vie with superimposed European ones for social and pedagogic status, language planning—"a government authorized, long-term, sustained and conscious effort to alter a language's function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems"¹—is seen as a necessary adjunct to modernization.²

To the extent that language is bound up with cultural and national identity and decolonization entails the creation (or recreation) of authentic identities among formerly colonized peoples, language reform is part of the decolonizing project. Yet the problematic, often tendentious nature of governmentally inspired language change was apparent to even the earliest writers on the subject.³ Students of developed and developing countries came to share this concern.⁴ Contention over what language to upgrade or privilege and how is not limited to newly independent, multiethnic or pluralistic nations.

Though contestable on ideological grounds, European languages in Africa and elsewhere are preserved and defended precisely because they are foreign and ostensibly neutral tongues. Even when spoken badly or by a tiny minority, superimposed colonial tongues are valued because no indigenous ethnic groups are specifically

identified with them. English is valued in Mauritius for this reason. Functional and economic considerations, such as the importance of mastering a world language, also reinforce the colonial linguistic heritage.⁵

Linguistic conservatism can be contested and provide energizing grist for those seeking power. Leaders and would-be leaders of discrete groups challenge the linguistic status quo and compete for popular support by playing the language card. Brian Weinstein calls such leaders “language strategists.”⁶ Adapting Crawford Young’s description of political operators dipping into the general pot of culture for politically piquant issues, I propose the term linguistic entrepreneurs.⁷ Semantic preferences aside, Weinstein’s conclusion that “intervention into linguistic processes and manipulation of words,” what he calls the language of politics, “can be a means of increasing human suffering or increasing human freedom and happiness” can not be contested.⁸ However, because language can be so easily politicized, the overall response to proposed linguistic intervention is as likely to be negative as positive. The more pluralistic a society is, the more negative the reaction will be.

The following analysis of language policy and planning in developing, especially African, nations highlights five points. Externally imposed European languages, no matter how artificial in origin, perform indispensable functions in former colonies. One of these roles, linguistic referee, administers from above without ostensibly favoring any specific indigenous group, even though certain classes may thereby be favored. Indigenous (including creole) languages fulfill other, specifically functional roles that can not be successfully replaced by official tongues. European and indigenous languages are related to each other in a fine equilibrium, attempts to tinker with which can ignite underlying group tension. Finally, linguistic entrepreneurs, conscious of the emotiveness of official language change, will willingly use the politics of language to further their partisan aims. Language politics in Mauritius both typifies and elucidates these points.

Multilingualism in Mauritius

Multilingualism in Mauritius mirrors the historical and pluralistic profile of the island-nation.⁹ A French colony from 1767 to 1810, the Mauritian economy was launched on a settler plantation foundation with sugar cane as its staple and slavery as its motor. As in the West Indies, a French-based creole developed as the *lingua franca* among the African slaves. Now socially rehabilitated (and phonetically respelled), Kreol previously served as the language of choice between master and slave. French, however, remained the language of the plantocracy, whose modern day descendants are known as Franco-Mauritians.

Had the French contented themselves with growing sugar and trading from the Isle de France, as they called this island in the Mascarene chain of the Indian Ocean,

Mauritius probably would have remained under France's wings and eventually become, as did the nearby island of Reunion, an overseas department. But privateers and less private naval operators attacked British ships from this strategic spot between southern Africa and India, prompting British navy reprisals and Britain's takeover in 1810. From then until Mauritius' independence in 1968 the island remained a British colony with English enforcing the law of the land.

However, English never became the language of the land. Unusual in the annals of colonial conquest, the terms of the 1810 Act of Capitulation, which officially ceded Mauritius to Great Britain, magnanimously guaranteed that the inhabitants of Mauritius could retain their religion, customs, property, and laws. The 1814 Treaty of Paris reinforced this understanding. Implicitly, the French language was preserved. Mauritius thus continued to be a French and French creole speaking society under the relatively unintrusive umbrella of British sovereignty. The one significant exception to Anglo-Saxon aloofness was the judiciary. In 1845 it was decreed that English would become the language of the higher courts.

British abolition of the slave trade in 1813, in anticipation of outright abolition in 1835, created a demand for "free" labor to replace the emancipated slaves. In 1829 an experimental convoy of "coolies" was brought from India, and the importation of Indian laborers began in earnest in 1834. Mauritian society underwent a demographic and linguistic revolution. In addition to the European languages of French and English and the slave-based Kreol tongue, the Indian languages Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu became part of the Mauritian soundscape, with Hindi and Urdu additionally valued liturgically. Chinese, too, was added in the course of the nineteenth century. Of these Asian languages Bhojpuri underwent the greatest evolution. It became the most localized (indeed, creolized) of nonindigenous Mauritian vernaculars. But no language rivaled Kreol for its islandwide utility.

There thus emerged a four-part harmony of Mauritian languages: Kreol as the uncontested lingua franca; French as the inherited language of social and cultural prestige; English as the language of education, law, public administration, and to a certain degree commerce; and the panoply of Indian and Asian tongues, led by Bhojpuri in the countryside, indiscriminately lumped together as "ancestral" languages.¹⁰ Proportions of purported native speakers of these various languages, as officially recorded by government census, are indicated in Table 1. Notably small is the number of Anglophones in a country that upon independence retained English as the primary language of the courts, schools, and parliament.

However difficult to measure, the high degree of bilingualism, and indeed multilingualism, in Mauritius should not be overlooked.¹¹ Monolinguals are rare. Between 55 and 60 percent of Mauritians speak French as their second language, and another 5 percent as a third language. Nearly half of Mauritians (45–50 percent) command at least tertiary mastery of English.¹² Even the least educated Mauritians—elderly, rural females of Indian extraction—are likely to speak at least Kreol and Bhojpuri.¹³

Table 1 Primary Home Language in Mauritius

	Number of Speakers	Percentage
Kreol	652,193	69.7%
Bhojpuri	201,618	21.5%
French	34,455	3.7%
Hindi	12,848	1.4%
Tamil	8,002	0.9%
Marathi	7,535	0.8%
Urdu	6,810	0.7%
Telugu	6,437	0.7%
Chinese*	3,653	0.4%
English	2,240	0.2%
Gujarati	290	n.s.
Arabic	280	n.s.
TOTAL**	936, 361	100%

* Includes Cantonese, Hakka, and Mandarin.

** TOTAL excludes dual language responses (see note 18 below), other languages, and incomplete responses (120,299 persons).

Source: Compiled from data in 1990 Housing and Population Census of Mauritius, Volume II: Demographic and Fertility Characteristics. Government of Mauritius, Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, tables D8 and D9, pp. 95-7.

Less than a third (27 percent) of Mauritians claim that imperfect mastery of French constitutes a handicap for them, although 61 percent claim such a handicap with respect to English. Officially, over 85 percent of Mauritians are literate, of which 71 percent can write a letter in French, 47 percent in English, and 22 percent in Kreol. Ninety-three percent watch television news in French. Over half of Mauritians listen to the radio news in Hindi (actually, in Hindustani, the more formal variety of the language).¹⁴

So faithful to their cultural heritage were succeeding generations of Asian and Indian immigrants that retention of their ancestral languages was institutionalized, though not without controversy, within the Mauritian educational system.¹⁵ Thus, while English became the medium of instruction and French a highly privileged second language, Asian (or, in Mauritian parlance, oriental) languages became an optional subject of study. Significantly, despite some agitation in the 1970s for recognition and upgrading of Kreol, it never achieved status as a school-taught subject.

Despite being taught in school, Asian languages were not included in the important Certificate Primary Examination (CPE). The attempt to upgrade the status of the so-called ancestral languages by including them in the crucial CPE ranking precipitated the 1995 crisis and change of government.

Mauritian Education: Indian Ocean Mandarinism

Education in Mauritius was broadly patterned after the British system and may be visualized as a pyramid. At the apex of the system is the University of Mauritius in Réduit, located near the president's official residence. It grants degrees up to the doctoral level. It began as a research institute in the 1960s and as of 1996 housed teaching faculties in agriculture, engineering, law and management, science, and social studies and humanities, along with a center for medical studies. Approximately two thousand students were enrolled at the university in the mid 1990s, with plans to expand to five thousand seats.¹⁶

Traditionally, the managerial elite of Mauritius emerged from the secondary level of education, with higher trained doctors and lawyers becoming the dominant political figures. However, not all secondary schools in Mauritius are equal in prestige or quality. A handful of colleges, as they are known, carries the imprimatur of excellence and elitism. Entry into these "star schools"—Royal College, Queen Elizabeth, Maurice Curé, John Kennedy, Sookdeo Bissondayal, St. Esprit, St. Joseph, Loreto Convent—, not secondary school education, is the preadolescent's hallmark of meritocratic success in Mauritian society. To a large degree, how high one flies in Mauritian society depends on the high school into which one is accepted.

Approximately 30,000 pupils sit for the CPE examinations at the end of the academic year in November. Fewer than two-thirds pass. Only the top 2,000, however, are admitted into the top secondary schools, where pass rates on the fifth and seventh year exams are considerably higher than the national average (less than two-thirds for the former and slightly over half for the latter). Thus, the Mauritian educational system functions as an elaborate, lengthy weeding out process that through competitive examinations selects a tiny elite group from the mass of children with which it begins.

Admission to the top colleges, understandably, is intensely competitive. As it is based strictly on the results of the examination at the end of the six year primary school, parental interest in the outcome of the CPE takes on monumental, if not traumatic, proportions.¹⁷ In response to the demand to maximize the chances of success at this critical juncture of preadolescent Mauritians' lives, an unofficial, possibly inequitable and exploitative institution, after hours tutoring (*leçons*), has emerged. Some teachers suggest that success on the CPE depends on drilling their pupils after school, and parents, at least those who can afford it, are only too happy to oblige. Relatively few families are willing or financially able to remove their children from this pedagogic pressure cooker by enrolling them in one of the three private French system schools on the island (École du Centre, École du Nord, and Lycée Labourdonnais) or the English language international school (Le Bocage).

Although the medium of instruction in Mauritian schools is English, teachers are permitted to resort to the more familiar Kreol or Bhojpuri to facilitate comprehen-

sion during their students' first few of years of schooling. French is introduced early on; formal instruction in an Asian language (excluding Bhojpuri) is optional, as is religious education. Other subjects include mathematics and environmental studies. However, of all the subjects tested on the CPE, only four—English, French, mathematics, and environmental studies—count for purposes of ranking and therefore determine selection in the hierarchy of colleges. Most pupils study one of the seven Asian languages offered (Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi, Mandarin, and, in the wake of the 1970s Islamic revolution, Arabic). Since 1986 they have also been able to take an examination in one of these languages for the CPE. Nonetheless, the results of these Asian language tests have never been used for ranking.

Changing the modalities of the CPE, especially in a way that might affect its ranking of students, naturally touched very sensitive nerves in Mauritius' highly pluralistic polity. Changes that threatened to unbalance the delicate language equilibrium that had evolved on the island—itsself a reflection of political equilibrium—were certain to provoke heated reaction. Forcing the issue in an election year guaranteed a political crisis.

Political Context

In 1995 Mauritius was governed by a coalition led by the Militant Socialist Movement (MSM), headed by Anerood Jugnauth, the prime minister, in concert with the Mauritian Militant Movement (MMM), the Democratic Labour Movement (MTD), and the Organisation of the Rodriguan People (OPR). Elections in 1991 had given the MSM-MMM-MTD-OPR alliance an overwhelming fifty-nine of sixty-two elected seats in the legislative assembly. Jugnauth had served as prime minister since 1982, when he had led the MMM. A split within this party, particularly between Jugnauth and Paul Bérenger, prompted Jugnauth to leave it in 1983 and found the MSM. One of the pretexts for the split was the MMM's insistence that Kreol be upgraded as a national language and used, for example, in the national anthem and on the nightly news.¹⁸ Elections in 1983 and 1987, resulting in varying coalitions, maintained Jugnauth at the helm of government.

Jugnauth's thirteen years as prime minister followed the fourteen year tenure of Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. Ramgoolam had brought Mauritius to independence in 1968 and led the nation from his position as head of the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) until 1982. In the microcosmic maelstrom of Mauritian politics personality, ideology, and ethnicity erratically converge within a vibrant democratic system to fashion counterintuitive alliances and bring about unexpected electoral outcomes. Thus, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, who died in 1985, has been alternately characterized as the "father of the nation" and as a pro-Hindu populist. Anerood Jugnauth's sudden switch from leftist politics, as MMM activist, to free market economics, as

MSM leader, had few electoral consequences. And Paul Bérenger, outwardly the most radical of Mauritians to achieve political prominence, actually hails from the most conservative of the island's communities, the Franco-Mauritian class of plantation owners. Mention should be made of Gaëtan Duval and the Mauritian Social Democratic Party (MSDP). Fearful for the fate of the minority Creoles in a tyranny of the majority, it initially opposed independence but has become a regular player in the Mauritian democratic game.

Despite an exceptionally good economic profile during most of his prime ministry, by 1995 Jugnauth suffered from an image as an authoritarian leader and from the popular malaise that commonly results from overextended incumbency. Galvanizing the electorate with a potentially vote-catching theme—upgrading the role of the ancestral languages of the various Asian communities that collectively make up two-thirds of the population—was politically appealing. However, Jugnauth and the MSM underestimated the apprehension that modifying school exams generated and did not anticipate outright rejection of the plan by Mauritius' supreme court. The linkage of impending elections with school examinations thus backfired resoundingly on the incumbent rulers.

CPE: Colonial Irrationality and Linguistic Functionality

Although the annual ritual of the CPE is a postcolonial creation, the practice of nationwide competitive examinations at the primary level is not. In 1957 the Educational Regulations Act stipulated that admission to secondary schools would be based on results of an end of cycle test, through a program approved by the minister of education. Although the curriculum underwent substantial modification in the years following independence, the winnowing system of examinations did not. Until 1978 students were required to take two sets of examinations, one for primary school certification and the other for ranking. In 1978 these two examinations were collapsed into the single CPE, the results of which simultaneously determined certification and ranking.

The issue of oriental languages in CPE ranking had gestated for over a decade.¹⁹ In 1984, a year into Anerood Jugnauth's tenure as prime minister, a parliamentary select committee was set up to investigate the modalities for inclusion of these languages in ranking students. Two years later it recommended that all children take examinations in five, not four, CPE subjects. For those children not studying an Asian language, a new subject, cultures and civilizations of Mauritius, would be introduced. For the purposes of calculating the fourth CPE score, after English, French, and mathematics, the higher result between environmental studies and the oriental language (or cultures and civilizations of Mauritius) would be used.

These recommendations were not followed. Nonetheless, in 1987 oriental lan-

guages were added to the CPE for certification, though not ranking, purposes. In 1991 another select committee was set up to reconsider the previous committee's conclusions; it issued its report in 1993. On the grounds that it would be onerous for youngsters to choose between the cultures and civilizations subject and an Asian language, that such a choice would disadvantage the latter, and that a new course in Mauritian cultures and civilizations would in any event "not [be] practical and workable," this select committee rejected its predecessor's proposed formula. Instead, it recommended simply that pupils who had studied an oriental language would take tests in five subjects (oriental language, English, French, mathematics, and environmental studies) and that those who had not would take only four. For the former group the lower score among environmental studies, French, and oriental language would be dropped. These recommendations were accepted by the Jugnauth cabinet at the end of 1993, forwarded to the minister of education in early 1994, and communicated to the nation's schools by Mauritius' examination board in March 1995 for implementation later that same year.

The effect of the new CPE formula on the ranking of primary school children was the subject of much controversy and consternation. This subject could not be separated from its broader implications for group relations on the island-nation. On one side were ranged the dominant party in the government coalition, prominent Indian cultural organizations, the Asian language teachers' union, and the syndicate of government teachers. They invoked the importance of the cultural survival of Mauritius' diverse groups and the inequity of having pupils take examinations that did not count. On the other side were members of the "general population," a colonial holdover classification including Creoles and Franco-Mauritians, and Asian parents whose children had not, for whatever reason, elected to study an ancestral language. They believed that the new CPE formula was designed to give families of Indian origin a leg up over all others and confirmed long-standing suspicions about the "communalist" tendencies of Anerood Jugnauth's politics. A Common Front for Justice on the CPE sprung up to fight the change in examination ranking, and the government was brought to court. Meanwhile, the only statistical projection of the actual effects of the change in ranking concluded in 1994 that five percent of the boys and six percent of the girls who were not tested in an oriental language would be adversely affected by the new formula.

Yet it was far from certain that CPE change would uniformly work to the advantage of Mauritian families of Indian origin. Not all oriental languages are equally difficult or equally well taught. For instance, Hindi, with the largest and best endowed pedagogic infrastructure, is in a privileged position vis-à-vis Tamil and Telugu. Rather than unifying Mauritians of Indian origin, the proposal to include oriental languages on the CPE rekindled subtle comparisons and rivalries among the various Indian communities.

Although not directly tied to the inclusion of oriental languages on the CPE, a

quid pro quo to assuage the sensibilities of the nonoriental, predominantly Creole and Catholic community, was reached. The so-called Catholic school “deal,” recommended by yet another select committee, reserved for parochial schools the right to select half of their incoming students according to the institutions’ own (presumably religious) criteria. (Previously, placement of pupils was effectuated through a less inclusive quota system.) By proposing a minimal entry threshold to guarantee the parochial character of the Catholic schools, the government considered that it was making a significant concession to the largest non-Hindu bloc. The two proposed changes in the educational system—oriental language ranking on the CPE and partial preference for confessional school matriculation—advanced on parallel paths until converging in a political paroxysm. In 1995 the legislature approved the 50 percent confessional school formula.

Constitutional Rejection

On October 27, 1995, the supreme court of Mauritius, in response to the challenge sponsored by the Common Front for Justice, declared that the government’s CPE policy was “unfair and arbitrary and offended the principle of equality before the law and equal protection of the law embodied in Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights enshrined” in the country’s constitution. Introducing oriental languages as a component of ranking was, at least in the way conducted by the government, unconstitutional and unimplementable.

The court ruled that employment of two sets of ranking procedures, for students tested and not tested on oriental languages, was a discriminatory procedure, a “differentiation casting a handicap on a large number” of pupils. In reaching this conclusion the court considered a wide array precedents and concepts of equal protection. Interestingly, it invoked constitutional law as developed in the United States (with which Mauritius has no direct legal ties) and India as much as it did Mauritian jurisprudence. Thus, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which rejected the principle of separate but equal schooling in the United States in 1954, was deemed relevant in assessing the constitutionality of language test ranking in Mauritius in 1995. Only slightly less eclectic—but more ironic, given Mauritius’ history of slavery to the 1830s—was the court’s favorable citing of plaintiffs’ claim that “at least as far back as 1793 the concept of equality has always existed in Mauritius as part of the democratic principles of this country.” The plaintiffs cited (in French) “*la déclaration des Droits présentée au peuple français en juin 1793*,” highlighting the multilingual complexity of Mauritian jurisprudence, history, and society.

Reaction to the supreme court’s judgment was as polarizing as the issue itself. Returning from an overseas trip, Prime Minister Jugnauth made an oft-criticized remark regarding the “seventy percent” of the population (that is, the Indo-

Mauritians) whose rights were being suppressed by the minority (presumably Creole) population. ("I am a Hindu; there are things to defend.") In using the term "demons" to stigmatize his adversaries, he left himself open to accusations of racism. Jugnauth claimed he was merely referring to his political opponents, but his comments were taken as a thinly veiled attack on the Creole community at large. Familiar retorts about Jugnauth's "communalist" tendencies were recycled. His decisions to solve the CPE problem by amending the constitution to allow the inclusion of oriental languages for ranking purposes and to codify the 50 percent formula for Catholic schools heightened tensions further.

On November 19, 1995, eighteen Hindu cultural organizations and the Hindu Teachers' Union organized a demonstration in favor of including oriental languages on the CPE. "We shall lose our cultural identity if we do not pay attention and if we do not react today," declared the head of the Government Hindi Teachers Union. Another speaker declared: "We do not wish our languages to disappear like the dodo bird."²⁰ At a Hindu consecration ceremony Prime Minister Jugnauth declared: "It is normal to give ancestral languages the same...value and...status as English and French which had been privileged." Here the prime minister concluded his sentence in Kreol: "depi lepok colonial" (since the colonial era). Two members of Seva Shivir, a Hindu organization, conducted a "symbolic" fast. On the other side, the Common Front for Justice on the CPE redoubled its opposition to inclusion, gaining the support of the General Workers Federation, the Association of Mauritian Jurists, and the bishop of Port Louis. The presidential Committee of Sages (an advisory commission) gravely commented, without partisan interest, that "the social problem created around the CPE is the sign of a more profound danger that could threaten the harmony of Mauritian society."²¹ Remaining pretenses of governmental unity collapsed on November 10 when the third minister (and leader of a coalition party) resigned, distancing himself from a supposedly ethnic platform in the forthcoming elections and a "communalist drift [tending] towards the destruction of social cohesion" in the nation.²² Shortly thereafter the minister in charge of the outlying island of Rodrigues also resigned. Both men, not surprisingly, were officially from the so-called "general population."

Discussion preceding the vote to amend the constitution, scheduled for November 15, 1995, was drawn out and intense. Only after nineteen hours of debate, shortly before 6:00 a.m. on November 16, was the balloting conducted. Amending the Mauritian constitution requires a two-thirds supermajority in parliament. Forty-four (out of sixty-six) members of parliament were needed in 1995. In addition to its own twenty-four votes, the MSM cobbled together seventeen additional ones from its closest allies. But twenty-one abstentions (seventeen from the Labor Party and MMM) and three absences deprived the government of the necessary majority. Only one member, an independent, voted against the constitutional amendment.

The next day, ostensibly because of the amendment's rejection, Prime Minister

Jugnauth dissolved parliament and called new elections for December 20, 1995. According to *Le Mauricien*, this date had been chosen well in advance, the CPE issue providing the MSM with a “golden opportunity” to campaign on a politically advantageous theme.

Even by his own admission, Jugnauth sorely miscalculated the support that the oriental language issue would net him amongst the Indo-Mauritian electorate.²³ The result was a crushing blow to Jugnauth. The opposing Labour Party-MMM coalition won a 60–0 victory.²⁴ Mauritius’ new prime minister was Navin Ramgoolam, son of Seewoosagar Ramgoolam; Paul Bérenger, leader of the MMM, became deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. Although the LP-MMM contenders had promised an equitable resolution of the CPE dilemma that included a nondiscriminatory oriental language ranking component, they quietly continued the stop-gap solution adopted by Jugnauth in the waning days of his administration: reservation of a certain number of places in the best schools for pupils who excelled on the oriental language test and whose CPE ranking was also above a high threshold.

The outcome of the 1995 elections did not hinge on the language issue. Leaders of the Common Front for Justice on the CPE themselves agree that dissatisfaction with the dour MSM line (and leader) and a general desire for change, not the CPE issue, brought Ramgoolam and Bérenger to power. Mauritians did not vote on the basis of the problem that precipitated the elections. Typical of the disenchantment felt by members of the voting majority is the sentiment expressed in a letter to the editor of *Le Mauricien*.

I am Asian but I wish to distance myself, as do so many others, from this 70 percent spoken about by [the minister of education]. My son studies an Asian language, to which we attach much importance because it is the language often used to transmit the messages of our religion. Nevertheless, and on account of the CPE, I have established the priorities of my son, and the Asian language has been relegated to second place....We are absolutely not interested in it being included for ranking. So don't count me among your 70 percent....Lacking a coherent policy of languages, the ministry of education is in the process of promoting not Asian languages but the communal demon....²⁵

In a multilingual society such as Mauritius, debates over one language or group of languages have implications for all the rest. Counting (or not counting) some languages for ranking purposes acknowledges a tacit hierarchy among all languages. As a result of the debate over Asian languages, even the long established *modus vivendi* between English and French again came under scrutiny.²⁶ For some, including the influential editorialist of *Le Mauricien*, Gilbert Ahnee, the disproportionate usage of French over English represents an anomaly in a society requiring full entry into the global community. “Without being excessively pessimistic regarding the future of

francophonie, in one century French will perhaps not have more international presence than Czech or Polish today.” As for Mauritius, “people do not think about their grandchildren; they fight especially for their long cremated or buried ancestors.”²⁷ Editorialist Ahnee’s pessimistic assessment of a backwards-looking Mauritian consciousness is at odds with anthropologist Eriksen’s more positive, future-oriented one.²⁸

Privy Council Reversal

Although Mauritius became a republic in 1992, with an (indirectly) elected president replacing the queen as chief of state, decisions of the supreme court can still be subject to the British monarchy’s privy council. Appeal to the privy council must be made with the agreement of the Mauritian supreme court. Such agreement was extended in February 1996 to the Government Hindi Teachers Union’s request to appeal the CPE ruling in London.

On February 18, 1997, the judicial committee of the privy council rendered its judgment: the Mauritian supreme court had erred in determining that the inclusion of Asian languages in the CPE ranking was unconstitutional. According to the five member committee, the supreme court overstretched its jurisdiction in determining that the education regulations were discriminatory and therefore violated the constitution. Whether or not certain inequalities constitute actual ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination is a matter rightfully decided by the parliament, not the courts, declared the privy council. As a matter of principle the privy council’s decision highlighted the relative power of the legislative vis-à-vis the judicial branch in the British-inspired Mauritian legal system. “Democracy in Mauritius, including respect for human rights and principles of rational behaviour, is sufficiently robust to make it unnecessary to put Parliament in such judicial leading strings.”²⁹ The supreme court’s invocation of American and Indian constitutional law in its decision making also came under criticism.

Reversal of the supreme court ruling led to pressures on Ramgoolam’s government to reinstate immediately an Asian language ranking component in the CPE examinations. Yet the issue of ranking may become moot. Labour’s minister of education had already floated the idea of abolishing the ranking process, although not before the year 2000. Whether or not ranking in its present form is abolished, the politics of language and ethnicity will continue to underlie all proposals for educational change. Although ranking has been under attack from several corners in Mauritius for various reasons, the probability of its abolition has almost certainly been increased by the politicization and adjudication of language.

Linguistic Obsolescence and Mauritius

An almost taboo subject in Mauritian political circles is the gradual disappearance of several ancestral languages as living media of discourse. While the full panoply of oriental languages continues to be taught, particularly at the primary level, their vernacular value has virtually ceased to exist. Interest group jockeying probably accounts for a fair number of the few respondents, summarized in Table 1, who claimed their ancestral language as the primary language spoken at home. Even Bhojpuri, long the privileged vernacular in rural Mauritius, is succumbing to the pressure of Kreol. Indian languages in Mauritius are becoming ancestral tongues transmitted to the younger generation for the purposes of ritual and communal identification but hardly used for everyday communication. Hindi, backed by strong cultural support organizations and the dynamic Indian film industry, may yet stave off local obsolescence. But even for youngsters with family ties to northern India commonalities derived from English rather than Sanskrit are more likely to predominate.

The CPE crisis of 1995 was a watershed in Mauritian history. It revealed that politicians can not automatically count on ethnic languages in mobilizing local political support. In a conflict pitting group identity against scholastic imperatives, parents/constituents in Mauritius showed that their primary concern lay with the educational and employment prospects of their children, not with the standing of their ancestral tongue or community. Ethnicity is being rivaled (if not supplanted) by other forces, processes, and institutions, notably industrialization, migration, and tourism.³⁰

Those who argue that Mauritians of African and mixed descent remain locked out of power and economic success—the *malaise Créole*—are not likely to share this view. Postcolonial favoritism towards Hindus, particularly in administrative postings, is undeniable. Yet, while Mauritian Creoles may momentarily lag behind the Asian majority in socioeconomic advancement, there is some recognition of targeted approaches to underprivileged communities.³¹

Also significant is the lack of enthusiasm for the most patently logical solution to the examination language disparity: to include Kreol on a par with other languages. Inclusion would require, as has long been advocated by some movements and parties, the recognition of Kreol as a Mauritian language worthy of school instruction and pedagogic evaluation. Yet only a few diehard, idealistic intellectuals persist in advocating that Kreol be added to the school curriculum, even on an optional basis. Mauritian parents, Creole as well as non-Creole, want their children to achieve maximum proficiency in English and French.

The CPE crisis may be viewed as a moment in Mauritian language “tipping,” a decisive point in linguistic evolution beyond which the decline of one language becomes inevitable and the supremacy of another is confirmed. The 1990 census demonstrates that this process has already begun.³² In Mauritius language tipping is

a plural phenomenon: several languages (the Asian ones) lose out, and the stature of at least two (English and French) is reaffirmed. Even though Kreol never came close to being adopted as a policy solution, it probably gained strength vis-à-vis the Asian languages as a result of the CPE crisis. It is not clear that the privy council ruling from London will, in the long run, reverse this process.

Postcolonialism and Language Policy

In postcolonial society many politicians will continue to play the ethnolinguistic card for partisan ends. As their societies undergo the industrial, high technology, and informational transformations associated with globalization, they will increasingly encounter the same disappointment as Prime Minister Jugnauth initially did in Mauritius. While Jugnauth may feel that he was ultimately vindicated by the privy council's judgment, his and his linguistically partisan allies' "victory" was certainly mitigated by the need to seek recourse to a foreign body and to invoke legalistic rules rather than substantive principles.

Both on the national and familial levels, populations, in Mauritius and elsewhere, will become increasingly sensitized to the importance of mastering world languages for countrywide and personal success. Automatic, defensive reactions in favor of indigenous and against European languages will become nuanced. Paradigms of language planning must explicitly integrate the economics of language if they are to remain grounded in realism.³³

Attempts by politicians to tinker with the linguistic structure as it has evolved in their societies can backfire painfully. Linguistic equilibrium does not imply stasis. Nevertheless, an effort deliberately to change the sensitive balance between historically inherited languages is not as wise as to allow them to evolve naturally, even if the linguistic "inheritance" is itself indisputably political, in that it reflects social and power relations that arose out of colonial antecedents.

True language planning is neither social engineering nor political gamesmanship. Rather, it is a sober stock taking of the global direction of linguistic evolution followed by a realistic allocation of educational resources. Mauritius was fortunate that, in 1995–97, a potentially explosive partisan language policy, cloaked in the rhetoric of bureaucratic neutrality, was defused peaceably and constitutionally. In other places, at other times, the outcome may not be so fortuitous.

NOTES

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2. Carol M. Eastman, *Language Planning: An Introduction* (San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp, 1983); Joan Rubin and Bjorn H. Jernudd, eds., *Can Language Be Planned?* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1971).

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5. David Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); David Laitin, "The Tower of Babel as a Coordination Game," *American Political Science Review*, 88 (1994), 622–34; David Laitin, "The Game Theory of Language Regimes," *International Political Science Review*, 14 (1993), 227–39.

6. Brian Weinstein, "Language Strategists: Redefining Political Frontiers on the Basis of Linguistic Choices," *World Politics*, 31 (1979), 345–64.

7. Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 40.

8. Brian Weinstein, *The Civic Tongue: Political Consequences of Language Choices* (New York: Longman, 1983).

9. See Toni Arno and Claude Orian, *Ile Maurice: Une Société Multiraciale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986); Jean-Claude Lau Thi Keng, *Inter-Ethnicité et Politique à l'Île Maurice* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991); Larry Bowman, *Mauritius: Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder: Westview, 1991); Bernard Lehembre, *L'île Maurice* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984); Deborah Bräutigam, "Institutions, Economic Reform, and Democratic Consolidation in Mauritius," *Comparative Politics*, 30 (October 1997), 45–62; Thomas Meisenhelder, "The Developmental State in Mauritius," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35 (1997), 279–97.

10. See Philip Baker, "The Language Situation in Mauritius with Special Reference to Mauritian Creole," *African Language Review*, 8 (1969), 73–97.

11. See Pierre-Marie Moorghen and Nicole Z. Domingue, "Multilingualism in Mauritius," *International Journal of the Sociology of Languages*, 34 (1982), 51–66; Karl Noël, "Le Problème des langues à l'Île Maurice," *Culture Française* (1972), 7–23; Peter Stein, *Connaissance et emploi des langues à l'Île Maurice* (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1982).

12. Daniel Baggioni and Didier de Robillard, *Ile Maurice: Une Francophonie Paradoxe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), pp. 46–47.

13. The 1990 census on language use referred to in Table 1 also includes as bilingual combinations of the "language usually spoken at home" Creole and Bhojpuri (48,579 persons), Creole and French (21,387), and Bhojpuri and Hindi (20,976).

14. Issa Asgarally, "Langues et Processus d'Inclusion/Exclusion," in Issa Asgarally, ed., *Etude Pluridisciplinaire sur l'Exclusion à Maurice* (Reduit: Presidency of the Republic of Mauritius, 1997), pp. 85–102.

15. Hindi was introduced on an experimental basis in 1935. In 1954 it was introduced, along with Urdu and Tamil, throughout the public school system. Telugu was added in 1958, Marathi in 1965, Mandarin Chinese in 1977, and Arabic in 1980. National Assembly (Government of Mauritius), *Report of the Select Committee on the Certificate of Primary Education/Oriental Languages* (Port Louis: Government House, 1993), 38–39.

16. See Rada Tirvassen, "Le Problème de la langue d'enseignement à Maurice: Une approche socio-historique," in R. Chaudenson, ed., *Langues, économie et développement*, vol. 2 (Aix-en-Provence and Montmagny: Institut d'études créoles et francophones, 1990), pp. 183–99; Rada Tirvassen, "Les Langues et l'éducation à l'île Maurice: Convergences et divergences," *Etudes Créoles*, 15 (1992), 63–80; Rada Tirvassen, "De la réforme pédagogique à l'enseignement de l'écrit à l'île Maurice," *Culture et Pédagogie*, 10–11 (1993), 36–48.

17. "Today's ranking, pushed to a paroxysm, produces ferocious competition, hence private lessons, extra textbooks, robotic children, family stress....Ranking is a funnel with a veritable stranglehold at the end. Pitiless." Father Alain Romaine, quoted in *Le Mauricien*, Nov. 16, 1995.

18. Even Bérenger, founding member of the MMM, admits that the Kreol issue was not the true reason for the alliance breakup. Interview, May 22, 1997. Jugnauth has never seen the necessity of formally granting Kreol official status. Interview, December 19, 1996.

19. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Linguistic Diversity and the Quest for National Identity: The Case of Mauritius," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 13 (1990), esp. 12–14.

20. "Le Mouvement pour les langues orientales: Soutien à tout parti politique qui appliquera le rapport Dulloo," *Le Mauricien*, Nov. 20, 1995. The dodo bird evolved and became extinct on Mauritius and is still a national symbol.

21. "Comité des sages: Des initiatives communes afin d'empêcher la déchirure du tissu social mauricien," *Le Mauricien*, Nov. 9, 1995.

22. "M. Xavier-Luc Duval soumet sa démission au gouvernement," *Le Mauricien*, Nov. 10, 1995.

23. Interview, December 19, 1996.

24. Four additional seats were allocated under the constitution's "best loser" system, designed to balance ethnic-cum-party disparities, including two for the *Mouvement Rodriguais* and one each for the Parti Gaëtan Duval (PGD) and Hizbulla, and two other seats went to another party on the outlying island of Rodrigues (the Organization of the People of Rodrigues). See Raj Mathur, "Parliamentary Representation of Minority Communities: The Mauritian Experience," *Africa Today*, 44 (1997).

25. "Pour l'inclusion des langues orientales, mais...," *Le Mauricien*, Nov. 10, 1995.

26. The relationship between the English and French languages is another important component of Mauritian language equilibrium, which can not be examined in sufficient detail in this article. See Baggioni and de Robillard. From capitulation until independence French had been promoted mostly by the Franco-Mauritians and upper class Creoles, with upwardly mobile Indians and Chinese favoring English. In recent years, due in part to an active French government cultural policy and a relatively disinterested British one, the balance has been tipping in favor of French. English is now commonly characterized as a "neutral" language in Mauritius, reserved for parliamentary, judicial, administrative, and educational purposes but not identified with a specific ethnic community.

27. Gilbert Ahnee, "Et quid de la pédagogie?," *Le Mauricien*, Nov. 9, 1995.

28. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "A Future-Oriented, Non-Ethnic Nationalism? Mauritius as an Exemplary Case," *Ethnos*, 58 (1993), 197–221; Eliphaz G. Mukonoweshuro, "Containing Political Instability in a Poly-ethnic Society: The Case of Mauritius," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 14 (1991), 199–214.

29. "Le Privy Council reverse le jugement de la Cour suprême," *Le Mauricien*, Feb. 19, 1997.

30. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Two Modes of Group Identification," *Journal of Peace Research*, 32 (1995), 427–36.

31. Asgarally, ed.

32. Vinesh HOOKOOSING, "Linguistic-Cultural Pluralism and Development: The Mauritian Experience," paper presented to the Second International Conference on Language in Development, IALF, Bali.

33. François Grin, "The Economics of Language: Match or Mismatch?," *International Political Science Review*, 15 (1994), 25–42; Didier de Robillard, "Planification des langues et économie des ressources humaines: Le cas de l'île Maurice," *Etudes Créoles*, 12 (1989), 117–35.