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Creole and Technology: Building Bridges Among Ethnolinguistic Groups in Mauritius

Background

This project looks at the formation of national identity through the interaction between language and technology. In Mauritius, computer-mediated communication (CMC) – emails, chats and texts – create connections among young people of different diasporic groups. This connection is made possible through a shared code, Mauritian Creole (MC) – the ancestral/ethnic language of the Afro-Mauritians, the mother-tongue of most Mauritians and the “unofficial’ national language” (Eriksen 1990: 14). In CMC, therefore, diasporic identities become secondary to national identity.

This project relates mainly to the linguistic theme of the programme. It looks at the role of new technology in changing diasporic and national allegiances in a highly multiethnic society. Because CMC requires a shared code, it promotes MC among people of diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The need to communicate effectively also leads to the emergence of orthographic conventions for this non-standard language.

This study extends our understanding of issues related to diasporas and identity to non-Western societies and addresses issues relevant to scholars and the general public.

Research questions

Mauritius is a nation of immigrants, where loyalties usually lie with specific ethnolinguistic groups rather than the nation as a whole. One element that is clearly indigenous to the island is the non-standard French-lexified creole, MC.

The Government have realised that MC is an asset for nation-building. In 2004, they set up a committee to devise a standard for the language. It is expected that the official standardisation of the language will add authority and legitimacy to the language.

Standardisation is a linguistic and political process directly related to the identity of the language and its speakers (Sebba 1998). But the way creoles are standardised can reify biases against these languages which are seen as inferior to their lexifiers.

Dr Rajah-Carrim’s previous research shows that young Mauritians write MC in the very specific context of CMC (Rajah-Carrim 2004). Together, therefore, MC and CMC unite Mauritians of various diasporic origins. While there is

currently no official standard for MC, many young Mauritians of different ancestral backgrounds have devised their own orthography and interestingly, orient towards some specific forms. Their orthography is largely phonemic in nature and as such, diverges from French. For instance, “red house” is *lakaz ruz* – French equivalents: *case* (house), *rouge* (red). The commonly used graphemes <k,w,z> index Mauritian identity by obscuring the French origins of words and may be interpreted as a “political agenda of independence, autonomy and anti-colonialism” (Sebba 1998: 25).

The research questions address the interaction between language, technology and identity from users’ perspectives and relate it to current macro-social trends. Dr Rajah-Carrim asks how exactly MC is written in CMC. Can users’ choice of orthography be related to ideologies of identity? Is it important to users that the official standard currently in preparation conforms to the “phonemic” system that they seem to have come up with locally?

Aims and objectives

1. To assess the importance of a shared code as a marker of identity among Mauritian youths drawing on Dr Rajah-Carrim’s previous and current research in this area and her native knowledge of MC and Mauritian culture.
2. To analyse the potential of CMC to promote the use of MC as a standardised written language.
3. To demonstrate the role of users, rather than just language experts, in devising and promoting a standard for a language and contribute to ongoing linguistic debates in Mauritius.
4. To understand the importance of technology in building links among people of diverse origins.

Research context

This project can be placed within the larger and still embryonic debate on the impact of CMC on language structure and perceptions of identity (Herring 1996, Baron 2000, Crystal 2001). Drawing on recent research on CMC, it exposes the complexities of language behaviours and the use of technology in the construction of national identity in a multilingual and multiethnic community.

Hinrichs (2005) has argued that CMC can lead to the emergence of orthographic conventions in creoles. To date, corpus-based studies on creole orthography in CMC are highly limited. This project makes a timely and substantive contribution to this research area. It goes a step further in that it discusses the role of language in CMC in bringing about a sense of national identity among young people. In so doing, it links research done on language and identity in Mauritius and the structure and standardisation of MC.

Furthermore, we are looking at a highly vibrant linguistic context where the role of MC as a language of everyday interaction and nationhood is being discussed. By analysing language behaviours in a dynamic domain like CMC, this study addresses issues that are “live” and of immediate interest to

Mauritian society. It will therefore make a practical contribution to the development of standard MC and its use in the education system.

Dr Rajah-Carrim's previous research has looked at the way in which ethnic and national identities interact and citizens forge a national identity based on ideologies about a common language (Rajah-Carrim 2004). This project builds on her research interests and explores ideologies of language and identity in a new medium of communication.

Finally, this topic is of interdisciplinary interest cross-cutting work done in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and information technology. Its results will therefore have wide appeal: the public and people in the academy. It targets not only experts but, crucially, users who play a vital role in standardisation issues in creole communities (Sebba 1998).

Research methods

Dr Rajah-Carrim will collect a corpus of 250 emails by Mauritians to Mauritians. Emails will be obtained from twenty-five *Coloured, Indo- and Afro-Mauritians* – the three main ethnic groups - aged between 13 and 30. This is the age-range where the use of CMC is most extensive. A systematic analysis of the corpus will allow the compilation of a list of linguistic features found in the CMC variety of MC. We will look at conventions used for words found only in MC, and words etymologically related to French (i) with the same meaning and (ii) with a different meaning. On the basis of these findings, we will establish whether users indeed orient more towards a phonemic system than an etymological one.

More qualitative data will be obtained from interviews with the same twenty-five respondents. Interviews will especially interrogate perceptions about (i) standardisation and identity and (ii) language ideologies and technology.

The quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and provide different perspectives on the questions raised above.

Project Management

Dr Rajah-Carrim is the only person involved in data collection and analysis for this project which will run for nine months.