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Mauritius: Nationalistic v/s
Nationistic Choice**

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Language Educational Policy in Mauritius: Nationalistic v/s Nationistic Choice

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Abstract

Despite the fact that it is not the mother tongue of Mauritius, English is the official medium of instruction in Mauritius. It is the government's nationistic choice that is the subject of this paper. Over the years, English has been considered by the government as being an obvious choice because of its neutrality and its function as a gateway of economic prosperity. Yet, the high rate of failures in the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examinations, is attributed by some to the fact that the medium of instruction is not the mother tongue but a second/ foreign language.

Taking into consideration Fishman's (1968) distinction between nationalism and nationism, the investigation of motivations for the choice of language education policy and the reasons for the maintenance of English as the medium of instruction will help fulfill the aim of this paper; the aim of which is to discuss how the language educational policy in Mauritius is one of the key mechanisms in the structure of its power. To this effect, documentary research has been carried out. Educational reports which have had a direct bearing on the choice of language educational policies have been reviewed and analysed. The analysis of the data sheds light upon the motivation for the choice of a nationistic language educational policy by the Mauritian government.

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Introduction

Education is an important agent for the implementation of language policies. Indeed, according to Santiago (1982), education is viewed as a primary agent for solving many problems in multilingual developing nations. It is also an important agent used by governments to implement their ideologies. In this paper, we will explore how the social and political context of Mauritius influences language educational policy, our main concern being the choice of English as a medium of instruction and keeping in mind Fishman's (1968) principles of nationalism and nationism.

Language policy is closely related to the distinction Fishman made (1968) between *nationality-nationalism* and *nation-nationism*. Within this framework, 'nationalities' are groups of people who view themselves as a socio-cultural unit with integrative bonds, whereas 'nations' are political units which tend to have one dominant nationality. In determining language policies, Fishman (1968) contends that a country needs to balance the concerns of nationalism (the feelings that develop from a sense of group identity) and nationism (the practical concerns of governing). If language policies are formed primarily on the basis of nationalism in which the concern of promoting a national identity is paramount, such things as the efficient conduct of the government and its institution may suffer. On the other hand, if language policies are based on nationism, with little regard for the emotional attachment that languages can have, language planning may engender hostility among some members of society.

In discussing the language planning and policies of post-colonial nations, Fishman (1968) distinguishes between three types of nations; the A-modal, the Uni-modal and the Multi-modal nation. In A-modal nations such as Cameroon, a language of wider communication such as English or French is encouraged throughout the society. In contrast, in Uni-modal nations, like Malaysia, the ultimate aim is to achieve a monolingual society, putting forward an indigenous language as the national language. Finally, in Multi-modal nations, such as Singapore, which seeks to promote a bilingual society, a language of wider communication is used in certain domains, often more formal, with the indigenous language used in more informal contexts. Mauritius is situated midway between A-modal nations and Multi-modal nations, with the choice of English as the official language, French acting as asemi-official language and Kreol Morisyen enjoying the status of unofficial national language in the background.

Language policies, by specifying the choice of an official language and the medium of instruction, determine who learns English and for what purposes. One of the central areas of conflict, especially in Africa, in the designation of the medium of instruction is whether to provide initial education in the mother tongue or in a language of wider communication. While an important conference sponsored by UNESCO in 1951 (1953) recommended that every effort should be made to provide initial education in the mother tongue, in many countries this recommendation has not been followed, even till today. Having inherited colonial language policies, many countries, such as Benin,

Guinea Bissau and others preferred maintaining the policies (Bamgbose: 2004). Factors influencing this decision include the promotion of the usage of a language of wider communication such as English or the fact that the mother tongue is not sufficiently developed to be used as a medium of instruction. This decision is related to which languages are given official recognition by political leaders and to the whole issue of nationalism versus nationism.

Consequently, the teaching and learning of English, as of any language, is an activity infused with social and political significance, as these choices are often made within the political arena. In some countries, education policies regarding the teaching of English may be based on a desire to restrict knowledge of the language to an elite, while in others the study of English may be promoted as a basis for achieving political unity or economic development. It is this ambiguous relationship that exists between English and the attribution of power that we are going to explore in the Mauritian context, in this paper.

The Worldwide position of English

It is indisputable that English is the international language of the modern world (Crystal: 1997a). From an estimated four million speakers in 1500 (Jespersen: 1968), limited almost exclusively to the British Isles, English is currently spoken by approximately 1.5 billion speakers worldwide. This spread of English is generally viewed as being natural, neutral, pragmatic, beneficial and freely chosen (Graddol:1997)

However, this concept of English as natural, neutral and beneficial is far from being absolute. As Alastair Pennycook (1994:23) says, to *view the spread as natural is to ignore the history of that spread and to turn one's back on larger global forces and the goals and interests of institutions and governments that have promoted it. To view it as neutral is to take a very particular view of language and also to assume that the apparent international status of English raises it above local, social, cultural, political or economic concerns.*

Indeed, any language cannot be viewed as being devoid of any concepts of power (Chomsky: 1979). Therefore language educational policy determines to a great extent the teaching and learning of a language, and consequently, outlining the structure of power and inequality in countries throughout the world.

Kachru (1986: 1) argues persuasively that one central reason for the spread of English is the widespread belief that proficiency in English can transmute an individual or a speech community by providing 'an added potential for material and social gain and advantage'. English is not only the gateway to economic prosperity but also functions as a gatekeeper to positions of prestige in a society. With English enjoying such an important position in many educational systems around the world through language educational policies which favour its spread, it is one of the powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment or social positions. (Bamgbose:2004).

Therefore, it cannot be assumed that English itself is a neutral language. Nor can one presume that its spread is viewed positively throughout the whole world and is accepted whole-heartedly by all countries and their citizens. There exist some famous instances when English has been rejected in former colonies. This occurred in Tanzania, where English lost its status as the joint official language in 1967 when Swahili, the other official language, became the sole official language. There are many reasons to a shift in policy namely ideological, political or educational reform (Bamgbose:2004). However, policy shift and fluctuation in policy can also be towards the decreasing use of the mother tongue and increasing use of English language. Although Tanzania opted for a policy advocating the use of mother tongue in primary education and succeeded to a great extent, it was not implemented at secondary level. This was the case in many other countries such as Zambia and South Africa where despite a shift in language educational policy on paper, the implementation of the policies did not occur.

Language Educational policy in Mauritius

The use of English in the Mauritian education system was established in the British colonial period (Tirvassen: 1998). Many attempts to promote mother tongue education by various colonial and post-colonial governments have been done , but English has always been seen as the tool to use to climb the ladder of success, and has remained the ‘ language of government, the civil service, education, and of all formal and official transactions’ since independence (Sonck: 2005, 39).

Medium of instruction in Mauritius

English, being the official language, is the official medium of instruction in the Mauritian education system. Most of the teaching in Mauritius is, in principle, done in English. The three major examinations, the Certificate of Primary of Education (CPE), the Cambridge O Level and the Cambridge A Level are carried out in the English medium except for French and the non-European languages. In accordance with the official regulations dating back to 1957, teachers are allowed to use any language that is spoken in Mauritius during the first three years of primary schooling, although the use of English is compulsory from the fourth year (i.e 10 year old children) of study.

The Education ordinance of 1957 reiterates the policy stated in the 1944 Education ordinance. It is significant to note that the 1944 Education ordinance was the outcome of a political compromise during the days of the Empire between the English and the French who were competing with each other for cultural supremacy (Tirvassen: 1999). In practice, what this meant was that the language policy of the British administration was honoured in its breach. It granted freedom to its teachers to choose any medium of instruction even if all the textbook material (with the exception of French) was in English. This

implied that such a measure of freedom was exercised especially at an oral level since the technical terms in Mathematics, for example, could not be translated into Kreol Morisyen. In brief, the government of Mauritius adopted a nationistic attitude towards language educational policies which were particularly geared towards accomplishing political objectives and catering for different linguistic groups.

However despite the stance taken by the government, the use of English as the medium of instruction is ambiguous as the use of English is made only in classrooms and is minimal (Sonck: 2005). In Mauritius, Kreol Morisyen is the language of general use, the language of equality. According to the 2000 population census 70% of the Mauritian population consider Kreol Morisyen as being their mother tongue. According to Sauzier-Uchida (2009), Kreol Morisyen is used as medium of communication in most informal settings. It can, thus be considered as the language which binds the whole of the Mauritian nation, as a national language (Sauzier-Uchida: 2009). This further renders the issue of medium of instruction problematic.

Indeed, the use of Kreol Morisyen, the mother tongue as a medium of instruction was an issue raised in the late 1960s, just before Mauritius gained independence. Until that date, it had been taken for granted that education should be carried out in English, the official language, and therefore it was stated in all educational documents that English should be the medium of instruction at all levels of education, despite the frequent oppositions made by the Francophone Mauritians who believed that French should be the medium of instruction. However, as has been seen, the mother tongue of most Mauritian children being Kreol Morisyen, those documents made allowances for the use of Kreol Morisyen as a support language in the first few years of primary education (Glover: 1978).

In the past few decades, the high rate of failure at the end of the primary cycle has been attributed to the fact that Mauritian children were educated in languages that were not their mother tongue (Sonck: 2005) (Sauzier-Uchida:2009). Since the past few decades, it has been suggested that there should be a change in the medium of instruction. This was reiterated in the Education and Human Resources Strategy Plan (2008-2020). It has even been suggested that Kreol Morisyen be introduced as the medium of instruction in the first three years of education of a child and that basic concepts in education be taught in Kreol Morisyen, followed by a period of transition where literacy skills should be transferred from Kreol Morisyen to other languages.

Currently, the Mauritian government has introduced Kreol Morisyen as a subject at primary levels. Charged in 2004 to develop a standardized version of Kreol Morisyen, linguists and lecturers from the University of Mauritius and the Mauritius Institute of Education came up with the 'Graphie L'Harmonie' which was proposed as the standardized version of Kreol Morisyen and which is taught at primary level in Mauritius starting from 2012 (PMO:2011)(Quirin:2012).

However, it should be noted that although Kreol Morisien has been introduced as a subject, it will not be a compulsory subject but an optional one which will be offered on the same grounds as other Asian languages. This brings to the

foreground the highly debatable issue of the stance taken by the government; whether it is of a nationistic one or that of a nationalistic one.

Research Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, a documentary research has been carried out. According to Mogalakwe (2006), documentary research tends to be as effective and relatively less costly to use as research method than social surveys, in-depth interviews or participant observation. Reports commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, notably; the Report of the Commission of Enquiry on post-primary and secondary sectors of Education of 1978, entitled 'We have all been children', the Report of the Commission of Enquiry on Education of 1982-1983, entitled 'The Road Ahead', the Ramdoyal Report of 1990 and the EDUCATION & HUMAN RESOURCES STRATEGY PLAN 2008-2020, published in 2009 will be analysed closely. These documents are necessary as their contents offer an insight into how the problem of which language to choose as medium of instruction has been dealt with over the span of these last four decades. Hence, it gives us an idea of how the recommendations have influenced the choice of the government, concerning the problem of the medium of instruction.

Findings

Review of 'We have all been children', the Report of the Commission of Enquiry on post-primary and secondary sectors of Education of 1978

Commissioned to write a report on the education system of the 1970s and to recommend changes that could be made, the issue of language was one of the areas on which the members of the Commission concentrated (Glover: 1978). This issue had a direct impact on the relationship maintained by the government with the international community. The Committee recognized in a section dealing especially with the linguistic situation of Mauritius within the educational system that there existed in Mauritius a problem concerning choice of medium of instruction. Voicing out the divergent opinions of the population concerning this issue, the Commission preferred not to take any sides but maintained neutral position about the debate between those who adopted a mild stance and those who felt that the use of Kreol Morisyen would be appropriate for teaching purposes.

The members of the Commission agreed that the decision as to which language to use in the classroom should be left to the teachers who would know which language would be best for the students. The Commission was totally adamant against the proposal made by some that Kreol Morisyen should be added as a subject to the Mauritian educational curriculum and that English and Kreol Morisyen should become compulsory languages, leaving the other languages to a secondary position. Kreol Morisyen, according to the members of the Commission, was not the first language of all Mauritian students; Bhojpuri

being the mother tongue of many students. The Commission also commented on the similarities that existed between Kreol Morisyen and French, which would lead to confusion.

The Commission also believed that Mauritian children were offered a unique opportunity compared to other children of the world, that of being able to have a fair command of two international languages, English and French. Along with recommending a thorough study on Kreol Morisyen which would enable the start of its corpus planning, the Commission recommended the consolidation of the teaching of its languages and encouraged schools to offer courses in other internationally recognized languages.

Review of 'The Road Ahead', the Report of the Commission of Enquiry on Education of 1982-1983

Though one of the terms of reference of the Glover Report of 1982-1983 was to review the aims and objectives of the school curriculum to make it more responsive to the linguistic needs and aspirations of the country as well as those of the individual, and in particular to make it play a more active role in the building up of

the Mauritian nation, the report did not attribute a particular section to the language issue in the Mauritian educational system. Dealing briefly with the issue, the members of the Commission agreed that the children who entered the primary sector were at once exposed to too many languages. The Commission recommended that the medium of instruction in the pre-primary sector should be the language of the environment so as not to disadvantage those who had had little exposure to other languages. However, the Commission refused to impose anything in the field of languages.

One member of the Commission recommended the staggering of languages to be implemented at the start of primary education with the language of environment being used so the student could familiarize himself or herself, but the rest of the Commission maintained its position that there should exist no form of compulsion. It also thought that a process of social evolution was preferable and that no serious change could be arrived at without the setting up of the studies recommended by the previous Glover report. The Commission reiterated its recommendations towards the study of other internationally recognized languages.

Review of the Ramdoyal Report 1990, The Education System of Mauritius: Proposal for Structural Reform

The 1990 Ramdoyal Report considered the language issue a very important matter and refused to ignore its repercussions. Initially exposing the linguistic situation in Mauritius, the Commission stated that policy objectives aim at the more effective teaching and learning of English and French and the promotion of Oriental languages. It outlined the main linguistic problem that was present in our educational system. Unlike the British educational system on which it was based, the medium of instruction is not the mother tongue of Mauritian students, and this according to the Commission, was one of the main reasons for the failure of the Mauritian student in acquiring a certain degree of literacy.

To sustain this argument, the Commission put forward the publications of writers like J.E.Meade and the linguist J.Macnamara who advanced that one of the reasons for the failure of the Mauritian educational system was the imposition of several languages on the student, a fact agreed on by Mauritian teachers as well. The Commission went on to further its argument by talking about the survey carried out by the MIE in 1988 and the Mauritian Country Paper produced by the Ministry of Education which showed that a large number of students leaving primary school could neither read nor write English. The Commission expressed its sympathy for the Mauritian student who had to be competent in two foreign languages, English and French, and one optional Oriental language to be able to succeed in obtaining a sound primary education.

Yet, the Commission pointed out that the government, though aware of the linguistic problem present in the Mauritian education system hesitated to bring forward any changes to the system as the language issue was a very sensitive one, a decision which the Mauritian public abided by.

The Commission refused to ignore this problem and the fact that the majority of school leavers were not literate. One proposed solution was the reinforcement of 'teaching of reading with understanding of English' (Ramdoyal, 1990:70). It was believed that if more time were attributed to the teaching of reading in the school time-table, Mauritian students would be more apt to understand English, thereby justifying the proposal to extend primary education from six to seven years.

The Commission agreed with those who believed that the staggering of languages over the first two or three years of the primary cycle would be beneficial for the students. However, it acknowledged that no specific change could be implemented without close study of this matter by the Ministry of Education and specialists because language teaching was beheld in Mauritius as being a very sensitive issue, and hence proposed a Pilot School Language Research project, to be undertaken by specialists.

Review of Education and Human Resources Strategy Plan 2008-2020

The Education and Human Resources Strategy Plan 2008-2020 brings to the forefront the linguistic dilemma as being one of the major problems affecting the Mauritian educational system. According to it, one of the major problems is that teachers make use of Kreol Morisyen as support language without being trained in the methods and applications of bilingual education/ instruction. Thus, instead of facilitating learning, the use of Kreol Morisyen can influence negatively the learning of students. Thus one major solution offered to this problem in the Education and Human Resources Strategy Plan 2008-2020(2009) is the development of teacher training programmes focusing on 'the impacts of bilingualism and accompanying teaching methods', thus ensuring that teachers are able to make optimal use of the bilingualism of Mauritian students, one of their greatest resources.

Discussion

Although it can be said that the trend has evolved since the last few decades, it is quite clear after the thorough perusal of the reports that the Mauritian government has not changed its stance from a nationistic one to a nationalistic. Although, all reports acknowledge the existing linguistic problem in the Mauritian educational system, notably the use of English as medium of instruction, it is quite categorical in the maintenance of the same language educational policy that has been in place in Mauritius since the 1944 Education Ordinance Act. Where ‘(steering) the middle course’ is preferred to an actual change in the choice of medium of instruction in the 1970s (Glover, 1978: 121), in the 1990s the only solution to the linguistic dilemma proposed is that of reinforcing the ‘teaching of reading with understanding of English.’ (Ramdoyal, 1990:70), while in the 21st century it is advised to have recourse to ‘broad based national consultation’ before policy decisions can be taken to allow the use of the any other language apart from the ‘official language of instruction’ to facilitate learning. (MOE, 2009: 42)

It is quite clear that no Mauritian government has wanted to opt for a shift in its nationistic stance to a nationalistic one, at the detriment of Mauritian students’ education (Sonck: 2005). Indeed, it can be seen that whilst writing the 1978 Glover report, one of the main ideas that was kept in mind by the Commission was the importance of building a good relationship between Mauritius and the international community, as advocated by the terms of reference. Hence, the teaching of English and French was seen by the Commission as being ‘a precious advantage’ for the Mauritian student as these were two of the most important international languages, an advantage ‘which should not be thrown overboard without serious thinking being given to the subject’. (Glover, 1978:123). Mention of the same advantage is made in the Education and Human Resources Strategy Plan 2008-2020, although a shift in the terminology is noted. Mauritian students’ greatest ‘resource’ is said to be their bilingualism and it is strongly advised to design ‘bilingual education programmes that emphasize a gradual transition to English and offer native-language instruction in declining amounts over time’ so as to ensure ‘academic success in the second language.’ (2009:62). Thus, as can be seen no mention at all has been made in the last decades to replace the current medium of instruction, English by Kreol Morisyen, the mother tongue of the majority of Mauritian students.

The Commission of the 1978 Glover report was totally categorical in refusing the suggestion that Kreol Morisyen replaces French or the Oriental languages as compulsory language in the Mauritian education system. The 1990 Ramdoyal report was adamant that the ‘teaching of other languages like French and an optional “Oriental language” should’ not, in any lieu, ‘suffer as a consequence’ to the emphasis laid on the teaching of English (1990:70). The refusal to give French and the Oriental languages a secondary position in the Mauritian educational system is very much a political decision (Ramdoyal:1976) (Sonck: 2005) (Sauzier-Uchida:2009). Since the majority of the population who gained political power were of Indian origins, the linguistic claim to maintain Oriental languages was obvious. As for French, being the

language of the oligarchy, the Catholic elite and the educated sections of the rest of the population, it cannot be sacrificed.

Although the difficulties that would arise if Kreol Morisyen would become the medium of instruction have been the subject of much debate in the last few decades, there has been a considerable change in the position of Kreol Morisyen in the 21st century (Quirin: 2012). Indeed, Kreol Morisyen has been introduced as an optional language officially in many Mauritian primary schools on 11 January 2012. Approximately 4000 Mauritian students are going to study it as a language. Yet, this does not mean that there has been a change in the stance of the Mauritian government. According to the Minister of Education, Culture and Human Resources (2009), 'English is and remains the medium of instruction across the different sectors of the system' and 'the principle has always been to expose all (..) learners to other languages like English and French that make up for (the) comparative advantage at all levels. This is all the more true for Tertiary levels studies since (the) emerging professionals have to be in a position to participate in activities in a global context.'

Moreover, the fact remains to be noted that Kreol Morisyen has been introduced as an optional language, and not a compulsory subject. Although Kreol Morisyen is said to be the mother tongue of a majority of Mauritians (Sonck: 2005) (Sauzier-Uchida:2009) (MOE: 2009) and the national language of the country, this nationalistic dimension has been discarded with its introduction as optional language at the same level as an Oriental language in Mauritian primary schools. Indeed, the fact that it has been introduced as an optional language to be studied at the same time than any other oriental language, highlights its association with the members of the Creole population which shows that it is its ethnic dimension that has been taken into account before making this decision.

Conclusion

In 1968, Mauritius gained its independence. One of the first questions facing the government was the issue of selecting an official language educational policy. In this case, nationalism and expediency were the deciding factors. The new government was anxious to extend education and to establish a language educational policy that would be acceptable to all and of value to the country as a whole. It therefore adopted English as medium of instruction, because it was perceived as being neutral as it was free of any association with any ethnic group and it was also viewed as being the key to economic prosperity. However, as we have seen during the writing of this paper, the 'neutrality' of English has been questioned over years. English, not being the mother tongue of the Mauritians, allowed only a small minority to gain economic power. The majority of the population lagged behind when it came to having access to economic achievement. One of the main reasons attributed to this failure was the fact that English was the medium of instruction in the Mauritian educational curriculum.

As seen, although it is quite clear that English, as medium of instruction, acts as a barrier for a great majority of the Mauritian population, opting for another medium of instruction is not even considered after four decades of language educational policy maintenance, despite the introduction of Kreol Morisyen in the educational system. Thus, it can be concluded that the stance adopted by the Mauritian government is very much a nationistic one rather than a nationalistic one as the maintenance of English as medium of instruction and the introduction of Kreol Morisyen as an optional language are governed more by political concerns rather than the building of a Mauritian identity and it is, therefore, vivid that the choice of English is far from being neutral.

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