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Kiat November

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The Hare and the Tortoise Down by the King's Pond: A Tale of Four Translations

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RÉSUMÉ

L'analyse de quatre traductions d'un conte folklorique mauricien, autrefois un conte oral raconté par les esclaves africains, me permet de passer en revue la hiérarchie linguistique à l'île Maurice. Les langues en question sont le créole mauricien, le français et l'anglais. Un résumé du développement historique et sociolinguistique est fourni pour mettre cette recherche en contexte. L'utilisation du concept de l'idéologie me permet ensuite de prendre en considération l'influence des convictions idéologiques des traducteurs dont les traductions peuvent être perçues comme symboles des relations linguistiques inégales de l'île.

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the linguistic situation on the island of Mauritius, as revealed by the analysis of four translations of a folk-tale, originally an oral tale recounted by African slaves. The languages involved are Mauritian Creole, French and English. A brief account of the Mauritian historical and socio-linguistic development is given to contextualize my investigation. I then examine the translations from the conceptual framework of ideology, arguing that not only were they the instruments of the translators' ideological convictions but that, in the process, they also came to symbolize the asymmetrical linguistic relations in Mauritius.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

folktale, historical and socio-linguistic situation, ideology, island of Mauritius, Mauritian Creole

In 1888, Charles Baissac, a descendant of French colonizers in Mauritius, undertook, for ethnographic reasons, the task of compiling, transcribing and publishing some Creole folk-tales, which he subsequently translated into French. A century later, these folk-tales were recuperated by a group of social and language activists who produced a new bilingual version, offering a Creole retranslation of Baissac's original text alongside an English translation. This article is an analysis of one particular tale – '*Zistoire ième av tourtie dans bord bassin léroi*' – and its three subsequent translations.

A survey of the historical and socio-linguistic situation in Mauritius

Before I begin, I would like to give a summary of Mauritian socio-cultural history as an invaluable background to help contextualize the linguistic power relations at play on the island in the 19th and 20th centuries and, to a large extent, still prevalent today. The small island of Mauritius is found in the Indian Ocean, some 855 km east of Madagascar. Although known to Arab sailors during the Middle Ages, Mauritius

remained an uninhabited island until it was claimed by the Dutch in 1598 and named Mauritius in honour of their '*stadthouder*,' Prince Maurice van Nassau. The Dutch attempt at colonization, however, was sporadic and half-hearted, and culminated in their departure in 1710. Colonization proper began with the French arrival in 1715. An important port of call for the French East India Company ships on their way to India and the Far East, the island, renamed "Isle de France," soon acquired settlers as well as shiploads of slaves from Africa and Madagascar. Upon arrival in Mauritius, families of the slaves were routinely separated and mixed with different ethnic groups to prevent any potential rebellion. This ensured that no shared language structure survived and consequently, a Creole language quickly developed as the need for communication, firstly between the ethnically different slaves themselves, and secondly with their French-speaking owners, arose.

French colonization lasted for almost a century but ended when Britain sent a strong expeditionary force to capture the island during the Napoleonic wars in a bid to deprive the French of a base from which they were challenging British hegemony in the Indian Ocean. In 1814, a capitulation treaty was signed between Britain and France. The island reverted to its former Dutch name but the new colonizers, keen to ensure the collaboration of the French settlers, guaranteed the continuance of French language, customs, laws and traditions. Economic, social and cultural power continued to rest on the French plutocrats whilst state power was concentrated in the hands of the new administration. This unusual alliance meant that the French language was allowed to thrive, with direct consequences for the linguistic future of the island. In some ways, the lack of a strong linguistic policy on the part of the British was already a harbinger of days to come when future administrators, British and native, would find no political will to implement a coherent course of action when needed.

When Britain granted Mauritius its independence in 1968, the newly installed government, like many former British colonies, chose to retain the use of English as its 'official'[1] language. Whilst French is promoted as a 'semi-official'[2] language and continues to be influential within cultural and social domains, English is acknowledged as the language of political and economic power, used predominantly for business and administrative purposes. The State also recognizes the latter as the official teaching medium within its educational system. However, very few Mauritians consider English as their mother tongue. Official figures confirm that in 2000, only 0.3% of the population on the island spoke English at home (Housing and Population Census 2000).

On the other hand, Creole, or Mauritian Creole to be more precise, has flourished since its humble beginnings as the pidginized version of French. In a country that prides itself on its linguistic mosaic – the presence of the descendants of Indian indentured labourers and Chinese immigrants who arrived in the 19th and 20th centuries also changed the demographic and linguistic landscape of the island – Creole is the most popular language used for inter-ethnic communication. Figures show that the number of Creole speakers has been steadily increasing. In 1952, 37% (Dinan 2002: 65) of the population spoke Creole; in 2000, 70% did (Census 2000). The importance of Creole as a potential linguistic unifier can be gauged by adding that the government recognizes the existence of 13 other languages[3] on the island; languages, which apart from English, French and Creole, are confined essentially to intra-ethnic communication. Creole however, has no official value. Its oral nature, its

lack of fixed standardized spelling, its historical association with slavery and with the current black population that constitutes the poorest stratum of society have all contributed to make Creole the language that Mauritians speak "*malgré eux*" (Eriksen 1992: 97).

A tale of four translations

The focus of our textual analysis rests upon four translations, the first being Baissac's '*Zistoire ième av tourtie dans bord bassin léroi,*'[4] the transcription of an oral tale recounted to him by African slaves. Although certain purists may argue that a transcription is not a translation, because the latter essentially concerns the textual transformation of one linguistic structure into another equivalent linguistic structure, Jakobson's concept of "*intersemiotic translation*" (2000: 114) suggests otherwise. According to Jakobson, if words are verbal signs, which can be represented by non-verbal signs (or vice versa), the bridge used to link two distinct sign systems such as a text and an oral narrative can be conceived as a form of translation. Baissac's other translation, '*Le lièvre et la tortue au bord du bassin,*'[5] which was provided alongside its Creole source text, will also be analyzed here. The other two texts[6] are '*Zistwar yev av torti dan bord basin lerwa,*' in effect, a retranslation of Baissac's 'original' Creole text with a different Creole spelling, and its English counterpart, '*The hare and the tortoise down by the king's pond,*' both of which were translated and published by an organization called Ledikasyon Pu Travayer ('Education for the Workers,' abbreviated henceforth to LPT) in 1989.

The theoretical framework, which I draw upon to analyze the above four texts, is derived from cultural studies and focuses on the role of ideology behind translations. Originally considered mainly in terms of its political undertones, the concept of ideology, has however, been opened up in recent years to include a wider connotation. Verschueren, for example, sees ideology as "*any constellation of beliefs or ideas bearing on an aspect of social reality, which are experienced as fundamental or commonsensical […]*" (quoted by Calzada Pérez (2003: 5). The Oxford English Dictionary goes further and defines ideology as "*a systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to […] the conduct of a class or group, and regarded as justifying action […]*" Ideology can therefore be said to reflect a given group's values or set of beliefs, which are action-oriented. If applied to the field of translation studies, "*translators translate according to the ideological settings in which they learn and perform their tasks*" (Calzada Pérez 2003: 7).

What then, were Baissac's ideologies and to what extent did they influence his translations? It was Baissac's interest in Mauritian Creole that first led to his analysis of the language in his "*Etude sur le patois mauricien*" in 1880, considered today to be a well of information for Creole linguists throughout the world. His belief that Creole was facing an imminent demise led him eight years later to compile the folk-tales and to make them accessible to a wider audience through his French translations. These, however, were firmly embedded in Mauritian culture and not domesticated for their Francophile readership. In fact, in his preface (1888: XIX), Baissac compared his Creole texts to their French translation in this way: "*Notre pauvre patois (est) victorieux dans cette lutte contre son opulent adversaire.*" ("*Our poor dialect (is) victorious in this struggle against its sumptuous opponent*"). However, it is also worthwhile to note that Baissac was a teacher at the *Collège Royal* of Curepipe, a branch of the prestigious

secondary school first founded by French settlers in 1791 in the capital, Port-Louis. An avid Francophile, a defender of the French language on the island, he was known to offer tuition in French grammar with the aim of defending the French language against the incursions of Mauritian Creole. His portrayal of African slaves, as shown in his preface, reveals a paternalistic, nay condescending, and patronizing attitude. Lamenting the end of slavery, which was abolished by the British in 1835, he believed that the subsequent importation of large numbers of Indian indentured labourers to replace the loss of slave labour had had adverse effects on the black population and its language. The black African population, in his words *"irresponsible"* and belonging *to "(an) inferior race"* (1888: II-III), was becoming 'lazy.' Creole tales were no longer being told and his collection of folk-tales were to be seen as *"un inventaire post-mortem"* *("a post-mortem inventory")*. It is no wonder therefore, that an asymmetrical power relationship between Creole and French is reflected in his textual productions.

Within this French/Creole diglossic situation, the latter has always assumed the role of low variety, compounded by the fact that it is an oral language, without any standardized form of writing. Inevitably, writing in Creole produces many variations. In Baissac's case, although the text is in Creole, the French influence is obvious, since the spelling strongly reflects his French background – French words were retained wherever possible (*grand bassin, même, sale, gardien, quand, noir, canon, avant, content, goûte, commère, doucement, etc.*). Only minor adjustments were made where the Creole words bore a close phonetic resemblance to their French equivalents ("*bonzour*" instead of "*bonjour*," "*zamais*" instead of "*jamais*," "*léroi*" instead of "*le roi*," "*manman*" instead of "*maman*," etc.). Additionally, the print layout of his Creole text closely followed French conventions, with the use of a short dash instead of speech marks to indicate conversation. One might argue here that since Mauritian Creole was born out of a contact situation where French held the dominant position, many of its lexical items were bound to have stemmed from the French lexicon, and if that were so, it stood to reason that they should be written according to the standardized French spelling. I contend, however, that there is another factor beyond a superior attitude towards Creole which could explain Baissac's translation strategy of gallicizing the Creole lexis.

It is interesting to note that when Baissac published his collection of folk-tales in 1888, Mauritius had already been a British colony for 73 years. Baissac himself was, therefore, a British 'citizen,' having been born in 1831, sixteen years after the beginning of British occupation. Although Britain, at the time of the French capitulation, had guaranteed the preservation of French laws and customs, attempts were slowly but surely being made by the authorities to widen the use of English on the island, much to the dismay of the French settlers. In 1841, the Colonial Office decreed that all proclamations and public notices in English would be considered as the original versions and the French versions as mere copies. The use of English was extended to the judiciary by the ordinances of 1845 and 1847. In educational matters, an area which would have been a matter of concern to Baissac as a teacher, attempts to impose English as medium of instruction during the 19th century often gave rise to strong outbursts on the part of the French settlers. This conflict was further exacerbated by the demographic importance of the Indian indentured labourers who, by 1853 – only 18 years after the abolition of slavery – already constituted 51.4% of the population on the island (Kalla 1986: 167). The choice of English as the language of schooling

for these new immigrants would necessarily upset the linguistic apple cart. Despite the 1877 Ordinance, which stipulated that exams should be taken in the language chosen by the school directors, the Education Council throughout the rest of the 19th century endeavoured to include the rule that students should equally pass their English exams. This was the socio-cultural background to Baissac's publication and translation of his collection of folk-tales; the former colonizers finding themselves in the unenviable position of being colonized and the balance of power between the two languages slowly tilting in favour of the new masters. My view is that Baissac's translation into French, instead of English, is an affirmation on his part of the importance of his language against the ever-increasing encroachment of English. Significantly, Baissac also chose to have his book published not in Britain nor in Mauritius but by a publishing house in Paris.

Like Baissac, LPT was no less keen in the promotion of their ideological purposes. For them, the retranslation and publication of their Creole text was not simply due to the need to overcome the linguistic problems usually associated with temporal difference – in their case a 100 years' differential – but was also due to their belief in the value of Mauritian Creole. As already mentioned previously, Creole is the national language, in the sense that it is the most popular inter-ethnic channel of communication, spoken and understood by the vast majority of the population. However, it lacks the recognized social and formal status enjoyed by French and English, and to promote it at the expense of other languages, especially the Oriental languages, is a political minefield, which Mauritian governments are reluctant to tackle.[7] In contrast, LPT, a left-wing organization, born out of the student political movements of the 1970s, aims to encourage the formation of Creole as a national language through educational and literacy programmes, Creole writing competitions and the development of a Creole literary corpus. The creation of their orthography,[8] different from Baissac's, owes much to the perception that Creole is not subordinate to French. Let us, for instance, compare the opening sentences of the two Creole texts:

> «*Longtemps, longtemps, dans payi Maurice, ti éna éne léroi qui ti gagne éne grand bassin.*»
> «*Lontan, lontan dan pei Moris, ti ena enn lerwa ki ti gayn enn gran basin.*»
> («*A long, long time ago, in Mauritius, there was a king who had a big pond.*»)

In the first sentence structure, the French influence is markedly distinct: out of the fifteen words, eight are in their actual French form. The second one, on the other hand, owes its spelling more to a phonetic transcription. In rejecting the use of diacritics, LPT chooses to further the distance between modern Creole and its original lexifier; with Creole, no longer to be considered the low variety in this diglossic situation.

However, the search for a Mauritian linguistic identity goes much deeper than a rejection of French lexical norms. It also foregrounds the unequal relations between Creole and English. To LPT, what is at stake is a nascent national language trying to assert itself against an established language, the official language. In a 2001 colloquium organized in Mauritius, Lindsey Collen, the LPT's representative clearly states:

> «*Nu ena enn lirzans pu fer langaz Kreol Morisyen rekonet. Nu ena enn lirzans pu introdir Kreol pu lanseynman dan lekol. Zordi zanfan pe kontinye aprann langaz Angle ek Franse …….. sa pe fer odetriman nu langaz maternel.*» (2002: 9)

«It is imperative that Mauritian Creole is recognized as a language. It is imperative that we introduce the use of Creole in our school curriculum. Today our children are learning English and French … to the detriment of their mother tongue.»

She adds further:

«Seki nu bizin fer se introdir langaz Angle ek Franse ek Oryantal dan enn fason kot li reprezant enn ples (langaz maternel + lezot langaz), kot azute lor enn langaz maternel ki byen devlope, e ki pe kontinye devlope.» (ibid.)
«What we need to do is to introduce English, French and an Oriental language in such a way that they represent an additional benefit (mother tongue + other languages); they are to be added to the mother tongue which has itself been well developed and which will continue to be developed.»

LPT aims for the recognition of Mauritian Creole and its inclusion within school curriculum. Currently, the official medium of instruction is English[9] but the reality is that Creole is often used by the teachers when faced with the children's incomprehension. It is further acknowledged that 40% of 11-year-old children leaving school after 6 years of education are still functionally illiterate (Hilbert 2004). LPT sees in this high failure rate the proof that by ignoring Creole, the linguistic educational policies do not work, that they are essentially a political solution to maintain the social and ethnic equilibrium and do not, in themselves, constitute any practical pedagogical value; hence, the need for Creole to be used as the language of learning. In a clear reversal of roles, the Creole text is given prominence, whilst the English translation is regarded as an appendage; a necessary appendage, but an appendage nonetheless. Only after the mother tongue *"has been well developed,"* should a foreign language be introduced to the child.

The English translation, therefore, comes almost as an afterthought. There is no attempt to bring the text into correspondence with the set of values belonging to an English-speaking audience. The setting has not been moved to an English milieu and the presence of the "Other" has neither been deleted, nor changed. Indeed, the lexical choices point to the fact that there was no strategy to domesticate the Creole text into a transparent English text. Place names (*"Trois Zilots"*), local objects (*"calabash"*), food items (*"a ripe paw paw"*), historical currencies (*"pyas"*), references to popular beliefs (*"that's just how servants do their work in Mauritius"*) and popular customs (*"all four of the hare's legs are tied up just like when the Chinese shop-keeper takes a pig to market"*) have been kept. In other words, this is a source-culture oriented approach to translation.

Conclusion

I started this essay with a survey of the socio-linguistic situation in Mauritius and I shall finish by going full circle. Despite (or perhaps because of) the vagaries of history, the linguistic situation of Mauritius has greatly evolved since the start of its existence as a colony. French colonizers, British colonizers, African slaves, Indian labourers, Chinese immigrants – all have left their mark upon the linguistic record of this nation. The asymmetrical power relations that began with the birth of Creole, and continued throughout the island's colonization by both the French and the British, are today still being reproduced in the maintenance of a strict linguistic hierarchy. Creole finds itself at the bottom of the hierarchy, the ethnic languages a step above, whilst French is

immediately beneath English, itself at the top of the pyramid. But what I have endeavoured to highlight, the triangulated relationship between English, French and Mauritian Creole, is only part of the story. For those translators who choose to go against the grain and who wish to install a sense of national pride in their vernacular, the way ahead looks very arduous…

NOTES

1. and 2. Actually, neither status is explicitly guaranteed by the Constitution. Their acceptance as the 'official' and 'semi-official' languages is partly based on the stipulation contained within the Standing Orders and Rules of the National Assembly (the Mauritian Parliament) that "proceedings and debates … shall be in the English language, but a Member may address the Assembly in French." (See http://mauritiusassembly.gov.mu/rules.htm. Accessed on 20th November 2004).

3.   They are Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin, English, French, Arabic, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, Urdu. (See http://statsmauritius.gov.mu/report/hpcen00/Demogra/homeisl.htm. Accessed on 8th December 2004).

4 and 5. The texts consulted for this article are from the original 1888 bilingual copy of Baissac's collection, entitled "*Le Folk-Lore de l'Ile Maurice.*" The French translation is to be found on pages 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 and the Creole translation on pages 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15.

6.   These two texts, like Baissac's, were also published within a bilingual volume under the title "*Sirandann Sanpek.*" The Creole retranslation can be found on pages 33, 35, 37, 39 and the English text on pages 32, 34, 36, 38.

7.   In 1982, the left-wing government, which came to power attempted to promote Mauritian Creole by advocating its use in schools and instituting such changes as the presentation of the main evening news bulletin on television in Creole instead of French. This provoked an unfavourable public reaction, which led, among other factors, to this government's downfall nine months later.

8.   The movement to raise the status of Mauritian Creole does not rest on LPT only. Other known individuals (mostly linguists, such as Dev Virahsawmy and Vinesh Hookoomsing) have, since independence, also produced their versions of Mauritian Creole spelling. But, LPT has access to its own publishing house, and unlike the others, operates as a collective group, which gives it more clout to propagate its ideological views.

9.   To complicate matters further, apart from English, French is also a compulsory subject, whilst for many children, there is the option of studying an Oriental language (Hindi, Urdu, Arabic or Mandarin Chinese) from primary level onwards. This option is often taken up because the 2003 educational reform stipulates that the exam results for an Oriental language can contribute towards the required aggregate for entry requirements to secondary schools. What is worth bearing in mind is that save for French, the other languages are unlikely to constitute the mother tongues of many Mauritians. But for Mauritian parents, the acquisition of English is deemed a necessity in an increasingly English-speaking world whilst the value of Oriental languages resides mostly in their identity tag, usually denoting ethnic appurtenance.

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