


Deconstructing the concept of *colonial languages*: The South-West Indian Ocean Islands

Rada Tirvassen 

Department of Ancient and Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Pretoria, South Africa
Email: rada.tirvassen@up.ac.za

Abstract

The central argument of this paper is that it is misleading to adopt simple, homogeneous frameworks that are based on the traditional understanding of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism when examining the link between languages and colonization. The label *colonial language* is not a first-order phenomenon. Its meaning is not determined by how the main historical events unfolded. While narratives of colonialism vary from one country to another—and this lies beyond the scope of the present paper in spite of some empirical research undertaken—it may be argued that the term *colonial language* does not carry a universal meaning that can be applied across all national contexts.

This article analyses some of the main socio-political events linked to languages which have unfolded in the South-West Indian Ocean Islands and which can shed light on the connection between languages and colonization-decolonization. The South-West Indian Ocean comprises several islands grouped into four island states (namely, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles) and two French island territories (namely, La Réunion and Mayotte). The first section will show that there is no strict correspondence between colonization defined from a chronological and geographical/political perspective and the meanings attached to *colonial languages*. The second section will examine the construct of *colonial languages* which implies that colonial powers adopted a clear and stereotypical approach to languages in their colonies. The third section challenges the idea that there is a single colonial legacy in terms of the relationship between languages and society. In particular, the meanings that *colonial languages* can have in the contemporary era depend on changing contextual issues and socio-cultural mutations.

Keywords: languages and colonization; language and decolonization; context; indirect rule

1. Introduction

In what can be described as a significant trend in sociolinguistics, a trend which, according to Mufwene (2002), has led linguists to bemoan the consequential demise of the ancestral languages and cultures of populations colonized by Europeans, scholarship on *colonial languages* is often driven by two major assumptions. The first assumption draws from the belief that the interplay between the history of society and the history of language can provide a useful

lens to understand the nature of some of the connections between languages and society. This belief is based on the idea that the manner in which factual events and circumstances unfold in history provides an adequate background to interpret the relationship between languages and society. For example, because Mauritius, a French colony from 1723, was conquered by the British in 1810 and obtained its independence in 1968, it is argued that the French and English languages are *de facto* the colonial languages of the community. A further example is provided by Kamwangamalu's (2003b) assumption that language shift in South Africa can be explained by the four major social changes which have taken place over the past 350 years with each change impacting South African society as a whole and language use in particular. These changes are Dutchification, Anglicization, Afrikanerization, and Democratization. This understanding is based on the premise that historical sources can be taken at face value as they provide an understanding of what really took place in the past.

The second assumption, which draws from the first one, is about the role ascribed to colonial languages. Scholars are of the view that the said colonial languages have been instrumental in imposing and perpetuating colonial dominance (Calvet 1974; Pennycook 1998; Phillipson 1992) and are, therefore, an adequate tool to achieve decolonization. The following interpretation of Pennycook and Phillipson's Anglo-American conspiracy theory, provided by Kamwangamalu (2003a: 67), illustrates my point:

The English language is a corrosive influence on individual self-esteem and collective cultural identity because it conveys an "Anglo-Saxon," "Western," or "Judeo-Christian" world view alien to the societies and cultures to which English is spreading.

I must admit that the view expressed in this quotation is not about colonization *per se* but concerns the aftermath effect of colonization. In any case, it is an example of the language used to express strong feelings regarding colonial languages. I must also add that Pennycook's (1998) stance that colonialism should be seen as a site of cultural production is different from that of Phillipson (1992) and, in particular, of Calvet (1974) who centres his argument on the assimilationist theory according to which language—specifically French—has played a major role in French colonial rule in Africa. The purpose of the theory of assimilation was to turn African natives into *French* men by educating them in French. Despite these differences, these researchers share the view that any language policy decision aiming to promote indigenous languages at the expense of a colonial language is an act of decolonization. In other words, language is believed to be a meaningful device to understand the mechanisms that have served to implement the cultural and economic project of colonial powers, and, as a result, researchers hold that such devices are key to decolonization (Léglise & Migge 2007; wa Thiong'o 1986).

The broader issue that these assumptions raise is that, although many historical researchers highlight the continuities of (post-)colonial cultural rule and practices – or, more importantly, underline the heterogeneous practices and impact of colonialism over the last four centuries (Loomba 1998; Mufwene 2002) – a trend that remains in academic discourse on colonization research, particularly in sociolinguistics, is that colonization has had uniform consequences from a linguistic perspective.

This article is not another contribution about the impact of colonization on languages. In fact, while there is scope to re-examine the view that the colonial project, both economic-political and cultural, is encapsulated in the language policies of colonial powers, the perspective followed in this article is more limited. The central argument of this paper is that when

examining the link between languages and colonization it is misleading to adopt simple, homogeneous frameworks (Rosaldo, in Subedi & Daza 2008) that are based on the traditional understanding of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. There is no single unilateral pattern regarding colonization; the same applies to the role and functions attributed to so-called *colonial languages*. Furthermore, the (post-)colonial binary, which has served to interpret the language phenomenon or rather language policy decisions, cannot capture the complex nature of the functions that the so-called *colonial languages* play in countries freed from political domination. Not only does this binary division between the colonial and the post-colonial mask the different continuities between policies, practices, and sometimes beliefs (although this aspect in itself will need specific and in-depth empirical study), the label *colonial language* also does not take into consideration the contextual significations of these languages in the changing social and political challenges that communities face.

This article analyses some of the main socio-political events linked to languages which have unfolded in the South-West Indian Ocean Islands and which can shed light on the connection between languages and colonization-decolonization. The South-West Indian Ocean comprises several islands grouped into four island states (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles) and two French island territories (La Réunion and Mayotte). The first section will show that there is no strict correspondence between colonization defined from a chronological and geographical/political perspective and the meanings attached to *colonial languages*. The second section will examine the construct *colonial languages*, which implies that colonial powers adopted a clear and stereotypical approach to languages in their colonies. The third section challenges the idea that there is a single colonial legacy in terms of the relationship between languages. In particular, the meanings that *colonial languages* can take in the contemporary era depend on changing contextual issues and socio-cultural mutations.

2. Historical landmarks and colonial languages

The scope of this article is limited to the South-West Indian Ocean Islands. Each of these islands has its own history, population structure, and economic development. While Madagascar and Comoros have a pre-colonial history, the Creole islands—Mauritius, Réunion Island, and Seychelles—are Creole-speaking communities with no pre-colonial history as they were uninhabited. All three Creole islands were colonized by the French, albeit following a specific pattern of colonization: Houbert (1992) considers that they had an original form of colonization which is synonymous to creolization. Taking into consideration the complex and debatable meanings of the term *creolization* in sociolinguistics and in anthropology, I will leave this debate for another day and limit myself to their French legacy.

It is generally believed that French is a colonial language for each of these islands, even in the case of Seychelles as I will show below. One cannot dispute the fact that there were periods when the colonization pattern adopted by the French dictated the role and functions of languages in Réunion Island and in Mauritius; the same cannot be said regarding Seychelles. This argument is supported when one considers the role of the French language with regard to the institutional architecture of Mauritius and Réunion Island during the French colonial era, contrary to the sociolinguistic developments in Seychelles. Both the institutional structure and the political and economic domination of the slaves by the French population created the necessary conditions for the emergence of a colonial society in Mauritius and La Réunion, albeit one which is akin to a settlement colony as opposed to an exploitation colony (for further clarification, see Mufwene 2001).

The French settled on Réunion Island in 1642 when La Compagnie des Indes Orientales (the French East India Company) took possession of the island. The King of France then named the island Île Bourbon. Up until the end of the seventeenth century, the population was divided into two very distinct categories: French landowners on one side and African and Malagasy slaves on the other. During the French period, Mauritius, just like Réunion Island, operated as a settlement colony with a significant number of French settlers, while at the same time importing thousands of African slaves for the plantations. On both islands, there was a fairly developed institutional set-up, although it may have been more limited on La Réunion. French, the language of the colonial masters, contributes to the establishment of the institutional architecture of Mauritius and Reunion Island: It is the language of the central administration, the school, and the church as well as that of the colonial masters.

The Seychelles archipelago is also depicted as a former French colony with the French language being conceived as a colonial language. For example, Salabert (2003) links French with the French colonial masters. This understanding of the history of the archipelago can be challenged. The situation in Seychelles was a little different from that of La Réunion and Mauritius as the island did not develop a real sociolinguistic superstructure during the French colonial period. The archipelago, which was uninhabited before the arrival of the French, had neither a critical demographic mass when the French administrators left nor official institutions that played key roles in the lives of the population. In 1788, the island population consisted of only about 30 French inhabitants, to which one could add around 200 slaves. The case of Seychelles shows that the direct correlation that sociolinguists sometimes establish between the political control of a territory and the hierarchical relationship between languages or language practices deserves to be re-examined. The existence of a hierarchy of languages or language varieties is, in fact, inherent in human communities that undergo a process of bureaucratization, and it does not need colonization to develop. As soon as the process of bureaucratization is established, the egalitarian-style relationship (see Mufwene 2001) between indigenous languages or language varieties in a non-bureaucratized society is replaced by a hierarchical relationship. This was evidenced by the sociolinguistic developments in pre-colonial Madagascar.

At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, King Radama I took the initiative to democratize access to primary education, set up a military service, and create a central administration. All formal communication took place in the variety of Malagasy, which became the standard variety of the country and was associated with the Merina ethnic group to which the king and the largest component of the Malagasy elite belonged. This created a pre-colonial hierarchy of language practices between the standard variety and those that were excluded from the formal institutions. A similar pre-colonial diglossia existed in Comoros. Until the arrival of the French, Swahili and, to a lesser extent, Arabic were used for prestigious communication, especially in official institutions, whereas Shikomori was the language of non-formal communication. Classical Arabic was mainly the language of religion and the medium in which children acquired their writing skills, which were developed through Islamic instruction offered in madrasas.

Both the embryonic social and institutional set-up of the Seychelles archipelago, during what is termed *the French period*, and the pre-colonial sociolinguistic history of Madagascar and Comoros illustrate that the hierarchical relationship that exists between languages or language varieties is not solely determined by colonization. Implicit in the traditional understanding of *colonial languages* is that the political project of colonial powers determines the nature of the relationship between languages. This is a highly debatable stance. There is no one-to-one

correspondence between the political control of a territory by foreign powers and the hierarchical link between languages. This argument can be further refined by an examination of language policy decisions implemented by colonial masters. Indeed, as the next section illustrates, if one avoids top-down approaches and instead adopts a bottom-up analysis of language issues based on the need to take full account of the variations in the way the colonizers handled language policy questions in different colonies at different times (Sweeting & Vickers 2005), then even that candidate (language policy decisions of colonial masters) fails.

3. Colonial language policy: From the uniform conceptual narrative to empirical intricacies

What took place during the colonial period in the South-West Indian Ocean Islands—or at least in Madagascar, Comoros, and Mauritius—regarding language policy decisions illustrates that there is no such thing as a single, simple narrative concerning the relationship between languages and the type of political control and economic exploitation undertaken by colonial authorities. One can also add the Seychelles archipelago, taking into account what has been exposed above, or La Réunion, based on what will be developed in the last part of this article. This section will focus on Madagascar, Comoros, and Mauritius.

I would like to start with Madagascar. While the French language has undoubtedly served to reinforce, at least partly, the colonial project, the French colonial power did not have a clear and long-term approach towards the use of languages on the island. What took place in the educational field in Madagascar is highly significant. As Babault (2006) claims, *indigenous education*, as she terms it, was not always excluded from formal education, although its role varied significantly over the years and was subjected to the various reorganizations of the educational sector. In this respect, Babault (2006) mentions the decrees of 1916, 1929, 1933, and 1951. From 1896 to 1916, the instructions given to teachers remained vague; there were no guidelines to regulate the use of languages.

In 1916, French was imposed at all levels of the system. Although this decree made provision for the use of the dialect of the region, the French language progressively replaced these dialects during the first years of primary education. A few years later, the 1929 decree granted the Malagasy language a significant place both as a medium of instruction in primary education and as a subject throughout schooling. This turnaround was due partly to the commitment of Marcel Olivier (the French Governor) to the Malagasy language and to his respect for the cultural practices of the people. Indeed, the French Governor strongly criticized the disdain for the indigenous language and cultural practices. In his opinion, education should instil an appreciation of the indigenous language and culture in young Malagasy students.

Another example that illustrates the increasing importance given to the Malagasy language during the colonial period concerns the refusal of the colonial authorities on the island to implement policy decisions taken in Paris. On 30 January 1944, a conference was held in Brazzaville, the capital of French Equatorial Africa, to define the relations between France and her overseas territories. While the conference recommended that mastery of the French language be considered as the foundation of education in French colonies, this was not implemented in Madagascar. Finally, instructions received from Paris in 1951 authorized the use of the Malagasy language at all levels of primary education.

It must be said that this decision contradicts the usual standpoint of the French colonial policy towards languages and cultures. However, this is not an isolated decision as it has a parallel in

Comoros (Ibrahime 1977). Indeed, because of the success that the Koranic schools experienced on the Comoros Islands, Paul Pouperon, the Head of the Province between 1936 and 1940, was convinced that the doctrine of the separation of powers between the State and religious confessions, as enshrined in the French Constitution, could not be implemented in Comoros if the central administration wanted to control the influence of the Koranic schools. He even went so far as to request that the French follow the British model:

Notre enseignement est dédaigné parce que ne faisant nulle place à l'enseignement religieux, c'est-à-dire au Coran. (...) Pourquoi ne pas imiter, sur ce point, l'Angleterre? 'The education that we are proposing is disdained because there is no room for religious instruction, that is, for the Koran. (...) On this point, why not imitate England?' (own translation)

(Ibrahime 1977: 106)

The way language policy decisions were dealt with in colonial Mauritius is perhaps better suited to illustrate the argument that I would like to support in this section, not least because of the rich documentation available on the island's colonial era. The language policy implemented in the official institutions explains why it is necessary to avoid what Sweeting and Vickers (2005) call a "high level of generality" when examining issues concerning colonial languages. Along the same lines, when Tirvassen (2007) examines how the British anglicized the official institutions on the island of Mauritius, he concludes that there may well be a case to distinguish between macro-policies of colonial powers, if they ever existed, and strategic decisions taken by governors and implemented locally. One way to develop this point is to analyse how some of the governors of the island and the Colonial Office in London handled the complex issue of language in the executive and the judiciary.

Several despatches (no. 77 of 2 November 1834; no. 75 of 3 September 1836; no. 125 of 14 December 1839; no. 6 of 18 February 1841) were sent to the Colonial Office by Governor Nicolay, who governed Mauritius from 1832 to February 1840, and Governor Smith, who took over for a short period of two years. These despatches confirm that both governors were concerned by the lack of initiatives taken by the Colonial Office to ensure that the English language became the official language of administration of the island. They advanced several arguments in order to convince the Colonial Office to change its policy. Governor Nicolay, in despatch no. 77 of 2 November 1834, argued that conducting debates in the Council of Government in French as well as in judicial proceedings could generate the possibility of several inconveniences taking into account the need to fill all official posts with Englishmen. In despatch no. 75 of 3 September 1836, he not only stressed the need for an expedient decision concerning the issues raised in his previous despatch but also questioned the official status given in the Colony to the French version of laws. In despatch no. 125 of 14 December 1839, Governor Nicolay stressed the need for quick decisions on all the problems he faced and that had been the subject of previous despatches. Governor Lionel Smith's concerns went well beyond the use of the English language in the administration of justice in the colony:

But, my Lord, if English is really to become the language of the Colony, the most effectual step to ensure it, will be by causing Justice, particularly in the Civil Cases, to be administered in that tongue.

(Despatch no. 6 of 18 Feb 1841)

Governor Smith's plea clearly shows that not only was English not the language of the colony but also that the Colonial Office did not take any initiative to that effect. In response to Governor Nicolay's concern, the Secretary of State for the Colonies replied that to make the use of English mandatory was not practical. Instead, certain powers were conferred on the judges of the Appeal Court so that procedures could be simplified.

During the 160 years that the British spent in Mauritius (1810 to 1968), the Colonial Office rarely intervened on language. Based on the decisions taken, one can infer that from the Colonial Office standpoint, Anglicization was viewed as a means to ensure efficient communication both within the institutions of the island (where key posts were increasingly occupied by Englishmen) and between the colony and London. For example, on 12 August 1837, new rules of the Court were published according to which "no Advocate or Avoué shall be admitted to practice in the Supreme Court or Court of First Instance who shall not be acquainted with the English language" (Rules of Courts, 12 August 1837). This concern for accurate communication in official institutions was probably why the Colonial Office thought it necessary to make English the official language of the judiciary effective as of 15 July 1847.

The same lack of willingness on the part of the Colonial Office to intervene on language issues can be developed further with illustrations from the educational sector. Space only allows me to mention the initiatives taken by Governor Higginson and Governor Phayre in favour of Indian languages for the education of the children of the Indian immigrants. Higginson, a staunch supporter of educating Indians through the use of their vernacular languages, arrived in Mauritius in January 1851 after having spent five years in India, during which time the Indian Government was grappling with the language of instruction problem. Phayre was also sensitive to the education of the Indians and a firm supporter of the use of vernacular languages. However, because both Governors faced strong opposition from the Catholic Church and the French *sugarocrats*, no firm and sustainable decision could be taken on the issue. In the end, Phayre's successor, Bowen, called for a commission which concluded that "a purely vernacular education would be of no real value in Mauritius because it would be necessary to import, at a great cost, teachers from India" (Despatch no. 495 of 1 September 1888, cited in Kalla 1987: 51).

It may seem reasonable to conclude that the strategic importance given to Anglicization may have been limited to the control over some official institutions of the island and communication between the island and London. This interpretation tends to confirm Toussaint's (1969) hypothesis that the Anglicization process in Mauritius was late—this is understandable—and incomplete. One can challenge the use of this assessment: what constitutes an incomplete Anglicization process? One can however speculate and question whether Britain did ever construe Anglicization as a source of legitimacy for political authority and as one of the cultural missions associated with colonization. Tirvassen (2007) concludes that a comparison between the Colonial Office's approach to language issues and that of the governors seems to suggest that the best way to characterize the policy of the Colonial Office towards Anglicization in Mauritius was something between a confusion of purpose and a *laissez-faire* attitude.

I would like to come back to my main argument in this section. The label *colonial languages* implies that colonization, from a sociolinguistic perspective, is characterized by the regulation of the roles and functions of languages in a community in order to suit the purpose of political domination and the cultural mission that colonial masters attribute themselves. In this definition of *colonial languages*, sociolinguists imply that colonial powers adopted a clear, stereotypical and strategic approach to languages in their colonies. The manner in which language policy

decisions was taken in Comoros, Madagascar, and Mauritius can serve to challenge this view. While the scope of this paper is limited to the South-West Indian Ocean Islands, one can safely conclude only that there has not been a uniform colonial experience regarding languages; an overgeneralized definition of the term *colonial languages* that cannot take into account contextual conditions in which decisions were taken and implemented is debatable. One other weakness of such an approach is that it denies communities the right to complex language and cultural experiences. In fact, even within a country, the accurate meanings given to the term *colonial languages* is determined by the contextual issues at stake. This is what the next section will attempt to demonstrate.

4. Colonial languages during the contemporary period

There is a wide belief among sociolinguists that one of the legacies of colonization is the hierarchical relationship between the native languages of the indigenous population and those of the colonizers. For example, Chaudenson (1989) has conceptualized the link between language and colonization and has coined the label *colonial diglossia* to refer to the canonical difference in function and status between the languages of colonial masters and indigenous languages to which low prestigious functions are assigned. This over-generalized discourse, however, cannot capture the inextricable connection between European languages and the socio-economic fabric of former colonies. For example, while the English language has served to reinforce the colonial project in former British colonies, it has also fulfilled a range of other significant social, economic, and cultural functions. This is why Vaish (2005) considers that English, in India today, is an agent of decolonization that enables the urban poor to access the global economy. The designation *colonial language* does not take into account the complex link between the language of the colonizers and the economic and social advancement of the speech communities concerned. It also ignores the way individuals operate between different universes or rather in hybrid universes categorised as separate and distinct but which, in reality, are the ambivalent space that has resulted out of colonization.

This understanding of the role of *colonial languages* in contemporary social life is not limited to the work of scholars. In an informal interview carried out in Mauritius (Tirvassen 2014), one participant was asked what was more useful for her grandchildren's education: her ancestral language or English and French. She refused to choose one of them. Contrary to the knowledgeable discourse of some academics who do not take the trouble of questioning the assumption of their stance, Western civilization has not always been alien to the Other. Indeed, the colonial language has presented an opportunity for social mobility and, most importantly, is one of the ingredients of cultural hybridity. This is perhaps what the evolution of the social functions of French in Mauritius illustrates.

Very briefly, Mauritius first belonged to the French Government; in 1723, when there was no indigenous population on the island, the French claimed possession of the territory. In 1810, the British captured Mauritius, and it was ceded to Britain by the Treaty of Paris (1814) until 1968 when the island became independent. Mauritians seem to harbour the feeling that the French colonization, which is associated with the sugarocrats of French descent, is closer to human exploitation and the destruction of indigenous languages and cultural practices than the colonization model adopted by the British. While these views are never really expressed on the island, there are clues that hint at them. First, many scholars believe that the British contributed to the emergence of an Indian political bourgeoisie that took control of the island from the hands of the French sugarocrats. Hookoomsing (1983, in de Robillard 1991: 128) expresses this view when he claims that English has played an important role in the development of an

Indo-Mauritian bourgeoisie and in the consolidation of the latter's political power through state power.

Second, and even more relevant to my argument, is the use of the term *administrators* when the British colonization is referred to, particularly in the opposition established between the British and the French:

Such were the efforts toward defining and consolidating French identity, which necessarily opposed itself to the British administrators who really did not have a vested interest in Mauritius as a colony.

(Prabhu 2007: 90)

Whether the British did have a vested interest in Mauritius or not, taking into account their abject detachment of Diego Garcia from the Mauritian territory and having it leased to the Americans for the defence of the *free world*, is also a debatable issue. However, this question is beyond the scope of the current article. I would like to come back to the French language which has always been regarded as one of the most significant symbols of French colonization on the island. While knowledgeable scholarship (de Robillard 1991) has categorized it as a language performing segregationist functions in line with the spirit of the Code Noir, the French language is now perceived as one of the instruments or symbols of social mobility for all Mauritians. Indeed, many Mauritians who are socially and professionally successful move from using Creole as their vernacular language to French, as has been amply demonstrated by several years of research (cf. for example, Baggioni & de Robillard 1993). This type of social evolution again confirms that language is a complex phenomenon that serves social functions that undergo changes under social pressure. Languages do not have inherent characteristics. Categories like *colonial languages* can freeze cultural phenomena and mask complex social functions performed by languages. What Makoni (2013: 90) calls the "complexity, fluidity, and density of colonial contexts" are compressed into a series of stereotypes based on a powerful divide between dichotomies such as the strong and the weak, or Black people and White people.

The stance adopted by scholars who draw on the label *colonial* to interpret language-related issues is not only highly debatable, it ignores the changing contextual significations of these languages as illustrated by Vaish (2005) and French in Mauritius. At best, it can freeze complex sociolinguistic meanings into a stereotypical and simplistic understanding of the role and functions of languages from both a macro perspective and from the vantage point of an ordinary citizen. It can have far worse consequences when, for example, it serves to guide social and cultural reforms in the former colonies. This is what I intend to discuss in the last section of this article.

5. Miscarriage of justice and its consequences

In the Introduction, I stated that an overgeneralised understanding of the construct of *colonial languages* can be misleading. I understand this type of claim can seem arbitrary and gratuitous if it is not supported by concrete examples. I will illustrate my argument by explaining how the role ascribed to the languages of the colonial masters may have misled academics in their interpretation of language endangerment and language shift. I will also show that sentencing the languages of the colonizers as the *de facto* guilty party in language endangerment can provide legitimacy to advocates of strong decolonial strategies, which, in turn, can lead decision-makers and, in fact, whole nations into reforms with heavy negative socio-economic

consequences. These consequences are then borne mainly by the most vulnerable masses of the community. The national educational reform undertaken in Madagascar in the late 1970s will serve to illustrate my argument.

I will start with my first point. In order to highlight the role played by colonial languages in the demise of the languages of the slaves, scholars link colonization with the very powerful concept of *glottophasia*. Scholars such as Calvet (1974) and Phillipson (1992) depict the role attributed to colonial languages with terms such as *killer languages*, *linguicide*, *language murder*, *linguistic genocide*, and *language extinction*. When researchers use this type of discourse, they assume the right to judiciary power with the risk of invoking a miscarriage of justice, as has been the case with Nemo (1979) in Réunion Island.

According to the traditional understanding of colonization and its impact on languages, in Réunion Island, the Creole language would be the minority language, the one that is linked with slavery and colonial domination. This was (and still is) the stance of the advocates of the Creole language (Fioux 1999), especially during the 1980s and 1990s. It must be said that even in scholarly discourse, scholars attribute the status of a dominant language to French and, implicitly, that of a minority language to Creole. This is why Nemo (1979) considers that the French language should bear responsibility for the disappearance of the languages of the minority groups.

From an empirical perspective, the understanding provided regarding the role of French in the disappearance of minority languages is far from true. An examination of language dynamics in Réunion Island shows that it is the Creole language that is responsible for the disappearance of the languages of the minority groups. Immigrants who came from several parts of Africa shifted from their first languages to Creole. This argument leads to the broader issue of the inadequacy of canonical categories to model the complex social and anthropological functions that both Creole and French performed in what can be termed the colonial setting. Indeed, while Creole is linked with slavery and is often referred to as a minority language, if one takes into account its role in the disappearance of the indigenous languages of the slaves and the indentured labourers, it would also qualify as a killer language! What is still more significant regarding the fallacy of scholarly categorizations is that some of the colonial languages have been so domesticated that they have become indigenized. But this, of course, is a debate for another day. What is more relevant to my argument is that the sentence administered to the languages of the colonizers gives legitimacy to decision makers in search of excuses to provide validity for their political manoeuvres. Language policy reforms in Madagascar is a case in point.

Debates around colonization and decolonization have always been polarised in Madagascar. The first discourses around decolonization, in particular from a linguistic perspective, can be connected with the political events that started when the country became a French colony in August 1896. Although the French presence was never really accepted by the natives, colonial rule was not seriously challenged until the 1940s, leading up to the first rebellion in 1947. The bloody events that took place from 1947 to 1948 and claimed a significant number of victims contributed to the stigmatization of colonial rule. In spite of these tensions, when the country became an independent nation in July 1960, it avoided a radical break from its colonial past. For example, in 1968, ninety per cent of the existing 528 enterprises belonged to foreigners, and some sixty per cent of state expenditure was covered by taxes levied upon these foreign companies. However, there was a feeling, fuelled by opinion leaders, that the country was not implementing a policy of decolonization. There was a belief on the island that the growing dissatisfaction during the first few years of the presidency of Tsiranana, which led to acts of

violence, could be explained by the need felt for real national independence. To what extent genuine political and economic sovereignty were the real reasons behind the social unrest remains to be documented. However, Lieutenant Commander Didier Ratsiraka who became head of both state and government in 1975 surfed on this wave of unrest and implemented a policy based on the idea of scientific socialism. The implementation of this ideology led to the virtual collapse of the economy.

In the context of the cultural rehabilitation that he advocated, Didier Ratsiraka launched an intensive campaign for the promotion of the native language of the people in order to end what he described as colonial cultural dominance. At the same time, he claimed that he wanted to foster a feeling of national pride. He strongly prescribed that all remnants of colonization be replaced by national symbols and used *Malgachization* (Madagascarization) to support his campaign. A major overhaul of the language-in-education policy was central to his political agenda: The Malagasy language replaced French in a phased but poorly planned implementation of a language policy reform (Rambelo 1991). To gain public support for his campaign, one of the slogans used was 'French, the language of the slave' (ibid.: 48).

The reform brought chaos to the educational system. In the 1980s, following the public denunciation of the reform, the ideology behind the changes was itself contested. Public discourse on languages shifted significantly to the point that, in a public debate held in the capital of Antananarivo, one Malagasy intellectual asked whether French could not become the vehicle of Madagascarization. In a country where terms such as colonization and decolonization are polarized, the role of opinion leaders and, indirectly, that of academics is to provide clarity to these terms which can help to offer a sense of purpose to national reforms. One can then ask whether strong political terms in academic discourse do not fuel polarization. This debate which has ethical implications is beyond the scope of this article. In any case, the Malagasy experience confirms that contextual issues to which discourses are linked determine the meanings given to the *colonial languages*. Scholars and, in particular, sociolinguists who ignore the impact of their overgeneralized interpretation of terms such as *colonial language* can be responsible for decisions, such as those taken in Madagascar, which give academic legitimacy to political manoeuvres with severe socio-economic and cultural consequences (Rambelo 1991).

6. Conclusion

The islands of the Indian Ocean illustrate the idea that *colonial language* is not a first-order phenomenon. Its meaning is not determined by how the main historical events unfolded. Furthermore, the construct of *colonial languages* does not have universal and clear-cut meanings; the narrative regarding colonialism varies from one country to another. In fact, there does not exist a universal meaning of colonization that can be transferred to all national contexts. For example, based on what took place in Madagascar and Comoros, the term *direct control*, as opposed to the British *indirect rule*, in order to refer to the direct control of administrative mechanisms and cultural domination that the French supposedly exercised over their colonies, cannot be applied to the South-West Indian Ocean Islands. Finally, constructs such as *colonial languages*, and for that matter *minority languages*, which draw upon binary distinctions between colonial and post-colonial periods and policies, are inadequate to capture the complex roles and meanings attributed to the so-called *colonial languages*. Knowledge available on the social patterning of language use and language choice in newly independent societies tends to show that approaches based on a high level of generality are inadequate to explain the complex socio-cultural settings of post-colonial countries. Care should be taken, at least by academics, for social agents not to be trapped in highly ideological discourses.

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