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# **The English language and social inequality : Towards a re-evaluation of the role of English in Mauritius**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

This paper looks at the role of English as an agent implicated in the social and economic mechanisms which structure inequality in Mauritius. As in many postcolonial societies, English in this island is regarded as a language of power, success and prestige, and English-medium education provides one of the mechanisms of distributing social and economic power. However, the other side of the coin of economic opportunity is the complex mechanism whereby the English language structures inequality. It must be admitted that it seems to be extremely difficult to find the mix of language education and language planning decisions that will work for everyone in a postcolonial and multilingual society. Each context is unique in the combination of languages and the local cultural politics of English. One of the key questions to be asked here is : who benefits? Is the role of English in such countries an unfortunate colonial legacy, which has defied all attempts by the newly independent state to dismantle it? Or is the position of English maintained because it serves the interests of local elites? In this paper, I explore these issues critically, with reference to the situation in Mauritius where many students learn English against a background of linguistic diversity in what Tickoo (1993) has called an ‘acquisition poor environment’ (APE).

## ***INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY***

There seems to be a consensus in Mauritius on matters of language and education that English should remain a language through which students gain access to different types of academic knowledge. Literacy education for Mauritians in and through the English language is associated with economic advancement and social progress. In a multilingual setting like Mauritius, where French-based Creole, the home language of the majority of the population and the language of inter-ethnic communication, is equated with being powerless and underprivileged, literacy in the official medium (i.e.

English) is regarded as a major key to self advancement as well as empowerment.

In a world with trade barriers being broken, with single markets in areas such as Europe growing, and with economic competition rapidly developing on a global scale, competence in languages, in general, is increasingly important. Those who have multilinguistic capital may, indeed, be in a position to increase their economic capital. It so happens that English has gained a unique status in this context of the liberalisation of world trade and the globalisation of economy, and it would be foolish not to take advantage of this. The language situation in Mauritius being intimately bound up with the socio-economic realities, success in this society is therefore defined by proficiency in English (and, for that matter, French which is another European language used and taught in schools) in both the oral and the written mode.

### **ENGLISH AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY**

It is clear that, in literacy projects in developing countries in the twentieth century, literacy has been promoted for economic development. A literate workforce is considered essential for economic growth. Yet such programmes have also been used, consciously or subconsciously, to shore up the established order in a social system founded on injustice and inequality. Literacy education always has had ideological roots (Street 1984), and has been used to condition the masses to consolidate existing divisions of labour. There is increasing evidence that in many countries, including Mauritius, fluency in the English language is required for access to better jobs and opportunities. Access to English, however, is rarely uniformly available. Pattanayak (1996), who has long been an active figure in language education, describes how this mechanism whereby English language structures inequality works in India:

*English is backed by international groups which treat English as an instrument of colonisation and as a commodity for trade. Internationally, it is the support system for the managerial mini-sector for the preservation of privileges. It promotes the generation, sustenance and socialisation of a conspicuously consumeristic life style. It interprets skill migration as brightening life chances, and it accentuates the divide between (1) rural and urban, (2) the developing and the developed, and (3) elites and masses. It permits better education for a miniscule minority. At the same time, it inhibits interaction between science and society and it inhibits the creation of appropriate technology. As an adversary to many languages sharing communication, it promotes alienation, anomie, and blind spots in cultural perception. It is the carrier of values antithetical to*

*indigenous cultures and results in the atrophy of cultures. It makes non-English cultures permanent parasites on English and English-speaking countries. In the process, indigenous languages become anaemic and move towards death ...*

*It may thus be seen that there is a parallel between, on the one hand, English as a colonial imposition supported by a segment of the elite and receiving stiff nationalist opposition, and, on the other, the current elitist imposition acclaimed by a segment of the population aspiring to achieve access to elitist privileges and opposed by a larger segment of the population. (Pattanayak 1996:150-1).*

One important point raised by Pattanayak is the way that the existence of English in the upper hierarchy positions languages lower down as everyday vernaculars. Many languages (e.g. Creole in Mauritius) that are low in a linguistic hierarchy never get the opportunity to be expanded, standardized and used for wider social functions in the way the European languages have been since the seventeenth century. Robert Phillipson (1994:20) argues that this is a common situation in postcolonial countries :

*It seems highly likely that the language policies followed in postcolonial societies have served the interests of [the] North far better than the South, in particular the masses in South countries. There are parallels between economic and linguistic underdevelopment. Use of dominant western European languages (English in Nigeria, French in Senegal, etc.) has prevented local languages from going through the extension of range and repertoire that many European languages went through as recently as in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

The politics of English education has thus created a caste system of languages - which is Eurocentric and discriminatory - by relegating home languages to an almost non-existent position in the school curriculum. Moreover, an educational policy which establishes the languages to be used as a medium of education at primary, secondary and university level is a key factor in determining how successful speakers of the lesser used languages are within the education system. While modern social and economic systems require certain kinds of language competence, they simultaneously create conditions which ensure that vast numbers of people will be unable to acquire that competence.

With English taking up an important position in the Mauritian educational system, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions. Ngugi

(1986) describes his experiences in Kenya, where English became ‘*the main determinant of a child’s progress up the ladder of formal education*’ (p. 115):

*Nobody could go on to wear the undergraduate red gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the papers in all other subjects, unless they had a credit (not even a simple pass!) in English. Thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to holders of an English-language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom (p. 115).*

What emerges here is the clear suggestion that we cannot reduce questions of language to such social psychological notions as ‘instrumental’ (i.e. the desire to learn a language to pass an exam and get a job) and ‘integrative’ motivation (i.e. the desire to assimilate into the target language speaker’s culture) but must account for the extent to which language is embedded in social, economic and political struggles. Language competence remains a barrier to employment, education and economic well-being due to political forces of our own making, and not to inadequate learning theories and teaching methodologies, or other explanations that are commonly proposed (Phillipson 1992).

### **ENGLISH IN MAURITIUS: ESL, EFL or EIL?**

English has little or no foundation in Mauritian society except a political one (Foley 1992). On the basis of the ‘realities’ of how English is used in Mauritius, one can argue that it plays an ‘institutional’ role rather than a ‘social’ role. English is the official language, i.e. the language used in parliament, the judiciary and for administration in schools.

However, it is spoken by only 0.21% of the population (see Table 1 below). French, the mother tongue of the Franco-Mauritians and part of the ‘gens de couleur’ (mixed) population, is used by the mass media, so that 80% of the newspapers are written in French.

Although the different ethnic groups, anxious to preserve their identity, cling to their respective language, interaction between them has given rise to an ever-developing Mauritian language, the Mauritian Creole (MC) which has become the dominant home language of the Mauritian population. A look at the census of 1990 (see Table 1 below) shows that 61.72% of Mauritians admitted that Creole was the language they usually spoke. If we compare what the official census describes as the ‘languages usually spoken in Mauritius’, in 1983 and 1990, we have the following:

**Table 1: Languages usually spoken in Mauritius**

	Census 1983	Census 1990 (% in Brackets)
English	2,028 (0.21)	2,240 (0.21)
French	36,048 (3.73)	34,455 (3.26)
Creole	521,950 (53.98)	652,193 (61.72)
Oriental Languages	403,849 (41.77)	367,772 (34.71)

*Source: Census 1983 and Census 1990*

Baker (1972) argues that English, French and Creole have become associated with knowledge, culture and egalitarianism respectively, while the Oriental languages which include Bhojpuri, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi and Mandarin, are largely identified with what may be termed 'ancestral heritage'. In the above censuses, it is significant to note that the instructions relating to 'mother tongue' which accompanied the census forms read as follows: 'Mother tongue' - The language spoken in your home during your early childhood. You may not necessarily have spoken or speak the language at present'. It is thus clear that the term 'mother tongue' means something quite different from the definition 'one's native language' and it is this writer's experience that many Mauritians of Asiatic origin understand 'mother tongue' to mean a language spoken by one's ancestors at the time of their arrival in Mauritius. It is therefore safe to assume that the oriental languages are, in fact, 'ancestral' languages and are by no means primary or first languages for Mauritians. According to Baker (1972), egalitarianism is generally a more important matter than 'culture', 'knowledge' or 'ancestral heritage', which explains why, in practice, Creole has been adopted as the language of everyday use by almost all Mauritians.

The vast majority of Mauritian learners are taught English in what has been called an 'acquisition poor environment' (Tickoo 1993) and, as a result, the language does not become a usable means of communication. When Mauritians speak of receiving their education through the English medium, it is a different scenario from the type of education that people in India, anglophone Africa and Caribbean countries receive. These areas can be referred to as ESL countries, i.e. where English plays the role of a genuinely second language, where it plays a 'social' role in the community and functions as a recognised means of communication among members who speak some other language as their mother tongue. The peculiar sociolinguistic situation of Mauritius, marked by a multiplicity of languages, affects the motivation to learn English in the classroom.

It is, indeed, customary (cf. Moag 1982, Platt, Weber & HO 1984) to apply the following broad terms to situations in countries as well as to individual speakers, as in the case of English.

ENL English as a native language (or English as a mother tongue or first language);

ESL English as a second language;

EFL English as a foreign language.

In recent years another category has been added, subdividing EFL into EFL proper and EIL (English as an international language). This means that English is referred to as EIL when used among non-native speakers and EFL when used by non-native speakers talking to native speakers.

Many parts of Great Britain, North America, or Australia, for example, have homogeneously English-speaking populations for whom English is a native language and a language of dominant and preferred use; in short, English as a native language ('ENL' or L1) can clearly be identified. English as a second language ('ESL' or L2) refers to English-using situations in which English is the language of public life for speakers of other languages at home. The term thus embraces at least two very different traditions: those who have moved to an English-speaking country but continue to use their own L1 at home (e.g. Punjabi speakers in the U.K, Spanish speakers in North America, Vietnamese speakers in Australia, or Ukrainian speakers in Canada); secondly, those who live in a multilingual society which (usually because it was once part of an empire, e.g. the British Empire) uses English as a language of mass communication, while nearly all inhabitants have other languages as their L1 (e.g. Nigeria, India, Singapore or Guyana). In principle, English speakers in both these contexts may have English indistinguishable from L1 users who have grown up in the same country, but those in the multilingual society will have developed nativised varieties of English, just as American or New Zealand L1 speakers have. All these speakers will often be referred to as 'second language learners', learning ESL (sometimes EL2) - English as a second language.

A third category of learner comes from countries where most inhabitants speak a national language which performs all major functions in the community. Here they learn foreign languages (FLs) for international communication only. They are the learners of EFL ('English as a foreign language'). Examples include Japan, Brazil, Hungary, Germany, and indeed most countries of the world. However, as English is used to communicate with Europeans, irrespective of whether the latter are English native speakers or not, and even by members of Francophone African States (with

French as a second language) to communicate with their anglophone neighbours, the term EIL ('English as an International Language') seems to be more appropriate as often only non-native speakers are involved.

One important point which may be made about this classification is that the categories as those offered above (i.e. ENL, ESL, EFL) are not watertight. Because people are so infinitely varied in the choices they make and the activities they perform, they cannot be constrained by such crude characterisations as those mentioned above.

ENL, for instance, embraces a wide range of spoken speech styles. Some accents may make it difficult for some other speakers of English to understand - though in practice such difficulties are rapidly overcome given goodwill and contact. Some varieties (though very few, if any, in the U.K.) may differ substantially from Standard varieties of English in grammar and vocabulary, so that even when written down they will be scarcely intelligible to speakers of some other dialects.

ESL poses similar problems of clear definition. First, the variation issue raised under ENL above poses similar problems in multilingual contexts. In British schools, for instance, there has been a major debate about who should have substantial language support : should it mainly go to 'obvious' bilingual learners who speak (for example) Punjabi, Greek or Cantonese as a first language, or will this disadvantage speakers of English dialects such as Jamaica?

Finally, the changing international scene forces us to reconsider the category 'foreign language' also. In the second half of the twentieth century, traditional ESL countries have either developed a mixed local/international language as a means of national communication (as India has with Hindi and English), or have moved heavily towards a major local means (as Hong Kong has recently by demoting English in favour of Mandarin). Thus the old FL countries are gradually becoming more SL and the old SL more FL. The situation is constantly changing.

One reason for the instability of these categories is that they perform three functions simultaneously: they describe social factors, they describe psychological factors, and they define administrative functions in education. Individuals and groups are constantly making choices in relation to the social factors, and institutions are adjusted by politicians to respond to (or to resist) these choices. So, although they are helpful in clarifying some of the tensions in thinking about language, we must not believe that these distinctions reflect something that is fixed or permanent. Particularly we must not assume that in any sense there is a hierarchy of competence, achieved by ENL, ESL and EFL speakers, implicit in these classifications: a

Nigerian writer of English as an L2, Wole Soyinka, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 ; two of the greatest English novelists of the past century, Conrad and Nabokov, were originally EFL learners.

Although the labels EFL, EIL, ESL and ENL, in this order, generally imply an increase in the functions the language fulfils, this categorisation, as stressed above, is not always clear-cut.

In theory, whereas ENL and ESL countries use English for intranational (as well as international) communication, EIL countries use it only for international communication. Furthermore, due to its intranational functions, multilingualism in ESL countries comprises large sections of society, whereas in EIL countries it is basically only individuals who are polyglots as a result of their special training or individual experience.

Other sociolinguistic features can be used to determine the classification between ESL and EIL countries. If second languages can be acquired in social contacts, especially from peer groups, international languages are usually learnt in formal education. ESL is usually learnt because a learner wants to integrate into the ESL speech community which normally enjoys high prestige, English being often used as an indicator of class. On the other hand, the prime motivation for learning EIL is to use the language for restricted communication purposes in one's occupation (e.g. business, teaching) or holidays. The prestige of English certainly appears to be highest in an ESL community, because it is associated with a successful élite and with the degree of formal education.

As sociolinguistic phenomena usually have linguistic correlates, it is interesting to investigate the formal linguistic features of English as used in ENL, ESL and EIL countries. A very important linguistic question is which target norm, model or standard of English, is accepted in the speech community. This norm may be used in language teaching, propagated in books or in broadcasting, and codified in books on usage and grammar and in dictionaries. Growing linguistic awareness in independent nation-states goes hand in hand with growing political awareness because both are aspects of a developing national identity. Thus, the political independence of nations from Britain was often followed by a desire for linguistic independence. This happened in the United States, and more recently in Australia and in the Republic of South Africa, especially as far as pronunciation and vocabulary are concerned. Interestingly enough, a similar development seems to be taking place in some ESL nations, for example in post-independence India or Nigeria, both being countries which have found it difficult to express national identity in one unifying indigenous language. For EIL nations it is usually not possible to accept their own national standard because their international partners may find communication

difficult when a distinct national variety is used. Thus a more neutral 'working English' is considered to be preferable; such an international target variety has been called 'Utilitarian English' (Wong 1982). This concept was suggested as an alternative for the new nations of the Third World to Quirk's 'Nuclear English' 'that would contain a subset of the features of natural English; ... [it] would be intelligible to speakers of any major variety and could be expanded for specific purposes' (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik 1985:9). Whereas Quirk wants to introduce planned simplification to make the variety easier for the learner, Wong (1982:270) claims that 'Utilitarian English' 'is already spoken in many parts of the Third World, in regions where English has merely an auxiliary and instrumental role to play in the non-native speaker contexts'.

Even if a certain norm is generally accepted in a country, be it in the codified form of an institutionalised norm or only as a performance norm, there will still inevitably be a degree of variation. In ENL situations it tends to correlate with ethnic background and educational achievements, which are often closely linked with socio-economic status. In EIL situations it will vary primarily with educational background, that is the amount of schooling and amount of English language teaching available.

One linguistic reason for deviations from the native speaker norm in ESL, EFL and in EIL nations is the interference from other languages spoken, especially the mother tongue. Standard English structures are not 'properly' used, underused or not used at all, because they do not occur in the mother tongue. Other linguistic reasons, besides the interlanguage influences, can be found within English itself. For instance, when common target language structures are (over-) generalised, a generally correct English rule is extended to words, structures, etc. to which normally specific rules apply.

It is taken for granted that ENL speakers can talk more fluently (whether subjectively or objectively measured) than ESL and of course EIL speakers. Similarly, native-speaker English is thought to be more elaborate and has more registers at its speakers' disposal, whereas ESL speakers are more restricted, and EIL & EFL speakers normally have only a small range of expression in formal style.

In the light of the sociolinguistic and linguistic features of English as a native (ENL), second (ESL) and international language (EIL) as described above, the position of English in Mauritius would more closely resemble an EIL country rather than an ESL one. The theoretical framework of features (as summarised in Table 2) is still rather tentative, but it can serve as a basis for determining the position of English in Mauritius.

**Table 2 : Sociolinguistic and linguistic features of English as a native (ENL), second (ESL) and international language (EIL) in idealised oppositions (Schmied 1991:34).**

Features	ENL	ESL	EIL
(1) Official status	Uniquely recognised	explicitly supported	-
(2) Communicative range	intranational	intrainternational	international
(3) multilingualism -		societal	individual
(4) acquisition from	parents	environment formal education	formal education
(5) motivation for language acquisition	expressive	integrative	instrumental
(6) prestige	(taken for granted)	very high	high
(7) target norm	indigenous national	indigenous national	utilitarian international
(8) Variation	social and regional	ethnic and educational	educational
(9) interference	-	strong	strong
(10) generalisation	-	very strong	strong
(11) fluency	very important	important	restricted
(12) stylistic range (registers)	very broad	broad	restricted

## **LANGUAGE AND EDUCATIONAL FAILURES**

A reassessment of the position of English brings into fresh perspective the tradition of complaint that many Mauritians have built up against the 'falling' standards of the language in the country. Older civil servants and teachers particularly can be heard to observe that in their school-days, primary school leavers were able to read and write English with reasonable fluency, but nowadays English has gone badly downhill. A matter of concern is the poor performance of students in English language at the Cambridge School Certificate (S.C) examinations where a credit about (45%0 is the minimum requirement for joining all government posts. The greatest concern about English standards is the fear that a vicious circle may develop : when the pupils' English deteriorates, some of them are still trained to be teachers and their 'bad English' results in their pupils learning even worse English.

In a sense, the 'falling' standard of English in schools was to be expected in view of the rapid expansion of the Mauritian educational system during the past decades. Several accelerated development plans for education were geared more towards quantity than quality. Looking at the overall picture quantitatively, it seems clear that there are many more Mauritians learning English than ever before.

Complaints about the quality of English are commonplace even in the U.K. A recent report in a British newspaper has this to say :

*Standards in this year's GCSE English examination have slipped dramatically following the reintroduction of old-fashioned written exam papers. Examiners across the country confirm a real and sudden decline in the quality of English used ... The news will rekindle the furious battle between those who argue that the methods of testing are solely to blame and those who claim that there is a real slide in pupils' English ... particularly in spelling, grammar and punctuation.*

(THE OBSERVER, 24 JULY 1994)

In Britain, judgements about the quality of English are made by comparison with Standard British English. But we might be justified in asking ourselves whether it is realistic and fair, in the light of the position of English here, to make similar complaints by comparing Mauritian forms of English with a native-speaker British Standard variety set up as the model of proficiency for learners who neither speak nor hear it spoken in their linguistic environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

We find ourselves in a linguistic situation where English has the sociolinguistic and linguistic profile of an institutional and international language (EIL), but is tested as a first language against a native-speaker model of proficiency. A debate is required to look into the aims and purposes that Mauritians wish to accomplish in the teaching of English in our schools. If it is meant to ensure literacy for all, a re-evaluation of the role of English is needed, to make it suited to the needs of the mauritian population.

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