RAMGULAM Girish Kumar

Code-switching among Mauritian Facebook users

Introduction

This paper aims at observing the various ways Mauritians express themselves on social media. As Facebook is one of the most popular social media platforms in Mauritius, we will be going through comments that have been left on the public page of *l'express Maurice*, one of the leading newspapers of the country, in order to determine the frequency as well as any other underlying components of code-switching in such an objective environment. Before undertaking the study, it is nevertheless important to first set the scene.

Mauritius: A brief presentation

Mauritius is a small island in the Indian Ocean, home to an independent population of nearly 1.3 million people that can fluently converse in both French and English. Additionally, Mauritians being descendants of African slaves, indentured labourers from India or traders from China, as well as former colonists, further enhances their exposure to multiple languages. Besides their Creole mother tongue, English and French, most, if not all, of the local population can speak or understand at least one of the following languages as well: Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Chinese, Arabic or Bhojpuri. Consequently, interactions between Mauritians are very often bound to include snippets from the aforementioned languages. Moreover, it should be noted that Mauritian Creole is fairly young, receiving an official orthography in 2011 and introduced in the primary school syllabus in 2012.

Constraint-based vs constraint-free theories of code-switching

There exist two main research programs for code-switching: *constraint-based* and *constraint-free*. The former, advocated by Poplack, recognizes two constraints to code-switching. The

Free Morpheme Constraint suggests that intra-sentential language switches can be allowed as long as they do not involve bound morphemes, words that cannot stand on their own, including prefixes and suffixes, such as *-ing*, *dis-* or *-ful.* For example, the following sentence might not be accepted, where *quadri-* is a prefix that has been attached to the Mauritian Creole word, *kouler* which means *colour*:

Nu ena enn pavyon en quadrikouler.

We have a quadricolour flag.

The second restriction, the *Equivalence Constraint* stipulates that switch between languages can only occur in situations where the juxtaposition of the different languages do not affect the syntax rules of either language. For example, the second of the following sentences in a mixture of Mauritian Creole and English will be quite problematic under that rule:

Li finn tell me. / *Li told me.

He told me.

The Mauritian Creole time marker for past tense, *finn,* is absent from the second sentence, but the tense change makes up for it. As such, both sentences express the same idea and follow the syntax rules of both Mauritian Creole and English.

Jeff MacSwan (56) argues that Poplack has not attempted to provide any viable explanation to those constraints and, instead, has just applied her sample of Puerto-Rican bilinguals as universally acceptable in relation to other instances of code-switching.

On the other hand, the *Constraint-free* theory is regarded as "not a particular theory about [code-switching] but a program for [code-switching] research" (MacSwan, 19). He believes that code-switching should be studied with impartiality and without restrictions, maintaining that "if a particular theory proposed within the constraint-free program is shown to be false, it

does not lead researchers within the program to turn to CS-specific constraints but rather to adjust the analysis to newly discovered data" (MacSwan, 20). Therfore, in relation to a developping language such as Mauritian Creole, it is best to study it without any restirctions that could impact its evolution badly.

Code-switching among Mauritians online

Mauritians tend to converse in various code-switching patterns that are generally understood by others from the same society, even if they do not use the same pattern or morphemes. For example, in one article on the *l'express Maurice* Facebook page, two consecutive comments presented the same idea in different ways:

1)"<u>Reste</u> to lakaz."

Stay your home. (Literal translation)

Stay at your home.

2)"Pan dire toi <u>ress</u> lakaz?"

Haven't told you stay home? (Literal translation)

Haven't you been told to stay at home?

Apart from the first being an imperative sentence and the second a question, two observations that can be made is the difference in how the verb *stay* is written. While none is really wrong at this point, it should be noted that the officially recognized Mauritian Creole grammar, *Gramer Kreol Morisien*, considers the verb *stay* to be written as *res*. In pure Mauritian Creole, the sentences would have been written as such:

1) Res to lakaz.

2) Pa'nn dir twa res lakaz?

It should also be mentioned that Mauritian Creole, as opposed to English or French, does not change the forms of verbs in relation to the subject, though it does have specific markers for each tense. The following is an example from the *Gramer Kreol Morisien:*

Mo <u>manz</u> diri. = *I eat rice.*

Mo <u>pe manz</u> diri. = *I am eating rice.*

Yer, mo <u>ti manz</u> diri. = *Yesterday I ate rice.*

Even in question form, the verb will stay the same:

Yer to <u>ti manz</u> diri? = *Did you eat rice yesterday?*

As such, there is no official justification to why the two comments present the verb *stay* in different ways, besides the personal choice of the locutors. As long as the sentence follows the basic subject-verb-object order, even if the words are slightly modified, the pronunciation will stay more or less the same and the meaning will not be affected.

Components influencing code-switching among Mauritians

In relation to the act of code-switching among Mauritians, even though it has already been established that it is mainly a result of multi-ethnicity and the gradual emergence of Mauritian Creole, there are also other factors that are to be considered.

According to Tejshree Auckle, "language policy and social attitudes are not kind towards native Kreol", further noting that even daily code-switching occurrences in Mauritius have not been able to prevent Mauritian Creole from "[meeting] its fair share of resistance from various quarters"(Auckle and Barnes, 106). In an attempt to determine the reasons that influence Creole speakers from occasionally changing their mother tongue to English or French, Aukle conducted a research with very interesting results. She found that code-switching, though popular nationwide, is specifically observed in some situations.

One of her observations involves a group of friends in a clothing store. One of them alternates between talking with her friends and with the salesgirl. Aukle notes that the girl speaks in Creole with her friends but changes to French or a French accent when speaking to the salesgirl. According to Auckle,"the move here, is from mere girly chitchat about clothes, to a more authoritative stance vis-a-vis the salesgirl who is being ordered to show the girls the different styles of dresses that the shop stocks" (Auckle and Barnes, 112).

Another point she makes is the use of reiteration in an attempt to "bring about a change in the power dynamics in the conversation". In the following comment on Facebook, the person is expressing their disagreement on an issue. He faces backlash in a reply. In turn, he defends his arguments but through a switch in language:

User A: Ey mo pa dakor moi li ti bizin pa faire sa kumsa!

Hey, I do not agree. He should not have done it like that!

User B: B to pa ti capav faire li tomem?

Couldn't you have done it yourself?

User A: Kifer moi mo ti bizin faire? **Zot travay sa!** It's their job!!

*Why should I have done it? **It's their job!** It's their job!*

This reiteration serves as a way to enhance the consternation as well as put more emphasis on the reasoning of User A.

Aukle's research also touches on a code-switching technique that is quite popular in Mauritius, that of changing the subject of a conversation. There is no main purpose of this technique other than to notify the interlocutor that one wants to talk about something else or is not interested in pursuing the conversation. Such an example would be as follows:

"Li mem linn roder...Anyway it's useless..."

He asked for it...Anyway, it's useless...

On a different note, mainly to address the situation of negative attitudes to Mauritian Creole and subsequently to its influence on code-switching, we will look at the reputation of of the language among a part of its population, during interviews performed by local researchers.

In relation to the introduction of the native language as a taught subject, one person blatantly replied:

"It's not worth [introducing Kreol in school]. We can't go anywhere with it. If a child learns French, he/she can go to France. Or if he/she learns English, Hindi, Urdu, he/she can find his/her way in any country. Or such languages as Mandarin, Tamil, Telugu, all these. These are the things that have to be introduced. I don't find it necessary to introduce Kreol" (Rajah-Carrim, 65).

Another respondent claims that:

"Kreol in itself is not the language that we're using universally. We have to take into consideration the fact that we're living into an era of globalisation. If we stay backward with our Kreol, using it as an official language or even in our education, there wouldn't be much future for our youth, the youth of tomorrow" (Rajah-Carrim, 66)

In her research with secondary school students, Bissoonauth notes that "students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to make higher use of Kreol at home while students from medium and high socioeconomic backgrounds use a higher combination of English, French and Kreol together with ancestral languages" (Bissoonauth, 71). This further accentuates the conflicting views between Mauritian speakers on the importance of the mother tongue in other

spheres, as well as giving a little more insight on one of the reasons to why code-switching is so popular.

Conclusion

In the light of this study, it can be said that code-switching is an important part of Mauritian interactions. It is present in the country's culture and is accepted nationwide. While some people use it instinctively, others do so to fit in a posher entourage. It is however surprising to observe the number of comments written in Mauritian Creole on the Facebook page of *l'express* Maurice, especially in accordance to the negative connotations of the language. But in the end, it is clear that code-switching, on a national level, is first and foremost an inheritance both to Mauritians and to Mauritian Creole.