

## French Language in Mauritian Newspapers: A Cultural Exception in Journalism

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### Abstract

This article comments the cultural exception concerning the medium used for communication by the media especially in newspapers in Mauritius. From a global standpoint, all former colonies of Great Britain have adopted English language as the medium used to communicate to their audiences. The cultural exception exists in Mauritius where despite one and a half century of British rule from 1810 to 1968, French language is consistently being used more nearly two and a half centuries and this trend is not likely to change in the near future. This paper examines why the Mauritian press has been successful in using French language and what are the key factors that have allowed the situation to persist since such a long time. The other aspect of the research briefly addresses the difficulties encountered to make English a medium for communication in the local press and why it remains more an official language than a spoken and currently used language. The use of French language in the Mauritian written press confirms the strength of that particular language by explaining how such cultural exception that prevails in the small island nation of Mauritius.

**Keywords:** Mauritius; Written press; Newspapers; French; Cultural exception

### Introduction

The current situation regarding the written press is quite difficult owing to the fact that a variety of media like online newspapers, search engines and social media are dramatically changing the image of information availability and use. Newspapers are still popular in the island of Mauritius, situated to the South-West of the Indian Ocean, 700 miles off the east coast of Madagascar. As many countries in the Commonwealth that groups all the former colonies of Great Britain in the past, Mauritius adopts English as its official language but remains a vibrant bilingual society where French has been popular since the arrival of the French, back three centuries ago, in 1715. Since these two languages are interchangeably used in the country, it has become of interest to see how media favours more one language than another one. Despite the fact that English remains the most widely used language in the business world, French language has had its say in Mauritius. Primacy of French in the written press continues a long tradition [1]. This is widely evidenced through the use of French language in the media-both in the audio-visual and the written press sectors.

### The Influence of French Culture in Mauritius

Before addressing the issue of French predominance in the written press, it would be useful to relate the influence of French Culture in Mauritius. As of 2015, Mauritius celebrated on 21<sup>st</sup> September of this year, the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the French in Mauritius [2]. This celebration was a moment to recall the influence of the people of French descent in the country that now barely count 2% of the population but remains a strong economic power for the Mauritian economy [3]. The rule of the French from 1715 to 1810 claimed an important influence on the culture of Mauritius because the island was ruled as an oligarchy even up to middle of the last century.

French language was spoken by the White population also known as Franco - Mauritians. French culture was influential in the early days of human conquest of Mauritius. In 1773, the oldest French newspaper of the Southern hemisphere 'Annonces, Affiches et Avis Divers des Iles de France et de Bourbon' was launched [4]. Since that time, the art of printing in the island never looked back. It contributed to the

development of an intellectual class, and in turn, the intellectual class helped the development of printing and publication [5]. Other periodicals followed suit but stayed for some time before they disappeared. 'Le Cerneen' newspaper was launched in 1832 by Adrien d'Epinau, an important French colonist of his time, who was also a bank manager. This newspaper was highly popular among the ruling class since its inception and remained popular in Mauritius up to the time of its closure in 1981 [6].

### Administration and language

French language was commonly used during the early days of French colonisation while there was the development of a *lingua-franca* known as 'Kreol' that was used by the slaves who worked for their masters. 'Kreol' developed as a pidgin from French but has today got recognition as a mother-tongue in Mauritius. This language spoken by this 'people admirable' is unstoppable [7]. When the British took over Mauritius in 1810 after defeating the French, they established English as the medium of communication. English language developed as the main language used in administration and for official purposes. Among the terms of the surrender of the French, the British allowed them to stay on the island, to keep their culture, language and religion as laid out in the Treaty of Paris [8]. Despite the fact that the British conquered the country, they allowed French language to exist side-by-side as a means of developing democracy and tolerance that were the key values driving British rule in the different colonies that it conquered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The open - mindedness of the British allowed French language

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to be used in the written press and various forms of communication used by the oligarchs. The tolerance of the British towards French and the introduction of English in Law, Government and education have ensured that eventually bilingualism would be common among a significant proportion of the population [9]. It should be noted that the majority of the population had little access to education during that time and this disallowed people of different communities to widely use French language. Paradoxically, intellectuals from the Franco-Mauritian community developed the press industry in Mauritius and maintained French dominance in the written press.

Little could be said of the use of English language in the written press since Mauritius has not been a country with central power retained by the government. This element of democracy, fundamental to human rights, did not encourage government to have a press of its own to express opinion and convey information. English never spread throughout the population like French. It became the language of rule and French remained the language of the rich and powerful and became associated with the cultured, the educated [9].

### A brief account of print media evolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Mauritius

It would be exacting for this research paper to make a thorough analysis of the influence of French language in the written press. Certain brief illustrations explain how French language influenced readers during the last century at critical times of history.

**1908: Creation of 'Le Mauricien':** The centenary newspaper 'Le Mauricien' was founded in 1908. It grew up with its eponym name to become one of the country's leading newspapers [10]. Raoul Rivet was an eminent editorialist of the newspaper and he influenced readership during his time in office since 1922 to 1957. 'Le Mauricien' is published in French language and remains a well-acclaimed opinion and analysis paper.

**1930s: A few publications in different languages:** To counter French influence in the press, the 1930s saw different newspapers from different cultural groups to represent each community's power in Mauritius. Newspapers were in Hindi, Chinese and English. At the same time, there were also rises in French publications namely 'Action'.

In the 1950s, 'Mauritius Times' was published by Bickram Singh Ramlallah and set forth the pace for analysis and outlook of the Mauritian society. This paper still appears today but faces strong competition from new publications in English.

**1963: 'L'Express' enters the print media business:** In 1963, 'L'Express' entered business as a paper written mainly in French. Such a newspaper has always positioned itself as a trend setter in the press industry. With its strong editorial content marshalled by its founder, Philippe Forget, 'L'Express' was the first paper to double its size (4 to 8 pages in 1973) and up to 12 pages in 1978. He mentioned his paper as a paper for reference during its golden jubilee celebration in 2013 [11].

**1978: Offset reaches the press:** 1978 was a turning point for the press industry. Newspapers like 'Le Mauricien', 'L'express' and 'Le Cernéen' were published in offset - a new printing technology replacing the linotype [12]. At the same time, readership rose because of the high visual quality of newspapers and the excellent style used in the leading papers.

**1992: Desktop publishing and colour reaches the press:** By 1992, there was a major revolution of the written press in Mauritius. Newspapers adopted colour as a new standard in order to boost

readership and better illustrate their contents. This proved to be a 'winning formula' for a short time.

**2000 onwards: Internet and online newspapers are available:** By 2000, with the advent of the Internet back in 1995, newspapers started to develop their content online and in French language. Readers didn't spend long online anyway, especially since most people paid by the minute for their internet access [13]. This has consistently developed over the years and a newspaper like 'L'Express' boasts having 300000 visitors per day.

### The stance of French language in the written press: A hypothetical overview

The technical developments that took place in the written press industry may account for the maintenance of an adequate level of readership among Mauritian readers. Technology and innovation are essential marketing tools that have a direct impact on customer influence. This means that newspapers continued to be read with developments highlighted above. Incidentally, this favoured the use of French language in news media because of an increase of customer loyalty. French papers, like their counterparts around the world, are searching for the elusive magic formula which would boost their profitability as they shift online [14].

The other argument could be that whether or not technology and innovation impacted the Mauritian press, French language consolidated its influence on readers. This looks like a null hypothesis whereby it becomes imperative to think of the factors that have helped in maintaining the influence of French language in the written press in the Mauritian society.

This could be interpreted as:

H<sub>0</sub>: Technological improvements and innovation had little or no effect on the influence of French language in Mauritian newspapers.

H<sub>1</sub>: Technological improvements and innovation consolidated the influence of French language in Mauritian newspapers through sustained readership.

**Factors supporting the Null Hypothesis:** Taking into consideration that French language is currently being widely used in Mauritian newspapers, it is hereby not necessary to view alternative hypotheses although, as mentioned above, technology and innovation did support reading newspapers and indirectly support the argument of French communication.

The key factors are supported below:

**The closeness of French language to locally-spoken creole:** The first argument favouring the Null Hypothesis is the closeness of French language to the local language spoken by more than 90% of the Mauritian community. Since Mauritian *kreol* is very close to French language especially in the spoken form, it is implicitly understood that the way information is presented in French in the Mauritian press directly appeals to its audience. News in the media namely radio and television is in French and the language is well rehearsed in the minds of the Mauritian audience. Since the same verbal language, cues and spelling are used in the written as well as in the spoken form; Mauritian audiences find a quick appeal to reading newspapers in a style that closely matches their expectations. This statement confirms why Mauritians have remained loyal to the use of French language in the written press. The French language appears to have a preferential status in the mass media, since it has the highest percentage of broadcast time

[15], and is most frequently used in newspapers and local publications [16].

**French as a language of nobility:** Although French is generally more widely and better spoken in Mauritius in this millennium compared to the past century as a result of higher level of education of society, French language has maintained an important position in the lives of the natives and enjoys a degree of social prestige in society [17]. Formerly associated with the local bourgeoisie in higher classes, French is now vulgarised in its use. For instance, small businesses communicate quite fluently in French and this does not create barriers that one would likely suspect in the past. This statement again supports the idea that French language still commands respect in the Mauritian society and people like speaking and reading French. The high visibility of French language in Mauritian newspapers just confirms the null hypothesis.

**French language and Mauritian bilingualism:** Another key issue that has favoured the use of French language in the written press is the importance of bilingualism in Mauritian society. Authorities and academics advocate the importance of keeping up cultural bilingualism in Mauritius as a view of maintaining competitive advantage in business. A parallel idea, common in former French colonies, is this statement of Madagascar's official language policy in the mid 1970s: 'It is necessary to recognise that for a long time yet, we will need this French language as opposed to the Malagasy majority language-as a window open to the world of technical civilization' [18]. The fact that people are exposed to English, French and in addition to these, Oriental languages like Hindi, Urdu or Mandarin, has in turn developed a compelling effort of maintaining French language in the media. This is because public administration and government authorities use English as the main medium of communication but also allowed French to be used concurrently. The effort to maintain bilingualism in Mauritius therefore serves as a suitable measure of allowing French to coexist in Mauritius and influence its use in the written press.

**Opinion leaders support for French language:** In line with the predominance of French language in the written press in Mauritius comes the influence of opinion leaders in the print media sector. The use of French language has been promoted over the years by influential editorialists and writers like Raoul Rivet of 'Le Mauricien' newspaper who advocated values pertaining to justice and equality in the newspaper that he directed between 1922 and 1957. André Masson disputed a lot of not favouring Mauritius to go for independence in the 1960s with his outright comments in the same paper. Philippe Forget of 'L'Express' newspaper fought more for independence in the columns of his creation at the same time of his opponents. Max Moutia of 'Advance' newspaper was also a major columnist who expressed his opinions on culture in French language. Apart from editorialists, there were writers like Aunauth Beejadhur, Malcom de Chazal or Sookdeo Bissoondoyal who spoke of culture and the creation of a Mauritian culture. All their ideas were rightfully developed and debated in French language.

The opinion leaders have forged a culture that has been permeated over the years by new journalists who expressed at their best in French language - just to name a few - Gilbert Ahnee, Raj meetarban, Sydney Selvon, etc. Their writing style has created a high level of readership loyalty among readers and this claim again why French as a language has always got its deserved position in the local Mauritian newspapers. Ironically, according to the influential editorialist of Le Mauricien, Gilbert Ahnee, the disproportionate usage of French over English could represent an anomaly in a society requiring full entry into the global community [19].

**The Sommet de la Francophonie and similar celebrations as a yardstick to nurture French language:** There have events to celebrate French culture in Mauritius and these have been instrumental in consolidating the presence of French language in the media. The Sommet de la Francophonie that took place in the country in 1993 was considered as a major event that placed Mauritius in the highlights through the promotion of French language. This was an attempt to consolidate the position of Mauritius as a French-speaking nation forming part of the Francophonie. The objective was to set the desire to transform the Francophonie in a concrete entity and determined to make its voice heard on the international scene, particularly against the Anglo-Saxon world [20]. Similar events have again prompted the position of Mauritius internationally as a country espousing bilingualism. The 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorating the presence of the French in Mauritius might be considered as a boost up for the preservation of French language in the press.

**The other side of the coin, the influence of English language in the press:** From the present standpoint, it would be useful to acknowledge that French language predominates over the Mauritian press. It is necessary to point out that English language is not totally absent or eliminated from print media. The present - day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century [21]. Understanding the importance of English language as a universal one in the business world, efforts have been undertaken to promote English as a medium of communication. Some illustrations are provided below.

### More weekly papers in English

'Mauritius Times' could be considered as the first and longest lasting weekly paper in English. It also has a few articles in French. Launched in 1954, this newspaper has remained conservative in its approach on being mainly an analysis and comment paper. It is still printed in 'black and white' but has evolved from 4 to 16 broadsheet pages. This paper has recently been challenged by a glossy magazine 'Weekly' published by l'Express - La Sentinelle group.

### English language presence in magazine or weeklies

The success of English language has been felt at a time when the level of English proficiency for secondary school students was low in the country. Because all Mauritians are exposed to English in schools, either as a subject or as the mode of instruction, most (73.23%) consider themselves to be functional in English [22]. With a low pass rate in General Paper and English language at the Cambridge School Certificate and Higher School Certificate, there was an urgent need to improve the standard of English language.

L'Express newspaper introduced a special weekly section 'Outlook' which gained appeal and in July 2012, changed into 'Weekly', a magazine that appears every Friday with a popular editorial content combining simple language and humour [23]. Else, there is 'News on Sunday' that was launched by Mike Lynch in the 1990s and continues to appear weekly fully in English.

### Newspapers in regional languages

There are a few newspapers that use regional languages from India and China but their appearance is not regular. 'Chinese Daily News' and 'Hua Sheng Bao' appear in Chinese [24]. There was also a past publication in Hindi language 'Jan Vani' and earlier 'Janata'. Since

readership is low, these publications are seriously affected by printing and publishing overheads and have ceased to appear.

The rise in popularity of English language in the written press does not presently affect publication in French language. This is actually difficult and is likely to be as such in the future despite the revival of the official English language in Mauritius. It is clear that English remains the medium of communication in official instances like the public service and all protocol communications but cannot supersede and replace French language.

## Conclusion

The presence of French language in the Mauritian press is much dependent on the country's openness to ancestral languages. Since the French first established in the country three centuries ago, they have had the greatest influence over the people during the years of colonisation. Under French rule for a century, French was the language used by the rulers. The creation of the first newspaper in Mauritius back in 1773 states the power and influence of French in print media since then. This influence has been sustained over the years despite British colonisation that took place in 1810. The fact that the British rulers allowed all communities living in Mauritius to have total freedom to follow their cultures allowed the ruling class comprising Franco - Mauritians to keep using French.

The other perception was that French language remains highly praised as being a language of nobility helped such a medium to be developed over the years in the history of print media. Technological developments that took place in the printing industry allowed more readers to have access to information but also encouraged them to better read and learn French language. Historically, French as a language has always benefited from support from governmental authorities and all people loving French culture. In Mauritius, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Francophonie Summit in 1993, the participants decided that the summits would use French as a common Language [25]. This gesture meant to reaffirm their membership in the Francophonie family while respecting member diversity. The Francophonie environment within which Mauritius exists ensures the long-term existence of French in the media besides the language being close to the local lingua-franca *Kreol*.

In recent times, there has been some revival of English language but this is still minimal compared to the coverage provided to news items in French. It is important to address areas where English, though in the lead, faces sharp competition. The relevant areas are wide and cover the daily or weekly press, television, the web, publishing and trade [26]. The essential point here is that French maintains its popularity in the print media in Mauritius and this could be an exception to the rule among all the former colonies of Great Britain which are now Commonwealth members and use English as the main medium for communication. The Mauritian exception in this sector deserves to be pointed out which also reminds us that language spread and evolution hardly proceed uniformly everywhere, as the ecologies of appropriation and practice vary from one territory to another [27]. This explains the vibrancy of French in print media in contemporary Mauritius.

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