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# ON THE ORIGIN AND LINGUISTIC STATUS OF RÉUNIONNAIS

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## 1. Introduction

In this article I will discuss the development of a French lexifier creole, Réunionnais, which has often been dubbed a semi-creole because of its acrolectal features. One should point out that the French input heard by the creators of Réunionnais was not standard French, but 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century colloquial varieties of French. Several researchers on French lexifier creoles (e.g. Alleyne 1996: 35-40) have shown that spoken French at this time was characterised by a heavy reliance on periphrastic verbal constructions, and avoided the standard synthetic forms for the future and the past, for example. This is crucial since most creolists agree that creole TMA markers are in fact derived, at least phonetically, from colloquial French periphrastic constructions (e.g. Lefebvre 1998). As Alleyne (1996: 35) points out,

Il est important de constater que le français possède, et possédait dans le passé, au moins deux modalités syntaxiques – l'une standard, conservatrice, bourgeoise; l'autre innovatrice, dynamique, populaire.

[It is worth noting that French has, and had in the past, at least two syntactic modalities – a standard, upper class conservative one, and an innovative, dynamic and working-class one.]

The ‘popular’ (working-class) French alluded to by Alleyne is characterised mainly by phonological and lexical differences, and by a greater reliance on analytical, periphrastic constructions to encode tense, mood and aspect, as opposed to the standard inflected forms (e.g. colloquial *je vais manger* vs. standard French *je mangerai* ‘I will eat’). This does not mean that colloquial and standard French were typologically different languages. But there were important stylistic differences: the analytical structures of spoken French were more widely used, and because of their analyticity and reduced inflection, they more closely resembled the TMA markers of Kwa languages spoken by West African slaves, who were present (though not a majority) during the formative stages of Réunionnais. Alleyne adds (1996: 35):

la différenciation dialectale, telle qu’elle existe sur le territoire français, a été observée principalement sur le plan phonologique et lexical... il y a beaucoup moins de particularités régionales sur le plan syntaxique.

[dialectal differences in France have been observed mainly in the area of phonology and the lexicon... there are much fewer regional differences in the syntax.]

The following discussion will include colloquial French expressions when they differ from standard French, if they can shed light on the origin of creole structures. Section 2 discusses the demographic evidence surrounding the genesis of Réunionnais. Section 3 highlights some linguistic features specific to Réunionnais, and section 4 discusses Réunionnais TMA markers, in an effort to show that basilectal Réunionnais is a ‘true’ creole, and not simply a dialect of French, in its use and combination of TMA markers. Given the claims (e.g. Chaudenson 1984) that Réunionnais and Mauritian are genetically related, each Réunionnais example is followed by the translation in Mauritian, for comparison.

## **2. The settlement of Réunion: demographic facts**

Réunionnais emerged at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century on the *Isle de Bourbon* in the Indian Ocean. The contact situation in Bourbon (now called Réunion) was different from most other French island colonies, and the linguistic result is often considered a partial, rather than total,

creolisation of French. In particular, there is evidence that Réunionnais did not arise out of a preexisting pidgin, but instead is the result of a gradual creolisation process away from French, over several generations, as successive waves of slaves acquired increasingly divergent varieties of L2 French. Thus, henceforth the term 'creolisation' will be used to refer to the process of gradual creolisation, as defined by Chaudenson, and the term 'creolised French' will refer to the linguistic result (acrolectal, mesolectal or basilectal) of the gradual creolisation process. Note that, according to the gradualist model, the acrolect and mesolect predate the basilect. (For a description of the gradual creolisation model, see Chaudenson 1989, 1992, 2000.)

Réunion was first settled in 1663, but for the first fifty years there were more free citizens than slaves. In 1709, there were 387 slaves on the island, representing 43% of the total population of 894, with 507 whites (Chaudenson 1989: 50). The slave population was as follows: 40% locally-born; 25% South Asian; 25% Malagasy; 10% other African. Another Indian Ocean island, Isle de France (now Mauritius) was settled by France some fifty years later. After the abolition of slavery in 1835 (Mauritius) and 1846 (Réunion), massive numbers of Indian workers were brought to Mauritius; many fewer were brought to Réunion. In Mauritius, over two thirds of the total population is of Indian origin, whereas in Réunion ethnic Indians represent 15% of the population. Before 1710, there were fewer slaves than whites in Réunion, so slaves probably had sufficient exposure to French, although there was some shift-induced interference (Baker and Corne 1986). Between 1710 and 1805, slaves increasingly outnumbered whites, so new slaves had less and less direct access to the lexifier language. According to Chaudenson (2000: 113), the initial homestead society lasted until 1735. Subsequently, the shift to a plantation economy required more slaves (or 'bozals'), who had only restricted access to French, and 'whose linguistic targets and models consisted of approximations of French from [the first slaves brought in during the homestead society]' (Chaudenson 2000: 126).

According to Baker and Corne (1986), before 1710 Réunionnais emerged as a non-creole vernacular, which was spoken by both slaves and whites. This vernacular was neither a true creole, nor a dialect of French. The reason for the ambiguous status of the first Réunion vernacular is that the free non-white population was born to French fathers and Malagasy or Indo-Portuguese mothers (not unlike the situation at the Dutch colony of the Cape, which gave rise to Afrikaans). As more slaves arrived on Réunion, a continuum developed between local French and early Réunionnais at one end, and more basilectal

forms at the other end. If slaves had been imported in large numbers for a long time after 1805 (when locally-born slaves began to outnumber the number of whites), there would have been a greater chance for a more basilectal creole to develop. However, in Réunion, the slave trade ended in 1835. In other words, the slaves were never really numerically dominant enough for their creole to break off completely from French and for the continuum to disappear. By contrast, on Mauritius, which was also a French plantation colony, slave imports were more massive and slaves had much less direct exposure to French, so a more radical creole could develop.

There is textual evidence of a true, independent creole on Mauritius from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, whereas in Réunion it seems that there was never a single, stable variety of Réunionnais, except for the early form of *Bourbonnais* (see below). Baker and Corne (1986) claim that the existence of a continuum always precedes the emergence of a stable creole. Their point is that in Mauritius this stable creole emerged early on (18<sup>th</sup> century), whereas on Réunion it never really emerged and the continuum persisted.

The demographic makeup of Réunion can be explained mainly in terms of the island's economic development. Baker and Corne (1982: 104) distinguish the following stages:

- 1663-1715: small-scale agriculture (*société d'habitation*);
- 1715-1815: coffee production for export (slaves brought in);
- 1815- present: sugar plantations;
- 1947: départementalisation (growing influence of standard French, schooling, influx of Frenchmen from mainland France).

An early form of Réunionnais (*Bourbonnais*) emerged during the *habitation* period, when Frenchmen were numerically dominant. After 1715, more Frenchmen and slaves were brought in huge numbers. The *Petits Blancs* (poor Whites who did not own slaves) emerged as a separate group during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After 1835, slavery was abolished, creating a need for indentured labourers from India.

The demographic makeup of the island changed over the centuries. In 1663, two Frenchmen and ten Malagasies (including three women) came over from Madagascar. After 1678, 14 'Indo-Portuguese' women arrived, and married French colonists. Around 1690—that is, when Réunionnais began to emerge—the ethnic makeup of the island was as follows (based on Chaudenson 1989: 53), out of a total population of 258:

- 76 Frenchmen, or 29% of the total population;
- 40 slaves from Madagascar, or 16% of the total population (Corne calls them ‘involuntary immigrants’ in Baker and Corne 1982: 105);
- 64 individuals of mixed French-East Indian ancestry, or 25% of the total population (French fathers, East Indian mothers);
- 78 individuals of mixed French-Malagasy ancestry, or 30% of the total population (French fathers, Malagasy mothers).

The main non-French influence during the initial period of emergence of Réunionnais was probably Malagasy, given that this language group was the single most important ethnic group. The French settlers were mainly illiterate artisans, who spoke colloquial varieties of 17<sup>th</sup> century *Langue d’oil*, which was spoken in the northern half of France, even though the official language was standard French. Chaudenson (1974: 1125) believes that the mixture of various Oil dialects reinforced the inherent tendency toward the simplification and levelling of the inflectional system.

The first known sentence recorded in Réunionnais was in a ca. 1722 report by a local intellectual on a decision made by the *Conseil Provincial de Bourbon* (Chaudenson 1981: 3):

La peur des châtimens suggérait parfois aux prévenus de singuliers moyens de défense. Elle est plaisante cette déclaration de Marie, la bonne de M. Ferrere qui a abandonné son travail pour commettre pour la seconde fois ‘le crime de marronnage.’ A elle demandé pourquoi elle s’est enfuie pendant six mois, elle répondit:

[The fear of punishment sometimes led the accused to find unusual means of defence. The following utterance is amusing, by Marie, Mr Ferrere’s servant, who left her job to commit the ‘crime of marronnage’ [escape from slavery] for the second time. When asked why she had fled for six months, she answered:]

*Moin la parti marron parce qu’ Alexis l’homme de jardin*  
 I perfect leave maroon because Alexis the gardener  
*l’était qui fait à moin trop l’amour.*  
 past who make to me too-much love

‘I ran away because Alexis the Gardener was always making love to me’  
 (Chaudenson 1974: 444, 1106, 1147)

Chaudenson (1981) mentions that this is exactly how the sentence would be uttered in present-day Réunionnais. As Corne (Baker and Corne 1982) points out, this sentence, recorded 60 years after the initial settlement of the island, already displays the main features of Réunionnais:

- strong (object) form of the 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun used in the subject position (*moin*) instead of the French pronominal clitic;<sup>1</sup>
- perfect tense: auxiliary *la* + past participle *parti* (standard French uses the auxiliary *être*, not *avoir*);
- past tense: *lete ki* (presumably from the embedded construction ‘*l’était qui*’).

The sentence above, which dates back to 1720, represents a mesolectal variety of Réunionnais, rather than a basilectal variety, given the many French features. Presumably at this time, the more basilectal varieties had not yet appeared, as we will see below—although it is possible (and unverifiable) that the person quoting this passage may have moved it toward the mesolect to make it more intelligible to speakers of standard French.

According to Chaudenson (1989), during the 18<sup>th</sup> century the slaves could be divided into the following groups according to their origins: (in order of numerical importance) East Africans, locally-born slaves, Malagasies, and smaller numbers of Indians and West Africans. This contrasts with Haiti where most slaves were West Africans who spoke Kwa languages.

According to Baker and Corne (1982), the target language in most cases was the so-called *lete ki* vernacular of the first colonists. The *Petits Blancs* were in fact often of mixed ancestry, spoke a mesolectal Réunionnais, and settled inland. When slavery was abolished, blacks also moved inland, and the *Petits Blancs* settled yet further up in the *cirques*<sup>2</sup> and high plains. The basilect, *Créole des Bas*, probably only emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the influx of slaves trying to acquire *lete ki* French, since until 1715 there was only small-scale agriculture, where slaves lived in close contact with their masters.

However, ultimately, continuing immigration from France and contact with French may have slowed down the creolisation process and only allowed partial creolisation of French. According to Baker and Corne (1982: 126), this is why Réunionnais is so different from Mauritian:

- French input was partially different (the *lete ki* structure existed in the colloquial French input in Réunion but not on Mauritius);

- There was only gradual creolisation in Réunion between 1663 and 1715; in Mauritius creolisation may have begun almost from the beginning of settlement (though it may have gone on for a long time; see Baker's (1995) article on the rate of development of various creoles);
- Many slaves were brought to Mauritius from the very beginning; in Réunion, substratum languages played a lesser role given the fact that the population was more heterogeneous linguistically (according to the figures provided above on the ethnic make-up of Réunion), although presumably each substrate language may have contributed some structures.

Still, Chaudenson (1981) believes that Réunionnais and Mauritian Creole both have a common origin (*Bourbonnais*), and that current differences are due to the development of a post-creole continuum on Réunion that eroded the most basilectal varieties. In other words, Réunionnais has decreolised in the direction of French.

The controversy surrounding the supposed genetic relationship between Réunionnais and Mauritian Creole will be discussed below. For the time being, suffice it to say that Chaudenson (1981) does provide evidence that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Réunionnais and Mauritian were much more alike than they are today. (Baker and Corne 1982 say nothing about 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Réunionnais.) In particular, he provides examples of creole constructions that existed in Réunionnais during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but are no longer in use today. Similarly, he shows that Mauritian Creole has undergone some internal changes over the past 200 years. This does not prove that early Réunionnais was in fact the ancestor language of modern Mauritian, but it does indicate that Réunionnais and Mauritian used to be more alike than they are today.

Chaudenson (1981) claims that Réunionnais is a more or less direct descendant of regional 17<sup>th</sup> century French, the only difference being that, in contact with the L2 French of slaves, Réunionnais accelerated changes which were inherent in regional French. On this point Baker and Corne (1982) agree with Chaudenson, since they too consider Réunionnais as a descendant of 17<sup>th</sup> century French. However, a closer look at various Réunionnais TMA markers reveal that basilectal Réunionnais is *not* a dialect of French, as will be argued in section 4 below.

### 3. Linguistic evidence concerning the genesis of Réunionnais

There are at least three varieties of current Réunionnais. *Créole des Blancs* (or *Créole des Hauts*), an acrolectal variety of Réunionnais, is a variety of creolised French spoken by a population of mainly European origin. *Créole des Bas* is the basilect, which emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and is mainly spoken by individuals of African descent. Mesolectal varieties are spoken by individuals of mixed ancestry. *Créole des Blancs* may originally have been transmitted to French children by mixed-race nannies and servants, along the lines of Afrikaans in South Africa. It has features absent from the basilectal creole, including:

- rounded front vowels, palato-alveolar sibilants (replaced by alveolar sibilants in other varieties of Réunionnais, and in Mauritian, possibly because of Malagasy substratum influence);
- a masculine/feminine distinction in possessive determiners (*mon, ma*);
- use of the relative pronoun, and some instances of ‘weak’ personal pronouns (*je, tu, il*, instead of basilectal *moin, toi, li*) (Chaudenson 1981: 167).

In most French-lexifier creoles, the ‘weak’ personal pronouns *je, tu, il*, which in French cliticise onto the auxiliary, have been replaced by the more salient full forms *moi, toi, lui*, which in French are only used for emphasis, or in some non-subject functions (e.g. *me, te* as preposed objects). In the plural, even the strong pronouns *nous, vous, eux* have been reinforced by the postposed *autres*, i.e., *nous-autres, vous-autres*. This replacement of nominative forms of the plural by the strong forms (objective case) is also attested in nonstandard varieties of French in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in Canadian French where such forms are widespread. In Réunionnais (and in Mauritian), the strong pronouns have themselves become phonologically reduced, thus we have *mo, toue* or *t, li, nous, zot*. For non-subject uses, modern Réunionnais has adopted French prepositional pronouns (*à moi, à vous, à lui*)—that is, *amoin, avous, ali*. It is not clear why the French stressed pronouns (*moi, vous, lui*) have been reinforced with the preposition *à*. Chaudenson (1981) mentions two factors which may have ‘conspired’ in establishing this form in Réunionnais: (a) such forms are found in 17<sup>th</sup> century colloquial French, ‘*Un homme est là qui veut parler à vous*’ (quoted from a play by Molière); (b) there are two series of Malagasy pronouns, one of which begins with [a]: *ahy, anao, azy, antsika*.



Given that there was some Malagasy influence in Réunionnais phonology (such as the replacement of /S/ and /Z\_/ by /s/ and /z/), it is possible that the Malagasy substratum facilitated the spread of the dative pronominals *à moi, à toi* to object functions, especially once the stressed pronouns (*moi, toi, lui*) had displaced the French weak subject pronouns (*je, tu, il*). Recall that, during the first period, Malagasy slaves represented at least 25% of the population.

Chaudenson (1981: 193) points out that in most French-lexifier creoles, the synthetic verbal forms of standard French are replaced by invariant verbal forms with preposed TMA particles. He adds that many, if not all, preverbal particles are derived from periphrastic French constructions. It is true that, in Quebec French for example, such periphrastic forms are much more common than in standard European French—that is, the use of the analytic future *aller* + infinitive (*il va manger* ‘he will eat’) is more common than the synthetic *futur simple* (*il mangera* ‘he will eat’). Similarly the creole aspectual markers *ap(re)* (‘in the process of’), *pou(r)* (future/expectation), and *fin(i)* (perfective) seem to be derived from periphrastic French forms still in use in Quebec French—for example:

1. *Elle est après travailler.* (Quebec French)  
    she is after work.inf  
    ‘She is working.’
2. *Il est pour partir.* (Quebec French)  
    he is for leave.inf  
    ‘He’s about to leave.’
3. *Jean a fini de manger.* (both standard and Quebec French)  
    J has finished of eat.inf  
    ‘Jean has finished eating.’

However, a common etymology does not necessarily entail a common function. This is where Baker and Corne (1982) are correct in disagreeing with Chaudenson. Corne does not deny that creole TMA markers are etymologically derived from French, but his point is that they are used in the framework of a non-French syntax, and as such do not reflect a modified variety of French, but an altogether different language. Note that in the examples above from colloquial French, we are dealing with inflected modals and auxiliaries, not to be confused with the invariant, preposed TMA markers of creoles. According to Chaudenson,

... le français présente nombre de tendances dont la systématisation et la radicalisation, *au contact d'autres langues* et dans des conditions socio-culturelles très différentes, ont pu conduire à la formation de systèmes linguistiques nouveaux.

(Chaudenson 1981: 195; emphasis mine)

[... French is characterised by various tendencies which, when they became more systematic and more radical *in contact with other languages*, under very different socio-cultural conditions, may have led to the creation of new linguistic systems.]

It is possible that some features of Réunionnais may be due to an acceleration of changes that were already under way in colloquial French. But this does not mean that Réunionnais (or any other creole) can be characterised as a dialect of French. While the initial variety of Réunionnais (*Bourbonnais*) may have been a form of L2 French, it is not clear at all that basilectal Réunionnais, which formed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is a form of French, given its complex use of preverbal TMA markers, as we will see below. Furthermore, basilectal Réunionnais is not mutually intelligible with French (although mutual intelligibility is a subjective criterion and cannot alone be used to establish that one is dealing with two languages, rather than with two dialects of one language).

Corne states that 'Réunionnais must be categorised as a variety of French' (Baker and Corne 1982: 127), a view also shared by Mufwene (2000) who claims all French-lexifier creoles are varieties of French. However, the linguistic status of Réunionnais remains controversial (Holm 2000: 29-31). The examples provided in section 4 will show that, in basilectal Réunionnais at least, verbal constructions are typically creole (with preposed TMA markers), and are difficult to ascribe to normal, internally-motivated changes within French. In Réunionnais, although some verbs (in particular the auxiliaries *etr* and *avuar*) have French inflection for person and number, most verbs have a relatively invariant stem, as in the following examples:

4. a. *Mi manz.*<sup>3</sup> 'I'm eating.'
- b. *Ou manz.* 'You're (sg) eating.'
- c. *Li manz.* 'He's/She's eating.'
- d. *Nou manz.* 'We're eating.'
- e. *Zot manz.* 'You're (pl)/They're eating.'

French, by contrast, has three phonetically different forms in the present tense: *mangeons* (1<sup>st</sup> person plural), *mangez* (2<sup>nd</sup> person plural), and *mange* (all other persons, with various spellings).

In the initial stages of *Bourbonnais*, there coexisted two forms of the present: 1) the acrolectal subject + *i* (predicate marker)<sup>4</sup> + short form of verb (i.e. present *manz*); and 2) the basilectal subject + infinitive (i.e. long form). In Mauritian (according to Chaudenson), only the second form survived, whereas in Réunionnais the first form is used more now because of basilectal erosion. In other words, Chaudenson (1981) claims that Réunionnais has undergone decreolisation under the influence of French, and that as a result the most basilectal forms of Réunionnais have disappeared and the whole continuum has moved upward toward French. Chaudenson does provide examples of basilectal forms which were used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but not attested in modern Réunionnais. For example, the last examples of subject + long form (infinitive) date back to the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

With respect to preverbal *i/li*, Chaudenson claims that this resumptive pronoun had two functions originally in both Réunionnais and Mauritian: (a) resumptive subject pronoun and (b) copula. In modern Réunionnais, only the (a) usage survives (generalised to all persons) and in Mauritian, only (b) survives. For the future, Réunionnais uses the French synthetic form in negative sentences but the periphrastic *va* + infinitive for affirmative sentences:

5. *Li donn-ra pa.*  
 he give-fut not  
 'He won't give.'  
 (Mauritian: *Li pa va donné.*)
6. *Li va don.*  
 he fut give  
 'He will give.'  
 (Mauritian: *Li va donné.*)

In other creoles (like Mauritian Creole), the analytic form has spread to the negative as well, e.g. *n'a pas va...* 'will not...' (Chaudenson 1981: 209). Of course, there are only isolated examples used to illustrate historic changes and dialectal difference within Réunionnais. The following section provides a more detailed description of modern Réunionnais morphosyntax.

#### 4. Aspects of Réunionnais morphosyntax: TMA markers

The following description is based on Baker and Corne (1982), Cellier (1985) and Chaudenson (1984). The Mauritian examples in parentheses were obtained by me from two Mauritian informants in the summer of 2001. Chaudenson (1984) points out that some of Baker and Corne's descriptions of the facts are not entirely reliable since: (i) They use French grammatical terms (*passé composé*, *conditionnel*, *participe passé*) to characterise Réunionnais; (ii) some of the translations are erroneous; (iii) the data presented is representative of the most acrolectal varieties of Réunionnais, and Baker and Corne (1982) do not provide any examples from basilectal Réunionnais. Nevertheless, Chaudenson (1984) agrees that the vast majority of their examples are attested, so I have included them in the following description. When relevant, I indicate whether the forms are acrolectal or basilectal. Otherwise the reader should assume that the forms are mesolectal and basilectal. Finally, as pointed out above, each Réunionnais example is followed by the Mauritian equivalent in parentheses, for comparison.

All tense, mood and aspect markers are preverbal in modern Réunionnais, whereas negation is postverbal. This suggests that Réunionnais may still have verb raising from V to Infl, as evidenced by the residual inflection on some Réunionnais verbs. This sets Réunionnais apart from other French lexifier creoles, where verbs are invariant and negation is preverbal. Réunionnais has two preverbal past tense markers, which are used either with or without the copula. The copula has three invariant forms: *lé* (present), *lété* (past) and *sra* (future).

##### 4.1 Past perfective marker (*la* + V) and past imperfective marker

(*té* + *i* + V)

Réunionnais has two past markers: the past perfective marker *la* (from French *passé composé* form using auxiliary *avoir*, e.g. *il a vu*, 'he has seen') and the past imperfective marker *té* (from French imperfect *était* 'was', or perhaps past participle *été* 'been') as illustrated in the two following examples:

7. *Muê la vni.*

I            PERF   come

'I have come.' (Baker and Corne 1982: 14)

(Mauritian: *Mo fin vini.*)

8. *Moin té i manz.*  
 I PAST 'i' eat  
 'I was eating.' (Cellier 1985: 42)  
 (Mauritian: *Mo ti pé manzé.*)

Baker and Corne (1982) mention that the verb forms used with the tense markers are either bare stems (in basilectal varieties), or a 'long' form (in acrolectal varieties) which are derived from the French past participle:

9. a. *prâ* (bare stem) vs. *pri* (ACROLECTAL) 'take'  
 b. *met* vs. *mi* 'put'  
 c. *konet* vs. *koni* 'know'

Cellier (1985: 48) points out that out of 400 Réunionnais verbs, 330 have two forms, a long and a short form. The acrolect uses both forms of the verb, whereas the basilect only uses the invariant verb stem:

- 10.a. *Mi manzé.* 'I ate' ACROLECTAL RÉUNIONNAIS  
 b. *Moin té i manz.* 'I ate' BASILECTAL RÉUNIONNAIS

#### 4.2 *Completive aspect marker: fin(i).*

This marker, from French past participle *fini* 'finished' may combine with the imperfect past marker to produce the pluperfect *te fin(i)*, but it may also appear on its own followed by the lexical verb:

11. *Muê te fini vuar.*  
 I PAST COMPLET come  
 'I had seen.' (Baker and Corne 1982: 17)  
 (Mauritian: *Mo ti trov.*)

12. *Mu i fin(i) met.*  
 I 'i' COMPLET put  
 'I had seen.' (Baker and Corne 1982: 17)  
 (Mauritian: *Mofin met.*)

13. *Lé fey te fini gréné.*  
 the leaves PAST COMPLET scatter  
 ‘The leaves were scattered.’  
 (Mauritian: *Bann fey fin fan partou.*)

#### 4.3 Future markers: *po(u) + V*, *(a)va + V*, and *sa(va) + V*

The imminent or indefinite future is expressed by using a preverbal aspectual marker, either *po(u)* (from French preposition *pour*) or *(a)va* (from the French analytic future *va* ‘go’), called ‘prospective’ by Cellier (1985), and ‘indefinite future’ by Lefebvre (1998):

14. *Si moin lété pa po piké...*  
 if I PAST NEG FUT poke  
 ‘If I was not about to poke...’ (Cellier 1982: 70)  
 (Mauritian: *Si mo pa ti prè pou pik...*)

15. *U ava gau é bezmâ.*  
 you FUT get a punishment  
 ‘You will be punished.’  
 (Mauritian: *To pou gagn en pinisyon.*)

16. *Li va pa vole.*  
 he FUT NEG steal  
 ‘He won’t steal.’  
 (Mauritian: *Li pa pou coquin.*)

The prospective future can be expressed in two ways: (i) by using the synthetic verb stem + suffix *-ra* (see examples 17 and 18 below; also Baker and Corne 1982: 1) and (ii) using a preverbal marker *sa(va)* (from colloquial French *s’en va* + infinitive). As noted above, the periphrastic construction is generally used for affirmative constructions.

17. *Mi i sâtra pa.*  
 I ‘i’ sing.PROSFUT NEG  
 ‘I won’t sing.’ (Baker and Corne 1982: 17) ACROLECTAL  
 (Mauritian: *Mo pa pou santé.*)

18. *Mi i dorra pa.*  
 I 'i' sing.PROSFUT NEG  
 'I won't sleep.' ACROLECTAL  
 (Mauritian: *Mo pa pou dormi.*)

19. *Mi sa manzé.*  
 I PROSFUT eat  
 'I will eat.' (Cellier 1985: 45) BASILECTAL  
 (Mauritian: *Mo pou manzé.*)

Baker and Corne (1982) claim that this particle cannot be used in a past + future (i.e. conditional) configuration, unlike Mauritian Creole where one has *ti ava* (past + future). However, Chaudenson (1984) and Cellier (1985) provide examples where past markers and future markers are combined:

20. *Moin té i sava dansé.*  
 I PAST 'i' PROSFUT dance  
 'I was going to dance.' (Chaudenson 1984: 167)  
 (Mauritian: *Mo ti pou dansé.*)

21. *Moin té i sa apré travayé.*  
 I PAST 'i' PROSFUT PROG dance  
 'I was going to be working.'  
 (Mauritian: *Mo ti pou travay.*)

22. *Moin té i sa travayé.*  
 I PAST 'i' PROSFUT work  
 'I was going to work.' (Cellier 1985: 45)  
 (Mauritian: *Mo ti pou travay.*)

As mentioned above, the prospective future *sa(va)* and the indefinite future *(a)va* are derived from the French *s'en va* and *va* respectively, both of which are used to express the future in colloquial French. However, in Réunionnais they are invariable and used in a non-French syntactic framework, since they are uninflected and can be combined with other TMA markers. In this sense they are similar to the Haitian indefinite future marker *va/ava*.

The prospective future example (19) is also attested in a phonetically

reduced shape, which is almost identical to the reduced form for the immediate future in Quebec French:

23. a. *Ma manzé.* (Réunionnais)  
 I.FUT eat  
 ‘I will eat.’
- b. *M’a manger.* (Canadian French) < *j’m’en va manger*  
 I.will eat  
 ‘I will eat.’
- c. *Vous allex manger.* (Canadian French)  
 you(pl) will.2pl eat  
 ‘You (pl) will eat.’

This fact has been used to support the superstratist model of creole genesis mentioned above (e.g. Chaudenson 1992), which claims that most creole structures are inherited from various dialects of their respective lexifier languages, with some regular internal changes and morphological levelling. However, in Quebec French the various forms of the future modal *aller* ‘to go’ cannot be used in conjunction with other modals or auxiliaries, whereas in creoles (including Réunionnais) they can, as we have seen in examples (20–22) above. This shows that, although forms (23a) and (23b) are superficially similar, they are underlyingly different: in Réunionnais, (23a) is a reduced form of example (19), *Mi sa manzé*—that is, the combination of the subject pronoun with a bare, preverbal aspectual marker. In Quebec French, example (23b) represents a phonologically reduced form of the verb ‘to go’, which cannot be used with other persons (as illustrated in (23c)). Thus, in Quebec French we are dealing with a purely phonological process, whereas in Réunionnais there are two historical processes, namely the reanalysis of a French periphrastic structure into an invariant, preverbal TMA marker, with a subsequent phonological simplification.

#### 4.4 *Progressive marker*: (a)pre + V

In Réunionnais, the progressive aspect is expressed using an invariant preverbal marker *apre*, based on the French periphrastic future *être après* + infinitive (‘to be after’).



24. *Li l(e) apre lir ê liv.*  
 he is PROGR read a book  
 ‘He’s reading a book’ (Baker and Corne 1982: 24)  
 (Mauritian: *Li pé lir en liv.*)

25. *Moin té i sa apré travayé.*  
 he PAST ‘i’ PROSFUT PROGR work  
 ‘I was about to go to work.’ (Cellier 1982: 70)  
 (Mauritian: *Mo ti prè pou travay.*)

Note in example (24) that the copula is optional, reflecting a difference between lects. In particular, in acrolectal Réunionnais the copula is used, in basilectal varieties it is not. The zero-copula form is typical of other Frenchlexifier creoles, and again this shows that (basilectal) Réunionnais is not a variety of French, since in no French dialect does one find zero-copula structures in periphrastic constructions. Also, the combination of three preverbal TMA markers in example (25) is typical of creoles and has no equivalent in French (standard or colloquial). Example (28) below illustrates the same point.

#### 4.5 Inchoative markers: *met (a) + V*, *komans + V*, *gay(e) + V*

These markers indicate that an action is beginning, as in the following example:

26. *i komans koupe lé kolé zanim.*  
 ‘i’ incho cut the throat Animals  
 ‘They begin to cut the animals’ throats.’ (Cellier 1985: 46)  
 (Mauritian: *Li komans pou koupé licou bann zanim.*)

Baker and Corne (1982: 83) note the existence of a very particular construction which has no direct equivalent in current French: constructions using *gay(e)* or its acrolectal form *gagn* (both from *gagner*) with the meaning ‘to have’ or ‘to get’.

27. *Muê la gay sa avek Zili.*  
 I past get that with Julie  
 ‘I got that from Julie.’ (Baker and Corne 1982: 83)  
 (Mauritian: *Mo fin gagn sa ek Zili.*)

Apparently, this extension in the use of *gagner* is derived from 17<sup>th</sup> century French. However, Réunionnais developed another meaning for *gay(e)/gagn* + infinitive: ‘to be able to...’. In example (29) below, *gagn* is used as a TMA marker. As we have seen in the previous examples, the tense/mood/aspect markers may be combined to produce various meanings, as in the following two examples from Cellier (1985: 47):

28. *Famm la té fini koman kakayé.*  
 woman det past compl incho laugh  
 ‘This woman had already begun to laugh.’  
 (Mauritian: *Sa famm la fin komans riyé.*)

29. *Koméla noré<sup>5</sup> besoin gagn retourné.*  
 now FUT MOD MOD return  
 ‘Now we should be able to go.’ ACROLECTAL  
 (Mauritian: *Astèr la nou bizin kapav allé.*)

#### 4.6 A note on the historical development of TMA markers

As already mentioned, most of the examples above are taken from mesolectal and basilectal varieties of Réunionnais, while some are attested in acrolectal varieties. There is evidence that the continuum illustrates the various developmental stages of Réunionnais, and that the acrolectal constructions predate the basilectal ones. For instance, Chaudenson (1981: 185-188) shows that over a period of 100 years (1780 to 1880 approximately), personal pronouns in both Mauritian and Réunionnais evolved phonetically toward increasingly basilectal pronunciations: *moi* (1<sup>st</sup> person singular) became *m*’ in Réunionnais and *mo* in Mauritian. Similarly, *vous autres* (2<sup>nd</sup> person plural) became *zot* in both creoles. The three examples below illustrate the basilectalisation of both languages over the same period:

18 <sup>th</sup> century	19 <sup>th</sup> century
30. <i>moi va manzé</i>	<i>mi sa manzé/ma manzé</i> (Réunionnais)
I FUT eat I	FUT eat /I.FUT eat (Chaudenson 1981: 210)

18 <sup>th</sup> century	19 <sup>th</sup> century
31. <i>moi donné vous</i>	<i>mo donn ou</i> (Mauritian)
I give you (SG)	I give you (SG) (Chaudenson 1981: 196)

- |   |                          |     |
|---|--------------------------|-----|
| 18 <sup>th</sup> century  | 19 <sup>th</sup> century |     |
| 32. <i>moi s'en va manzé</i> <i>mo a manzé/mo ava manzé</i> (Mauritian) |                          |     |
| I   | FUT                      | eat |
| I   | FUT                      | eat |
| /I  | FUT                      | eat |
- (Chaudenson 1981: 210)

Further examples of the Réunion creole continuum are provided by Alleyne (1996: 41), who argues that:

le réunionnais... reflète, dans ses variétés actuelles (...) tous les niveaux dialectaux et stylistiques du français qui ont fait partie de la structure socio-linguistique de la situation de contact. Cela apparaît clairement dans les différentes formes verbales synonymes qui ont survécu.

[In its modern varieties, Réunionnais reflects all the dialectal and stylistic varieties of French which belonged to the sociolinguistic setting of language contact. This is clear in the different synonymous verbal forms which have survived.]

This is illustrated by the forms listed in (30) to (32). Alleyne (1996: 98) also shows that in 18<sup>th</sup> century Mauritian, there was a copula and subject-verb inversion in question formation, whereas in present-day Mauritian (and in most other creoles) the verb remains *in situ* and the copula is deleted:

18<sup>th</sup> century Mauritian:

33. *Ou li ton manman?*  
 where is your mother  
 'Where is your mother?'  
 (Modern Mauritian: *Kot to maman?*)
34. *Sa blanc la li bokou malen.*  
 this white DEICTIC is very smart  
 'This white man is very smart.' (Alleyne 1996: 98)  
 (Modern Mauritian: *Sa blan la byen malen.*)

Modern Basilectal Réunionnais:

35. *Sa en bon bong.*  
 this a good guy  
 'He's a nice guy.' (Alleyne 1996: 89)  
 (Modern Mauritian: *Li en bon boug.*)

Again, this suggests that 18<sup>th</sup> century Mauritian was typologically closer to French since it had verb-raising and a copula, whereas today Mauritian has no verb-raising and no copula (at least, not in attributive and equational constructions). Other present-day French-lexifier creoles follow the modern Mauritian pattern, as illustrated by the following examples where there is no verb-raising, and a copula only in existential constructions:

36. *Kote li ye* (Haitian)  
 where he is  
 ‘Where is he?’ (Alleyne 1996: 93)
37. *Kouman ou ye* (Dominican, St Lucian)  
 how you are  
 ‘How are you?’ (Alleyne 1996: 93)
38. *Komo to ye* (Louisiana Creole)  
 how you are  
 ‘How are you?’ (Alleyne 1996: 93)
39. *Ou to ye* (Louisiana Creole)  
 where he is  
 ‘Where is he?’ (Alleyne 1996: 93)
40. *Kot li te ye* (Louisiana Creole)  
 where he PAST COP  
 ‘Where was he?’ (Alleyne 1996: 93)
41. *Kouman yo di sa nan kreyol* (Haitian)  
 how you say that in creole  
 ‘How do you say that in creole?’ (Alleyne 1996: 74)
42. *Kouman (ou) di sa an kreyol* (Mauritian)  
 how you say that in creole  
 ‘How do you say that in creole?’ (Alleyne 1996: 74)

Compare (42) with the French translation in (43):

Colloquial French (no inversion)

43. *Comment on dit ça en créole*  
 how one says that in creole

Standard French (with subject-verb inversion)

44. *Comment dit-on ça en créole*  
 how says one that in creole

Standard French (no inversion)

45. *Comment est-ce qu'on dit ça en créole*  
 how is-it that one says that in creole

Although the examples in sections 4.1 to 4.6 demonstrate that basilectal Réunionnais uses invariant TMA markers, like other creoles, the Mauritian translations provided after each example show clearly that homophonous markers are not used to convey the same meanings in both languages, and in particular are combined in very different ways. The informants for the Mauritian examples confirmed that Mauritian was not mutually intelligible with Réunionnais, and that Haitian was in fact much easier for them to understand. In the end, Mauritian may be no closer to Réunionnais than to Haitian.

## 5. Réunion: a post-creole continuum?

As noted in section 3, *Créole des Blancs* represents a variety of partially creolised French which has features absent from the basilectal creole, such as rounded front vowels, masculine/feminine distinctions in possessive pronouns, and the use of weak personal pronouns (*je, tu, il*).

Chaudenson believes (contrary to Baker and Corne) that Mauritius was first settled by Frenchmen and slaves from Réunion, and that therefore Mauritian creole is genetically related to Réunionnais. Essentially, Chaudenson claims that *à date ancienne* (i.e. in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), Mauritian and basilectal Réunionnais shared most morphosyntactic features (agglutination of French articles, pronouns, analytic tense, zero copula, etc.), but that due to basilectal erosion in Réunionnais and internal changes in Mauritian, the two languages are now very different and not mutually intelligible. He also points out that both Réunionnais and Mauritian share exactly the same phonemic

inventory and almost the entire lexicon (Chaudenson 1974: 239-240). The following quote summarises Chaudenson's position (1984: 252):

Si le créole réunionnais présente aujourd'hui des caractères particuliers, ce n'est pas, comme P. Baker a vainement cherché à l'établir, en raison d'une origine différente de celle des autres parlers de la zone, mais parce que la situation sociolinguistique l'a conduit à évoluer de façon à faire disparaître nombre de traits basilectaux communs avec les autres parlers, qui les avaient d'ailleurs, très vraisemblablement nous le verrons, hérités, directement ou indirectement, de lui. (Chaudenson 1984: 252)

[If today Réunionnais creole has some specific characteristics, it is not, as P. Baker tried to show, because of a different origin from other languages of the area, but because the sociolinguistic setting made the language evolve in such a way that several basilectal features common with the other languages have disappeared, even though these languages had probably inherited these features from Réunionnais, directly or indirectly, as we will see.]

However, one major problem with Chaudenson's position is that basilectal Réunionnais emerged during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *after* Mauritius was first settled. It is possible that early Réunionnais (*Bourbonnais*) influenced the development of Mauritian Creole, but because of the chronology, the basilectal forms of Réunionnais and Mauritian must have developed independently from one another, possibly from a common mesolectal or acrolectal ancestor. In fact, most of the similarities between Réunionnais and Mauritian may be due not to a genetic relationship between the two, but rather to the fact that both languages have the same lexifier language, which was restructured in similar (though not identical) ways, as well as similar substrata, namely Malagasy, Bantu languages, and some West African (mainly Kwa) languages. The difference lies in the fact that Réunionnais has retained some French morphosyntax, whereas Mauritian has none.

Chaudenson (1984: 162) criticises Baker and Corne (1982) for using only acrolectal examples in order to maximise the differences between Réunionnais and Mauritian. This is the main problem in describing Réunionnais: since there is a continuum, the different varieties do not seem to be autonomous

from one another and speakers typically master a range of lects. Therefore, forms elicited from a single speaker may actually belong to different lects.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite conflicting descriptions of Réunionnais syntax, there is strong evidence that *basilectal* Réunionnais is not just a variety of French, as shown in the examples in section 4. Thus, the *Créole des Bas* is just as much a creole as Haitian or Mauritian, though it is not as radical a creole, partly because it has recently undergone decreolisation under the influence of French, the official language. The basilectal erosion of Réunionnais is shown in Chaudenson (1981), who provides several examples of basilectal creole structures from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries which have disappeared from modern Réunionnais. If this basilectal erosion continues, Réunionnais may undergo further decreolisation and eventually be absorbed by French, and persist only as a regional dialect of French.

However, the verbal forms analysed in the previous sections (with the exception of the forms identified as acrolectal) show that Réunionnais is similar to other French-lexifier creoles in its use of combined TMA markers. While it is true that negation is postverbal in Réunionnais, contrary to most other creoles, this feature alone is not enough to claim that Réunionnais is a dialect of French. I have mentioned in passing that many of the TMA markers seem to come from periphrastic verbal constructions found in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century French, and also in Quebec French, which because of its isolation from France is in many respects more conservative than standard French. However, a common etymology does not imply a common underlying structure. In other words, the data suggests that the French periphrastic constructions have been reanalysed as invariant, preverbal TMA markers in Réunionnais, as happened in other French-lexifier creoles.

Thus, the term semi-creole may apply to the early stages of Réunionnais (*Bourbonnais*), and to some acrolectal varieties spoken by the *Petits Blancs* today (these varieties are probably direct descendants of *Bourbonnais*). However, the basilectal Réunionnais spoken by Blacks, Indians and some mixed-race individuals is a creole, not a semi-creole, even though it is less radical than Mauritian or Haitian since it does have a number of French grammatical features, such as an optional copula and postposed negation. Though it is true that, in the Principles and Parameters syntactic framework,

postposed negation is evidence of verb-raising from V to Infl, this feature alone is not sufficient to classify Réunionnais as a dialect of French. First, French also has verb-raising to Comp in yes-no questions as evidenced in subject-verb inversion (e.g. *As-tu acheté le livre?* ‘Have you bought the book?’), while basilectal Réunionnais has no subject-verb inversion as in other creoles. Furthermore, several other diagnostic features can be used to establish ‘creoleness’, including phonological characteristics (such as the absence of front rounded vowels in French-lexifier creoles, including basilectal Réunionnais), lexical semantics, and especially the existence of bare, preverbal TMA markers, all of which are typical of Réunionnais.

Finally, though early Réunionnais (*Bourbonnais*) probably influenced Mauritian in the early stages, Mauritian cannot be considered an offshoot of Réunionnais since the basilectal features of Réunionnais, including its complex system of TMA markers, emerged after the settlement of Mauritius and the establishment of a creole there. Thus, most features of modern Mauritian appear to be independent developments. In sum, though Chaudenson (1974, 1981) is probably right in claiming that (basilectal) Réunionnais is a ‘true’ creole, Baker and Corne (1982, 1986) make a compelling case that Mauritian developed independently of Réunionnais.

## Notes

- 1 Baker and Corne (1982) transcribe the Réunionnais 1st person singular pronoun as *muê*, with the circumflex indicating that the vowel is nasalised, whereas Chaudenson (1981 and elsewhere) and Cellier (1985) use a transcription based on French pronunciation (i.e. *moin*). In this article, examples are presented with the orthography used in the original source.
- 2 A *cirque* is a steep hollow, often containing a small lake, occurring at the upper end of some mountain valleys.
- 3 *Mi* is an allophone of the 1st person singular pronoun *moin* (*muê*).
- 4 Baker and Corne (1982) point out that /i/ or /ki/ (used with the past tense) are obligatory verbal markers, except before *avuar* (‘to have’), *etr* (‘to be’), *a(va)* (indefinite future marker) and *fin(i)* (completive aspect marker). They also believe that the *ki/i* is probably derived from the periphrastic French construction *C’est moi qui...* Another hypothesis is that /i/ could be a 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *reprise du sujet* (resumptive subject pronoun) which generalised to other persons. According to Chaudenson (1984), this is the only correct interpretation of the origin of /i/: Chaudenson (1984: 168-169) says that the mysterious /i/ ‘résulte de la généralisation à toutes les personnes du ‘i’ anaphorique’ [‘comes from the generalisation of the 3rd person anaphoric ‘i’ to all other persons’]. In other words, Chaudenson does not believe that /i/ is a contraction of /ki/.



- 5 This future marker is not mentioned elsewhere in Cellier (1985), and it is presumably an acrolectal feature derived from the French future of *avoir* (*aurai*).

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