

# ASPECTS OF SEYCHELLES FRENCH

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The Seychelles Archipelago in the Indian Ocean consists of islands and islets lying between the 4th and 10th parallels South, and the 46th and 47th lines of East longitude. They are approximately 1200 miles north of Mauritius and 1100 miles east of Zanzibar.

The Seychelles are marked on Portuguese charts dated 1502, but the first recorded visit to the islands was in 1609, by an English ship. The second recorded visit was in 1742 by Captain Lazarre Picault, who returned in 1774 and annexed the islands for France. Picault, who was acting as the agent of Mahé de la Bourdonnais, governor of Mauritius, named the principal island Mahé, and the group Iles de la Bourdonnais. In 1756, the group was renamed after Moreau de Séchelles, *contrôleur des finances* under Louis XV. The first permanent settlement was made about 1768, when the town of Mahé was founded.

The islands were occupied in 1810 by the British, to whom they were ceded by the Treaty of Paris in 1814. Incorporated at first as a dependency of Mauritius, they were constituted a separate colony in 1903.

The Seychelles were uninhabited when first visited by Europeans, and were subsequently colonised by settlers from Mauritius and Reunion (then called Bourbon). The European section, still predominantly French, forms less than 5% of the population. The early planters imported slaves from Mauritius and Reunion, and the Negro population was further increased by the introduction of freed slaves from West Africa. There has also been an immigration of Chinese, and, in larger numbers, Indians, most of whom are from the Malabar coast. The non-white population speaks a creole French very similar to that spoken in Reunion (see Jones 1952). Although English is the official language, and is also the medium of instruction in state schools, creole is spoken in everyday communication by the majority of the population, and French is used by the European families of Reunionnais and Mauritian origin.

## PHONEMES

The following phonemic study of the French spoken in the Seychelles is based on the findings of a questionnaire put to members of a family who emigrated from the Seychelles to New Zealand, the mother and 19-year old son three years ago, the father and two daughters (aged 18 and 15) two years ago. Both parents are natives of Bordeaux. Before coming to New Zealand, they had lived in the Seychelles for 24 years, so that most of the children's education was provided there before it was continued in New Zealand. The questionnaire used was a modified version of that used by Martinet 1945.

**Vowels.** The oral vowel phonemes were:

I	Y	U
E	OE	O
A		

For the status of [ə], see below.

The nasal vowel phonemes were: |ẽ|, |œ|, |ã|, |ɔ̃|.

The archphoneme |I| represents the phonemes |i| and |j|, which are in complementary distribution. |i| occurs in all positions except: (1) syllable-initial before a vowel, and (2) syllable-final after a vowel, when |j| occurs; thus (1) *travaillons* |travajɔ̃|, but *piéd* |pie|, realised as [pije]; and (2) *travail* |travaj|. For final |i|, the free variant |i<sup>ɪ</sup>| was noted in the speech of the son and elder daughter.

The archphoneme |U| represents the phonemes |u| and |w|, which are in complementary distribution, |u| occurring in all positions except syllable-initial before a vowel, when |w| occurs. Thus |west|, but |lu œR|, realised as [luwœR]. For final |u|, the free variant [uw] was noted in the speech of the son and elder daughter. The only exception to the above account is the word *houille* |UI|, realised as |uj|, which is an introduced metropolitan word; |UI| is normally realised as |wi| *oui*.

The archphoneme |A| was normally realised as |a|. In the speech of the mother, the most conservative and least anglicised speaker in the family, there was a tendency to lengthen this to |a:| in words where standard French has |a|. The son and elder daughter consistently used [a<sup>ə</sup>] or [a:<sup>ə</sup>] in final open syllables.

The archphoneme |E| represents the phonemes |e| and |ɛ|, which are in complementary distribution: (1) in final open syllables: |e|; e.g.: *craie* |kre|; *était* |Ete|; *été* |Ete|; (2) in final closed syllables: |ɛ|; e.g.: *père* |pɛR|; *fête* |fɛt|; (3) in prefinal syllables: |E|; e.g.: *était*, *été* |Ete|. For final |e|, the son and elder daughter consistently used the free variant [e<sup>ɪ</sup>].

The archphoneme |O| represents the phonemes |o| and |ɔ|, which are in complementary distribution: (1) in final open syllables, and in prefinal syllables: |o|; e.g.: *pot* |po|; *donner* |done|; the prefinal [o] is very short; (2) in final closed syllables, and before |R| of the same syllable: |ɔ|; e.g.: *sotte*, *saute* |sɔt|; *porter* |pɔRte|; *porte* |pɔRt|. For final |o|, the son and elder daughter consistently used the free variants [ou] [ow].

The archphoneme |Y| represents the phonemes |y| and |ɥ|, which are in complementary distribution, |y| occurring in all positions except syllable-initial before a vowel, when |ɥ| occurs: *huile* |ɥil|, but *lueur* |ly œR|. In the speech of the son and elder daughter, the free

variant [y<sup>u</sup>] occurred for final |y|.

The archphoneme |œ| represents the phonemes |φ| and |œ|, which were in complementary distribution in the speech of all except the mother who used only |φ|; with the others, |φ| occurred in final open syllables, |œ| in all other positions.

The status of [ə] was difficult to determine with the limited corpus available, its use corresponding in detail to no recorded metropolitan usage. It occurred regularly only in monosyllabic words, and in the initial syllable of other words, e.g.: *je me le demande* |ʒə mə lə dəmãd|, and must therefore be accorded phonemic status in these positions. Elsewhere, its occurrence appears to derive from use as a *voyelle d'allègement*, the full conditions for which were not determined.

The phoneme |ẽ| was realised as [ẽ] (not [ẽ̃]); |œ̃| as [œ̃]; |ã| as [ã], except in the speech of the father, who used [ã<sup>n</sup>]; and |õ| as [õ].

Some consideration must also be given to vowel hiatus, which occurs very rarely. It is normally avoided between words by liaison of the preceding consonant, or (less frequently) by the use of [h]: *les haies* [lEze] or [le he]; *en haut* [ãno]. Within the word, vowel hiatus was normally avoided by the introduction of a glide, the nature of which was determined by the preceding vowel: *piéd* [pije]; *loueur* [lu<sup>w</sup>œ R], *lueur* [ly<sup>u</sup>œ R].

**Consonants.** The consonant phonemes were:

p	f	t	s	ʃ	k	
b	v	d	z	ʒ	g	and l, R.
m		n				

For |j|, |w|, |ɥ|, and [h], see the section on vowels above. The English phoneme |ŋ| occurs in borrowings such as *camping* |kãpiŋ|. The consonants are realised as in metropolitan French. The following notes are added: in foreign loanwords, the children used [dʒ] where the parents used [ʒ] as in *jazz* [ʒaz]; and [dʒaz]; the [R] was *grasseyé*; when the combination |nj + C| occurs, it is realised as [ɲ + C], e.g.: *renseignement* |RãSENjmã| [RãSEɲmã]. Double consonants occurred only in words representing a prefixed form, e.g.: *limité* |limite|, *illimité* |illimite|; archaic *remédiable* |Rẽmediabl|, *irremédiable* |irRẽmediabl|.

**Relationship to Standard French.** Two main influences appear to have been at work on Seychelles French in comparison with standard metropolitan pronunciation: Southern regional metropolitan French, and English. The Southern influence may in fact be the influence of the parents' place of origin, although it would appear that most of the French settlers trace their families back to Southern stock. However, it is hardly worthwhile discussing the detail of the influences when the

material has been provided by one family only, a family, moreover, which has been further subjected to additional English influence since its arrival in New Zealand.

## Vocabulary

### Flora

1. *Coeur de boeuf*, *chérimolia*, *âtres* are fruit-bearing trees of the *Anona* genus. *Atres* appears to be a name peculiar to the Seychelles.
2. *Jamalac* is also a fruit-tree, *Eugenia malaccensis* L. Réunionnais creole *zamalac*. The name probably comes from the old botanical name *Jam(bosa) malac(censis)*.
3. *Orange* is used for *oranger*, and designates a variety with green-skinned fruit that do not ripen to yellow.
4. *Takamaka* designates *Calophyllum inophyllum* L., the *tamanou* of French Oceania. The name is also used in Reunion and the Comorres, and is presumably of Swahili origin.
5. *Antigone* is an ornamental vine, *Antigonum leptopus* Hook. & Arn., more commonly known elsewhere as the *liane corail*.
6. *Bougainvilléa* is the well-known ornamental, *Bougainvillea spectabilis* (with red flowers) and *B. glabra* (purple flowers). Metropolitan French uses *bougainvillée* or *bougainvillier*; the Seychelles word is the generic name, also used as the common name in English.
7. *Chouchoute* is the name of the "choko" (*Sechium edule* Sw.). The word also was current in French India, and is used in New Caledonia. The New Caledonian use can be explained only through introduction by Malabar workers from Reunion, where, although *chouchou* is the standard form, *paille de chouchoute* is also attested. The occurrence of the word in the Seychelles may be due to direct immigration from the one-time French enclaves on the Malabar Coast, or to the Réunionnais origins of so many inhabitants.
8. *Egrette* designates *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* Sw., more usually known elsewhere as *l'orgueil de Chine*, but *aigrette* is also used, and the Seychelles spelling may reflect the English *egret*.
9. *Flamboyant* "flame tree", *Delonix regia* (Bojer) Ref. (= *Poinciana regia* Bojer); this is essentially an overseas French term, recorded in France only by the Larousse dictionaries. The tree originates from Madagascar.
10. *Giraumon* "pumpkin" has replaced *citrouille*.
11. *Margose* "balsam-pear", *Momordica charantia* L., also used on Reunion and New Caledonia with the same meaning. Originally a Portuguese word borrowed from Mozambique, *amargosa* "bitter", cf. Mauritian *margose* "bitter". *L'amargose* has become *la margose*.



12. *Sensible* is the name of the *mimosa clochette*, *Dichrostachys glomerata*, the leaves of which react to the touch in the same way as those of the sensitive (*Mimosa pudica* L.).

#### Fish, Crustaceans, Mollusks

13. *Bourgeois*: a fish renowned for its fine taste.
14. *Camaron* designates a freshwater prawn, and is also used on Reunion. It is a borrowing from Mozambique of the Portuguese *camarão*, of the same meaning.
15. *Capitaine* is a name commonly given in Reunion and French West Africa to large edible fish of varying genera. The name is often specialised, cf. West African *capitaine de rivière* and *capitaine d'estuaire* (Mauny 1952): in the Seychelles *capitaine de port* is used.
16. *Ourite* "octopus", cf. Mauritian creole *zourite*. From Malagasy *horita*, "octopus".
17. *Tec-tec* "cockle" is probably a deformation of Fr. *tectaire* which designates a genus of gasteropod mollusks found in warm waters. The word does not appear to be connected with Reunionnais and Mauritian *tèque-tèque*, which designates a bird.
18. *Tourlourou* is the name of a small crab. The name designates a land crab in the French West Indies (*Gecarcinus ruricola*), French West Africa (*Cardisoma armatum*), and Tahiti (*Cardisoma carnifex*), and the "fiddler crab" (*Uca* sp.) in New Caledonia; in Brittany it designates an unidentified crab. The origin, from Provencal *tourlourou* "tapageur", is clear.
19. *Vieille* "codfish" (*Cossyphus (Harpe) rufus* L.).
20. *Couroupas* "slug".

#### Birds

21. *Nardin* is a small black parrot (*Coracopsis nigra*), commonly taught to imitate words after its tongue has been slit.
22. *Perroquet noir* designates a "singing parrot".
23. *Serin* is the name for a finch, *Fringilla (Carduellis) canaria*. The males are red, the females grey.
24. *Toc-toc* "sparrow".
25. *Veuve* designates a bird possibly the same as the African *veuve* (Ploceidae), generally sombre in colour, with a long black tail.

#### Insects

26. *Mouche jaune* "wasp".

#### Maritime Words

27. *Caster* "basket-trap for fish"; cf. Metropolitan and Reunionnais *caster* "lobster-pot".

28. *Catioulo* "dinghy".

29. *Nalle* "large passenger ship". Such ships are rare visitors to Victoria, the port of Mahé, and their main importance in earlier times was for the mail they brought.

30. *Péniche* "whale-boat"; this sense is now archaic in metropolitan French.

31. *Quartier-marron* "raft". The use of *marron* may here represent Reunionnais *marron*, first used of runaway slaves, then in such expressions as *rum marron* "illegally-manufactured rum" (hence of poorer quality); or it may refer to the colour of the banana stems commonly used by small boys in the Seychelles to make rafts.

#### General Vocabulary

32. *Grenasse* "shower of rain" } These are both maritime words the meaning  
33. *Chavirer* = Fr. *renverser* } of which has been generalised. *Chavirer*  
is similarly used in New Caledonian French.

34. *Bungalow* "beach house" } These are both English borrowings. *Bus-*  
35. *Bus* [bœs] = Fr. *autobus* } *driver* is also used.

36. *Caoutchouc* "tyre". Also in New Caledonian French.

37. *Calou* "locally-made rum", the manufacture of which consumes most of the local production of sugar-cane. Elsewhere, *calou* designates the fermented liquor of palm sap (especially of the coconut palm). The name may however be a transfer of Reunionnais *calou* "bâton à piler", cf. Réunionnais *frangourin*, *flangorin* "hand-mill for crushing cane", then "home-made rum".

38. *Pounaque* designates the residue which is left after manufacturing copra, and which is used as pig-food.

39. *Paletot* = Fr. *veston*, as in New Caledonian French.

40. *Cache* "two-cent piece". Also a coin name in the French of Indo-China.

41. *Canette* "marble", as in Southern metropolitan French.

42. *Mec* "fellow, chap", with no pejorative value. The term seems to have lost its pejorative value in army usage during the first World War, and this usage appears to be more typical of overseas French (New Caledonian also) than of Parisian.

43. *Maquereau* "a person who talks about you behind your back", a development of the sense "police informer".

44. *Grand brûlé* "person from the southern half of Mahé". About 1770, Pierre Poivre, *intendant* of the Ile de France, realising that the Seychelles were outside the hurricane belt, had spice plantations

begun there with the object of wresting the monopoly of the spice trade from the Dutch. The existence of these plantations was kept highly secret, and when in 1778 a vessel flying a British flag was seen approaching the harbour, the plantations were set alight so as not to reveal the secret. The ship turned out to be a French slaver which thought it was entering a British port. The name *Grand Brûlé* was given to this southern spice-plantation area of Mahe as a result, and was drawn from the geologically recent lava-flow area called *Le Grand Brûlé* on Reunion. The name designates people from this area of Mahe.

45. *Pointeur* "boy-friend".

46. *Noutia* "dance".

47. *Séga mauricien* "dance". On Mauritius and Reunion, *séga* is the name of a dance, and in Mauritian creole the word also means "to tremble", and is the name of an African snake. A semantic development of Portuguese *sega* "harvest"?

49. *Salaam* "goodbye, adieu", of Arabic origin. The word was introduced into Mauritian and Reunionnais usage either from contact with Arabs or by Muslim immigrants from India, and is used on these islands as the normal greeting both on meeting and on leaving people.

50. *Ou* is a borrowing from creole, where *ou* = Fr. *vous*. In Seychelles French, it is mainly used in the expressions *eh, ou!* "Hey, you!", and *ou féroce* "pretty good".

#### *Sources*

The sources of the vocabulary terms noted fall into the categories typical of French dialects in colonies or former colonies: provincial terms (e.g. 41), archaic terms (30, ?36, ?39), intercolonial borrowings (here Reunion and Mauritius provide the dominant influence: 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 44, 47, and possibly 37), maritime words (32, 33), borrowings from the new dominant colonising language (English in this case: 34, 35, possibly 6, 8), and from other foreign languages in neighbouring areas (usually here through another medium, in this case mainly Reunionnais French, cf. 4, 11, 14, 16, 47, 49). Some of the terms may be local innovations (e.g. 45), but much more information is required on the many varieties of overseas French before innovation may be regarded as certain.

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