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Philip Baker, Sibylle Kriegel

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# Mauritian Creole

PHILIP BAKER AND SIBYLLE KRIEGEL

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## 1. Introduction

The Republic of Mauritius, located about 900 km east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, has a total area of 2,040 square kilometers and had an estimated population of 1,288,000 in 2008. It comprises the island of Mauritius itself (1,865 km<sup>2</sup>), where the overwhelming majority of the population lives, and the dependencies of Rodrigues (109 km<sup>2</sup>, c.40,000 inhabitants), Agalega (24 km<sup>2</sup>, c.300 inhabitants), and the St Brandon group of islets which, though constantly visited by fishing vessels, lacks any permanent residents.

Mauritian Creole, the dominant spoken language of Mauritius and its dependencies, is spoken by everyone born in these islands as their first or additional language. It is also spoken by many thousands of Mauritians who have emigrated to other countries, mainly in western Europe and Australia. It is closely related to Reunion Creole (see Bollée, in this volume) and Seychelles Creole (see Michaelis and Rosalie, in this volume).

## 2. Socio-historical background and the current linguistic situation

After the island was abandoned by the Dutch in 1709, it was occupied by the French in December 1721 by a few people from Reunion (then called *Isle Bourbon*) while awaiting two much delayed ships from France which eventually arrived in March 1722 after half the passengers, mainly Swiss troops, had died en route. None of these people came as settlers. They were joined by 30 slaves from Reunion, almost all of whom left within a year, and 65 Malagasy slaves, a third of whom quickly escaped and were never recaptured. The Compagnie des Indes wanted some Réunionnais families to move there but this did not happen because they feared that Mauritius, with two natural harbours whereas their island had none, might rapidly overtake Reunion in importance. By the end of 1725, hardly any of the Europeans who came in 1722 remained in the island, the Swiss troops having been replaced by French soldiers.

In 1726, Lenoir, head of the Compagnie's Indian Ocean operations, proposed a new plan for the settlement of the island: military colonization. Unattached young women were to be brought from France. Soldiers who married one of them would be given land and slaves in order to become settlers. Slaves were to be shipped from West Africa, Madagascar, and India while skilled artisans were to be recruited in Pondicherry

### Mauritian Creole

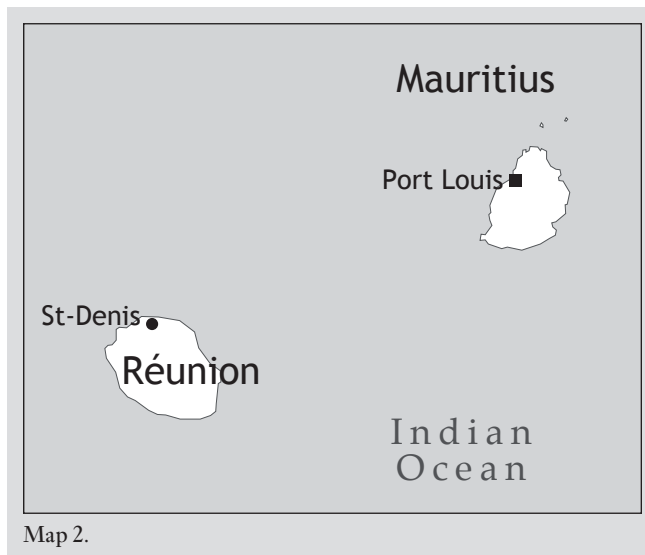
Number of speakers:	More than 1,300,000
Major lexifier:	French
Other contributing languages:	(In chronological order:) Malagasy, Tamil, Wolof, Mandinka, various Bantu languages of East Africa, Bhojpuri, English
Location:	Mauritius in the western Indian Ocean
Official language of Mauritius:	English



Map 1.

for construction work. These plans were rapidly implemented. By 1730, non-Europeans already outnumbered Europeans by a considerable margin. When appointed governor of the two islands in 1735, Labourdonnais chose Mauritius as his headquarters, reducing Reunion to provincial status, thereby confirming the fears of the Réunionnais. Languages spoken by non-Europeans in Mauritius at that time include at least Bengali, Indo-Portuguese, Malagasy, Mandinka, Tamil, Wolof, and perhaps Yoruba.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While most slaves from West Africa were transported from the Compagnie's depot in Senegal, there was one shipment from Whydah which brought 178 slaves to Mauritius in 1729. Baker (1982a, 1982b) assumed that these would



Map 2.

In the 30 years from 1735, Madagascar was the main source of slaves, but slaves speaking Bantu languages had begun to be introduced from 1736 and their proportion slowly increased until they overtook Malagasy arrivals decisively in about 1765. Thereafter, Bantu slaves from East Africa accounted for the vast majority of newcomers. Small numbers of Indian slaves continued to be introduced throughout the eighteenth century.

The terms of transfer of ownership to Britain in 1812 safeguarded the French language and culture, and discouraged any exodus of the Francophone population. A Protector of Slaves was appointed in the 1820s, bringing the realization that the abolition of slavery was inevitable, and leading many owners of domestic slaves to make the latter free citizens without waiting for abolition in 1835. Former slaves were then to be paid but required to remain on the plantations for several years. This plan failed because the wages offered were considered inadequate. Many slaves abandoned the plantations but then needed to find land where they could eke out a living. This proved difficult and some emigrated to Rodrigues, the Seychelles, and elsewhere. The plantations meanwhile found an inexhaustible, alternative source of cheap labour in India, thus sowing the seeds of long-term interethnic tension. This coincided with a boom in sugar prices, leading to a vast increase in the land under cultivation and Indian immigration on a truly massive scale. The population in 1835 was about 100,000; in the following 35 years a total of 365,000 Indian indentured labourers arrived, while only 81,000 of these had left on completion of their contracts by 1871. Sixty-eight per cent of the population was by then of Indian descent, a proportion which has scarcely changed since.

probably been speakers of one of the Gbe languages spoken by the majority of the population of what is today the Republic of Benin but there are now reasons for supposing that they might instead have spoken Yoruba (known locally as Nago) used by a significant minority in southeastern Benin.

Indian immigrants brought several languages from western (Gujarati, Maharati) and southern India (Telugu, as well as the already represented Tamil) but the majority came from the Bhojpuri-speaking region of northeast India.

Chinese immigrants also began arriving in the nineteenth century but formed only 0.5 per cent of the population when first identified as a separate category in 1861, and did not achieve their current proportion of around 3 per cent until 1952.

Although some primary schools, mainly run by religious organizations, had existed since the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1950s that free primary education became available for all children. This had the effect of enabling every Bhojpuri-speaking child to acquire Mauritian Creole in the playground while exposing all pupils to French and English in the classroom. French remained, as before, the dominant language of the media (a radio station and several newspapers). Television, introduced in 1965, brought some increase in the use of English, but this remained little used outside the domains of education, government, and big business. Mauritian Creole was the dominant spoken language of the towns but shared this role with Bhojpuri in rural areas.

British policy in the 1960s was to divest itself of its colonies, including Mauritius. Hindus, about half the population, generally favoured independence, while most of the “general population”<sup>2</sup> (30%) was firmly opposed, and other minorities were uncertain of where their best interests lay. Tensions came to a head in 1965 with rioting and interethnic murders leading to a state of emergency and the arrival of British troops. In the following 1967 election, parties favouring independence won a clear majority and Mauritius became independent in 1968.

Sociolinguistic changes since independence include a generally more relaxed attitude to Mauritian Creole and its use in some domains where it was formerly all but taboo (e.g. banks). However, there has so far been only a marginal increase in the use of Mauritian Creole in the broadcasting and print media.

Other, more significant, changes are signalled by census figures relating to language use. These have been collected since 1944 but published figures were often misleading because they recorded ethnic rather than linguistic information. Considerable improvements to data collection and analysis have been made since then. The most striking change over the period 1944–2000 as a whole is the steady increase in Mauritian Creole at the expense of oriental (Chinese and Indian) languages. The 2000 census allowed respondents to name either one or two languages as being “usually spoken at home”. The published figures indicated that 81 per cent spoke Mauritian Creole, alone or in combination with another language, at home, while the corresponding figures for Bhojpuri and French were 18 per cent

<sup>2</sup> A term introduced in the mid-nineteenth century but still in current use which is applied to (descendants of) the population prior to the introduction of indentured labour following the abolition of slavery. It was expected (hoped?) that the latter would return to India on completion of their contracts.

and 6 per cent, respectively (Atchia-Emmerich 2005). No other language was used at home by more than 2 per cent of the population.

### 3. Writing in and about Mauritian Creole

More than 60 texts in Mauritian Creole are known from the 1730s to 1930 (Baker & Fon Sing 2007).<sup>3</sup> All these adopt French orthographic conventions, with the partial exception of Anderson (1885) in which, for example, French ⟨qu⟩ is consistently replaced by ⟨k⟩. Within this period, Baissac (1880) published the first grammatical description of Mauritian Creole. Independence in 1968 brought renewed interest in Mauritian Creole's grammar (see Corne 1970; Baker 1972; Moorghen 1972; Papen 1978) and literary possibilities while, in newspaper articles, the activist Dev Virahsawmy promoted official status for Mauritian Creole and offered a phonemic orthography for it.<sup>4</sup> Several other orthographies have been proposed since then, but none has yet won general acceptance due to the diverse attitudes towards Mauritian Creole among the island's population and to most systems being linked to particular religious or political factions with which many authors would not want to be associated.<sup>5</sup> Lack of consensus on orthography has not, however, hindered writing in Mauritian Creole since hundreds of publications in Mauritian Creole have appeared since independence, possibly more than in any other French creolophone territory. Nevertheless, written Mauritian Creole is unlikely to find a secure place in primary schools until an orthography commanding widespread approval emerges.

Two dictionaries of Mauritian Creole were published in the 1980s (Ledikasyon pu Travayer 1984 [Mauritian Creole to English]; Baker & Hookoomsing 1987 [Mauritian Creole to English and French]) while Carpooran published the first monolingual Mauritian Creole dictionary in 2009.

### 4. Phonology

In the Mauritian Creole examples which follow, IPA transcriptions are given between slashes or brackets, while the Baker & Hookoomsing (1987) orthography is used in all other circumstances, but with the additional marking of the vowels of stressed syllables with acute or grave accents (see §4.3 for details).

<sup>3</sup> Anderson (1885) published Mauritian Creole translations of the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Only the first of these is reproduced in Baker & Fon Sing (2007).

<sup>4</sup> This was based on the McConnell-Laubauch orthography employed in Hall (1953), the use of which had already been abandoned in Haiti.

<sup>5</sup> While the recent *grafi-larmoni* proposed by Hookoomsing (2004) avoids such associations, it is too early to say whether it will find general acceptance.

#### 4.1. Vowels

Mauritian Creole has five oral and three nasal vowels but there are increasing signs of schwa becoming established as a sixth oral vowel (see Table 1). However, a number of remarks are needed on the above:

(i) Today /e/ tends to be pronounced as [ɛ] in closed syllables and [e] in open syllables, and /o/ is similarly heard as [ɔ] and [o] in closed and open syllables, respectively.

(ii) Nasalized /ẽ/ and /õ/ are always given mid-low pronunciations [ɛ̃] (sometimes [ã̃]) and [õ̃]. Nasalized /ã/ is a back vowel, [ã̃]. In the orthography, these are written ⟨eñ⟩, ⟨oñ⟩ and ⟨añ⟩.

(iii) Denasalization of historically nasalized vowels distinguishes Mauritian Creole from other French creoles. This occurs in two main contexts: (1) word-finally, inherited sequences of nasal vowel + voiced plosive have changed to corresponding oral vowel + nasal consonant. Such words include those derived from French from which final post-consonantal /l/ and /r/ had already been dropped: *ansám* 'together' < *ensemble*, *kokóm* 'cucumber' < *concombre*, as well as the short forms of variable verbs: *ván*, *vánde* 'sell' < *vendre*; (2) word-finally following /m/ as in *lamé* 'hand' < *la main*, *píma* 'chilli' < *piment*.

(iv) Schwa, written ⟨ë⟩ here, is not heard in basilectal speech but is becoming frequent in other varieties, particularly in words which traditionally had /i/ deriving from schwa in their initial syllable: *dëló* 'water' < *de l'eau*. In such words, schwa is unstressed, but a stressed schwa is also heard as the reflex of English [ʌ] in a few words such as *régbi* 'rugby (football)'. All words in which [ə] occurs also have alternative pronunciations with [e] or another vowel so [ə] does not yet have phonemic status.

Table 2 shows diphthongs and long vowels. The diphthongs in parentheses are rare. Mauritian Creole equivalents of French words such as *famille* with final [ij] are today normally pronounced without a final glide. [iw] and [ew] are limited to

Table 1. Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Close-mid	e ě		o õ
Open-mid		(ə)	
Open		a ã	

Table 2. Diphthongs and long vowels

Orthographic	Vy	Vw	Vr
IPA I	(ij)	(iw)	iə
E	ej	(ew)	eə
A	aj	aw	a:
O	oj	–	ɔ:
U	uj	–	uə

words of Indic origin (*sém* ‘vermicelli’). The IPA representations of the realization of vowel + *r* in word final and preconsonantal positions are their current values. (In all other positions, *r* is today realized as a voiced velar fricative, [ɣ].) Old Mauritian Creole texts retain French graphic *r* in most positions but provide no indication of its pronunciation.

4.2. Consonants

Table 3 shows the consonants of Mauritian Creole. The dental to palatal area of the stops is rather complex and appears to be undergoing change. Traditionally /t/ and /d/ are dental (as in French) but both are palatalized, as [tʲ] and [dʲ], or lightly affricated, as [tʰ] and [dʰ], before [i] or [j]. Old texts suggest that /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ were formerly very rare but increasing numbers of non-French words containing these affricates have become established in Mauritian Creole over the past century, and the contrasts made in this area now vary from speaker to speaker. This has resulted in some minimal pairs for many speakers such as *jét* [dʒɛt] ‘jet plane’ and *dyét* [dʒɛt] ‘diet’. A further complication is that, in words adopted from English, initial /t/ and /d/ generally retain their alveolar pronunciation when followed by [i]. For example, *tím* ‘(sports) team’ and *dím* ‘dip switch, dipped headlights’ contrast sharply with the pronunciations of the initial consonants of e.g. *timid* [tʰimɪd] ‘timid’ and *dimál* [dʰimál] ‘pain’ among all Mauritian Creole speakers.

There are several reflexes of the French palatal nasal [ɲ] in Mauritian Creole. In the long form<sup>6</sup> of *ganye* (<French *gagner*) ‘get’, the most usual pronunciation is probably [gan je] (where the space indicates syllable division) but several others are current including [ga ɲe] and [gæ ɲe] (or with denasalization, [ga je] and [gæ je]). In the short form, here written *gany*, the pronunciation is typically [gan] but variants include [gæj] and denasalized [gæj]. Graphic sequences of ⟨ni⟩ immediately followed by another vowel in French words established in Mauritian Creole have essentially the same set of variant forms as those for Mauritian Creole words of French origin containing the graphic sequence ⟨gn⟩ illustrated above.

Table 3. Consonants

		Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	voiceless	p	t		tʃ ⟨ch⟩	[tʲ ~ tʰ]	k	
	voiced	b	d		dʒ ⟨j⟩	[dʲ ~ dʰ]	g	
Nasal	voiced	m		n		ɲ ⟨ny⟩	ŋ ⟨ng⟩	
Fricative	voiceless	f			s			(h)
	voiced	v			z		ɣ ⟨r⟩	
Approximant		w		l		j ⟨y⟩		

<sup>6</sup> See §6 for details of long and short forms of Mauritian Creole verbs.

Sequences of oral vowel + [ŋ] in Mauritian Creole have often been misrepresented as if they were the sequences of nasalized vowel + [g] (from which some derive historically). This is part of a more extensive phonological rule described earlier (see denasalization in §4.1) to which there has only been resistance from a very few “prestigious” words such as *lanŋ* ‘language’. For many Mauritians, the latter contrasts with *lan* ‘angle’ (<French *l’angle*). In addition [ŋ] occurs in numerous words of non-French origin such as *béŋkrep* < English *bankrupt*, *b<sup>(h)</sup>áy* ‘intoxicating potion made of cannabis and milk’ < Indic *bhang*, *kóŋgolo* ‘crest (of a bird)’ < Makonde (a Bantu language) *idem*, *váyvay* < Malagasy *vangovango* ‘rough work’, etc.

Finally, [h] has only very marginal status. *Ha* occurs as a variant of *sa* ‘this, that’ but appears to have only limited geographic distribution. It is also found in some words of English or Indic origin as well as proper names such as *Harold* and *Mohun*, but in all cases its pronunciation is optional and appears to be rarer than its omission.

4.3. Suprasegmentals

Mauritian Creole is a stress-timed language. Three kinds of syllable can be identified:

- (1) Unstressable in all circumstances: these include the TAM markers (§6), subject personal pronouns (§5.1) and possessive adjectives, the articles *en* and *la*, the final syllable of long forms of verbs with both short and long forms, most prepositions, etc.
- (2) Obligatory stressed in all circumstances: these include the prefixes *ré-* and *dé-*, the emphazier *mém*, the number *én* ‘one’, etc.
- (3) Stressable: all nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs contain at least one stressable syllable which may be pronounced without stress when adjacent to another word containing a stressed syllable, depending on the rhythm of delivery adopted by the speaker.

Note that stress placement can distinguish two different words or meanings which would otherwise be represented graphically as identical, as in *refér* ‘to recover (from an ailment)’ versus *réfer* ‘to make or do again’; *la* ‘definite article’ versus *lá* ‘locative adverb’; *kúd-kúd* ‘do a lot of sewing’ versus *kud-kúd* ‘do a bit of sewing from time to time’.

In the remainder of this article, where words are cited in isolation, the vowels of obligatorily stressed or stressable syllables bear the acute accent. In example sentences, however, the acute accent marks stress with rising intonation while the grave accent marks stress with falling intonation.<sup>7</sup> These two diacrit-

<sup>7</sup> Example sentences are derived from a variety of sources, including Baker (1972, 2003), Anonymous (1980), Kriegel (1996), and Kriegel et al. (2003, 2008, 2009). These sources are not indicated following the examples cited because all have been (re)transcribed here in the Baker & Hookoomsing (1987) orthography for consistency and have in some cases been adapted to focus attention on the feature under discussion.

ics simultaneously thus indicate stress and intonation contours, and render the use of graphic Ø to mark the non-existent copula unnecessary.

## 5. Noun phrase

### 5.1. Pronouns

Mauritian Creole has the pronouns set out in Table 4. The essential difference between the two forms of each singular and plural pronoun is that dependent subject pronouns are obligatorily unstressed whereas the object/independent subject forms are normally stressed but their stress may be lost when adjacent to another stressed syllable.

The distinction between familiar and respectful forms of the second-person-singular pronoun is found in early data in almost all French creoles but is absent from the majority of modern varieties. That the distinction is fully maintained in Mauritian Creole may in part be due to influence from Bhojpuri and other Indic languages which have a familiar versus respectful contrast even if it is coded on the verb (Kriegel et al. 2008).

Dependent subject pronouns can be, and frequently are, omitted where the referent is clear from context. Several examples will be found in the glossed text at the end of this article. Note also that absence of a second-person-singular pronoun can often be interpreted as reflecting the speaker's uncertainty as to whether familiar *to* or respectful *u* is more appropriate in a particular context.

### 5.2. The relative pronoun *ki*

The relative pronoun *ki* 'who', 'which', 'that' introduces relative clauses. In many environments, *ki* may be omitted.

- (1) *Mári ti zwan tifi (ki) Gásen pu màrye la*  
Marie PST meet girl (who) Gassen FUT marry DEF  
'Marie met the girl (who) Gassen is going to marry.'
- (2) *gólfis (ki) mo ti àste yèr la in mòr*  
goldfish (that) I PST buy yesterday DEF PRF die  
'The goldfish (that) I bought yesterday has died.'

Table 4. Personal pronouns

	Dependent subject	Object and indep. subject
1SG	<i>mo</i>	<i>mwá</i>
2SG FAM	<i>to</i>	<i>twá</i>
2SG HON	<i>u</i>	<i>ú</i>
3SG	<i>li</i>	<i>lí</i>
1PL	<i>nu</i>	<i>nú</i>
2PL	<i>zot</i>	<i>zót</i>
3PL	<i>zot</i>	<i>zót</i>

Note that *la*, generally regarded as the definite article (but see §5.6), obligatorily occurs NP-finally in all cases, even though it relates to *tifi* and *gólfis* in the above examples.

The relative pronoun cannot readily be omitted from an NP forming part of the predicate.

- (3) *Pyér fin kòz sa ar Pòl ki travày labànk*  
Pierre PRF talk that with Paul who work bank  
*komersyál la*  
commercial DEF  
'Pierre has discussed that with Paul, who works at the Commercial Bank.'

### 5.3. Nouns

All Mauritian Creole nouns are invariable and may in consequence be interpreted as singular or plural according to context unless the indefinite article *en*, a preceding numeral, or the preposed pluralizer, *ban*, are present to provide disambiguation.

A striking feature of hundreds of Mauritian Creole nouns is that their initial consonant or syllable derives from a French article. Examples are: *léd* 'help' (< *l'aide*), *zóm* 'man' (< *les hommes*), *laví* 'life' (< *la vie*), *lezó* 'bone' (< *les os*), and *dilwíl* 'oil' (< *de l'huile*).

### 5.4. Adjectives

Mauritian Creole has a closed set of adjectives which precede the noun and an open set which follow it. Membership of the closed set is similar to, but not identical with, the French set of preposed adjectives. Mauritian Creole additions include *bezer* 'despicable' and English-derived *ful* 'complete'. Note also that *bel* means 'big and strong/extensive/impressive': *en bel tifi* signifies a powerfully built, rather than conventionally beautiful, young woman; see also the remarks on the reflexes of French *petit* below.

All adjectives may be reduplicated, but reduplication gives preposed adjectives (with stress on the first occurrence of the adjective) an augmentative interpretation while this attenuates the meaning of the postposed set (with stress on the second occurrence of the adjective).

- (4) *en grán lakáz* 'a big house'  
*en grán-grán lakáz* 'a very big house'
- (5) *en simíz rúz* 'a red shirt'  
*en simíz ruz-rúz* 'a reddish shirt'

If preposed adjectives are modified in any way other than reduplication, they are placed after the noun: *en lakáz byèn grán* 'a very big house' or *en lakáz grán terib*, 'an exceptionally big house'.

The preposed French adjective *petit* has three different reflexes in Mauritian Creole: *píti*, *típti*, and *ti*. All these occur

in preposed position. *Típti* derives from the reduplication of French *petit* but functions as a single morpheme meaning ‘tiny’ in Mauritian Creole. *Ti* is best considered a diminutive prefix because it differs from adjectives on four counts: (1) it is inherently unstressed whereas all adjectives contain one stressable syllable; (2) it cannot occur as a single-word predicate; (3) it cannot be accompanied by an intensifier; and (4) while two preposed adjectives cannot readily co-occur, *ti* can follow any preposed adjective: *en zóli ti-lakáz* ‘a pretty little house’.

Comparatives and superlatives are formed with a preceding *pli* or *mwen*: *Klénsi pli zèn ki mwà* ‘Clency is younger than me’; *mo grámer mwen vyè ki mo grànper* ‘my grandmother is younger than my grandfather’. For a superlative reading, some restriction of reference is generally indicated: *Tíma pli zèn dan nu grúp* ‘Fatima is the youngest in our group’ (lit. ‘Fatima is more young in our group’). An alternative comparative structure employs *pliski* or *mweniski* after the adjective: *li málèn pliski mwà* ‘s/he is cleverer than me’.

### 5.5. Preverbs, adverbs, and prepositions

Preverbs are adverbs which precede the verb but follow any TAM markers. They include *ánkor* ‘still (expected to terminate soon)’, *túzur* ‘still (not expected to terminate soon)’, *neplí* ‘no longer’, *záme* ‘never’, *nek* ‘merely’, and *fék* ‘just a moment ago’.

Frequent adverbs include *ísi* ‘here’, *labá* ‘there’, *ladan* ‘inside’, *deór* ‘outside’, *aster* ‘now’, *tár* ‘late’, *byén* ‘in a good way’, as well as a few such as *dúsmàn* derived from French adverbs ending in *-ment*.

A few adverbs function as prepositions as well but are obligatorily unstressed in the latter role: *anbá* ‘under(neath)’, *aván* ‘before’, *ápre* ‘after’. Other frequent (unstressable) prepositions include *lor* ‘on’, *pu* ‘for’, and *dan* ‘in, at’.

### 5.6. Articles and demonstratives

Mauritian Creole has a preposed indefinite article *en* (unstressable), which contrasts with stressed *én* ‘one’: *en lakáz* ‘a house’, *én lakáz* ‘one house’.

Mauritian Creole also has a postposed (and clause-final) particle *la*, which is frequently described, somewhat misleadingly, as a definite article. It derives from the second element in the discontinuous French demonstrative *ce . . . là* ‘this’. Mauritian Creole has both *sa* alone and discontinuous *sa . . . la* as unambiguous demonstratives, of which the latter is by far the more common. But in many instances it is difficult to decide whether *la* alone, which occurs with far greater frequency than either *sa* or *sa . . . la*, should be considered a demonstrative or definite article since, without detailed knowledge of the context, both readings are often equally plausible. A further complication is that bare nouns in Mauritian Creole can also have a definite reading. A great many such bare nouns occur in Baissac’s

(1888) folktales; they are found less frequently today but are by no means rare. In addition, since the nineteenth century, there are examples of the third-person-singular possessive pronoun *so* being additionally used as a kind of definite article; see Guillemin (2007).

### 5.7. Genitives

The set of possessive adjectives in Mauritian Creole is the same as the set of preposed dependent subject pronouns in Table 4 except that the third-person-singular possessive pronoun is *so* (from French *son*) not *li*: *mo lakáz* ‘my house’, *to zárden* ‘your garden’, *so simíz* ‘his shirt’.

Mauritian Creole also has two genitive structures. One has the order possessed + possessor, the other order is possessor + *so* (*zot* if the possessor is plural) + possessed: *lisyeñ Sesil* and *Sesil so lisyeñ* both mean ‘Cécile’s dog’. These structures can be freely combined: *lisyeñ Sesil so frer* and *frer Sesil so lisyeñ*, both meaning ‘Cécile’s brother’s dog’.

## 6. Verb phrase

About 70 per cent of Mauritian Creole verbs are variable, having both short and long forms: *manz/manze* ‘eat’, *dans/danse* ‘dance’. Other verbs have only one form. Variable verbs adopt their short form when immediately followed by a direct or indirect object and their long form in most other circumstances, according to purely syntactic criteria.

Mauritian Creole has six preverbal markers relating to tense, aspect, and mood. They immediately precede the verb, their order with respect to each other being: *ti* (past marker), *fin/in/n* (perfect marker), *pe* (progressive marker), *a* (indefinite future marker) and *pu* (definite future marker),<sup>8</sup> plus the zero marker. In Table 5, the different markers are displayed in relation to the lexical aspect (Aktionsart) of the verb. We distinguish between dynamic verbs (*bát/e* ‘hit’, *mànz/e* ‘eat’) on the one hand and stative (*krwàr* ‘believe’) and adjectival (*malàd* ‘(be) ill’) verbs, on the other. Unmarked dynamic, stative, and adjectival verbs have the same temporal interpretation. The Aktionsart distinction is only relevant because some verbs are, according to their Aktionsart meaning, incompatible with some of the preverbal markers or convey other semantic nuances. Thus, the progressive marker in combination with states can yield inchoative meanings: *mo pe malàd* ‘I am becoming ill’; the perfect marker in combination with adjectival verbs can refer to a change of

<sup>8</sup> Historically, (*v*)*a* was the only future marker but *pu* emerged as an alternative during the nineteenth century. The distinction between indefinite and definite appears to be valid for all post-1950 data. One interesting historical change is that whereas (*v*)*a* was compatible with the negator *pa* in the nineteenth century, this ceased to be possible once (*v*)*a* could no longer express the definite future due to the establishment of *pu* in the TAM system. In consequence, no twentieth-century attestations of \**pa* (*v*)*a* are known.

Table 5. Tense–mood–aspect markers

Marker (French etymon)	Aktionsart	Tense/aspect
∅	All	Simple present, habitual present, generic present, perfective past (in narrative contexts)
<i>pe</i> ( <i>après</i> )	Dynamic	Progressive present, immediate future
<i>ti</i> ( <i>était, été</i> )	Adjectival	Ongoing change of state ('become')
<i>fin/in/n</i> ( <i>finir</i> )	All	Simple past
	Dynamic	Perfect with current relevance
	Stative	Completed change of state with current relevance
<i>a/va/ava</i> ( <i>va</i> )	All	Indefinite future
<i>pu</i> ( <i>pour</i> )	All	Definite future

state resulting from a past event: *So figir in ruz*. 'His face became red'.

TAM markers can be combined in a limited number of ways, as indicated in Table 6.

Wherever the past tense has been clearly established in a narrative, by *ti* or an appropriate adverb, all subsequent verbs receive a past interpretation without the need to repeat *ti*.

Of the four types of modality identified in Kriegel et al. (2003), *kapàv* is used to express possibility. (There is no reflex of the French verb *pouvoir*.) Necessity is expressed mainly by *bizen* (but *devèt*, *fòde*, and *oblize* occur too). *Bizen* is used for all four types of modality, including epistemic modality.

In epistemic uses verbal particles (*pe*, *fin*) are postposed to the modal (see Table 7), while in non-epistemic uses they are preposed (Kriegel et al. 2003).

(6) Epistemic reading

*mo pà truv mo laklè, mo bizen (f)in pèrdi li*  
 1SG NEG find POSS key 1SG must PRF lose 3SG  
 'I don't find my key. I must have lost it.'

(7) *mo pà'n truv li dan traváy ozòrdi; li bizen pe àl*  
 1SG NEG.PRF find 3SG in work today 3SG must PROG go

Table 6. Combinations of tense–mood–aspect markers

	Aktionsart	Tense/aspect	Modality
<i>ti'n</i>	All	Past-before-past	
<i>ti pe</i>	Dynamic	Progressive past	
	Adjectival	Past ongoing change of state ('was becoming')	
<i>ti ava pe</i>	All		Counterfactual (with past reference) <sup>a</sup>
<i>ti a</i>	All		Past conditional (indefinite)
<i>ti pu</i>	All		Past conditional (definite)

<sup>a</sup> See feature 44 of Baker & Kriegel (2012, Mauritian Creole dataset in APiCS Online).

*por-Lwi*  
 Port-Louis.

'I don't see him at work today. He must be going to Port-Louis.'

(8) Non-epistemic reading

*lòntan pa ti èna lalimyèr; dimún pe bizen alim*  
 before NEG PST have light person PROG must light  
*lalàmp, labùzi*  
 lamp candle

'Formerly, there was no electricity; people had to light an oil lamp or a candle.'

The verbal negator *pa* follows the subject (noun or personal pronoun), but precedes all verbal markers:

(9) *nu pà ti pe dòrmi*  
 1PL NEG PST PROG sleep  
 'We were not sleeping.'

The negator regularly combines with *èna* 'have', *ànkòr* 'yet', and *fin* 'PRF' as *p'èna* 'to lack', 'to not have', *p'ànkòr* 'not yet', and *pà'n* 'NEG + PRF'.

Table 7. Modality

Type of modality	Construction	Examples with translation
Participant internal modality (possibility/necessity)	<i>kapàv, bizen</i>	<i>Kómye kán li kapàv kùpe par zùr?</i> 'How much sugar cane can he cut each day?'
Participant external modality ('root')	<i>kapàv, bizen</i>	<i>U bizen marse pu àl traváy?</i> 'Do you have to walk to work?'
Participant external modality, deontic (permission/obligation)	<i>kapàv, bizen</i>	<i>U bizen al lopital.</i> 'You must go to hospital.'
Epistemic (uncertainty/probability)	<i>bizen</i>	<i>Li bizen fin gány enpè en sòk.</i> 'S/he must have been a bit shocked.'



Mauritian Creole uses the dummy copula when predicative phrases are fronted, for example, in questions:

- (10) *kúma so lakáz ète? so lakáz zòli terib?*  
 how POSS house COP POSS house nice terrible  
 ‘What is her/his house like? His/her house is very nice.’

## 7. Simple sentences

Word order in Mauritian Creole is SVO. In spoken informal language, if the subject referent is set by the context, it can be dropped without any syntactic constraints. This technique is also productive for constructions with a passive sense: the subject position may also be left empty if the referent is indefinite and generic:

- (11) *si Ø mèt mva dan lòt klìma mo pà pu kapàv [...]*  
 if put ISG in other climate ISG NEG FUT able  
 ‘If they/you put me in another climate, I won’t be able [to cope] [...].’

Another construction type is the promotion of the patient to subject position:

- (12) *sa lasán-la mèt dan kàn ùsi*  
 DEM ash-DEM put in sugar.cane too  
 ‘These ashes are also put into (the ground where) the sugar cane (is planted).’

A very limited group of verbs of negative physical affection allows a morphologically marked passive construction with the auxiliary *gany* (‘get’ < French *gagner*).

- (13) *en lisyén in gany bâte*  
 INDF dog PRF get beat  
 ‘A dog has been beaten.’

There are different competing techniques for the expression of reflexive voice.

(a) The most common is for the object pronoun to be used as a reflexive marker, optionally accompanied by the intensifier *mem*:

- (14) *li ti kapàv enfòm li (mèm)*  
 he PST able inform him (self)  
 ‘He was able to inform himself.’

(b) With body care and grooming verbs, mention of the relevant body part tends to be optional:

- (15) *ràjen pe ràz (so figir)*  
 Rajen PROG shave POSS face  
 ‘Rajen is shaving (or: is getting shaved).’

(c) Traditionally, POSS + *lekor* was used as a reflexive marker. This is now rare but survives mainly in the expression *zet so lekor*:

- (16) *fidu fin zèt so lekòr depi en pòn*  
 Fidou PRF throw POSS body from INDF bridge  
 ‘Fidou has committed suicide by throwing himself off a bridge.’

**Reciprocal voice** can be expressed by a special construction using the word *kàmarad*. ‘friend’:

- (17) *sáken èd so kàmarad*  
 each.one help POSS friend  
 ‘They help each other.’

With **ditransitive verbs**, the indirect object generally precedes the direct object but this order can be reversed, with the indirect object following a preposition, giving greater attention to the direct object:

- (18) a. *mo ti dòn Pyer liv la*  
 ISG PST give Pierre book DEF  
 ‘I gave Peter the book.’  
 b. *mo ti don liv la ar Pyer*  
 ISG PST give book DEF with Pierre  
 ‘I gave Peter the book.’

## 8. Complex sentences

Sentence coordination can be achieved by coordinating conjunctions or by simple juxtaposition. The main coordinating conjunctions are *e* ‘and’, *be, me* ‘but’, and *ubyen* ‘or’. Mauritian Creole shows a tendency to distinguish sentential coordination (verbal coordination) marked by *e* (19) and nominal conjunction marked by *ek* (20), even if *ek* is increasingly used even in contexts of verbal conjunction (21).

- (19) *mo pe lèv en bàl kàtrovèn kilo é mo pe*  
 ISG PROG lift INDF big.sack eighty kilo and ISG PROG  
*gálupe avek sà*  
 run with that  
 ‘I am lifting a large 80 kilo sack and I am running with that.’

- (20) *pápi ek mámi prè pu àle zòt ùsi*  
 dad and mum ready for go 3PL too  
 ‘Dad and mum are about to go, them as well.’

- (21) *bizen bril èn azòrdi isi ek bril èn lot kòte*  
 must burn one today here and burn one other side  
 ‘One has to be burned here today and one burned the other side.’

**Object clauses** are zero-marked or introduced by *ki* (< French *que*) (including with verbs of speaking and of knowing).

**Adverbial clauses** are introduced by different subordinators, such as *kan* ‘when’, *si* ‘if’, *parski/akoz* ‘because’, *apre* ‘after’, and *avan* ‘before’.

## 9. Other structures

## 9.1. Interrogatives: total questions

Any statement may be turned into a question simply by switching the intonation on the final syllable from falling to rising pitch regardless of whether this is a stressed syllable or not.

- (22) *Zórz en bòn profesèr Zórz en bòn profesér?*  
 Georges INDF good teacher Georges INDF good teacher  
 ‘Georges is a good teacher.’ ‘Is Georges a good teacher?’

Alternatively, the statement can remain unchanged but be turned into a question by adding *nón?* ‘no?’ (corresponding to English *isn’t it?*, etc. or French *n’est-ce pas*):

- (23) *Zórz en bòn profesèr, nón?*  
 Georges INDF good teacher no  
 ‘Georges a good teacher, isn’t he?’

## 9.2. Interrogatives: partial questions

Partial questions are those in which a noun phrase (NP) or adverbial is replaced by an interrogative element. A subject NP can be replaced by *ki* ‘who, what’ or the longer structure *ki senla* (or *sanla ki* (from which the first *ki* is often omitted):<sup>9</sup>

- (24) a. *tú dimún in àl*  
 all people PRF go  
 ‘Everybody has gone to the races.’  
 b. *lekùrs ((ki) sénla) ki ’n àl lekùrs?*  
 race who who REL PRF go race  
 ‘Who (is it that) has gone to the races?’

An NP within the predicate is normally replaced by *ki* and moved to sentence-initial position, again without any change of intonation pattern at the end of the sentence:

- (25) a. *èna en pagòd Sanmàrs*  
 have INDF pagoda Champ.de.Mars  
 ‘There is a pagoda at Champ de Mars.’  
 b. *ki èna Sanmàrs?*  
 what have Champ.de.Mars  
 ‘What is there at Champ de Mars?’

If the verb in the sentence in which the NP in the predicate is preceded by a verb in its short form (see §6), the replacement of the NP by *ki* and its movement to sentence initial position also requires the verb to adopt its long form:

- (26) a. *so sér apel Àyvi*  
 POSS sister call Ivy  
 ‘Her sister is called Ivy.’

<sup>9</sup> *Senla/sanla* is popularly considered to derive from *sa* ‘that’, *en* ‘one’, and *la* ‘there’, but early texts show that it in fact comes from French *celle-là*.

- b. *ki so sèr apèle?*  
 what POSS sister call  
 ‘What is her sister called?’

In verbless (zero copula) sentences, moving the NP replaced by *ki* to the front also requires the introduction of the dummy copula *ète* (see also 10, above):

- (27) a. *so gràn frer ti en sòfer tàksi*  
 POSS old brother PST INDF driver taxi  
 ‘His elder brother was a taxi driver.’  
 b. *ki so gràn frer ti ète?*  
 what POSS old brother PST COP  
 ‘What was his elder brother?’

## 9.3. Focus

Focus is generally achieved by suffixing *mem* to the emphasized item. With an object or independent subject pronoun, this can be glossed as ‘self’: *li-mem* ‘himself’, *nu-mem* ‘ourselves’. Additional focus can be achieved by fronting this:

- (28) a. *nu fin rèsi fèr sa nu-mèm*  
 IPL PRF succeed do it IPL-EMPH  
 ‘We have succeeded in doing that ourselves.’  
 b. *nu-mém nu fin rèsi fèr sa!*  
 IPL.EMPH IPL PRF succeed do that  
 ‘We ourselves have succeeded in doing that!’

With pronouns, focus can also be achieved by placing the stressed independent subject pronoun before the dependent one:

- (29) *twá, to fin rèsi fèr sa!*  
 2SG.INDP 2SG.DEP PRF succeed do that  
 ‘YOU have succeeded in doing that!’

The first two above possibilities are also available for object NPs, but *mem* is perhaps best translated ‘real’ or ‘really’ in most cases:

- (30) a. *sa kómi-la en vòler-mém!*  
 DEM shopkeeper-DEM INDF thief-EMPH  
 ‘That shopkeeper is a real thief!’  
 b. *en vòler-mém sa kòmi-la!!*  
 INDF thief-EMPH DEM shopkeeper-DEM  
 ‘That shopkeeper really is a thief!!’

Fronting is not available for focusing subject NPs but *mem* is available for emphasis and additional prominence is achieved by adding the appropriate resumptive pronoun before the *mem*:

- (31) a. *misye Bége-mém ti vini*  
 Mr Begué-EMPH PST come  
 ‘Mr Begué himself came!’

- b. *misye Bége li-mém ti vimi!*  
 Mr. Begué 3SG-EMPH PST come  
 ‘Mr Begué came in person!’ (not one of his clerks)

## 10. Lexicon

Due to the wide range of origins of its non-Francophone population throughout its history, Mauritian Creole’s vocabulary is drawn from many sources. Baker (1982b) identified 1,535 words of apparent non-French derivation. Given that the Baker & Hookoomsing (1987) dictionary contains entries for some 15,000 individual words (excluding compounds), that suggests that fully 10 per cent of the lexicon is of non-French origin. However, 554 of these are from English and obviously postdate the transfer to British rule in 1812. The second largest source is Indic languages (292 words) and, while such languages were marginally represented in the eighteenth century, there can be no doubt that the majority of these date from nineteenth-century Indian immigration. Words for which no etyma have yet been identified form the third largest category (257). Together, these three categories account for 72 per cent of the non-French lexicon.

Lesser, but nonetheless important, sources include Bantu languages (collectively), Malagasy, and Tamil, each with between 60 and 100 items. Smaller sources, each accounting for fewer than 20 items, are Chinese, Manding, Portuguese, Wolof, and languages of the Benin area.

### Glossed text

This text, published in Kriegel, Ludwig & Henri (2009), is the transcript of a spontaneous conversation recorded in October 2004 between a young interviewer (Fabiola Henri = F) and several members of a family living in the rural area of Roche Terre, the main interlocutor being 92 year old Ramdhanee Churitter (R). Mala (M), 49 years old, is his nephew’s wife. While this glossed text is entirely in Mauritian Creole, code switching between Mauritian Creole and Bhojpuri is very frequent within this family circle as well as in much of rural Mauritius as a whole.

R: *Avàn nu ti pàs bùku mizèr.*  
 before IPL PST endure a.lot.of hardship  
 In the past we endured a lot of hardship.

F: *Bùku mizèr.*  
 a.lot.of hardship  
 A lot of hardship.

R: *Wí, bùku bùku mizèr. Mo kòne Mòris*  
 yes a.lot.of a.lot.of hardship ISG know Mauritius  
 Yes, an awful lot of hardship. I know how this Mauritius

*la kùma li ti ète. Zot dir astèr la “li*  
 DEM how 3SG PST be 3PL say now PCL 3SG  
 used to be. Nowadays they say it

*’n vìn pàradi”.*  
 PRF become paradise  
 has become a paradise.

F: *Ti bizen travày bukú?*  
 PST MOD work a.lot  
 Did you have to work a lot?

R: *Wi; lér la mo ti rès sèz an,*  
 yes hour PCL ISG PST remain sixteen year  
 Yes. At that time I was only sixteen

*dizwèt an. Mo ti anvil. Mo ti pe apràn*  
 eighteen year ISG PST in.town ISG PST PROG learn  
 or eighteen years old. I was living in Port Louis. I was learning  
*travày. Tipti lakàz tòl. Lari bürboñ, lari*  
 work tiny house sheet.metal street Bourbon street  
 a job, and living in tiny sheet metal houses, in Bourbon Street,  
*legliz, lari deförz.*  
 Church street Desforzes  
 Church Street, and Desforzes Street.

F: *Porlwi sá?*  
 Port.Louis PRO  
 Are they in Port Louis?

R: *Partù. Porlwi, típti ti-lakàz tòl*  
 everywhere Port.Louis tiny DIM-house sheet.metal  
 Everywhere in Port Louis there were tiny little sheet-metal  
 houses.

*ti èna. Wi, típti;*  
 PST have yes tiny  
 Yes, they were tiny.

F: *Pà ti gány bùku kàs?*  
 NEG PST get a.lot.of money  
 You didn’t get much money?

R: *Wi, lepók mo ti... mo ti a... mo ’n rès*  
 yes period ISG PST ISG PST ? ISG PRF stay  
 That’s right. At that time I was... I stayed  
*bukù... sóz... Labà anvil. Abén,*  
 a.lot what’s.its.name down.there in.town oh.well  
 a lot at.. what’s-its-name.. down there in Port Louis.

*mo kòn tù. Ísi lakam̃p... ísi lakam̃pany*  
 ISG know all here countryside here countryside  
 I know all about that. Here in the countryside

*ti bwà. Wi. Me astèr la partù.*  
 PST wood yes but now PCL everywhere  
 it was woodland. Yes. But right now everywhere... .

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F: *Partú ranze.* R: *Bèl-bel lakàz.*  
 everywhere nicely.arranged very.impressive house  
 Everywhere has been neatly laid out. R: Large, impressive  
 houses.

F: *Wi.* M: *Fini dèvelope.* F: *Wi.*  
 yes PRF develop yes  
 Yes M: A nicely developed area. F: Yes.

R: *Sá mo 'n tûrve.*<sup>10</sup> *Wi.*  
 PRO ISG PRF see yes  
 That's what I've seen. Yes.

F: *Ti pe travày bukù lóntam, nóñ?*  
 PST PROG work a.lot formerly no  
 In the past, you had to work very hard, didn't you?

R: *Wi, lóntam búku mizér nu 'n pàse, nù.*  
 yes formerly a.lot.of hardship IPL PRF endure us  
 Yes, in the past we suffered a lot of hardship, we really did.

<sup>10</sup> *Turve* 'see, find' (long form; the corresponding short form is *tur*) is a variant form of *truvè*.

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