French on the Island of Bourbon (Réunion)

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Abstract

France first laid claim to the uninhabited Island of Bourbon in 1640 (the name was changed into La Réunion in 1848), but permanent settlement and colonisation did not start until 1665. The present study zooms in on the first 50 years of the French colony and examines the intricacies of who spoke which language to whom on the basis of sociodemographic data concerning colonial households in the société d’habitation (‘homestead society’). Interethnic marriages were frequent in the first years; many of the first French settlers had Malagasy spouses and servants, others married young women from India. Malagasy can be shown to have left an imprint on the variety of French spoken during the early years of the colony. It is assumed that the colonists and their slaves spoke varieties which can be classified as approximative French, sharing several features with other varieties of overseas French. These early approximative varieties of French became the basis from which Réunion Creole developed in the société de plantation (‘plantation society’) in the years after 1725.

Keywords

Réunion/Bourbon French – Malagasy – ‘société d’habitation’ – comparative approach

1 Introduction

One of the dominant topics in creole studies of the last decade has been a rediscovery and renewed questioning of basic issues and notions in the field and,
consequently, a restating of the question of precisely what it means when a
given language is classified as a "creole".

Neumann-Holzschuh and Schneider, 2000b: 1

This question is particularly pertinent in the case of Réunion Creole (rc). According to Holm (2000: 19, 29), its identity is “the subject of considerable
debate”; he designates it “Réunionnais French” or “vernacular French of Réunion” and classifies it as a “semi-creole”. His distinction between a semi-
creole and a creole is based on the number of “creole features” found in a par-
ticular variety. However, if one defines a creole as a new language developed
from a base language (English, French, Portuguese, etc.) in the context of
European colonial expansion from the 16th to the 18th century, rc should be
included in the family of French-based creoles. It is substantially different
from its source language and is seen as a creole by most linguists. However,
since creole grammars evolve by restructuring and reanalysis of the grammatic-
ical features of their base languages, with input from contact languages, it does
make sense to analyse “degrees of restructuring in creole languages”, the sub-
ject proposed for the Regensburg conference of 1998 (Neumann-Holzschuh
and Schneider, 2000a). From this point of view, it can be said that rc was
restructured to a lesser degree than other creoles; it has without doubt
remained closer to French than e.g. Haitian or Antillean creole. The reasons for
this are the particular social circumstances in which creole genesis took place,
especially in the initial period of language contact.

In order to gain a clear picture of the early years of language contact and its
linguistic outcome, one needs a detailed account of the demographic develop-
ment, of social interaction between Europeans and their non-European ser-
vants and slaves, and early texts which can shed light on linguistic development.
For the French colony of Bourbon—the island received this name in 1649, it
was changed to Réunion in 1848—we are lucky to possess, among other
historical documents, a detailed description of its population in 1709 (44 years
after the start of settlement) written by Antoine Boucher, storekeeper and
assistant of the governor de Villers, with a view to assessing the colony’s
potential for agricultural development (Barassin, 1978). For a reconstruction
of the linguistic evolution we can draw on two religious texts from the 18th
century written by Philippe Caulier C. M., a Lazarist priest who worked
on Bourbon from 1749 to 1771 (see Bollée, 2007b). These texts, Profession de
Foy, en jargon des Esclaves Nègres and Petit Catechisme de l’Isle de Bourbon tourné au Style des Esclaves Nègres, contain approximately 4,500 words and were probably used by their author for the religious instruction of slaves in the 1760s. Written about a century after the beginning of colonisation and about 40 years after a massive increase in the slave population due to the introduction of coffee on the island as the main crop for export, they seem to represent an intermediate stage in the development from French to modern RC, and they show clearly that creolisation in Réunion must have been a gradual process. The manuscript of these texts was discovered in the Lazarist Archives in Paris by the historian Megan Vaughan.\textsuperscript{1} They were unknown until Philip Baker and I presented and commented on them in a workshop of the Groupe Européen de Recherches en Langues Créoles in Amsterdam in March 2003. Vaughan quoted two passages in her book (2005: 219–20), but sent photocopies of the originals of these to Philip Baker to check her translation. Realising that these were hitherto unknown texts, he asked for more information and was supplied with the remaining pages of Caulier’s text. We very much appreciate her generosity, and we think that these texts are an important \textit{trouvaille} for diachronic studies of RC.\textsuperscript{2}

2 \hspace{1cm} Two Phases of Creolisation

According to the theory of Chaudenson (e.g. 2001: 95–129, 2003: 88–90), which has been adopted by many linguists, two phases in the evolution of colonial societies can be distinguished: the “homestead society” (\textit{société d’habitation}) in the first decades of settlement, and the “plantation society” (\textit{société de plantation}) which does not appear until the colony begins to develop a full-fledged agricultural industry. The terms \textit{habitant} and \textit{habitation}, found in all French creoles, refer to the farmer and the “basic” rural farm producing food crops, whereas \textit{plantation} denotes a larger area planted with a particular crop, especially sugar cane. In the initial period of the \textit{société d’habitation}, the number of Whites was greater than, or equal to, that of the Blacks—on Bourbon it took

\textsuperscript{1} In the context of research for her 2005 book \textit{Creating the Creole Island. Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius}.

\textsuperscript{2} I am indebted to Philip Baker for leaving further treatment of the texts to me. For the preparation of my article (Bollée, 2007a) and my book (Bollée, 2007b), the analysis he presented in Amsterdam was very helpful. An edition of these texts is available online in Baker and Bollée (2004).
half a century for the number of slaves to equal that of the free population. In the second phase, the société de plantation, new slaves are imported on a massive scale, their number rising rapidly until Europeans form only 10 or 20 percent of the population. In the initial phase, the slaves have access to speakers of the European language, the base language of the creole, whereas in the second phase this is no longer the case. Newly introduced slaves (bozals) are instructed by slaves born in the colony, and their target are the varieties of the base language spoken by these locally born slaves. Singler (2008: 336) points out: “The significance of a habitation/plantation model (or something akin to it) is widely recognized.”

2.1 The First Phase of Development

The first phase of development on Bourbon has been described by the historian Jean Barassin as “cinquante années d’abandon” (1978: 16). France had begun to take part in the trade with India at the beginning of the 17th century and was therefore in need of a port of call for taking water and provisions, repairing ships and nursing crew members affected by scurvy. The uninhabited Mascarene islands would have been a good choice, but Mauritius with its two natural ports had already been taken by the Dutch, so the French had to put up with its sister island, much less attractive because of an un hospitable coastline without a natural harbour or protected moorage, the other disadvantage being that it is situated in the cyclone zone. France took possession of the island in 1640, but with no intention to found a colony. The only temporary inhabitants were 12 rebels exiled from Fort-Dauphin (Madagascar) who, when called back to Madagascar by the new governor Flacourt in 1649, gave an enthusiastic description of the good life they had led, the healthy climate, and the abundance of food. In consequence, Flacourt took possession of the island once again in 1649, naming it Bourbon, but still making no attempt to create a settlement. Another exile with six French companions and seven Malagasy servants spent four years on Bourbon, but left discouraged in 1658 because a cyclone had destroyed his farm. Permanent settlement began in 1663 with two Frenchmen leaving Madagascar of their own free will, accompanied by ten Malagasy domestiques, three of them women.

In 1664, Colbert founded the Compagnie française des Indes Orientales (CIO), Madagascar being destined to become a colony of settlement and to serve as entrepôt for the trade relations to be established with India, China and Japan. This might have given Bourbon a chance, but attempts to colonise the island remained hesitant. In 1665, the first expedition to Madagascar stopped at Bourbon and set down 20 French indentured servants (engagés) under the command of Étienne Regnault, who started the first settlement. However, both
plans had to be abandoned after the massacre of Fort-Dauphin in 1674, and bad news about unprotected moorage and cyclones, one of them causing a shipwreck in 1689, did not encourage the CIO to develop the colony. Its peopling was thus “un peuplement de hasard”, mainly of Frenchmen arriving from Madagascar with Malagasy wives or servants. In 1671 the population counted 80 persons: 41 Whites, 36 Malagasy and three children of mixed blood. Of the 63 Frenchmen who had survived the catastrophe of Fort-Dauphin in 1674, 16 found refuge in Bourbon in 1676, among them three women, two French and one Malagasy. Since the majority of males were unmarried, in 1678 the CIO brought 12 Indo-Portuguese young women and two girls from Pondicherry, all of the young women being married immediately (Barassin, 1978: 19–23). The first census of 1686 counts a population of 269:

- 10 families of French father and mother = 53 persons
- 12 families of French father and Indo-Portuguese mother = 66 persons
- 14 families of French father and Malagasy mother = 78 persons
- 8 Malagasy families
- 2 Dutchmen, one with a French wife, one with a locally born wife
- 16 Malagasy men
- 12 men from India (Chaudenson 1974: 455, 2001: 99)

In the first decades, the population grew slowly (see Table 1). The term “Whites” is avoided here because many of the first French settlers had arrived from Madagascar with Malagasy wives or had married their Malagasy servants; others had married the Indo-Portuguese women brought to the colony in 1678. The term “servile population” (*population servile*) is used because the

| Year  | Free population | Servile population | Total  |
|-------|-----------------|--------------------|--------|
| 1689  | 212             | 102                | 314    |
| 1705  | 423             | 311                | 734    |
| 1709  | 507             | 387                | 894    |
| 1711  | 557             | 467                | 1,024  |
| 1713/14 | 633          | 538                | 1,171  |

3 Figures are from Barassin (1989: 256), which are updates of those given in Barassin (1978: 27).
Malagasies arriving with the first French settlers were legally servants (*domestiques*), not slaves. Interracial marriages, extremely frequent until the end of the 17th century, ended in the first decades of the 18th century, and the people of mixed race were gradually absorbed by the white population (Vaxelaire, 1999 (vol. 1): 80–81).

The status of the first non-Whites on Bourbon is regulated by article XII of the “statuts, ordonnances et règlements de la Compagnie” of 26th October 1664:

*Il est très expressément défendu de vendre aucuns habitans originaires du pays [sc. Madagascar] comme esclaves, ni d'en faire trafic, sous peine de la vie.* Et il est enjoint à tous les Français qui les loueront à leur service, de les traiter humainement sans les molester, ni les outrager, à peine de punitions corporelles, s'il y échêt.

quoted in Barassin, 1957: 15; italics in original

Examples described by Antoine Boucher (see below) show that agriculture without slavery would have been possible on Bourbon. However, a memoir by François Martin, who founded the French colony of Pondicherry in 1668 and spent some time on the island in 1665, shows that, given the experience of the West Indies, production of tropical crops without slaves was unthinkable at that time. Referring to proposals that had been made to grow tobacco, indigo and sugar cane, Martin stated that these crops could only be cultivated employing slaves: “l'on ne peut cultiver ces trois sortes qu'en y employant des esclaves, ainsi que l'on pratique aux îles d'Amérique, et, sur ce pied, l'on a envisagé l'île de Madagascar et la côte d’Afrique dont l'on en pourrait tirer quantité” (quoted in Filliot, 1974: 28; cf. Barassin, 1957: 17).

Despite these recommendations the settlers abided by the *statuts* of 1664 and the Malagasies imported in 1669 and 1670 were not called “slaves”. In the parish registers they are identified by their origin, “du pays d'Annosso”, or by the *habitation* where they were employed, e.g. “noirs demeurant en l'habitation de Hystache Yard et Gilles Launay” (Barassin, 1957: 17). They had a French Christian name and a Malagasy patronymic (e.g. Louise Siaram, Etienne Lambouquiti). The term *esclaves* appears for the first time in 1680 in the report of an outsider, the captain of a visiting vessel: “Les colons demandaient des femmes, la plupart ayant été contraints d’épouser des négresses, leurs esclaves...” (quoted in Filliot, 1974: 30). A total of 21 slaves from Madagascar and East Africa (“adults” of 14 to 15 years and young children) were brought to the island on an unofficial basis in 1697, others were bought from passing corsair ships, but a regular slave trade was not organised before 1718. Slavery became legal only in 1723 when the *Code noir*, promulgated in the French Antilles in
1685, was adopted in modified form on Bourbon (Filliot, 1974: 32, 55; Barassin, 1957: 11, 1989: 255–56).

Until 1714, the population grew mainly because of a remarkably high birth-rate. The c10 sent French engagés only from 1665 to 1671 and in 1689. From 1687 onward, they were reinforced by a number of filibusters having decided to end their maritime careers by settling on the island: 44 out of the 121 chefs de famille documented between 1667 and 1714 belong to this group. Of these 121 men, 37 married women from France, Madagascar or India, the others founded families with daughters of the first settlers on the island. The percentage of Whites decreased gradually, but it was not until around 1720, more than 50 years after the foundation of the colony, that slaves began to outnumber the free population. As mentioned above, the term “Whites” is inappropriate here because, according to the census of 1709, out of 507 free citizens, only 169 were real Whites (“vrais Blancs”), immigrants from Europe or locally born Whites. About two thirds were made up of the Malagasy or Indo-Portuguese wives who had acquired French citizenship by their marriage and their numerous locally born offspring (Barassin, 1978: 25–27, 52).

2.2 The Second Phase of Development
The second phase of development began on Bourbon when the c10 made a serious attempt to develop a colonial economy on the island by introducing coffee as the main crop. The first plants arrived from Moka in 1715, but it took some years before the need for labour on the coffee plantations led to a significant increase in the rate of slave arrivals. After 1725, the population grew rapidly, especially the proportion of slaves (see Table 2).

On Bourbon, as in the other regions where French-based creoles have developed, “the change from one phase to the other was neither abrupt nor absolute” (Chaudenson, 2001: 113). Bourbon is, however, unique in having maintained, alongside big plantations, many small farms which survived into the second phase. Table 3 shows the slaves per owner as late as 1795.

One could ask where to draw the line between habitations and plantations—a question which to my knowledge has not been discussed so far. Eight to ten slaves might be a reasonable limit, especially in the context of Bourbon where many families had eight to fifteen children and “on the majority of farms, Blacks were fewer in number than members of the master’s family” (Chaudenson, 2001: 98). At any rate, we can assume that during the

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4. An exact date cannot be provided because no general census was taken from 1714 to 1724 (Barassin, 1957: 29; cf. Chaudenson, 2001: 54).
entire 18th century many slaves still had access to speakers of French, although in some cases it could have been limited.

3 The Société d’habitation

In the first years of the 18th century, when CIO finally took steps to assess the potential of the colony for the cultivation of crops of commercial value, a pilot named Feuilley spent a year on the island (from May 1704 to April 1705)

| Year | Whites | Other free citizens | Slaves |
|------|--------|---------------------|--------|
| 1725 | 1,402  |                     | 1,776  |
| 1735 | 1,716  |                     | 4,494  |
| 1767 | 5,237  |                     | 21,047 |
| 1772 | 5,477  | 225                 | 24,687 |
| 1779 | 6,464  | 465                 | 30,209 |
| 1788 | 8,182  | 1,029               | 37,984 |

| Number of owners | Number of slaves |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1,346 (47.4%)    | owners had 1 to 5 slaves |
| 514 (18.1%)      | owners had 6 to 10 slaves |
| 264 (9.3%)       | owners had 11 to 15 slaves |
| 37               | owners had 101–150 slaves |
| 15               | owners had 151–200 slaves |
| 6                | owners had 201–230 slaves |
| 1                | owner had 295 slaves |
| 1                | owner had 497 slaves |

Sources: Chaudenson (1974: 459, 2001: 54), Wanquet (1980: 43), cf. Bollée (2007b: 103).
conducting a detailed survey. His report was completed by the extraordinary documentation of Antoine Boucher who resided on Bourbon from 1702 to 1709. He took two censuses in 1705 and 1709 and wrote two extensive reports: *Mémoire pour servir a la connoissance particuliére de chacun des habitans de l’isle de Bourbon* and *Mémoire d’Observations sur celuy de l’Isle Bourbon*, written in 1710 and 1711. The first of these texts was published by Jean Barassin in 1978; it is an invaluable source for the study of Bourbon’s social ecology at the beginning of the 18th century.

### 3.1 The Free Population

In his first memoir, which is not entirely exempt from errors and exaggerations, Antoine Boucher describes in detail: origin, ethnicity, profession, family, slaves, farming and other activities as well as the behaviour and character of 89 *pères de famille* and 12 *mères de famille veuves*. According to his classification in the second memoir (of 1711), one can distinguish four groups of persons: (1) *anciens habitants* of French origin having arrived in the colony before 1686; (2) *Créoles blancs*, born on Bourbon of European parents; (3) *Créoles métis*, whom he calls “mulattoes” even if they are the sons or daughters of a French father and an Indo-Portuguese mother; (4) foreigners from other countries (Netherlands, England, etc.) (Barassin, 1978: 47–51). In an earlier work (Bollée, 2007b: 85–90), I quoted and commented on the description of one representative of each group. I repeat some details here, focusing on the role of women which seems to have been very important in the initial period. Therefore, 12 widows are added as a fifth group.

(1) Antoine Payet, one of the oldest *habitants*, arrived from Madagascar in 1674 or 1676 and married Louise Siaram, the Malagasy widow of a Frenchman with whom she had escaped from the massacre of Fort-Dauphin. With her 11 children, she was one of the *grand-mères de choc*, the 20 Malagasy or Indian wives with up to 14 children whose progeny lives on in many contemporary Réunionnais families: 62 can trace their ancestry back to Louise Siaram (Vaxelaire, 1999 (vol. 1): 80–81). On the basis of Boucher’s observations, Barassin

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6 See Bollée (2007b: 84). Barassin (1978: 41, 51) notes: “Ces pages ont été écrites par Antoine Boucher librement, car il n’y était pas tenu; […] elles montrent que Boucher souffrait de divers complexes à l’égard des habitants de l’île: complexe de supériorité intellectuelle et morale, d’autorité et de fonction, d’honorabilité et de frustration; mais surtout, qu’il était profondément raciste”.

7 Cf. also Chaudenson (2001: 68, 99–100) who underscores the readiness of the Malagasy and Indo-Portuguese wives for assimilation and acculturation.
notes that she and most of the other free Malagasy women succeeded in giving their children a good education.

(2) Pierre Mailliot’s wife Marguerite Brun, a locally born White like himself, cultivated a piece of land with the help of her children and one slave, while her husband, one of the 30 men accused of laziness by Boucher, wasted his time playing cards and drinking frangorin (fermented sugar-cane juice). The case of Marguerite Brun, who worked in the fields alongside a slave and her children, is no exception (see below).

(3) Pierre Robert, son of a French father and a Malagasy mother, and his wife Marguerite Collin, whose mother was Indo-Portuguese, were one of the 25 families who cultivated their land without slaves, the couple being assisted by their 11 children. The Roberts are praised by Boucher for their hospitality, which is still today typical of Réunionnais society.

(4) Guy Dumesnil, a Flemish corsair, arrived on Bourbon in 1704 and married Marie Anne Wildman, a White girl of 14. She was one of the 58 locally born brides who were married at the age of 10 to 14 in the years between 1687 and 1715 because no other marriageable women were available (Vaxelaire, 1999 (vol. 1): 81, 89). It is likely that Dumesnil, like other foreigners, learned the language of his French-speaking wife and children (see below).

(5) Sabine Rabelle, 53 years old, was one of the Indo-Portuguese women who arrived in 1678; she married a French engagé in 1679 with whom she had nine children. By 1709, three of them had died and five had founded their own families; her last daughter, born in 1698, is the little girl mentioned by Boucher. What he has to say about Sabine Rabelle and her compatriots shows that they had become praiseworthy members of the colony: “Cette femme est sans Education, mais fort bonne personne, vivant tres chrêtiennement, et fort laborieuse; [...] a l’aide d’un seul Noir, et d’une petite fille, elle cultive suffisament [sic] de la terre, pour vivre commodé-ment, et vend même du blé...” (Barassin, 1978: 184, 373–74). All the widows managed the farms of their husbands efficiently, working side by side with their children and a few slaves. With one exception, they are described as hard-working (laborieuses), one even as “un démon pour le travail” (Barassin, 1978: 119).

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8 At the beginning of the 18th century, each family had 8 to 9 children on average. The mortality of those under 20 years old being only about 25 percent, compared to from 52 to 63 percent in metropolitan France (between 1656 and 1735), the proportion of persons under 20 years was 65 percent in 1709 (Barassin 1989: 162, 164).
3.2 Servants and Slaves

As mentioned before, in the first decades, the colony had no slaves in the true sense of the word. Relations between masters and their Malagasy servants were at times not without tension; in the course of the years several cases of marronnage were recorded and after the disaster of Fort-Dauphin, of which the Malagasies on Bourbon had word, two attempts of revolt were made in 1676 and 1678, and another one in 1705, all of them brutally repressed, with the leaders condemned to death and hanged. It was only after the promulgation of the Code noir in the French Antilles in 1685 that the term esclave was used on Bourbon itself; it appeared for the first time in 1687 in a document attesting the sale of a young Indian (Barassin, 1957: 19). Summing up the evidence collected by Antoine Boucher in 1709, Jean Barassin ascertains: “La vie des esclaves à Bourbon était certes moins agréable que celles des Maîtres; cependant elle fut relativement douce au seuil du XVIIIe siècle” (1978: 436). Cases of maltreatment seem to have been exceptions; on the whole the slaves were treated correctly, as can be illustrated e.g. by Boucher’s statement about Gilles Dennemont: “il possède 9 Noirs, et 4 negresses, sur lesquels il a une autorité, sans les maltraiter qu’a propos, qui les tient dans le respect, aussy sont-ils fort sages, et bien attachés à leur Maître, et a leur travail” (Barassin 1978: 140).

The great majority of slaves were attached to the habitations, of the 384 slaves in Boucher’s census only 24 were in the services of the C10. The number of slaves on the habitations that had them varied from 1 to 16. The numbers on the basis of the figures provided by Boucher are shown in Table 4.

About one-third of the slaves, called Noirs and Negresses by Boucher, were locally born and two-thirds had been introduced from abroad; it should be noted that the figures in Table 4 above include small children.9 On the estates with many slaves, different tasks were assigned to them, the house slaves lived on the “emplacement” near the house of the family in their own huts, female slaves taking care of the master’s and the slaves’ small children. The slaves working in the fields (Noirs d’habitation) at a certain distance from the family home remained there throughout the year, working at their own pace without supervision. But on the habitations with few slaves, as a rule, the latter and members of the family worked together in the fields.10

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9 Referring to the census of 1709, Barassin provides the following figures: of 387 Noirs 196 were males over 14 years and 55 males under 14 years of age; 77 females over 12 years, 59 under 12 years of age (1957: 28). Boys over 14 years and girls over 12 years were considered as “adults”. According to Barassin (1989: 256), there were 273 adults and 114 children in 1708/09.

10 E.g. Anne Mousse, “négresse créole”, wife of a Frenchman aged 76 “qui ne peut remuer de vieillesse”, manages her farm (“fait fort bien valoir son habitation”) with the help of her
In conclusion it can be said that the majority of slaves lived and worked in close proximity to the master and his family as members of the same household. Their children grew up with those of their master, probably learning the same varieties of French. Newly imported slaves were dispersed over the entire colony and quickly integrated into the société d’habitation. They would probably have learned some kind of French from their masters and their fellow slaves fairly soon, as discussed in the following section.

### 4 Who Spoke what to whom and in which Situations?

The historical documents at our disposal contain very few remarks about language use in the colony. Monseigneur Maillard de Tournon, the Papal Legate who visited the island in 1703 on his way to China, observed that no other

two sons, four daughters and 2 female slaves (Barassin, 1978: 74). Pierre Pradau (a French filibuster having arrived in 1704) “est fort ménagé, très laborieux, et a l’appuy de deux noirs qu’il a, il vit fort agréablement, cultivant soigneusement le peu de terre qu’il possède” (p. 77). Jacques Naze, another former filibuster, cultivates his land with “un bon noir” and his wife, “qui malgré son libertinage ne laisse pas que de travailler” (p. 100).

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**Table 4**  
_Number of slaves on habitations in 1709._

| Number of Slaves | Number of Habitations |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 0                | 25                    |
| 1                | 18                    |
| 2                | 9                     |
| 3                | 11                    |
| 4                | 4                     |
| 5                | 8                     |
| 6                | 3                     |
| 7                | 4                     |
| 8                | 1                     |
| 9                | 3                     |
| 10               | 3                     |
| 12               | 2                     |
| 13               | 2                     |
| 14               | 2                     |
| 16               | 1                     |
language was spoken but French, and in 1709 governor de Villers declared that “puisque l’île était peuplée particulièrement de Français, sous la domination du Roy (de France), aussi n’y (parlait-on) que la langue française” (quoted in Barassin, 1989: 232). Obviously, these statements refer to the language of the colonists—neither the cardinal nor the governor would have been interested in language use among the slaves. In Antoine Boucher’s memoirs, no mention is made of the linguistic situation. Therefore, all we can do is to re-examine the demographic facts and the social settings described in the previous sections in order to propose some hypotheses.

The first census of 1686 shows that the population of 269 consisted of 44 families and 28 single men, 16 from Madagascar and 12 from India. Of these families, 36 (altogether 197 persons) had a French father, 14 of these being married to a Malagasy and 12 to an Indo-Portuguese spouse. The women from India, described as “portugaises des Indes Mulatresses” by Boucher, had surnames of Portuguese origin (e.g. Monique Pereire < Pereira, Louise Fonsèque < Fonseca, Domingue Rosaire < Rosario) and were daughters of Portuguese fathers and Indian mothers (cf. Vaxelaire 1999 (vol. 1): 80). They probably spoke Portuguese, possibly also a Dravidian language. It is highly unlikely that the Frenchmen learned the languages of their wives, and very likely that the wives were eager to learn French. 11 Even if they had tried to transmit their mother tongue to their children, it would not have survived into the next generation. From these families come the 58 locally born brides who were married between 1687 and 1715 at the age of 10 to 14 to locally born men or to filibusters, most of them from France (see above).

The Malagasy couples and their children (24 according to Chaudenson (1974: 455)) formed a minority, though a large one. It is certainly possible that in the early years they spoke a Malagasy dialect among themselves, but there is no evidence that the Malagasy mothers transmitted their mother tongue to their children born on Bourbon. 12 At the time of the census, the couples and the single men were still “servants” or already considered as “slaves”, thus they would have lived on the habitations of the families with French heads under the conditions described above, absorbed by the owner’s household. Even if the parents had continued to speak their Malagasy dialect and it was acquired

11 Cf. Chaudenson (2001: 100): “For the women discussed above [=the Malagasy and Indo-Portuguese wives], the use of this language [=French] was probably even the clearest way for them to show their social ascension out of the servile world.”

12 The Malagasy language is subdivided into several dialects, see Chaudenson (1974: 467–468) and Gordon (2005: 140). In the early years the Malagasies on Bourbon came from the region of Fort-Dauphin and were speakers of Tanosy.
by their children, these children, growing up with the children of the French-speaking master, would at best have been bilingual.

In 1709, French-speaking families and habitations are still dominant. The CIO sent French engagés only from 1665 to 1671 and in 1689; from 1687 onward the number of French-speaking habitants increased mainly by the filibusters who had decided to settle on the island. Of the 12 foreigners mentioned by Boucher, five came from the Netherlands, five from England, Ireland or Scotland, one from Germany and one was a Portugais Indien. Since they all married locally born French-speaking wives, it can be assumed that they quickly learned French. They are portrayed by Boucher as being well integrated in the société d’habitation; for example, Guy Dumesnil (mentioned above) was even appointed as capitaine de quartier in the district of Sainte-Suzanne (Barassin, 1978: 65).

From the description of life and work on the habitations at the beginning of the 18th century, it can be inferred that the slaves were in close contact with the French-speaking master and his family. The slaves working for the Company (CIO) were a small minority of mixed origin; in all likelihood, they also spoke varieties of French among each other. As mentioned above, one-third of the slaves were locally born and two-thirds had been brought to Bourbon from Madagascar, India or Africa in the course of the years. Of the 311 slaves counted in 1704, 209 were imported: 110 came from Madagascar, 45 from India (Bengal, Balasore, Nagore, Surat, Malabar), 36 were “Cafres” (Africans), 10 “de Guinée”, 6 from Mozambique; one is called “More”, and one came from Malacca (Barassin 1957: 24). As there was no organised slave trade before 1718, in the early years slaves arrived in small numbers, and the fact that 209 of them had been distributed among about 90 habitants makes it unlikely that small clusters of slaves of the same origin could have maintained their mother tongue as a means of communication in their new environment.

The Malagasies were an exception since they formed a majority in the non-White population, and it seems fairly certain that their language has left traces in Réunion Creole (see below). There was at least one habitation where the Malagasy language may have survived the early years, the one managed by Anne Caze, a widow aged 60 in 1709. She was most probably one of the three Malagasy female servants who arrived in 1663. She married one of the Frenchmen, and after his death was remarried to Gilles Launay in 1678. In 1704/05 the couple had 23 slaves: one Indian woman, two Malagasy men (Etienne Lambouquiti and Gilles Leheratchi, married to Anne’s sisters Marguerite and Jeanne), 12 sons and 8

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13 In 1708 they were 24: 18 males aged 2 to 70 (8 Indians, 2 from Guinée, 8 locally born) and 6 females (2 locally born widows, one married Indian, 3 girls aged 9, 6 and 6 months) (Barassin, 1989: 52).
daughters of these two couples. By the partition of property after Launay’s death in 1709, Anne Caze received 14 slaves, including four children. Except for the Indian woman, all her “slaves” were her relatives: a sister and brother-in-law, seven nephews, four nieces. Boucher praises her in these words: “Cette femme vit d’une maniere [...] exemplaire, devote, tout ce qui se peut, et charitable autant qu’il est possible de l’estre, fort laborieuse, et qui conduit ses noirs comme ses propres enfans, avec lesquels elle cultive une [sic] espace de terrain tres considerable” (Barassin, 1978: 113, 281–84). It is not surprising that Anne Caze treated her slaves like her own children since they were members of her family, but her case is by no means typical of the entire situation. However, although there is no clear evidence, it is feasible that Malagasy survived in this family—or in other families—until the end of the 17th century.

5 French and Approximative French

If we assume that French was understood and spoken by all Bourbonnais on the threshold of the société de plantation, the question arises: Which variety or varieties of French? After quoting Maillard de Tournon and de Villers who observed that everybody spoke French, Barassin adds his own reflections about the varieties of French in use on Bourbon at the beginning of the 18th century:

Cependant, c’est alors que s’amalgamèrent à la vieille langue française du XVIIe siècle, les patois provinciaux, les expressions de marine, des mots malgaches, l’accent étranger des anglais, hollandais et portugais; et le tout dut encore s’adapter au gosier, à l’oreille, à l’esprit des Noirs, originaires de Madagascar, des Indes, de la côte orientale d’Afrique, voire même de la côte occidentale, car ces Noirs constituaient presque la moitié de la population totale de l’Île. Pour lutter, chez les enfants, contre cette mutation progressive de la langue française, il n’y avait pas d’écoles, et l'instruction dispensée au foyer familial était, dans l’ensemble, inexistante, malgré les capacités réelles de certains chefs de famille.

Barassin, 1989: 232

What Barassin tries to describe here can be interpreted as a continuum: at one end the colonial French of the settlers and their families, at the other end the varieties spoken by the slaves.14 In order to provide a tentative description of

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14 Chaudenson speaks of a “continuum of approximations of French” (2001: 124, 170) or a “system of approximations of French” (2001: 146).
these varieties, I will draw on the analysis of the Caulier texts in Bollée (2007b) and on comparative studies of varieties of North American French (see Neumann-Holzschuh, 2003, 2008), especially the so-called *français marginaux* which have evolved without any normative pressure and are closest to the *terminus a quo* of creolisation (Chaudenson, 2001: 151–53, 163–65, 170–71).

### 5.1 The French of the Free Population

According to Chaudenson, in the period of the *société d’habitation*, the French of the settlers coming from various regions of France undergoes a self-regulating process of “koïnèisation [qui] contribue sans doute à homogéniser les variétés régionales et populaires de français utilisé par les colons” (2003: 182). A *koine* is defined by Siegel (2001: 175) as:

>a stabilized contact variety which results from mixing and subsequent levelling of features of varieties which are similar enough to be mutually intelligible, such as regional or social dialects. This occurs in the context of increased interaction or integration among speakers of these varieties.

In the context of the history of RC, the notion of koineisation seems to only partially apply. The absence of certain features or forms of dialectal origin attested in other varieties of colonial and overseas French can perhaps be explained by this factor, e.g. *a(l) ‘elle’, variants *eussse, ieusses, ieux* of the pronoun *eux*, indefinite article *ion, iun, iunne* (Bollée, 2007b: 96), but many dialectal variants attested in the texts of Caulier (e.g. *bian ‘bien’, vœquier ‘vivre’, pormette ‘promettre’, arussciter ‘ressusciter’*) have not been eliminated by the “standard” forms also used in the texts. Especially in the field of lexicon, mixing has occurred but levelling does not seem to have gone very far. Lexical diversity attested on the maps of the *Atlas linguistique et ethnographique de la Réunion* (Carayol, Chaudenson and Barat, 1984–1995) suggests in fact a mixture of lexical variants of different origin, but one also gets the impression that subsequent levelling has not occurred. Hundreds of *hapax legomena* give proof of dialectalisms maintained in the idiolects of small groups of informants (Bollée, 2003: 25–27) and show that the speakers felt no need to adapt themselves to the speech of their neighbours.

The Malagasy and Indo-Portuguese wives of the first settlers and the slaves from Madagascar and India arriving in the course of the years have made important contributions to the lexicon.\(^1\) Many names of plants, fruits,

\(^1\) See the relevant chapters in Chaudenson (1974): “l’apport malgache” (pp. 468–535) and “l’apport portugais, indo-portugais ou indien” (pp. 536–590). For the following examples,
vegetables or fishes are of Malagasy origin, e.g. ravnal ‘the traveller’s tree, Ravenala madagascariensis’, kābar ‘kind of yam’, zābrevat ‘kind of pea’, bisik ‘young gobidés fish’, zurit ‘octopus’; also designations of kitchen utensils or objects for daily use: farfar ‘large shelf placed over the hearth used to smoke corn, onions, bananas, etc’, tuk ‘three stones on which the cooking pot is placed over the open fire’, kalu ‘pestle’, firāg ‘hook or harpoon’, tāt ‘bag made of vacoa leaves’. The contribution of the immigrants from India is particularly noticeable in the vocabulary of food and cooking:

It is likely that the “Indo-Portuguese” mothers in the first families on Bourbon ‘Indianized’ the cuisine from the very start. They were instrumental in guiding and establishing culinary customs. Considering the social situation of the time, they probably passed them on to their daughters or to slaves who helped them with domestic chores. This initial Indian influence may have been prolonged and facilitated in the following years by notions of ethnic ‘specializations’ among the slaves: Indians, who were considered skilful and delicate and less hardy than the Malagasies or ‘Cafres’, were most often used to do chores in the house or ‘courtyard,’ instead of rough work in the fields.

CHAUDENSON, 2001: 233

The following words are of Indian or Indo-Portuguese origin: kari ‘a dish of meat or fish prepared with garlic, onions, tomatoes and occasionally turmeric’, asar ‘chopped vegetables or fruits seasoned with onions, vinegar, chillies, lemon, etc’, rugay ‘spicy preparation of vegetables with chillies and onions’, bazar ‘market; vegetables’; fig ‘banana’, bred ‘edible leaves of various plants cooked in broth’, brēzel ‘eggplant’, karābol ‘acid fruit, Averrhoa carambola’.

5.2 The Approximative French of the Slaves
It can be assumed that the majority of the slaves spoke varieties of French not too different from the variety of the free population. This is true not only of the slaves born on the habitations and raised together with the children of the masters, but also for a number of slaves who had arrived as children. To give two examples: studying the baptismal registers, Barassin (1957: 22) recorded from 1696 to 1698: 21 Blacks imported from Africa and Madagascar, 9 of them young children from 18 months to six years, 9 from 11 to 15 years, two “filles adultes” (who may not have been much older than 14 or 15) and one woman of...
about 20; from 1699 to 1701 in the parish of Saint-Paul: 43 newly arrived slaves, 19 of them children aged 5 to 15 years and 17 adults aged 16 to 30 (the age of the remaining seven is not indicated). Obviously, many of the 209 "Noirs d’importation" arrived on the island at a favourable age for acquiring a new language.

In the light of the texts written by Philippe Caulier in what he calls “le jargon des Esclaves Nègres”, I propose to discuss some linguistic developments which may have characterised the slaves’ approximative French. To support my hypotheses, evidence is drawn from descriptions of the français marginaux in North America; a more detailed comparison of the Bourbonnais texts with these varieties of French will have to wait until the data of Ingrid Neumann-Holzschuh’s forthcoming Grammaire comparée du français acadien et louisianais (GraCoFaL) are available. The following features can be observed in the Caulier’s texts:

- Tendency to neutralise the oppositions [y] : [i] and [ø, œ] : [e, ε]: jistice ‘justice’ (p. 33);
- Tendency to replace [ž] by [z]: touzour ‘toujours’, zamais ‘jamais’ (p. 33).
- Sporadic agglutinations: petit l’enfant ‘petit enfant’, bon l’esprit ‘bon esprit’, son zoreïes ‘ses oreilles’, son zieux ‘ses yeux’ (p. 35). The same phenomenon is observed in the French of Newfoundland, e.g. lanse ‘anse’, largent ‘argent’, lestomac ‘estomac’, zhuitre ‘huitre’, zyeux ‘yeux’ (Brasseur, 2001).
- Tendency towards loss of grammatical gender and inconsistent use of articles: son tête ‘sa tête’, son bons paroles ‘ses bonnes paroles’; acouter catchîme, bon parole du Prêtre ‘écouter le catéchisme, la bonne parole du prêtre’, faire signe la croix ‘faire le signe de la croix’, apprendre prières ‘apprendre les prières’ (pp. 38, 40–44). Cf. Neumann-Holzschuh (forthcoming): “La catégorie du genre est affaiblie dans les variétés de l’acadien” (p.c.).
- Substitution of stressed for unstressed pronouns: moi connois ‘je connais’, toi i fai ‘tu fais’, li n’étoit pas fini marier ‘elle [la Vierge] n’était pas mariée’; unstressed je, tu, il(s), elle(s) do not occur in the Caulier texts. Plural forms are often reinforced by -autres: nous autes ‘nous’, contre eux autes ‘contre eux’ (pp. 11, 48–50; cf. Neumann-Holzschuh, 2008: 365).
- Use of postverbal object pronouns instead of preverbal clitics. In the texts of Caulier, these are regularly preceded by à (the three exceptions to this rule

16 The database contains at present 800 pages; publication is expected in 2006 (p.c. I. Neumann-Holzschuh).

17 These examples follow the spelling used by Caulier in the texts. Page numbers refer to the their description in Bollée (2007b).
may be due to inadvertence): *Li mettre à nous autres icy même, pour vive bien comme i faut* (pp. 10, 51–52; cf. Neumann-Holzschuh, 2008: 368–69). Since Malagasy object pronouns also have initial *a-* , Chaudenson proposes probable convergence of these forms and French dative forms à *moi, à toi*, etc. (2003: 404–405). It is very likely that generalisation of the object pronouns with *à* is due to speakers of Malagasy origin.

- Tendency to generalise the form of the third person singular of verbs for the entire paradigm: *nou-i-voit* ‘nous voyons’, *nou i fait* ‘nous faisons’, *nous i meurt* ‘nous mourons’ (pp. 55–57; cf. Neumann-Holzschuh, 2003: 72).
- Tendency to use the “infinitif substitut”: *li avoir envie délivrer J.C.* ‘il [Ponce Pilate] avait envie de libérer Jésus-Christ’ (p. 58; cf. Brasseur, 2001: xlviii-xl ix; Neumann-Holzschuh, 2003: 73).
- Tendency of the marker *i*, stemming from the 3rd person *reprise du sujet* in left-dislocation constructions, to spread to the other persons: *moi i crois* ‘je crois’, *tout ça qui nou i dit* ‘tout ce que nous disons’. In RC it was to be grammaticalised as a marker of finiteness (pp. 60–61; cf. Michaelis, 2000: 167–69).
- Morphological reanalysis of *il a → la*: *Dieu l’a fait le monde* ‘Dieu a fait le monde’, and *il est → lé*: *toi l’est Chrestien?* ‘Tu es chrétien?’ (pp. 62, 66–67). *La* was later grammaticalised as a copula in modern RC.
- Frequent use of periphrastic verb constructions, e.g. with *finir*: *quand nou fini mourir* ‘quand nous sommes morts’, *li fini venir au monde* ‘il est venu au monde’ (62–5; cf. Detges, 2000: 139–44).

Almost all these features are characteristic of one or several varieties of overseas French (*québécois, acadien, cadjin, French of Newfoundland*) which have evolved without normative pressure. From this tentative description it can be concluded that fifty years after the founding of the colony of Bourbon, the language spoken by the slaves was still a variety of French—although an approximative one. Their approximative French became the basis from which Réunion Creole developed in the *société de plantation* in the years after 1725.

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