

An exploratory study of morphosyntactic change in Chagossian Creole

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Fifty years ago, the British government forcibly displaced the entire population of the Chagos archipelago to Mauritius and the Seychelles. While no right of return has been granted, some 10,000 Chagossians have since migrated to, or have grown up in Crawley (West Sussex) and other parts of the UK (Jefferey 201). The Chagossian case is exceptional in that most of the population speak Creole as a heritage language, far removed from their native shores, and dislocated from a native-speaker base *in situ*. While the remaining fluent speakers who grew up on the Chagos archipelago remained in Mauritius and the Seychelles, UK-based Chagossian speakers who were granted British citizenship in 2002 now find themselves geographically and linguistically isolated (Benjelloun 2005). No published research is available that we are aware of on any linguistic aspect of Chagossian linguistic practice, including on basic questions such as the extent to which Chagossian Creole is now structurally aligned with its contact varieties (Mauritian Creole, Seychellois Creole, French, English); the extent to which their Creole is intergenerationally transmitted; or how speakers now perceive Chagossian Creole. This dearth of research complicates the task of responding to key goals that the community themselves have articulated: e.g. stemming the tide of critical language endangerment; revitalizing Chagossian Creole; the deficit framing of Chagossian culture and linguistic practices in UK schools (see Allen 2018).

This talk has two aims. In the first part of the talk, we describe the early-phase design of a multidisciplinary, community-based research project to document and revitalize language as part of the intangible cultural heritage of displaced Chagossians in the Mauritius, the Seychelles, and the UK. Through consultation with the community in question, we illustrate the anxieties that Chagossians express around key issues for revitalization: displacement and social networks; the deficit framing of Chagossian culture and linguistic practices in exile. In the second part of the talk, we report on early-stage pilot work in Crawley (UK) where Chagossians have settled. While this pilot work is about to begin at the time of writing, key research questions are: (1) to what extent is Chagossian Creole now structurally aligned with Mauritian, Seychellois Creole, French, and English, given fifty years of forced displacement in the Indian Ocean, and, since 2002, in the UK; (2) what inferences can be drawn from this preliminary data in terms of how contact-induced change has taken place, particularly given the unique context in which the Chagossians find themselves. The pilot data will be drawn from semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews combined with a sentence-translation task, which is being co-designed with Chagossians on the project, and which will be administered to a small, balanced sample of 1st and 2nd generation Chagossians (n=8). Linguistic features to be targeted include the variable realisation of articles, subject doubling, and long/short-verb forms, all of which are well documented in other contact varieties, such as Mauritian Creole (e.g. Syea 2012).

References:

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