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Philip Baker and the Making of Mauritian Creole

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Philanthropy brought Philip Baker to Mauritius in the 1960s, but not much is known about him and his work during that troubled period of the country's transition from colony to sovereignty. From a rare bionote found on the website of the University of Westminster, we learn that "he has also worked in a variety of other fields including film-making, journalism, and distance education."

In his introduction to "KREOL *A Description of Mauritian Creole*" published in 1972, Philip writes:

This book results from several years' interest in Kreol. It began as a series of notes made while learning to speak this language in the period 1965-7 when the author was living in the island.

What he had in mind then was to produce 'a simple teaching grammar designed to assist non-Mauritians in learning Kreol'. This led to 'an interest in linguistics' and to recast the material gathered into 'a reference grammar.' The distinction between 'Kreol' and 'Creole' in the title is explained thus: 'Kreol' with 'K' refers to the language, and 'Créole' with 'C' to a section of the population.

Among the three primary aims of the publication, it is worth quoting the one which could well be the first explicit reference to education and the Kreol-speaking child:

2. To provide some of the information required for the preparation of school courses in languages and other subjects designed specifically for the Kreol-speaking child, especially at the primary school level.

In 1972-3, Philip was back to Mauritius, and his book was hailed by the *Le Cernéen* of 20 September 1973, as:

- "a very comprehensive study and detailed analysis of the local patois (sic)".
- "an original work which comes at the right time and answers a long-felt need".
- "the work commends itself to the linguist, the philologist, be they Mauritian or foreign; to the teacher in the preparation of school courses (...); to the average Mauritian, who may learn from this book many things of which he is probably not aware about the language which he either uses everyday or hears around him".
- "(...) it can be of considerable help to foreign visitors who want to acquire a working knowledge of the local patois (sic) – which would make their stay among us more interesting in more than one way".

The reference to foreign visitors acquiring a working knowledge of Kreol was not just a pious wish. Philip's comprehensive book was followed by a Correspondence Course in Mauritian Creole which he produced at the request of the newly set up Mauritius College of the Air, where Philip worked for some time in the department of distance education. Thus, paradoxically, Mauritian Creole, then still referred to as the 'local patois', was for the first time acknowledged as a language for education and training.

Philip was back again in 1975, this time to focus on the Mauritian Creole dictionary project, the seeds of which had germinated during his first encounter with the language. A team of informants and collaborators joined in, including me, who became increasingly involved when he left at the end of the year to study for his Master's at York University. On his return in 1978, hardly had we started work on a new comprehensive orthography when, out of the blue, Philip received an order from the Mauritian authorities to leave the country within 48 hours. No explanation was given.¹ After his departure, the evening daily, *Le Mauricien* of 23 June 1978, came out with a headline on the proposed new orthography, with a no-comment mention to his expulsion in the article:

Avant d'être expulsé, la semaine dernière, par le gouvernement mauricien, M. Philip Baker qui faisait des recherches sur la population mauricienne (...), travaillait sur un dictionnaire kreol-anglais et kreol-français d'un millier de pages.

The *Diksyoner Kreol morisyen-Dictionary of Mauritian Creole-Dictionnaire du créole mauricien* was published by l'Harmattan (Paris) in 1987. The orthography adopted by the co-authors, lortograf-linite, was designed for "the representation of the two principal spoken languages of Mauritius, MC and Bhojpuri, within harmonized orthographic conventions which respect the morpho-phonemics of both languages."

The 1972 Kreol grammar together with the 1978 *lortograf-linite* and the 1987 dictionary constitute the foundations for Mauritian Kreol as a standard language of the first generation. The credit for this achievement goes to Philip Baker (1940-2017).

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

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URL : http://www.lpl-aix.fr/~fulltext/Etudes_Creoles /hookoomsing.pdf

¹ In a footnote on page 2 of his PhD thesis Philip Baker writes: "I was forced to leave the island at 48 hours notice by the former government of Mauritius in June 1978. No explanation for this expulsion was given at the time or subsequently."