

BOOK REVIEWS

Annegret Bollée (ed.), Deux textes religieux de Bourbon du 18^e siècle et l'histoire du créole réunionnais. Philippe-Albert Caulier C. M.: Profession de Foy, en jargon des Esclaves Nègres/Petit Catechisme de l'Isle de Bourbon tourné au Style des Esclaves Nègres, 2007, VIII + 152 pages. (Serendib Series, 1). London - Maharagama : Battlebridge Publications.

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In 2004, Annegret Bollée and Philip Baker published the *Profession de Foy, en jargon des Esclaves Nègres* and the *Petit Catechisme de l'Isle de Bourbon tourné au Style des Esclaves Nègres* on the Creolica website (Baker, P. and Bollée, A. 2004. Édition de deux textes religieux du XVIII^e siècle: Philip Caulier C.M.: *Profession de Foy, en jargon des Esclaves. Petit Catechisme de l'Isle de Bourbon tourné au Style des Esclaves Nègres*, in: *Creolica* (www.creolica.net/article.php3?id_article=30). The publication of these texts piqued the interest of many researchers interested in the development of creole languages as, although written by a French priest, Philippe-Albert Caulier C. M. for use in his mission work on Bourbon (Reunion) in the mid-eighteenth century, they appeared to bear witness to an emerging, though certainly not yet stabilised, creole system. It was with great pleasure and anticipation, then, that I commenced reading Annegret Bollée's 2007 book, in which she not only presents the texts (Section A) but provides a detailed linguistic analysis of them (Section B) as well as a chapter on the history of Reunion and the development of Reunion creole (Section C).

The two texts, written in what Caulier terms the "Style" of the slaves, were discovered by the historian Megan Vaughan in the Lazarist archives in Paris. When she forwarded the texts to Philip Baker, Vaughan also included a biography of Caulier which Bollée draws upon in her presentation of the author in Section A. Caulier spent over twenty years (1749-1771) working as a missionary in Reunion (or Bourbon as the island was called in his time) and it appears that he took great interest in instructing his flock of mostly Malagasy slaves in a language that they could understand. Caulier learned enough Malagasy not only to deliver his religious instructions to newly arrived slaves in this language, but also to write a dictionary (*Dictionnaire de la langue de Madagascar*) and a grammar. For slaves that had been on Bourbon for some time, however, and who had been "*obligés d'emprunter notre Langage, et de la jargonner autant qu'ils en sont capables*" (4) (My translation: forced to adopt our language and jabber it as best they can), he preferred to use their "Style" of French, a language that he deemed necessary for all priests on the island to use in the religious instruction of their slave charges.

The long quotes from the Caulier manuscripts that Bollée reproduces on pages 3-5 provide a

fascinating insight into the way in which the language of the slaves was perceived by Caulier. For him, this language or “jargon” was a variety of French. The term “creole” is not mentioned which, as Bollée points out, is not surprising given that it was rare to find this word used to describe a language before the end of the eighteenth century. Caulier claimed that the slaves distorted the French language and that, in terms of grammatical features and pronunciation, they spoke it in much the same way that they spoke their own language. So similar was their “Style” of French in structure to Malagasy that he recommended that missionaries learn it as an intermediary step to learning Malagasy. While these observations might lead people to think that a process of relexification was at work, Bollée’s linguistic analysis of the texts in Section B and her description of the historical development of Reunion creole in Section C do not bear this out. Instead, Bollée argues convincingly, the language in Caulier’s texts illustrates a stage of creolisation, a process that happened gradually over a relatively long period of time and that, in the case of Reunion creole, was “largely a process of second language acquisition by several generations of Malagasy or African-born adults” (117). The gradualist hypothesis, as elaborated by the late Jacques Arends (to whom this volume is dedicated), is privileged by Bollée and she uses it as a critical framework for her analysis and discussion.

After presenting Caulier’s reflections on why a priest needed to use the slaves’ “Style” when teaching them about religion, Bollée comments on the somewhat controversial issue of dating the Caulier manuscripts. She then makes a few remarks on the transcription of the texts before reproducing both texts in their entirety at the end of Section A. She also includes copies of Caulier’s surprisingly neat original scripts for the reader’s interest. While I particularly enjoyed seeing these pages in Caulier’s hand, I was not sure why the typewritten texts were presented in landscape format (printing restrictions or a desire to keep the same layout as the originals?). It makes for slightly awkward reading and for the *Profession de Foy, en jargon des Esclaves Nègres*, this is compounded by the lack of white space between lines. For ease of negotiation through the alternating Latin and “creole” lines, it would have been better, in my view, to have left a space between each Latin/“creole” grouping.

Section B begins with some reflections on methodology and Bollée makes it explicit that the inspiration for her work on the analysis of the Caulier texts was the research programme set out by Jacques Arends (1995). While both linguistic (the study of early texts) and extralinguistic (socio-historic) directions of research have been instrumental in advancing knowledge of the Indian Ocean creoles, particularly evident in the work of Robert Chaudenson and Philip Baker, Bollée underlines the fact that Jacques Arends’ notion of the gradual development of creole languages has not yet received the attention it deserves. For her, this concept, as opposed to the more traditional hypotheses of rapid or abrupt creolisation, is what guides her research and is particularly pertinent to the situation on Bourbon where, she posits, a creole language slowly developed once the economy moved into the “plantation phase” after 1720. Caulier’s texts, written in all likelihood some time between 1757 and 1771, thus provide an excellent source for testing the gradualist hypothesis and gaining greater understanding of the linguistic ecology of Reunion in the mid eighteenth century.

In order to determine the stage of creolisation that the Caulier texts represent (approximations of French, “bourbonnais”, a developing, non-stabilised creole or a fully autonomous creole?) as well as deciding whether the texts reflect linguistic reality (and if so whose?), Bollée embarks on a comparative approach in her linguistic analysis of the texts. Unable to draw upon contemporary 18th century French religious texts used in Reunion as a point of comparison, Bollée usefully turns to other religious texts from this period that were used in France (*le Catechisme du diocèse de Nantes* of 1723) and Quebec (*Petit catechisme ou l’abrégé de la doctrine chrétienne, En faveur des plus jeunes enfans, ou des personnes grossières* of 1700). These allow her to immediately determine the non-creole traits in Caulier’s manuscripts and the differences between the French and “creole” texts,

including a difference in word choice and an absence of abstractions in Caulier's versions. Bollée then makes some comments on the written forms and spellings chosen by Caulier to represent the pronunciation of the "jargon" of the slaves. She demonstrates that the texts largely conform to the French spelling norms of the time but that they also contain traits indicative of old, regional or dialectal French. She notes that, with a few exceptions such as / y / > / i / and / ž / > / z /, Caulier rarely attempted to represent "creole" pronunciations that differed from the French pronunciation of the period. This was doubtlessly due to the great variability in people's pronunciation but also because this was the first time someone was writing down this "jargon" for which there were no spelling conventions. Caulier probably did not dare to stray too far from French spelling for fear of compromising the readability of texts destined for his French-speaking colleagues.

The analysis in Section B is set out clearly and is both informative and interesting. Bollée covers all of the expected linguistic categories (noun phrases, pronouns, verb phrases, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions and lexical notes). Her comparative approach, using nineteenth century *réunionnais* texts as well as a number of sources for regional (including North American varieties) and dialectal French of the eighteenth century and earlier makes the analysis especially illuminating. The comparison of the Caulier texts with old Reunion creole texts as well as the present-day varieties of Reunion creole allows her to test her theory of a gradual development of the language. The texts show a spectrum of features, some present in Reunion creole today (the pre-verbal markers *i*, *la* and *fini*, for instance), some closer to the French of the period (the prepositions *à* and *de*) and other elements that have dialectal origins, such as the demonstrative pronouns *stila* (*celui*) and *stella* (*celle*). The texts also demonstrate that several features were undergoing grammaticalisation in Caulier's time but had not yet stabilised in the language (aspects of the pronominal system, the verbal system and negation, for example). Other features, like the use of "le corps" to mark reflexivity and the pronoun *zot* from the French *eux-autres*, show their potential for future grammaticalisation. The unmistakable message that emerges is that the language of the texts is highly variable, not yet stable, but showing that it is on the way to becoming a creole. The linguistic analysis therefore produces evidence in support of the gradualist hypothesis.

Section C comprises a history of Reunion and of Reunion creole. Despite working from secondary sources and thus not revealing anything "new" in the historical overview, Bollée skilfully relates the information to her thesis making it very relevant and worth reading, even for those very familiar with Reunion's population history. What many people will find interesting is her reproduction of excerpts from Antoine Boucher's 1710 *Mémoire* on the inhabitants of Bourbon (Barrassin, J. 1978). Choosing one representative from each of Boucher's groupings of the free population (original French immigrants, white Creoles, mixed-race Creoles and European foreigners) and using some slave owners as case studies for describing the servile population, Bollée highlights the close working relationship slaves had with their masters during the habitation period when slave numbers were low. Most landowners owned three slaves or fewer and these slaves worked alongside the master and his family. The slave children grew up with the master's children and probably spoke the same variety of French as them. As any new "bossal" slaves arrived in very small numbers, they would have quickly learned the language of their masters or co-workers. Bollée claims that possibly the first Malagasy slaves spoke Malagasy among themselves but there is no evidence that they passed this language on to their children born on Bourbon. She also draws attention to other matters that had an impact on the development of the varieties of French spoken on the island including Bourbon's unusually high level of *métissage*, the youthfulness of the slave population and the fertility of the women which resulted in a large young population that was essentially uneducated due to the lack of schools but also to the apparent lack of transmission of reading and writing skills on the part of literate fathers to their offspring.

Following on from the social and historical data, Bollée continues Section C with a discussion of

the varieties of French spoken by the colonists and slaves around 1725 prior to the transition from *société d'habitation* to *société de plantation*. Bollée is careful to point out that every creole has its own story and that the conditions under which Reunion creole eventually developed were very specific. She maintains that prior to the movement to a plantation economy, both colonists and slaves were speaking varieties of French but that a continuum of usages (from the French of the local elite to the *français approximatif* of the most recently arrived slaves) would have already been in place. While concurring with Chaudenson that slaves would have been speaking approximations (or L2 varieties) of the master's speech, approximations that ranged from very close to the master's French to quite far (what Chaudenson has called "*le français zéro*"), she does not agree that the colonists' speech ever underwent full *koinèisation* or levelling to produce one common variety. Based on the linguistic evidence in the Caulier texts, she puts forward the notion that, in addition to geographical isolation, some of the diversity of *réunionnais* today can be traced back to the fact that the colonists did not seem to apply the rules of "*autorégulation*" to their speech. In other words, they did not feel the need to adapt their speech to that of their neighbours and dialectal variants remained. Perhaps the lack of normative input from schools and lack of cultural infrastructure played a part in people resisting standardisation?

The implications for the speech of the slaves, then, are obvious. In addition to the continuum of approximations based on the time/space proximity to the master's tongue, the approximations would have varied depending on the variety of French that the master spoke. This meant that the language emerging was highly variable. Bollée is quick to point out, however, that the language spoken during this period was not creole – a number of the creole-like traits apparent in the Caulier texts (sporadic agglutination, uncertainty of grammatical gender, high frequency of tonic personal pronouns etc.) are also attested in other "marginal" varieties of French and are thus indicative of "*le français zéro*" rather than creole.

The arrival of relatively large numbers of slaves from about 1725 did have an impact on linguistic development on Bourbon. However, society did not change overnight and Bourbon, with its high rate of *métissage* and social class of *petits Blancs*, became a *société à deux vitesses*. That is to say, a habitation economy, characterised by small properties with a few slaves, existed alongside the vast, labour-intensive plantations. In the 1830s, for instance, Bollée notes that about half of the slave population worked on properties with an average of nine slaves as opposed to the sugar establishments where the average number of slaves was 142. This division of slaves into small *habitations* and large plantations was instrumental in the evolution of the acrolectal (*créole des Hauts*) and basilectal (*créole des Bas*) varieties of Reunion creole.

The way in which slaves integrated into society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as the ways in which they interacted with the colonists and creole slaves depended very much on the attitude of their masters and the size of the properties on which they worked. On large properties, access to the colonist and his family (and therefore to their variety of French) was limited or non-existent for many slaves. Their target language then became the *français approximatif* or nascent creole of the creole slaves. That the slaves needed to learn the community language is not questioned. Even though the economy developed into plantation mode, the numbers of new slaves coming to each plantation were probably not huge – there was not a scenario whereby hundreds of "bossal" slaves arrived on any given property at one time – Bollée posits that until the end of the eighteenth century, individual masters probably received about two or three "bossals" per year with a maximum of 10-15 going to the very rich planters. Integration (social and linguistic) would have been feasible, even on the largest properties. Moreover, the new slaves appeared to have been organised into pre-existing gangs headed by a creole slave overseer to further facilitate their integration into plantation life. Bollée maintains that under such conditions a communicative catastrophe, which many linguists see as an essential factor in creole genesis, never occurred on Bourbon even during the plantation phase.

How, then, did Reunion creole come about? Bollée sees the arrival of greater numbers of slaves from the 1720s as a critical factor—not insofar as it created a communicative catastrophe, rather, it was a partial rupture which saw the loss or weakening of a number of French categories. It led to the scenario described by Chaudenson of newly arrived slaves targeting the *français approximatif* of their creole overseers which, over time and with the arrival of more and more slaves, meant that learners were exposed to approximations of approximations and so on (See, for example Chaudenson, R. 1992, 2003). Each generation was targeting a language that was gradually moving further away from the “French” pole and closer to creole. Because of its particular social history, the linguistic rupture in Reunion was not as radical as in other colonies such as Mauritius and this engendered a less “radical” creole, a language that, nevertheless, is autonomous from French. What is more, the high degree of variation in Reunion Creole, indeed the existence of a continuum, can be attributed to demographic, social and geographical factors, all of which are peculiar to Reunion. As Bollée so rightly says, “*chaque créole a son histoire à lui*” (133). (My translation: “every creole has its own story”.)

This book, the first of Battlebridge’s new Serendib series, makes an excellent contribution to the field of creole and contact language studies and is an enjoyable and interesting read. It will appeal to creole specialists as well as people interested in linguistics, sociolinguistics and French colonial history. Bollée’s scholarship is exemplary and her approach is clear, logical and succinct. I found the detailed comparative work in the linguistic analysis (contrasting the Caulier texts with old, regional and dialectal French and later Reunion creole texts) particularly valuable. Through both linguistic and socio-historical research she makes a strong case for gradual creolisation in Reunion. Indeed, in a 152-page case study, Bollée confirms that only by taking into account the myriad of different social and historical factors, along with the diachronic study of available texts, can linguists draw any conclusions as to the impetus for creolisation in a given colony. As such, it is a fitting tribute to the much-missed Jacques Arends.

References

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