



LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT

Chagossian Creole – Language Snapshot

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ABSTRACT

Chagossian Creole is a French-lexified Indian Ocean creole spoken originally by the indigenous population of the Chagos Archipelago. Between 1965 and 1973, the British government forcibly displaced the entire population of the archipelago to Mauritius and the Seychelles. Many Chagossians have since migrated to, or have grown up in, parts of the UK, gaining citizenship in 2002. The Chagossian case is exceptional in that all Chagossians now speak Creole as a heritage language, far removed from their native shores, and dislocated from a traditional sociocultural base. There is scant published research available on Chagossian Creole lexicon, structure or practice, including on basic questions, such as the extent to which their creole is now structurally/lexically aligned with its contact varieties; the extent to which their creole is intergenerationally transmitted; or how



speakers now perceive or use Chagossian Creole. This dearth of research complicates the task of responding to the Chagossian community's own articulated goals relating to language. This paper serves as the basis for building a community-based research agenda for Chagossian Creole.

RÉSUMÉ

Le créole chagossien est un créole à base lexicale française de l'Océan Indien, parlé par le peuple indigène de l'archipel des Chagos. Entre 1965–1973, ce peuple de l'archipel aurait été déplacé de force dans sa totalité par le gouvernement britannique. Pendant leur exil à l'île Maurice et aux Seychelles, il est devenu possible aux Chagossiens de faire la demande de leur citoyenneté britannique en 2002, moment auquel la migration au Royaume Uni s'est déroulée. Le cas Chagossien est unique dans le sens que tous les Chagossiens sont maintenant des locuteurs d'héritage, éloignés de leurs rives natales, et séparés de leur centre socioculturel. Il existe présentement très peu de recherche publiée sur le créole chagossien, incluant le lexique, la structure linguistique et la pratique sociolinguistique. Nous ignorons beaucoup de réponses à des questions élémentaires comme : dans quelle mesure le créole chagossien est-il maintenant aligné linguistiquement/lexicalement avec les langues de contact ? La transmission intergénérationnelle continue-t-elle ? Comment est-ce que les locuteurs perçoivent ou utilisent maintenant leur créole ? Cette pénurie de recherche complique profondément la tâche de répondre aux objectifs communautaires concernant la langue. Le présent article peut servir de base pour élaborer un programme de recherche sur le créole chagossien.

Keywords: Chagossian Creole; kreol sagosien; *ilois*; French-lexified creoles; Indian Ocean creoles; Bantu; Malagasi

Language Name: Chagossian Creole, Kreol, *ilois*

Language Family: French-lexifier creole (Indian Ocean and western Europe)

ISO 639-3 Code: crs (we note that this code links to Seychellois Creole which is used incorrectly as an alternative glottonym for Chagossian Creole on Glottolog)

Population: ~10,000

Location: -7.261620, 72.377770

Vitality rating: EGIDS 6b

1 OVERVIEW

Chagossian Creole is a French-lexified Indian Ocean creole. It was the first language of Indigenous inhabitants on the Chagos Archipelago (see [Figure 1](#); [Figure 2](#)) until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the British government forcibly displaced the entire population (~2,000 Chagossians) to Mauritius and the Seychelles (Gifford & Dunne 2014). The territory remains in British control (Baldwin 2023; Jeffery 2011) and no right of return has yet been granted. However, this remains a live issue: as of 3rd October 2024, the British government agreed to relinquish sovereignty of the Chagos islands to Mauritius after a long-running judicial dispute, but the implications of this for Chagossians themselves are unclear.

Indigenous Chagossians (who can also refer to themselves as *zilois*) and some of their children gained UK citizenship in 2002 following the British Overseas Territories Act (BOT) (2002) and the reclassification of the British Dependent Territories (BDTs) as “Overseas Territories”. Chagossians born on the archipelago under its former status held BDT citizenship and thus became eligible for UK citizenship. The Nationality and Borders Act (2022) extended British and BOT citizenship to all Chagossians and their descendants born in exile. Chagossian Creole is thus spoken by forcibly displaced Chagossians and their descendants now residing in exile in Mauritius or the Seychelles, and by those who have since migrated to the UK (and France, according to unofficial figures).¹ No reliable speaker numbers exist: the British government has proposed that as of 2022 some 10,000 Chagossians reside outside of the archipelago, with at least 3,000 living in the UK. This is likely an under-estimate, as (i) settlement in the UK from Mauritius and the Seychelles has been ongoing, and (ii) recent census data suggest smaller numbers in Mauritius and the Seychelles (~3,066 and ~1,014, respectively), indicating that some of them have left.² Very little research has taken place on the linguistic repertoires of Chagossians, which are now more complex than prior to their forced displacement. What is clear, however, is that the Chagossian case is exceptional from a sociolinguistic perspective in that the population speaks their creole as a heritage language, far removed from their native shores, and dislocated from a traditional speaker base.



Figure 1: Indian Ocean. Source: Jeffery (2011: xii), reproduced with permission.

- 1 Census work by the *Chagossiens de France* group is pending.
- 2 Numbers for Mauritius are informal estimates as 2022 census data have not yet been published. Numbers for the Seychelles come from the *Seychelles National Bureau of Statistics* and include correct number agreement respondents who answered ‘Yes’ to question 01.24 “Is [Name] of Chagossian descendants” (2022: 227). The authors recognize here the limitations of such lines of evidence.



Figure 2: Chagos Archipelago. Source: Jeffery (2011: xiii), reproduced with permission.

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is scant published research on Chagossian Creole, both pre- and post-forced displacement, and little published research at all on the variety’s linguistic structure. The most comprehensive phonological and grammatical description available can be found in Papen (1978) as part of a comparative linguistic study of the French-based Indian Ocean Creoles. Papen’s fieldwork took place after Chagossians were forcibly displaced, and so the two research participants who form the basis of his study (both male, over 60 years of age) were consulted while residing in Mauritius.³ On lexis specifically, the 2nd edition of Carpooran’s *Diksioner morisien* [Mauritian Dictionary] offers a list of some 30 lexical items (2011: 1123–1126) that are “words from the Chagos archipelago and/or words spoken by Chagossian people” (53). Florigny, Pustka & Perreau’s overview of Mauritius and the Seychelles does however suggest some overlap in their usage (2024: 773). Lastly, Benjelloun (2005) provides a descriptive sociolinguistic sketch of the Chagossian context, with a focus on the impact of displacement on community cohesion. There are in addition one or two entries in reference surveys, such as Holm (1989: 403–4), but these and other indirect references draw exclusively on Papen (1978)’s work. Smith (1994) is an annotated list of pidgins and creole languages that includes reference to Chagossian Creole, but no sources are cited.

³ Papen’s original recordings have since been disposed of.

These works aside, we are aware of no other published research specifically on Chagossian Creole. There are, however, some important works in allied fields that focus on other aspects of language use among Chagossians in exile, notably Allen (2018), Gundowry (2018), and Vine (2011).

3 LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE

As a French-lexified creole with a predominantly Bantu and Malagasy substrate (Papen 1978: 9), Chagossian Creole has been described as linguistically similar to Mauritian, Seychellois, and Rodrigan Creoles, depending on the source.⁴ Smith (1994) lists Chagossian Creole as *ilois* Creole (cf. *zilois*) under *Indian Ocean Area — Mauritian*, stating that it is “very close” (347) to Seychellois Creole. However, Papen (1978) suggests that this depends on the level of linguistic description. In general, he remarks that “the speech of the islanders closely resembles that of the more conservative Rodrigan speakers, at least phonologically and grammatically” (Papen 1978: 82).⁵ Jeffery’s (2011) ethnography of Chagossians in Mauritius and the UK also reports that speakers assert a close similarity, particularly phonologically, to Rodrigues Creole (2011: 89). Conversely, Vine (2011: 118)—also an ethnography—remarks that there are identifiable accent features specific to Chagossian Creole (cf. Walker 1986: 16). Others have argued that Chagossian Creole structure has become increasingly aligned with Mauritian Creole (Baker & Corne 1982: 8; Benjelloun 2005: 118). This is unsurprising given that long-term, inter-ethnic contact and asymmetric power relations are known factors in language change (Giles 1979). As Papen also argued at the time, “Chagos islanders [...] invariably are adopting urban Mauritian Creole forms [...] particularly the young, and whatever distinctions existed between the two dialects will soon disappear” (1978: 82). However, this hypothesis remains to be tested, given the linguistic variation in Chagossian Creole described by Papen (1978: 81–82).

4 LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

While very little research has taken place on Chagossian Creole, attention has been accorded to other aspects of Chagossians’ intangible cultural heritage. *Séga* dance and music were a particularly prominent part of life on the Chagos Archipelago, which have since been transplanted by communities to their ports of exile (cf. Allen 2018; Gundowry 2018; Jeffery 2011). *Séga* constitutes a type of creole performance, recordings of which are available online dating back to the 1960s prior to Chagossians’ forced displacement. These will be useful for, among other things, analysis of diachronic change:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASo8kQTPSLk>
- <https://www.zianet.com/tedmorris/dg/1969sega.html>
- <http://filoumoris.com/group-tanbour-chagos-leritaz-kiltir-chagossien/>

4 The population of the Chagos islands were largely of African and Malagasy origin until the mid-1800s; many of Indian (particularly Tamil) origin were brought to the islands thereafter. Walker (1986) argues that a significant number of Chagossians—perhaps 40%—were of Tamil ancestry.

5 See Papen (1978) for a description of Rodrigues Creole.

5 TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

We end this paper by emphasising the need for a wider, community-based research agenda on Chagossian Creole, that must include Chagossians themselves in the design and conduct of the research, and that is cognizant of their own articulated goals as stated in the Democratic Statement and Chagossian Bill of Rights (see Allen 2018).

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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