Chapter 1

The Grand Narrative of the Researcher: a Case Study Approach of Macrosociolinguistic Research

1 Introduction

I will start by briefly recapitulating some of the ideas introduced in the previous chapter regarding the theoretical frame in which this scholarship is lodged. In its broadest sense, sociolinguistics is the study of society from the vantage point of language use and attitudes towards languages, or, to express it differently, the study of language in its social dimension. The ultimate aim of the discipline is to describe and predict patterned language behaviour as well as attitudes towards languages. This goal stems from the belief that sociolinguists are empowered to provide clarity on language practice in multilingual settings and, in a wider sense, on the complex interplay between languages and societies. To this end, researchers have laid stress on, amongst other issues, the status of languages, their functional differentiation (in particular in official institutions), language policy decisions, the resources provided to languages, language conflicts and the dynamics of languages, e.g., language maintenance, language shift and language death.

This chapter is devoted to a critical reflection on the type of scholarship carried out from what can be termed a macrosociolinguistic perspective. One of the main objectives of this approach to sociolinguistic research is to study the connection between language and social organisation in a distinct speech community. As I have found it easier to conduct my reflection using a case study approach, I carried out a meta-analysis of research undertaken in Mauritius over a period of more than three decades. The reason for my choice is twofold: first, macrosociolinguistic studies have featured prominently on the agenda of sociolinguistic research on Mauritius. Some of the main foci of these studies have been the functions and status of languages on the island, the typology of these languages – taking into account the fact that 1.3 million people are linked with a dozen languages – the conflicts that have emerged in the last decade and the different dynamics of multilingualism on the island. The second reason, as I will show later, is that
the island community is (also) caught in a situation of palpable tension between change and stability.

2 A Case Study Approach: the Sociolinguistic Setting of Mauritius

Macrosociolinguistic studies conducted on a single language community can serve to illustrate the meaning that is attributed to the relationship between language and social organisation. In theory, scholars use what they believe are descriptive analytical tools to account for language practice in formal and non-formal situations. For example, scholars who have described the sociolinguistic setting of Mauritius have proceeded with their research on the assumption that a study of the official rules and regulations of institutions as well as the tacit rules of social interactions would provide an accurate picture of language practice in the community. According to them, these rules and regulations offer the necessary insight to predict language use and attitudes towards languages. The general belief is that these rules and regulations represent ‘first-order reality’ for linguists. For this reason, researchers start by paraphrasing the laws or statutory regulations of official institutions with the aim of identifying the domains where rules are implemented, the category of actors who are involved and the types of context concerned. They then analyse the deviations that are revealed.

From a methodological perspective, scholars of sociolinguistics obtain their data from two sources: from the formal communications regulated by the major institutions in the relevant community, and from the non-formal communications in the community based on what these scholars regard as the major trends and patterns of language interactions. In other words, the institutional set-up and its regulatory framework regarding languages as well as what linguists believe are the dominant trends of language use in non-formal communication are believed to provide the necessary information to describe language behaviour and explain its relationship with the social architecture of the community. Sociolinguists who have undertaken research on Mauritius have based their studies on the functions of languages, making a distinction between languages used in communicative exchanges and languages that are linked with the cultural aspirations of the population but that are excluded from social interactions. The label ‘passive functions’ is often used to refer to the type of symbolic function that these languages fulfil.