MADAGASCAR: WHATÂ€™S IN A NAME?

Posted on June 29, 2017 by Sue

Why Madagascar is two syllables short of what it should be.
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Iâ€™ve always loved languages. I can vividly remember as a teenager, during a school exchange visit to France, the joy of discovering that I could actually communicate in another language. At University I learned more about how to get my tongue to perform the necessary acrobatics to pronounce those tricky sounds peculiar to the French language. Then during my linguistics training with Wycliffe back in the 1980s, in phonetics classes we were introduced to (and had to learn to recognise and reproduce) every speech sound which exists in human language: from flaps and trills, liquids, fricatives, to plosives, implosives and double plosives and plenty in between!

I became very familiar with many of these sounds when we lived in West Africa. Others, like voiceless vowels, I knew existed-for example in many South American languages-but I had never heard them (or rather *not* heard them!) for myself. Imagine my delight then, on my first visit to Madagascar, when I realised that this fascinating phenomenon exists in Malagasy languages! There are voiceless vowels all over the place. As you might imagine, these sounds are called â€˜voicelessâ€™ because they are produced without the vibration of the vocal chords. Try saying a word like â€˜soâ€™ with a finger on your voicebox. You will feel a slight vibration as you pronounce the â€˜oâ€™. Now try saying â€˜soâ€™ in a whisper. This time there should be no vibration, and there you have it: a voiceless vowel. Now this is not to say that people speaking Malagasy go around whispering all the time, itâ€™s just that some of their vowels are pronounced using the voice and others without the voice. In English, for example, sometimes we pronounce a â€˜thâ€™ without using the voice, as in â€˜â€™thighâ€™ and sometimes we voice it, as in â€˜thyâ€™.

Now when it comes to Malagasy place names, I think we can see how voiceless vowels have affected the way these have been translated into English and French. The name of the island in Malagasy is *Madagasikara* where the â€˜iâ€™ and the final â€˜aâ€™ are voiceless: ***Madagasikar****a.* I think this is probably how the name in French and English became â€˜Madagascarâ€™ â€“ the French and English didnâ€™t â€˜hearâ€™ the voiceless vowels and so didnâ€™t write them. The capital, *Antananarivo*, (which means â€˜City of the Thousandâ€™, while *An* means â€˜place ofâ€™) also has a voiceless vowel at the end and so in French it is â€˜Tananariveâ€™.

In a similar way, the town of *Toliara* on the south-west coast of the island is pronounced in Malagasy with a voiceless â€˜aâ€™ at the end: ***Toliar****a.* In French this became â€˜TulÃ©arâ€™. (The Malagasy â€˜oâ€™ is pronounced â€˜ooâ€™ â€“ phonetic symbol which the French have approximated to their â€˜uâ€™ sound and pronounced phonetically as).

Iâ€™m sure most place names have a story to tell when you look back at their history or compare them across languagesâ€¦