D-Lab: Haiti

Fall 2003

Creole Grammar

Sources:
http://www.ebenezermissions.org/GrmBasics_nn4.html and
Word by Word English/Haitian Kreyol
S. Molinsky and B. Bliss

Haitian Creole is an autonomous and phonetic spelling language based on 16th and 18th century lexical French and syntax principles of West African languages. It is the national language spoken by the entire population of Haiti and by most foreigners living in that country. One of the two official languages of Haiti, with French, it is also the congenial language used by people of Haitian descent born or living abroad. It is written the way it is pronounced, but it has its own grammatical rules. Some Haitians call their language *ayisyen.* The orthography and grammatical rules presented below conform to the Haitian Creole spelling of the Institut Pédagogique National (IPN), the spelling recognized by the Haitian government since 1979.

Haitian Creole orthography has four fundamental principles:

1. One sign for each sound
2. The same sign for the same sound
3. No silent letter
4. Each letter has its own function

Alphabet and Pronunciation

Most consonants in Haitian Creole are pronounced the same as in English.

B	as in bed
ch	as in machine
d	as in dandy
f	as in fork
g	as in go
h	as in hockey [but I can't think of a single Creole word with h without c in front of it]
j	as in orange
k	as in kind
l	as in label
m	as in master
n	as in no
p	as in pet
r	as in read (but pronounced in the back of the throat as if gargling), but like w as in win before vowels o, ò, on, ou
s	as in sink

t	as in table
v	as in vase
w	as in win
y	as in yard
z	as in zone

Creole vowels often show the influence of French. Speakers fluent in French pronounce some vowels differently than those who speak only Creole.

a	as in father
an	a cross between sounds as in control and under
e	as in say
è	as in get but longer
en	as in lens
i	as in sea
o	as in go
ò	as in ought
on	as in don’t
ou	as in two

an, en, on, and ou always function as single vowels with one sound each. The grave accent (ˋ)modifies the sound of a, e and o (i.e. separates it from it’s know vowels an, en, on, ou)

Noun

A noun is a word that names a person, place, thing or idea.

bwa (wood)
chèk (check)
chat (cat)

Agreement

Gender

Haitian Creole nouns generally have no gender. However, nouns for people ending in ez indicate the feminine:

koutirèz (seamstress)

Number

Nouns do not change to indicate a change in number. Instead the number is indicated by an article or a number.

Li gen youn sak. (He has a bag.)
Li gen twa sak. (He has three bags.)
Suiv siy yo. (Follow the signs.)

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that stands for a previously mentioned (or understood) noun. That noun is called the antecedent of the pronoun.

In the sentence

The house was badly damaged when it was hit by the hurricane.

The pronoun it refers back to the noun house (the antecedent).

Pronouns can serve a number of purposes. In Creole, the same pronoun is used for both subject and object. A pronoun is a subject pronoun when it precedes the verb and an object pronoun when it follows the verb.

m/mwen	I, me
w/ou	you
l/li	he, she, it, him, her
nou	We, us
yo	they, them

The abbreviated pronoun is generally used when the pronoun is the subject of a verb and is always used before the verb particle ap.

In the second person, the full pronoun ou is generally used before a consonant in written language.

The full pronoun is generally used to express the subject of an adjective or when it is an object.

A pronoun used after a noun indicates possession:

chat li (her cat)

When the noun ends in a vowel or a nasal (m, n), use the shorter form:

chyen w (your dog)

Articles

Haitian Creole has only one indefinite article, youn (a, an). It is only used in the singular. No indefinite article is used in the plural. The indefinite article precedes the noun.

Li gen youn sak. (He has a bag.)
Li gen sak. (He has bags.)

Definite articles follow the noun and are sometimes attached to it with a hyphen.

With singular nouns, the definite article varies depending on the noun's spelling.

Noun ending	**Definite article**	**Example**
consonant (except m, n, ng)	la, lan	fig la (the banana)
m, n, ng	nan	chanm nan (the room)
vowels (except nasal)	a	tikè a (the ticket)
nasal vowels	an	tren an (the train)

In the plural, there is only one definite article, yo.
fig yo (the bananas)

Adjectives

Adjectives describe or modify nouns and pronouns. In Haitian Creole, adjectives precede the noun they describe and are invariable.
ti chyen an (the little dog)

Adjectives do not require the presence of the verb to be.
M malad. (I am sick.)

Adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives or other adverbs. They are invariable.

To form adverbs from adjectives ending in a consonant, add -man to the adjective: dous (soft) becomes dousman (softly).

When the adjective ends in a vowel or a nasal, the adverb is formed by placing the word tou or pi before the adjective.

Many adverbs, such as byen (well), are not formed from an adjective.

In Creole, adverbs generally precede adjectives and follow verbs.

Sa a twò fret. (This is too cold.)
M konprann trè byen. (I understand very well.)

However, the adverb anpil (very, a lot) follows the adjective.

Sa a fret anpil. (This is very cold.)

Verbs

Haitian Creole verbs are not conjugated but retain the same form for all subjects and tenses.

Pale	(to speak)
M pale.	I speak.
Ou pale.	You speak.
Li pale.	He speaks.
Nou pale.	We speak.
Yo pale.	They speak.

Tense and mood are indicated by particles which precede the verb.

ap (indicates continuing action)
M ap pale. (I am speaking.)
Li ap aprann pale kreyòl. (He is learning to speak Creole.)

te (indicates past completed action)
Nou te pale. (We have spoken.)
M te manje. (I have eaten.)

a, pral (indicates immediate future)
M a pale. (I will speak soon.)
L a cheche youn taksi. (He will look for a taxi.)

M pral fè l. (I am going to do it very soon.)

ava (indicates sometime in the future)
M ava fè l. (I will do it some time.)

t ap (indicates past imperfect, generally parallel action, contraction of te + ap)
Yo t ap pale. (They were speaking.)
M t ap achte lè l vini an. (I was shopping when she came in.)

ta (indicates conditional or perfect conditional, contraction of te + a)
Yo ta pale si yo te kapab. (They would speak if they could.)

Nou ta renmen de kabann. (We would like two beds.)

It is not necessary to use the verb to be with an adjective.
M elas. (I am tired.)

To connect two nouns, use the verb se.
Li se yon avoka. (He is a lawyer.)

To indicate necessity, use fòk (must, have to). Fòk always appears at the beginning of the sentence.
Fòk mwen pale. (I must speak./I have to speak.)

Prepositions

Prepositions generally precede a noun and indicate movement, presence or lack.

nan (to, on, from, in, at)
Li nan youn bèl otèl. (He is in a nice hotel.)

a (at, in)
Ann ale a uitè mwen ka. (Let's leave at 7:45.)

avèk, ak (with)
youn chanm ak douch (a room with a shower)

pa (by)
Li konn leson an pa kè. (He learned the lesson by heart.)

san (without)
youn chanm san douch (a room without a shower)

de (of)
Li gen twa pye de longè. (It is three feet long.)

ba (for)
M ap pale ba ou. (I will speak for you.)

pou (for)
youn chamn pou de moun (a room for two people)

sou (on, on top of)
sou lòt bò (on the other side)
sou tab la (on the table)

anwo (on top of)
anwo tab la (on the table)

anba (under)
anba tab la (under the table)

sou kote (near, on the side)

sou kote bank la (near the bank)

Prepositions are used less extensively in Creole than in English.
M prale la pos. (I am going to the post office.)

Conjunctions

Conjunctions join two or more phrases or clauses together.

Coordinating conjunctions link two phrases or sentences of equal value:

e, ak (and)
epi, epitou (and, also)
ositou (also)
men (but)
ou (or)

Subordinating conjunctions link a subordinate clause with the main clause:
si (if)
kon (when)
kou (when)
kidonk (therefore)

A common expression is Si m te. . .m ta. . . (If I could, I would):

Si m ta rich m ta achte anpil rad. (If I were rich, I would buy many clothes.)

For extra emphasis, repeat the verb preceded by ala:
Si m te gen lajan ala achte m t achte. (If I had money, I would really buy things.)

If the subject is obvious, speakers may say only Si m te m ta, leaving their listeners to fill in the missing words.