D-Lab: Haiti

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Notes on the Haitian Creole Language

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A. Valdman, 1970

Haitian Creole has been blessed with a surfeit of workable spellings. Since the 1940's three spelling systems have been proposed, all of which provide a systematic way to represent the sounds of the language in a way that is independent of French. The first systematic phonetically-based representation for Haitian Creole was authored by the North Irish Methodist minister Ormonde McConnell, with the assistance of the American literacy specialist Frank Laubach. That spelling was replaced in the 1950's by a slightly modified notation devised by the Haitian journalist Charles-Fernand Pressoir, termed the Faublas-Pressoir or ONAAC spelling; the ONAAC was government's community development and literacy agency which had adopted the revised system which, until the last few years was used widely by Haitian authors and those who prepare materials destined for monolingual speakers. In 1975, however, a new notation was introduced by the Institut Pédagogique National (IPN), the agency charged with the implementation of a major reform program to introduce Haitian Creole in the schools. In 1979 this spelling was given formal recognition by the Haitian government. Today, nearly all materials in the language, both in Haiti and in U.S. Haitian communities, make use of that system.

The Role of Creole in Haiti

Haitian Creole is the vernacular language of Haiti. It is spoken by all the inhabitants of the island, and it serves as the only means of linguistic communication for nearly 90 percent of the population. Middle class and educated Haitians are bilingual: they speak both Haitian Creole and a variety of French which does not differ appreciably from that spoken in France. More accurately, middle class and educated Haitians are diglossic, for French and Haitian Creole function as two varieties of the same language, each language having a clearly defined domain. French is used exclusively for all administrative functions (in the courts, in government offices), in the schools, and in formal business transactions. Diglossic Haitians use Creole to communicate with monolingual Creole speakers but they also resort to it among their peers. It is not unusual for diglossic Haitians to shift from French to Creole in the course of a conversation, indeed, even in the middle of a sentence. The use of French and Creole on the part of middle class and educated Haitians may be summarized by the following diagram.

	Formal Situations	**Informal Situations**
Public Domain	French	French or Creole
Private Domain	French or Creole	Creole (French)

Both languages are used interchangeably by diglossic Haitians in informal situations outside of the home (in shops, in sermons, in radio broadcasts, in conversation with acquaintances and strangers and in formal situations within the home (receptions, conversations, with friends or relatives in the presence of outsiders).

In recent years one notes a gradual ascendancy of Creole over French, and the vernacular language is finding entry in many spheres from which it was barred previously. The ability to use both French and Creole is limited to a small minority of the population. From 70 to 90 percent of the population speak no French at all or speak it very brokenly. It is clear that the foreigner who comes to Haiti without any proficiency in Creole will fail to communicate effectively with most of its inhabitants. Creole is truly the repository of the culture of Haiti and is expressive of what we might call the ‘soul’ of its people.

Creole and French

Since it is the official language of Haiti, the only one admitted in the courts and in the transaction of official matters, French enjoys much higher prestige than Creole. Furthermore, since it is easily demonstrable that many Creole words are derived from French and since Creole does not have many of the grammatical categories of French, it is widely held by many persons inside and outside of Haiti that Creole is a reduced, a corrupted version of French. These persons also claim that Creole in fact has no grammar, and that to speak Creole one needs only to take French words, drop or change a few ‘letters’, and put them together in any order one wishes. As this Basic Course will show, Creole has a highly codified grammar and its sentences are characterized by explicit rules. These rules, of course, differ from those of French. This is merely another way of saying that Creole is a language distinct from French, although it not only shares part of the same sound system and vocabulary but some grammatical features as well. Despite these similarities French and Creole are not mutually intelligible, and the prospective student of Creole who starts with a knowledge of French will discover that acquiring the ability to understand and speak Creole well will be only partially facilitated by his knowledge of French.

The Origin of Creole

Haitian Creole shares many similarities of structure with languages clearly derived in some way from West European languages (Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish) which are spoken in the Caribbean. The territories in which Caribbean Creoles are spoken all share a common history of senventeenth and eighteenth century plantation economies that rested on the importation of slave labor from Africa. It is the speech of thse African slaves which eventually developed into the Creoles as hybrid languages consisting of words from some European languages strung together in sentences according to the grammar of one or more African languages.

This is in fact the most widely held view on the origins of Haitian Creole. Persons who hold this view assume that the African slaves upon arriving in the new world fashioned a language which would permit them to communicate with each other and with the white plantation owner by imitating imperfect Standard French, the presumed speech of the white colonists of Saint-Domingue. It is true that the plantation owners, to reduce the chances of rebellion, were careful to select slaves who came from different parts of Africa and who spoke different languages. Since Africa shows high linguistic diversification, slaves living on the same plantation had to resort to some lingua franca, some language of wider communication, to communicate with each other. It is not unrealistic to suppose that they would work out a reduced version of French and that they would also carry over many features of pronunciation and grammar from their various native tongues. Another version of this 'mixed' language theory assumes that the white planter, believing that the African slaves were primitive beings incapable of imitating such a complex language as French, deliberately simplified his language so that it could be understood and used by them.

Both views are extremely simplistic and ignore many well known historical facts, not to mention certain facts about language contact and language change. In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese began to trade expensively on the Western and Southern coast of Africa and in the Far East. In their dealings with tribal chiefs and traders they developed a contact language, a pidgin, which was probably derived from Lingua Franca, a trade language used by sailors and traders from a multitude of nations in the Mediterranean basin. It appears that a particular variety of this language – which we shall call Afro-Portuguese Pidgin – developed along the coast of Africa. No doubt Afro-Portuguese Pidgin exhibited Romance grammatical features, with a mixture of some African features, and a vocabulary derived from a variety of sources, but with a preponderance of forms from Portuguese and other Romance languages. Afro-Portuguese Pidgin was well known by Africans who engaged in the slave trade, and it was learned by some of the slaves while they awaited shipment in African barracoons and on board the slave trader ships.

It is grossly inaccurate to believe that the first settlers of Saint-Domingue were all plantation owners who spoke Standard French. It is well attested that, as was the case for the American colonies, the majority of the first white settlers of saint-Domingue were indentured laborers or social undesirables purging prison sentences. These came from a variety of French provinces and they probably spoke regional and social varieties of French that differed markedly from the language of the Versailles court or that of the Paris bourgeoisie. When the African slaves arrived in Saint-Domingue, it was with these 'poor whites', not with the planter and administrative class, that they interacted. Haitian Creole is best viewed then, as a contact language derived from two basically Romance types of speech. Overseas Low-class French and Afro-Portuguese Pidgin. The differences between Haitian Creole and French are not due to corruption and imperfect imitation. They are differences that one would expect between two different varieties of French or two different Romance dialects. These differences also stem from the structural reorganization of a single language triggered by the contact of two groups of people speaking different languages and who needed to communicate immediately in the most efficient, though, not the most elegant way.

Variation in Haitian Creole

It is widely held that Haitian Creole and all Creole languages for that matter, have no fixed usage, and that inded, they have no grammar. While it is patently false that

Haitian Creole has neither fixed usage nor grammar, the definition of a single set of pronunciation habits, forms and construction that could constitute a standard, a 'correct' dialect presents some problems.

First, like virtually all languages, Creole shows variations in spoken form determined by differences in geographical area, in social level, and in circumstances attending conversational exchanges between speakers. Second, because it coexists with French, and because the latter has more prestige, Creole continuously borrows words and expressions from French; and together with individual words and expressions Creole borrows French sounds and grammatical constructions. It is as if in English, together with such French loan words as chanteuse, we borrowed the vowels an and eu which do not occur in English.

Such languages as English and French also show considerable variation in spoken form, even within the standard dialect. Thus, in English the second vowel of the word tomato may rhyme with the vowel of mat or the vowel of mate. In the careful enunciation of such phrases as I'll pass you the s sound of pass is maintained, but in normal fast speech it is assimilated to the sh sound cash because of its contact with the y sound of you. Finally, futurity maybe expressed by going to + verb (I'm going to watch him, which is usually pronounced 'gonna', I'm 'gonna' watch him). This construction is also heard as 'amana' in the slipshod speech of some speakers. We would scarcely claim that, because of the occurrence of such variations, English has no grammar. It is the fact that a long written tradition exists for English which accounts in part for our general lack of awareness of variation in usage. English words are provided with a single written form no matter how many of different spoken forms they show. Since we view the written form as primary, we are easily lead into believing that each word must have a single spoken form, and we fail to perceive the spoken variants which many English words normally exhibit even in careful, 'correct' speech.

Haitian Creole shows extensive variation in spoken form determined by geographical factors. For instance the third person singular pronoun is li or l in the Port-au-Prince area, but i or yi near Cap Haitien in the northern part of the country. The Port-au-Prince dialect appears to have the greatest prestige, and speakers in other parts of the country imitate it. The Port-au-Prince area contains the highest percentage of diglossic Haitians, and it is the Creole dialect of that area which is most influenced by French today.

The Elaboration of an Orthography for Creole

Since Creole has always functioned in Haiti as a vernacular language whose domain was generally restricted to home, hearth and field, there was no need to write it down. The belief that it was not a full-fledged language also helped to inhibit any movement to provide Creole with a suitable orthography.

Persons who held administrative functions spoke French and acquired literacy in that language. Thus, it was not until about 1940 that serious efforts were made to devise a suitable orthography for Creole. At that time most of the monolingual speakers of Creole who constitute close to 90 percent of the population were illiterate, and it was decide that majority of Haitians could be given access to the written word and advantages that accrue there from only if they were taught to read the vernacular, the language they spoke.

In devising a suitable orthography for a language one attempts: (1) to represent significant sounds in a consistent fashion so that, ideally, each significant sound is always represented by the same letter and so that, in turn, each letter always stands for the same significant sound; (2) to provide a single written form for each word or grammatical ending even though the language may show extensive variation of spoken form; (3) to use symbols an spelling rules which can be learned rapidly by the speakers; (4) to use symbols which appear on typewriter keyboards and on type fonts used in the particular country; (5) to select symbols and spelling rules which will not offend the educated and influential segment of the country's population.