

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION
OF THE FRENCH WEST INDIES

This paper will highlight the historical and sociolinguistic characteristics of creoles, with special reference to the so-called FRENCH-LEXICON CREOLES.

- 1) Creoles are international languages fonctionning on a relatively reduced scale. As far as the French-lexicon creoles are concerned, two geographical areas may be distinguished :
 - A - the Caribbean-American zone :
 - a) the Caribbean islands : the Virgin Islands, Dominica, Martinique, St. Lucia, Grenada, Trinidad.
 - b) one mainland territory : French Guiana.
 - c) small mainland enclaves (in Brazil, Guyana, Panama, Venezuela, Louisiana).
 - B - the Indian Ocean zone : the Mascareignes (Mauritius, Reunion, the Seychelles).

- 2) Creoles are languages which have their origin in colonial expansion : first they are the languages of slaves, then after the abolition of slavery, of peasant ; today the languages of the masses and gradually becoming the vehicles of expression of entire communities. Creoles are not exclusively the creation of African slaves ; they arise out of the mixture of different peoples and groups involved, freely or forcibly, in the enterprise of colonialism. In the Caribbean-American zone, from the moment of the earliest successes of the tobacco and sugar trades, a class of colonists emerges and holds itself aloof, in the area of ideological and symbolic representation, from creole language and culture, which tend to become attributes of the servile strata of society. The slaves, deprived of all other instruments of communication but creole, invest themselves completely in it. Creole becomes the mother tongue and vernacular of an entire slave community.

The relegation to inferiority which creole suffers from 1685 onwards is reinforced on the abolition of slavery not only by the colonial authorities but also by the colonised peoples themselves in their concern to achieve access to French, the instrument of social advancement. The conflict between Creole and French has socio-economic roots, but also very powerful psychological and ideological props among the creole speakers themselves.

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1) Creoles are interventional languages functioning on a relatively reduced scale. As far as the French-lexicon creoles are concerned, two geographical areas may be distinguished:

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2) Creoles are languages which have their origin in colonial expansion: first they are the languages of slaves, then after the abolition of slavery, of peasant and today the languages of the masses and gradually becoming the vehicles of expression of entire communities. Creoles are not exclusively the creation of African slaves; they arise out of the mixture of different peoples and groups involved, freely or forcibly, in the enterprises of colonialism. In the Caribbean-American zone, from the moment of the earliest successes of the tobacco and sugar trades, a class of colonists emerges and holds itself aloof, in the area of ideological and symbolic representation, from creole language and culture, which tend to become attributes of the servile strata of society. The slaves, deprived of all other instruments of communication but creole, invest themselves completely in it. Creole becomes the major focus and vehicular of an entire slave community.

The relegation to inferiority which creole suffers from 1850 onwards is reflected on the abolition of slavery not only by the colonial authorities but also by the colonized people themselves in their concern to achieve access to French, the instrument of social advancement. The conflict between French and French has socio-economic roots, but also very powerful ideological and ideological roots among the creole speakers themselves.

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3) Creoles are dominated languages. Everywhere they exist, Creoles are dominated by a prestige language, usually european : French, English, Dutch, etc... The term diglosia is used to describe a situation in which two languages share the same sociopolitical space. We may take, like the American Ferguson, a view of diglosia as a balanced phenomenon, according to which in a country like Haïti, for example, certain situations require French (the language of formal relations) while in others the recourse is to Creole (the language of intimate, informal relations). But a less superficial understanding of Haïtan reality leads to a more adversarial conception of diglosia : 90 % of the population of Haïti, or almost 5 million people, speak only Creole in all situations and only 10 % have access to both French and Creole. But even in the latter case Ferguson's division into formal and informal situations remains a simplistic one.

The Creole-French conflict is not merely linguistic, but also socio-economic and cultural. In certain countries such as Haïti, it is reflected in a radical opposition of town to country ; in others (Martinique and Guadeloupe) this urban-rural conflict is more subtle and complex.

The subordination and domination of which creoles are also the cause of their exclusion from the field of education. Only, the last few years has Creole officially crossed the threshold of the school, and it has so far *done* so only timidly and with limited researchers and the tools provided to them are concerned.

4) Creoles, being dominated languages, are by the same token languages of resistance, of dissent, of combat even if not always in an organised and conscious fashion. At all events, creole language and culture function more and more as symbols of identity and are an essential component of the heritage of creole-speaking countries. This perspective seems to be the counterweight to their relegation and derives in fact from the *widespread* awakening brought about by victoires in local struggles and worldwide ideological changes (concepts of cultural identity, safeguarding of patrimonies, etc).

5) Creoles are young languages :

Creoles are only three hundred years old. French is about eight hundred years old, having been born in the 12th century. In the 15th century, dominated by Latin, it had not yet acquired all the domains of use it possesses today, and was incapable of expressing certain concepts. It is on the one hand by latinising itself, on the other hand by recourse to its ancient treasury of resources, that French has been able to respond to the exigencies which modernity has imposed on it. The difference between the Creole of today and the French of 16th century is that Latin, a language without specific national roots, was unable to resist the rise of national languages such as French.

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Whereas today French, the dominant language and the source of the Creole wordstock, is a powerful national and international language. Languages such as French and English weigh heavily on the future of Creoles through the acceleration of the process of decreolisation.

- 6) Creoles encounter, at a particular point in their evolution, the process of decreolisation. Decreolisation may be quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative decreolisation is the process whereby the number of speakers of a given Creole diminishes until the language dies out. Creoles like those of Grenada and Trinidad are so greatly stricken by this type of decreolisation that the great majority of their speakers are over 50 years old. And even they are a minority, the rest of the population speaking standard English or English-lexican Creole. Qualitative decreolisation is the process whereby Creole loses its "substance", without any necessary diminution in the number of speakers. One may even say that it is the increase in the number of speakers of Creole and the extension of its domains of use that are the cause of its gallicisation or anglicisation. If Creole, a language of peasant origins, is abruptly forced to relate to domains of use in the urban world (and thus to French) it runs the risk of being de-structured and then re-structured on the model of French. French is the source of the Creole wordstock, a phonological, syntactic and semantic influence.

In conclusion...

The considerable increase in the use of Creole in the media observable today (de-regulated private broadcasting, advertising, newspapers) is a cause of decreolisation. Dare we hope that the strengthening of Creole studies, the provision of linguistic tools (proliferation of grammars, dictionaries, etc...), the establishment of a flexible and well adapted training programmes for professionals in the fields of cultural organisation, communication and education, will bring about a re-appropriation of the linguistic and cultural structures of Creole ?

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tion, the process of de-structurization. De-structurization may be quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative de-structurization is the process whereby the number of speakers of a given Creole diminishes until the language dies out. Creoles like those of Grenada and Trinidad are an example of this type of de-structurization that the great majority of their speakers are over 50 years old. And even they are a minority, the rest of the population speaking standard English or English-based Creole. Qualitative de-structurization is the process whereby Creole loses its "substance", without any necessary diminution in the number of speakers. One may even say that it is the increase in the number of speakers of Creole and the extension of its domain of use that are the cause of its de-structurization or anglicization. If Creole, a language of peasant origin, is abruptly forced to relate to domains of use in the urban world (and thus to French) it runs the risk of being de-structured as then re-structured on the model of French. French is the source of the Creole vocabulary, a morphological, syntactic and semantic influence.

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The considerable increase in the use of Creole in the media (television, radio, private broadcasting, advertising, newspapers) is a cause of de-structurization. There are hope that the strengthening of Creole studies, the provision of linguistic tools (proliferation of grammars, dictionaries, etc...), the establishment of a flexible and well adapted training program for professionals in the fields of cultural organization, communication and education, will bring about a re-approximation of the linguistic and cultural structures of Creole.