

Creole Lexicon*

(Le lexique du créole)

Alongside the many words that have come from French and evolved into creole through basic sound changes (See ‘The Evolution from French to Creole’, <<http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/Evolution.pdf>>), there are a number of other sources of creole lexicon.

Creole has developed variously from:

- words originating from dialects from the North and West of France, cf. *tchenbé/kinbé* in Martinique or Guadeloupe, for example, which comes from ‘tiens bé’ or ‘tiens ben’, (‘to hold/keep’ from French ‘tenir’)
- terms borrowed from some languages of the slaves, namely West African languages, relating principally to flora and fauna but also to aspects of daily life, such as *malanga* or *tarot* meaning an edible tuber and *didiko* (‘light meal’ or ‘breakfast’ - *kikongo?*)¹
- a few terms that have also been borrowed from Caribbean languages. This is confirmed by the recent new edition of Father Raymond Breton’s 1665 *Dictionnaire caraïbe-français* ([n.p.]: IRD/Karthala, 1999). Some examples include *canari* (‘clay pot’), *mabouya* (‘large transparent lizard’ similar to the gecko), and *ajoupa* meaning a temporary shelter or a hut made of foliage.

In spite of these roots and external borrowings, creoles are not necessarily any more composite than other languages since the processes of evolution are systematic.

Contrary to past claims and to what is often still apt to be maintained today, creoles are no more heterogenous than any other language. Comments that spring to mind in particular are those that tend to make Haitian Creole, for example, a language composed of Ewe syntax and French vocabulary or even ‘French words cast in the mould of African syntax’.² More recently, Sylviane Telchid writes in 1997 on the subject of Antillean regional French that ‘the majority of its words, expressions, and phrases are borrowed from creole and hence from the languages that produced creole (Amerindian, African, Old French, regional French, French dialect, Spanish, English, and Indian)’.³ The names given to define the languages here, such as ‘African’ and ‘Indian’, are as fanciful as the perception of Spanish or English as languages ‘that produced creole’. There is no doubt that creole has sometimes borrowed from these languages, but no more than any other

¹ For further study, reference may be made to Pierre Anglade’s *Inventaire étymologique des termes créoles des Caraïbes d’origine africaine* ([Paris(?): Harmattan, 1998) but caution is advised when consulting this work since often the etymologies suggested are highly imaginative with no attempt made to verify that the terms have not actually originated from French. Suggestions as to source languages are made in view of simple phonic comparisons without there really being any possible semantic explanation. Compiled within the most stringent methodologies of comparative linguistics, on the other hand, is Annegret Bollée’s *Dictionnaire étymologique des créoles français de l’Océan Indien*, ([Hamburg(?): [Helmut Buske(?)], 1993) of which Part II, ‘Mots d’origine non-française ou inconnue’ (‘Words of non-French or unknown origin’) is a unique source of information. Unfortunately, its subject is the Indian Ocean creoles and therefore, although it is sometimes possible to find explanations for terms common to both the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, it is not tailored to present needs.

² Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, *Le créole haïtien: morphologie et syntaxe* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1974), p. 195.

³ Sylviane Telchid, *Dictionnaire du français régional des Antilles* ([n.p.]: Editions Bonneton, 1997), p. 223.

language which has or has had contact with these languages and certainly less than French, for example.

It is worth remembering that the French language, which has a large Latin stock, also has a significant Germanic stock, acquired during the Germanic invasions in the fourth century, and that it has also borrowed from the various languages with which it has been in contact throughout its history through wars, marriages, and so on, such as Arabic, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, English, German, and Russian.

One of the traits found to different degrees in the majority of French creoles is that of multifunctionality⁴ of lexical forms or, at least, of lexical base forms prior to any derivation which happens to be quite limited in creole. This means that the majority of single morpheme words can serve as noun, adjective, and even as adverb at the same time. Other words too can occasionally be either verb or noun according to their environment, with the particles indicating whether the phrase is nominal or verbal. In noun phrases, a subject or object phrase is indicated by the position of the word in relation to the main verb. The lexical base form is often not marked however, for example, *manjé* is a noun as well as a verb:

- *i ka manjé / i ké manjé* ('he is eating' / 'he will eat') - verb phrase
- *manjé-la / manjé-a-li* ('the meal' / 'his meal') - noun phrase

It is possible to distinguish a number of recurrent phenomena in Antillean lexical creation and these historically attested processes, which have characterised the transition from French to Creole, are often behind new lexical creations that have remained in existence:

- Agglutination of the article: the French article is often no longer separable from the base word so that creole words, such as *lari* ('road'), *monpè* ('priest'), and *divin* ('wine') take a creole article when spoken to give, for example, *on lari*, *monpè-la*, and *divin-la-sa*. This process can be compared, in contemporary terms, to a prefixation and seems to be used, in Martinique at least, to create abstract nouns, for example, *lachichté*, *ladévenn*, *lakontantman*, *lakonportasyon*, *latranblad*, *ladoutans*, and *lakrintitid*. This phenomenon stems historically from incorrect segmentation of words, bearing in mind that neither the masters nor the slaves in the initial stages of colonisation knew how to read or write, and is associated with the retention of the liaison [z]⁵ in words beginning with a vowel producing such forms as *zarb*, *zozyo*, *zanoli*, *zèb*, *zyé*, and *zafè* which are retained as such both in the singular and plural, cf. *on zozyo* and *sé zozyo-la*.
- Aphaerisis, or loss of the syllable at the beginning of a word, has given forms such as *pliché* from 'éplucher', *gadé* from 'regarder', *krazé* from 'écraser', and *blijé* from 'obliger'.
- A few prothetics are found in front of 's' + a consonant, for example, *eskandal*, *espésyal*, *èspésyalis*, and *èstati* from 'statue', although these are more rare.
- Various metathesised forms ranging from *érisi* and *présepsyon* which have evolved from 'réussir' and 'perception' to phonemic changes such as *siléma* which is used

⁴ On the subject of multifunctionality, reference can be made to volume 1, 'Les parties du discours' ('Parts of speech') in *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique d'Aix-en-Provence* (1983). In this collection of articles, G. Hazaël-Massieux on the one hand and Daniel Véronique on the other discuss this question, the former in relation to parts of speech in Guadeloupe Creole (pp. 73-85) and the latter in a reflection on the existence of an adjectival class in Mauritian.

⁵ International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

alongside *sinéma* while *koulfizi*, *koulpyé*, *koulwòch* and a few others are considered ‘normal’ forms.

- Some epenthesis, notably through the introduction of an ‘r’ between two vowels, for example, *klouré* from ‘clouer’ and *pwaryé* from *pwayé* (native ‘pea tree’).

While aphaerisis and agglutination of the article are generalised phenomena whose production is not linked to a particular social environment, it should be emphasized that metathesis and prothesis are, on the other hand, characteristic of popular or basilectal creole and are currently incorporated into the lexical creation processes which are presented at various times by the Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherches en Espace Créolophone (GEREC) since the aim of these creations is to fill gaps in the basilect which is being set up as the common language.

While inflection is limited in creole, it should still be pointed out that an exploration of lexical items which have different functions depending on their form as a result of parallel introduction into creole of inflected French forms would be important since it is possible that an assessment of the premises of possible grammaticalisations may be made from this. The Lesser Antillean creoles have retained some morphological elements suited to indicating the active/passive voices which other French creoles, in the almost universal absence of inflectional morphology, have to convey by different processes. Oppositions such as *fè/fèt* and *pran/pri* in Guadeloupe and Martinique allow the active/passive voices to be expressed:

i fè on bitin (‘he has done something’) >< *i fèt Lapointe* (‘he was conceived in Pointe-à-Pitre’)
i pran on liv (‘he has taken a book’) >< *i pri* (‘he has been caught/taken’).

The verb form ending in –é stands in opposition to the agent noun form ending in –è and examples include *chanté/chantè* (‘to sing/singer’), *bagoulé/bagoulè* (‘to deceive/swindler’), *gouvéné/gouvènè* (‘to govern/governor’), *péché/péchè* (‘to fish/fisherman’), *bétizé/bétizè* (‘to say or do silly things/someone who does or says silly things, a joker’), and *tayé/tayè* (‘to make clothes/tailor’). Since the average dictionary lacks many agent forms, merely listing the verb form for the most part, this process might naturally be extended to create new words since there is no reason not to have *péyè* (‘payer’) alongside *péyé* (‘to pay’), *kachè* (‘someone who hides’) alongside *kaché* (‘to hide’), and so on. As is also the case with French –eur however, it should be remembered that –è is not only found as a suffix marking an agent since there are French-derived forms, such as *chalè* (‘heat’), where the final –è is clearly not a suffix. By a quirk of history, some creole verbs also end in –è, for example *ouvè* or *wouvè* (‘to open’) and *dékouvè* (‘to discover’), most probably having formed from past participles (‘ouvert’, ‘découvert’). This is undoubtedly the case for many creole verbs since initial verbal structures used in speech in the sixteenth century did not correspond to infinitives because the oral forms of infinitives and participles were identical for verbs of the first conjugation group (ending –er) and probably for verbs of the second group (ending –ir) and –ir verbs of the third group. In these circumstances, not forgetting as well that there are also quite a number of verbs ending in –i from the second and third groups of French conjugation such as *fini* and *kouri*, it is not possible to systematically extend the é/è derivation process to all creole verbs. There are also verbs ending in –é which have too passive a meaning to be able to generate an agent noun, for example, the verb *graté* means that someone has been made to itch by something such as a button or an allergy, as in the phrase *bra a-moin ka graté*, and hardly presupposes the existence of an active ‘itcher’.

Inflectional markers are also sometimes used for masculine/feminine opposition in order to indicate a person’s gender. The è/èz opposition works quite well and, as a creative process,

can be applied as necessary to all agent nouns. If *chantè/chantèz* is possible, so is *kolpotè/kolpotèz* ('a gossip') and *chanslè/chanslèz* ('a person who brings luck'), although *ganmèz* ('an elegant person') seems to be exclusively feminine! It seems, however, that current dictionaries have not always sought to systematically list both feminine and masculine forms of agent nouns and merely give the masculine form for the most part.

In terms of derivation, there a certain number of suffixes, mostly inherited from French but generally applied with different rules and values, which engender changes in grammatical categories, however it should not be forgotten that zero derivation is a highly fruitful process in creole and that it is sufficient very often to attach the necessary functional morphemes to a lexical base form to make it a noun or a verb.

Nevertheless, the possibility of creating verbs by the addition of a suffix *-é* or *-té* is perhaps on the increase in contemporary creole:

- *bétizé* ('to do something stupid') from *bétiz*, *gazonné* ('to mow the lawn') from *gazon*, *biginé* ('to dance the biguine') from *bigine*, and *balkonné* ('to be standing on the balcony') from *balkon*
- *kadoté* ('to give a present') from *kado* and *pyété* ('to stamp one's feet, trample') from *pyé*.

Nouns too can be created (mostly abstract as a result) by means of various suffixes but, once again, these processes are found mostly in popular creole. Examples are *kontantasyon* ('contentment') and *tébètitud* ('being an idiot/imbecile/mentally retarded'); the etymology of *tèbè* is unknown. The use of any verb accompanied by the necessary articles is sufficient to make an abstract noun in creole, for example, *biginé-a-li* ('his/her way of dancing the biguine') and *manti-a-ou* ('your lie'). It is worth pointing out the following possible suffixes (there are certainly others), however it is advisable not to exaggerate their true effectiveness for reasons previously discussed:

- **-aj**: examples include *dékolaj* meaning dry rum taken in the morning on an empty stomach (to soak off the lizard lodged in the throat!), *vonvonnaj* ('buzzing'), and *dékatyaj* ('explanation'), a GEREK creation
- **-ans**: examples include *oublians* ('oversight') and *souvènans* ('memory')
- **-ité**: examples include *lapépasité* ('inability' or 'impossibility') and *lapérezité* ('fear')
- **-iz**: examples include *kouyonniz* ('stupidity' or 'foolishness') and *vayantiz* ('courage')
- **-man**: examples include *kòzman* ('conversation'), *protèjman* meaning a small object worn as a lucky charm to protect against ills, and *dékatman* ('analysis' or 'explanation'), a GEREK creation. This suffix is not to be confused with the adverbial suffix homophone *-man*, cf. *touboulman*, *dousman*, and so on
- **-ri**: examples include *kouyonnri* ('stupidity' or 'foolishness'), *mantra* ('lie'), and *toumantri* ('torment' or 'obsession')
- **-syon**: examples include *modisyon* ('curse') and *profitasyon* ('cowardice' or 'abuse of power')
- **-zon**: examples include *mantézon* ('lie'), *toufèzon* ('stifling atmosphere'), and *soulézon* ('drinking bout' or 'drunkenness').

In terms of composition, it should be pointed out that there are many, very productive processes as well as potential problems posed by classification inasmuch as it is precisely the multifunctionality of the majority of words that prevents classification as noun, verb,

adjective, and so on. The order of priority that is widely accepted however is head-modifier, with the exception of a few nominal forms in which the first part could tentatively be said to be playing more the role of a prefix than of a true adjective. Without claiming to be either exhaustive or definitive, four categories are therefore suggested for the grouping of compounds:

- (i) **adjective** (actually a prefix) + **noun compounds**: examples include *timoun*, *tiponch*, *vyékè*, and *jènjan*. The modifiers *ti-*, *vyé-*, *jèn-*, plus a few others (cf. *gwo-*, *bèl-*, etc.) belong to a closed category since the usual position of the modifier in creole is in postposition to the noun; even a noun that is in postposition to another noun is said to be its modifier, cf. *timoun fwè-moin* ('the son of my brother') and *fwè timoun-moin* ('the brother of my son'), and so on.
- (ii) **noun + noun compounds** (head-modifier): examples include *on zinyam-pakala* ('a pakala yam'), *on krab-sirik* ('a cirique crab'), *on tanbou gwoka* meaning a particular type of drum, *on boutèj luil* ('a bottle of oil'), *fanm-mayé* ('wife'), *fanm-déwò* ('mistress' or 'common-law wife'), and *kaka-zorèy* ('earwax').
- (iii) **verb + noun compounds** (tentative classifications): examples include *on salibouch* ('an appetiser'), *on bonbé-séré* (a dance in which the dancers' waists are tied together), and *on bénirété* (a formalisation of cohabitation, a marriage). The outcome can also of course be verbal: there are a considerable number of compounds with *fè*, for example, such as *fè lous* ('to play the big tough guy'), *fè kim* ('to froth/bubble/lather'), *fè labé* ('to enter into holy orders'), and *fè mas* ('to dress up for the carnival') as well as many compounds with *bay* such as *bay bal* ('to have fun' or 'to live it up'), *bay blé* ('to lie'), *bay do* ('to lose interest'), and *bay lavwa* ('to spread the news'). The majority of these creole 'verbs' can give rise to compounds or, at least, to constructions

- whose overall meaning is often very different from that of the parts
- which can by and large be substituted for single words that constitute a substitution frame with the compound word
- where the parts cannot be separated by the insertion of any element.

(Note: In languages with extensive derivation, an additional criterion in the identification of compounds is considered to be the frequent option to construct derived forms from the whole compound, for example, 'right-mindedness' is derived from 'right-minded', however this peripheral criterion does not apply to all compounds and, a fortiori, cannot be envisaged for creole, a language with marginal derivation.)

Of these classic criteria, which are often used to identify compound words, non-separability is accepted above all as the one that distinguishes true compounds from a momentary combination of two words in speech.

The ambiguity of the nominal and verbal character of forms appears clearly with some compounds, for example *béni-rété* (cited above) where, depending on context, *rété* can either mean 'cohabitation', as in *on rété*, or it can mean 'to cohabit', as in *i ka rété*. The question is whether *on bénirété* should be considered a compound of nouns or verbs.

- (iv) **verb + verb compounds** also give noun as well as verb compounds, for example, *i ka méné-alé* + complement ('he takes X') and *on ti méné-alé*. Once again, the question is whether the combinations are of verbs or nouns.

The average creole dictionary contains very few compound forms and it is worth referring to texts in order to study the productiveness of such processes. In respect of the orchestration of creole, namely in the development of a coherent orthography, it would be advisable to undertake the systematic marking of compounds with the presence of a dash between the constituent elements.

* Note

The sections in Bradley Hand ITC font have been introduced to give a deeper understanding of certain concepts.