The Status of Creoles*

(Le statut des créoles)

Although there are a number of French creoles, it should be borne in mind that the focus here is on Lesser Antillean Creole. In spite of (often deceptive) similarities associated with their common origin (essentially seventeenth-century 'français populaire'), all creole languages are different and it is important to note that the command of one creole does not automatically lead to the ability to understand another.

It should be mentioned at this point that there are also creoles stemming from other colonising languages:

- Portuguese creoles: spoken, for example, in Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and in other countries, notably America
- Dutch creoles: Negerhollands, which has almost died out however some elements of Dutch are perceptible in Sranan and Saramacan even though these creoles have been heavily relexified in English
- English creoles: examples include Jamaican, Gullah, Sranan, and Krio (Sierra Leone)
- there are also, without doubt, some Spanish creoles: Palenquero (Columbia) and Philippine Creole can be identified as such and there is still large-scale discussion on whether the flourishing language, Papiamento, is a Spanish- or Portuguese-based creole

Although creoles are certainly languages in the sense that the word can be used to refer to 'any linguistic system used to communicate', it is primarily their status that is the issue for those interested in learning about creoles.

It is worth clarifying at this point why it is not uncommon for *languages* to be contrasted with *dialects* and *patois* and why the term 'language' is opted for when political and cultural recognition is explicit and why one or other of the latter terms is used when a 'language' is considered to occupy an 'inferior' position.

Languages do not, in fact, all fulfil the same functions nor have the same status. Some languages are national languages, some have official status and others are only used by a section of the population in daily exchanges. There is no reason why idioms, which are not written and which do not have official language status, should be denied the name of 'language' since the term refers to any doubly articulated linguistic system used to communicate, however, it is not uncommon to hear all non-written or local languages being called dialects or patois. J. Dubois gives the following definition:

> A dialect is a form (we would say a variety) of a language with its own lexical, syntactic, and phonetic system which is used in a more restricted environment than that of the language itself. A dialect, which currently refers to a regional dialect as opposed to a language, is a system of combinatory signs and rules which has the same origin as another system, called the language, but which has not acquired the cultural and social status of this language from which it has developed independently.[1]

[1] J. Dubois, *Dictionnaire de linguistique* (Paris: Larousse, [2001(?)]), p. 149.

The primary meaning of the word dialect is given, first and foremost, as a 'specific form conferred on a language through diachronic evolution which is differentiated according to region'.[2]

These meanings concur but are, a priori, not pejorative and the term 'dialect' in no way marks out a language as inferior as long as one does not venture beyond these definitions. The confusion between dialect and patois in France is caused by the fact that, at present, all dialects are in a patois-type situation and have had seriously diminished status since the nineteenth century. It would be preferable, however, to keep the term 'patois', or preferably 'patois-type situation', to refer to languages or dialects of diminished status that are often dying out since it is regrettable to lose one of the terms by merging them. The term 'dialect' will therefore principally refer to a historically-derived geographical variety while the term 'patois' will refer to a language or dialect, often of diminished status, which is dying out and which can be principally characterised by the following traits:

- a non-written language as opposed to a standard variety responsible for all written functions
- a language in which not everything can be expressed because the speakers are accustomed to making use of another language for certain functions and where the so-called 'noble' functions are entrusted to the 'high' language **(See 'Diglossia', link: <http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/Diglossia.pdf>)**
- a language which is spoken by the oldest sectors of the population and, for this reason, is dying out. The vitality of a patois can be assessed by the age of its speakers, for example, the over 70s or the over 30s, and so on.

The etymology which has been suggested, in spite of criticism, for the word 'patois' might explain the pejorative value that has been attached to the notion. According to the Le Robert *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (edited by A. Rey), it is a deverbal noun from the Old French 'patoier' meaning 'to wave hands around, to gesticulate (in order to make oneself understood in the manner of a deaf-and-dumb person)', 'to behave, to plot', or derived from 'patte' (paw or animal's leg) with the suffix –oyer.

Any description of Lesser Antillean Creole as a patois really has to be mitigated because:

- admittedly, it is almost entirely non-written, and
- usage is essentially limited to informal situations, for example, it is not really used in university lectures or administration and its philosophical vocabulary is, at the least, indigent
- but all children speak creole and any 'foreign' children sent to school in the Antilles learn it through exposure within a few months and use it in the playground.

It is in this last respect that the creole and Breton languages differ:

- Breton is written very little or not at all, and
- usage is limited to informal everyday situations,

[2] M. Arrivé, F. Gadet, and M. Galmiche, *La Grammaire d'aujourd'hui. Guide alphabétique de linguistique française* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986).

- but no children (whose schooling is in French) speak it and, at best, it is only understood by those in the 40-60 age group who confess to not speaking it themselves.

A dialect or language that is no longer spoken except by the over 70s has hardly any chance of survival or revival. If spoken by the whole population, on the other hand, and with a well-managed linguistic policy, a language or dialect can gain status and, gradually, it will be possible to write and teach it, to endow it with literature, and so on. Once again though, its speakers must want to take part in its development and this is not always the case since there is often reluctance when it comes to a language of diminished status.

Creole situations are often described as diglossic **(See 'Diglossia', link: <http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/Diglossia.pdf>)** which means that two languages coexist unequally within the same linguistic community (cf. R. Chaudenson's *Créole et enseignement du français* (1989), p. 162). These two languages are often a creole and French or sometimes a French-based creole and English as in St. Lucia or Dominica in the Caribbean. In some cases, it is not a matter of just two languages coexisting but of three or even four languages being used in alternation according to rules which can seem complex but which a native speaker, integrated into his community, masters naturally. This is the case in Mauritius, for example, where alongside the French-based creole, Mauritian, there are other languages such as English, French, and various Indian languages including what is often defined as an Indian-based creole, Bhojpuri (the common language used essentially by the population of Indian origin). These languages, unequal in terms of status, are clearly not interchangeable and one rather than the other will be used depending on the circumstances and on the speaker or listener involved. Languages in diglossic situations are sometimes said to be in functional complementarity.

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