

Variation

(La variation)

Variation is the term used to refer to the appearance of lexical units in different forms and is a phenomenon that exists in all languages but is perhaps most marked in creoles. As oral languages, creoles have been only minimally used as a tool for writing with next to no standardisation or provision of the teaching manuals which, by exerting a normative pressure on those who consult them, inevitably generate a certain linguistic unity.

It soon becomes apparent when studying a creole that pronunciation and grammatical forms can differ from one village to the next and that more or less the same object or concept can be referred to by different names in different areas.

In linguistics, distinction is generally made between:

- **diachronic** variation, or variation through time, also called historic variation, for example, the second person singular, which is now represented by *ou*, would commonly have been expressed as *to* in nineteenth-century Lesser Antillean Creole.
- **diatopic** variation, which is variation according to place or geographical variation, for example, ‘my hair’ is expressed as *chivé-an-moin* in Point-à-Pitre but as *chuveu-an-moin* in Saintes.
- **diastratic** variation, or variation according to social class or to the social group to which a speaker feels they belong. In the diglossic situation that characterises the Antilles, diastratic variation often appears in the transition from French, representing the formal or higher level, to creole, representing the more informal level. Always with the deep-rooted feeling of being more ‘correct’ in the first case and more informal in the second, speakers will alternate between ‘il m’embête’ and *i ka anmèkdé-moin* or between ‘il est fatigué’ and *i las*.
- finally, **diaphasic** or ‘stylistic’ variation, or even individual variation. This is more difficult to characterise clearly especially for those creoles that lack sharp description. However, among all the choices offered by the creole lexicon, it is possible that where X will prefer to say *marakudja* and Y will prefer *pom-kalbas* is perhaps of the same order as the variation that makes the distinction between *gwayav*, *gouyav*, and *goyav*. Once again though, it would be necessary to carry out surveys in these cases to confirm that geographical or sociological factors are not contributing to one or other of these choices; this is known as variation analysis.

Obviously, this internal variation in a language or dialect, sometimes called intralinguistic variation, should not be confused with interlinguistic variation which also exists in creoles, for example, speakers will say *ich* for ‘child’ in Martinique but *ti-moun* in Guadeloupe. There is, in fact, very little interlinguistic variation between these two creoles which clearly come under the same linguistic set (the same language in fact) albeit with some topolectal, or geographical, variants. There is considerable interlinguistic variation, on the other hand, between various other creoles, particularly between those of the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. A Mauritian, for example, will use *bann* as a plural marker (*bann liv-la*) where a speaker from Guadeloupe uses *sé*

(*sé liv-la*); while both these forms are preposed, the Haitian will use the postposed *-yo* as a noun plural marker, as in *liv-yo* ('the books').

