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HAITIAN CREOLE: A CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATION

Haitian Creole is a unique language, as are all creole languages. Mother tongue of almost six million people—without counting those who have immigrated—it has its own particular ways of expressing in words, of making sentences and forming a discourse. However, for more than two centuries it has been excluded from many circuits of communication. The limits imposed on it have kept it from developing a creativity, at the vocabulary level as well as that of organizing a discourse that would assure a function of plural communication, both oral and written. The present challenge of this long-throttled language has posed an important number of problems in linguistics, teaching, culture and politics because of new communication systems and especially because of education.

I. THE POSITIONS ASSIGNED TO CREOLE IN HAITIAN SOCIETY

Creole is spoken by the entire population of Haiti; French is the official language, installed as such by the Constitution of 1926 and

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elaborated at the time of the American occupation. However, a concluding article of the 1964 Constitution, Article 35, stipulates that “the law determines the cases and conditions under which the use of Creole is permitted and even recommended for the safeguard of the material and moral interests of the citizens who are not well enough versed in French.”

Actually, this permission given to Creole was limited to the possible use of oral Creole in the cadre of courts and administrations, French remaining the written language and education in the schools being given exclusively in French.

Today, people speaking only Creole make up 80 percent, at least, of the Haitian population. With rare exceptions (for instance in areas where work is being done toward education in Creole), this population is illiterate. It is essentially rural, but it also regroups an important part of the urban proletariat and sub-proletariat.

Another part of the population (15 to 20 percent) is generally considered as bilingual. In reality, we can estimate that scarcely 3 percent of the Haitians, mainly belonging to the middle class, have a linguistic competence allowing them to face all situations of communication in Creole or in French. On the performance level, this minority uses one or other of the languages, depending on the objects of the discourse, relative social positions, etc.

The rest of these so-called bilinguals actually have a very uneven linguistic competence in one or the other of the languages, which is apparent in situations of distinct discourse. Creole is spoken much more often than French. This group, composed mainly of minor employees, artisans, chauffeurs and service personnel, shows a linguistically important imbalance.

Such a socio-linguistic phenomenon determines the attitudes and behavior that each group will manifest in a particular way.

1.1 The population that uses only Creole

Monolinguals in Creole are part of a civilization in which oral Creole answers all need for communication within a district. For the most part, these people are excluded from the written word and dwell in an oral culture resting on long-established traditions. This culture has a certain creativity and dynamism that go beyond mere

tales, proverbs or riddles and appear, for example, in farming community councils where problems of agriculture, health or economic exchanges are dealt with, along with that of illiteracy. During these meetings and other collective activities, oral Creole is normally employed in technical as well as organizational data. However, this priority of Creole is characterized by its way of analyzing reality through strategies proper to an oral civilization, necessarily limited as far as objectivation, capacity for abstraction and synthesis and keeping of data are concerned. These limits are apparent when it comes to the extent of the network of communication, bringing a relative isolation to these communities and reducing their participation in the life and affairs of their nation.

Although these people do not speak French, they are far from unaware of the existence of that language, especially of its social status. For Creole monolinguals, French incontestably represents a means of social promotion that they themselves have very little chance to gain. From this comes the feeling of inferiority they experience when faced with a French speaker or one who, addressing them in Creole, uses morphological signs or stereotyped French expressions that identify him as being bilingual.

Reciprocally, the monolingual farmer who addresses a bilingual or, *a priori*, a white man, will tend to introduce elements into his speech that are sometimes foreign to Creole, just to prove that he is not ignorant of French. For instance, the monolingual speaker whose phonological system does not have the central vowels /y/, /ø/, /œ/ knows perfectly well that the bilingual uses them where he himself uses /i/ and /e/.

A farmer once made the following statement to us:

abita veyt ap māže dyyy
The farmers of Verrettes eat rice
(*Les paysans de Verrettes mangent du riz*)

The Haitian bilingual—even one speaking a Frenchified Creole—would never pronounce /dyyy/; he would say /diyi/ or /dyyi/. These morpho-sociological signs show the consciousness that all Haitian speakers have of the respective place of the two languages with regard to social stratification.

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Writing, the privilege of French, is indispensable to Creole monolinguals in certain situations, particularly in dealing with the administration and at school. In all cases, the monolingual Creole speaker finds himself in circumstances that act systematically and strongly in his disfavor. When he is obliged to use writing in his affairs with the administration, he has to turn to a bilingual intermediary, who will exploit him. At school, he will have to acquire knowledge in a language that he neither knows nor uses, which condemns him to almost certain scholastic failure.

In other situations marked with traditional solemnity (a proposal of marriage, for example) one is forced to use a broadly stereotyped written language, mixing Creole structures with French ones. This written mesolect, called *français marron*, is the prerequisite of those within the community who are able to write.

1.2 *The bilingual group*

Oral Creole is substantially used in this group, whatever the social position of the speaker, in all situations that are not of a solemn nature, and when one does not wish to mark a distinct hierarchical relationship. If it goes without saying that normal conversations in Haiti, including those between important State functionaries, are in Creole, French will automatically be used to emphasize a certain distance, a solemn rapport of authority or the official nature of a situation.

With minor employees, the use of French is limited to certain professional requirements (especially written French); it will also be used to indicate superiority with respect to a monolingual Creole speaker or to show deference before a superior when circumstances demand it.

It seems that within the population using it on various levels, French has much more a symbolic function showing the relative position of the speakers or the solemnity of a situation, than a real function of communication. At the most, we could say that French appears more as a still socially prestigious language having no dynamism than as an instrument of communication having to answer to various needs. Its symbolic function imposes stereotyped forms on it that re-enforce this function by weakening its strength

of information. In this regard, when we read the Haitian press in French we see how meaningless written French can be, often becoming a series of bombastic and florid concoctions that are very weak in information and explanation.

Creole and French, unequally distributed according to social classes in Haiti, live and reflect colonial history and, since independence in 1804, the relationships of classes that have been formed in Haitian society. Whether we like it or not, one and the other language is a historical part of the Haitian national patrimony. In spite of its minor standing, Creole is one of the traits that defines the Haitian nation and is experienced by each Haitian as a component of his identity. Although issuing from the slave period, Creole in Haiti is not soiled with the vice of servitude, because the struggle for independence gave it a national significance as the language of a people who liberated itself with arms in its hands and Creole in its mouth.

II. RECENT EMERGENCES OF COMMUNICATION IN CREOLE

In Haiti in the last few years, we have seen that Creole in its oral and written forms has begun to penetrate into the field of communication from which it had been excluded. This penetration is not at all clandestine: it has happened openly (which does not mean "in all liberty") beginning with official and private initiatives.

Oral Creole, the language of public information

The use of oral Creole on radio and television was until recently confined to jokes and songs; it is now used for part of the local and international news as well as for discussions on subjects of national importance, such as education and health. We also see an increase in the use of Creole for official messages in certain areas. Finally, publicity in Creole is appearing more and more often on radio. Significantly, announcements in public places, such as the Port-au-Prince airport, are mainly given in Creole.

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Written Creole, the language of literature and social communication

Written Creole is emerging from its marginality; the theatrical and poetical production of Rassoul Labuchin goes far beyond the stage of the picturesque and folklore to reach a level of writing where Haitian culture and Creole are closely linked. Similarly, the novels of Frankétienne have come, as Frantz Lofficial writes, "to bring Creole out of the ghetto of minor genres in which it was confined. They have given a brilliant illustration of the literary capacities of Creole and proved, if it has been necessary, that it is adapted not only to recitation but also to the most developed reflection."¹

The press in Creole is still limited in a country where 80 percent of the population is illiterate. Nonetheless, it has a certain diffusion. There are two religious weeklies: *Bon Nouvel* with 20,000 copies and *Boukan* with 7,000.

Finally, we should mention that a growing number of billboard posters are in Creole and, even more interesting, that campaigns for sanitary and social measures depend upon oral and written Creole. Among these are campaigns in support of birth control and nursing mothers.

Creole as a technical language

The language of monolingual farmers and artisans, Creole has always answered the communication needs of these activities and those of the transmission of technical knowledge. Recently, the development of urbanization and trades dealing with construction, electricity, and others, has created opportunities to show how Creole can adapt itself, in vocabulary and discourse, to the new needs of communication.² This evolution brings a series of problems relative to the elaboration and use of technical texts written in Creole, to which we will return later.

¹ Frantz Lofficial, "Créole, Français: une fausse querelle? Bilinguisme et réforme de l'enseignement en Haïti", Québec, Editions "Collectif Paroles," 1979, 169 pp.

² Henri Tourneux, "Le lexique de l'électricité en Haïti," *Cahier du LACITO*, 1986.

Because of the lack of sociological and linguistic research in the analysis of these recent emergings of Creole in their evolution and connections, it has obviously been very difficult to determine with exactitude the causes of such a phenomenon. However, we may give some hypotheses that are yet to be verified.

The enormous increase in the number of transistor radios throughout the country, the considerable augmentation in transmitting power of the National Radio, the creation of local radio stations (Grande Anse, Port-de-Paix, Cayes, etc.) have entrained a large number of Creole-speaking listeners. We may reasonably assume that the programs had to adapt to this new population of listeners by giving a significant place to Creole.

Another hypothesis may explain the penetration of Creole into the new fields of communication: the exodus from rural areas that makes primarily Creole-speaking cities of urban centers. In 1950 Port-au-Prince had around 144,000 inhabitants; in 1971 this figure rose to 494,000; today it is probably more than a million. The massive influx of Creole-speaking country people has profoundly modified the socio-linguistic reality of the city: it can no longer serve to support the myth of Haiti as a French-speaking nation. Moreover, the exodus from rural areas and internal migrations have undoubtedly increased the need for long distance communication in Creole. The number of personal messages transmitted by local radios and even more by Radio Lumière (presented by Protestant ministers) is quite significant. Some partial surveys on the written messages exchanged through trucks that link the cities to the country reveal the use of a written Creole, certainly anarchic in its form but playing a useful role in communication.

Finally, we can believe that the Haitian communities—for the most part in the United States and Canada—want to preserve their identity through Creole and Haitian culture. The production of Creole writing in this emigration is not negligible, but it is difficult to know its impact on the population living in Haiti.

All these factors, *proving the need for an increased inter-comprehension*, have called on Creole to penetrate the field of social intercourse from which it has heretofore been excluded. In other words, Creole, the language of the masses, tends to become a mass language. It is within this new context that the reform in

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primary education has been inscribed, which has tried to suggest a solution for the crisis in the Haitian educational system.

III. ITS ENTRANCE INTO THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Primary instruction in Haiti was exclusively in French until the 1979 school reform, although at least 80 percent of the children entering school spoke only Creole.

School has always been one of the places where the relative positions of Creole and French were most marked. The child almost always found himself unable to use French as a means of understanding and communicating, unless he belonged to the most favored fringe of the population. The teacher, especially in the rural districts, generally used French only within the narrow confines of school and had enormous difficulty in mastering this language so as to engage in a true pedagogical dialogue with his students. Teachers and students were directed to give the appearance of a school "in French" but, unable to use this language to conduct a pedagogical discourse, they used a laborious mesolect in which French stereotypes and words were only symbolic. They experienced a situation of *shared linguistic insecurity*, torn between the common consciousness of an impossibility to communicate and the obligation to use the official teaching language once the school was entered. Educational officialdom and pedagogical practice were thus in eternal conflict, perverting the student/teacher relationship. Their rapport was strictly vertical and practically univocal; the students, destined to rote learning, were totally passive, reduced to the state of receptacles into which was poured a discourse that often made no sense to them.

School, undermined by linguistic insecurity, suffering the consequences of difficult economic and social conditions in rural and suburban populations, showed a more than disturbing balance. The rate of scholarization in the primary grades is very low (38.6 percent) and the productivity of the school system extremely weak. Thus, if we consider the school population in 1970 (113,338 students) we see that only 31 percent of the students reached the sixth year (that is, 34,866); 13 percent the seventh (14,178) and that 3 percent finally reached the terminal year. If we now refer to the people of school age, we see that 6.2 percent of them actually

complete the primary grades (6 years) and 0.7 percent the secondary. This does not take into account whether or not diplomas are obtained at the end of the cycle.³

Finally, we will add that the very small minority who at the end of the primary cycle succeed in obtaining their Certificate of Study could not find in their area—rural districts and provincial towns—the possibility to put their knowledge to profitable use. This diploma, obtained with great difficulty, thus inevitably became a “passport to the city” where those “privileged from school” went to swell the mass of unemployed accumulated in the slums.

In 1979 the Haitian Minister of Education decided to initiate a profound reform in primary education. This reform is intended to give solutions for some of the most troubling problems in the primary schools, especially the problems of language to be used in teaching. Let us remember in this regard that it is the education of adults (experimentation in the region of Côtés de Fer in 1976-1978) that introduced *ipso facto* Creole as the teaching language. A presidential decree of September 18, 1978, voted in the legislature, stipulates in its first article that “the use of Creole, as the common spoken language of 90 percent of the Haitian people, is permitted in schools as language-instrument and object of instruction” and this, as was to be expected, to “safeguard the cultural unity of the nation” and “make education accessible to all.” It is thus that Creole was called upon, by decree, to enter into the educational system.

It was only on March 30, 1982 however that the decree was published organizing the entire educational system. This decree, referring to the one of September, 1978 gives more precise information on the use of the two languages in the schools:

Article 29: Creole is a language of teaching and a language taught throughout the *École Fondamentale*.

French is a language taught throughout the *École Fondamentale* and is the teaching language beginning with the sixth year.

³ Sources: *Centre haïtien de Statistiques; Services des Statistiques du Ministère de l'Éducation.*

⁴ *L'École Fondamentale* covers the first ten years of school.

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Article 30: In the fifth year of the *École Fondamentale* the teaching of French is re-enforced in view of its use as teaching language in the sixth year.

Article 31: In all cases, beginning with the sixth year the number of hours reserved for either French or Creole (...) may not be less than 25 percent of the number of hours in the school week.

IV. SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CONTRADICTIONS
AND DIFFICULTIES OF THE REFORM

Those who have been ingenuous enough to believe that a decree would suffice to give Creole the status of oral and written instruction, so that the Haitian educational system would be rapidly and significantly improved, have been sorely disappointed. The few evaluations that were made in 1983 and 1984 have shown that linguistic competence both in Creole and French has remained mediocre. Rather than condemn the entrance of Creole into education, we find it more important to try to understand the reason for the predictable difficulties of this educational innovation.

The adoption of the new linguistic policy within the schools aroused contradictory apprehensions in the popular classes as well as in the favored classes. The first feared to be shut up in a Creole "ghetto" that, from their point of view, would destroy all hope, even the least, for the social promotion that only French could bring. On the other hand, the second group generally refused a "school in Creole" that would question the considerable privileges the former system gave to an even approximate knowledge of French. The new school had to trace a difficult road, socially; the improvements in education are not sufficiently convincing. The proof of the social utility of written Creole must appear in the system of extrascholastic communication; the finalities of the experiment must be translated by concrete possibilities of reinvestment in individual and collective activities. In other words, Creole was immediately required to give account of itself as never had been asked of French. Now, the educational system

cannot, alone, impose Creole as the language of written social communication to an entire population that is 80 percent illiterate. It cannot, alone, create a “cultural volume” in Creole in which academic knowledge acquired at school can be reinvested without danger of losing its social function. Of course, written Creole is emerging, as we have seen, but slowly, at the sporadic rhythm of isolated initiatives. The gap between the generalized learning of written Creole at school and the fragility of its social application may partly explain some of the disfunctions of the new system.

The evaluation of the linguistic competence of Haitian teachers made in 1984 revealed the incontestable difficulties they encountered in mastering written Creole. It must be understood that, for many teachers, writing Creole was an “incongruous” activity, in contradiction with the orientation and values of their initial training. We have made the serious error of thinking that because Creole was the oral mother tongue of the teacher he would find a spontaneous facility in mastering its written use by beginning with simple graphics. It should have been indispensable to allow him to acquire, during his training, a personal ease in reading and writing Creole, to train him to follow a course of reading and writing at his own adult level corresponding to his real interests. By neglecting the individual development of the teacher leading to a written mastery of his mother tongue, we have often made him the servile instrument of methodological instruction, instead of trying to transform each educator into a true promotor of written Creole. The laborious rapports of the teacher with written Creole have greatly weakened the pedagogical functioning of this practice. Teaching in Creole has drifted toward *recourse to oralization*, especially in the first years of the primary grades, partly destroying the efforts made so that reading and writing in the mother tongue could be realized. We could say that instead of seeing the schools act progressively toward a gradual modification of an oral civilization, called into question by the use of written Creole in the schools, we have witnessed a forceful entry of the oral tradition in the educational process itself.

During much of the implementation of the new linguistic policy, the attention of many has been polarized on the orthographic choices that have been made so as to effectuate normalization in writing Creole. The experience acquired in eradicating illiteracy in

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the adult population and teaching them to read and write in Creole, directed by a team from the *Institut pédagogique national* as well as by the efforts of the *Centre de linguistique appliquée* of Port-au-Prince⁵ has perfected a writing system that is both simple and efficacious. The conception of this writing responded to two major concerns: allowing the illiterate speaker to master the written code in a short time and when making graphic choices to keep in mind the perspective of possible instruction in French. Consequently, this system of writing wanted to avoid the difficulty of associating several possible letters or groups of letters in the same sound. The sound-letter relationship is thus bi-univocal and digraphs are avoided as much as possible. Based on the phonological system of Creole, the choices allow the preservation of the specificity of written Creole, as well as of French, the passage from one to the other being done all the more easily since it is not possible to confuse the two systems. The same sounds are found in French and Creole but the choice fell on the writing system employed by French as far as it manifested a significative constancy (for example, *ou, r, s*); on the contrary, when written French presented wide and unpredictable variations, the choice fell on graphics that are seldom or never found in French (*k, w, y*).

This system of writing caused some to rise in arms, claiming that such choices definitively cut off Creole from French (their fear was that Creole would wind up in the arms of English!). They were for the most part fierce partisans of a so-called etymological orthography. Their desire to dress Creole in the garb of French orthography in fact showed their wish to deprive Creole of its status as a completely separate language in order to make a sort of French *patois* of it. On the scientific level, the arguments of the partisans of etymological writing were inadmissible. On the pedagogical level, this type of writing could only introduce considerable difficulty into the learning of written Creole and sizeable ambiguities during the learning of written French. In reality, those who have wilfully centered the debate on its graphic aspects⁶ wanted to overlook the fact that the central problem was

⁵ P. Vernet, *Techniques d'écriture du créole haïtien*, Port-au-Prince, Le Natal.

⁶ We find an analogous situation in Ecuador, where debates are focalized on some points of writing in Quechua. Oddly enough, it is there too that we find the

posed by the entry of a language of an oral civilization into the world of writing and, more generally, by its necessary adaptation to a modern discourse.

When the language of an oral civilization enters the field of communication from which it has always been excluded, linguistic and sociological problems arise whose extent and complexity have not been measured. In an oral civilization, to which belong the Creole-speaking natives of Haiti, all linguistic communication necessarily rests on relationship of proximity and convergence woven by tradition and communal life, especially in the rural areas. The syntactic and rhetorical forms of speech follow certain patterns in which gesture, prosodic data and especially the “known” shared by the participants in the discourse play an essential role. These elements largely determine the general management of the oral intercourse. The didactic use of Creole, its being written down, requires a necessary distancing of the traditional social situation in which the forms and behavior of communication of the unilingual are forged. Up until now excluded from any didactic discourse, Creole has found itself summoned to take charge of a field of communication requiring lexical, syntactical and rhetorical tools which it has not previously possessed.

A serious error accompanied this transition, exacerbated by the time limits imposed by the reform: that of believing that it is possible, arbitrarily and before an effective use, to foresee the lexical and rhetorical responses of the language while ignoring the power of creation of the speaker faced with new needs. Theoretical linguistic analysis has given the illusion that a linguistic code may be examined outside its practical and creative application in a teaching situation. This detachment with respect to socio-linguistic practice has fed two conflicting tendencies: one, in the name of the “purity” of Creole, extols a maximum and systematic departure from French, to the point of suggesting neologisms whose use by the speaker is not necessarily guaranteed; the other tendency rejects the idea that a mechanical borrowing from other languages (French

use of “k” instead of the Spanish “c”. This has aroused lively protest and brought about the most absurd interpretations. Obviously, the objective in this affair is to divide, by any possible means, the Indian populations with respect to a strictly morphological problem.

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or English) is the simplest answer to new needs in communication. The partisans of the first tendency in their desire to rid Creole of all colonizing influence forget that a language does not obey a theoretical line, however well founded it is.

Those who sanctioned massive borrowing overlooked the fact that a language that has been dominated for a long time tends to be weak in resisting this sort of contribution and runs the risk of seeing its identity rapidly compromised. In their concern to "fill" the lexical and rhetorical "lacunae" of Creole, both factions disregard the essential problem: Creole, a cultural and social fact, must be able to penetrate the didactic universe, see it in all its aspects, imbue it with its semiological specificity and in that way generate an original didactic discourse.

* * *

We find it essential to affirm that in spite of the difficulties encountered and the errors committed, in spite of the disappointments caused by the partial results of the first evaluations, the use of Creole in Haitian education is an absolute necessity.

It is pointless to question ourselves today on the advantages or inconveniences of such an orientation: there is no other way than that for Haitian schools. What we should keep in mind, however, is that such a transformation takes time: we cannot measure its effects nor give an opinion on its results through the terms of a contract of cooperation or a ministerial decree. The entry of Creole into education with all its linguistic, social and cultural consequences is an event inscribed in the historical evolution of the country; it takes time, patience and a vigilance operating far beyond that of the perimeter of the school.

Today, after the fall of Duvalier and his regime, it is especially important not to reject the principle of the use of Creole in education with the pretext that it was officially sanctioned under the former dictator. The entry of Creole into education must be seen in its historic dimension, so that we can better understand its significance. The entire history of the Haitian people is marked by a desire for national independence, bound to the affirmation of a Haitian identity faced with constant foreign pressures. It is incontestable that for all the ideological currents that have

advanced Haitian specificity, the guarantee is the “man of the bluffs” and not the bourgeois merchant with an eye to colonial trade. This characteristic is of course found in the negritude the Duvalier system used to establish its dictatorship. However, it is in the name of these values and against the practices of the regime that the battle was fought, with great difficulty, to make a simple presidential decree an educational reality. We want to believe that today, freed from restrictions and obstacles imposed by the former regime, those responsible for education in Haiti will give this reform a dimension that goes beyond the mere changing of linguistic medium, so as to proceed to the profound transformations of the entire educational system in its contents and objectives. Let us conclude by saying that any policy of cooperation, whether it be bilateral or multilateral, that does not include in its consideration and procedure the fact of Creole is doomed to failure. By posing the necessity to use the Creole mother tongue to acquire essential ideas and know-how, by a valid instruction in French from the first year of primary school, the Haitian reform in education questions the concept of traditional and elitist francophonism, the concept of an egoistic and short-sighted cooperation.

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