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**We Don't Speak a Real Language:  
Creoles as Misunderstood and Endangered Languages**

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A creole woman on the island of St. Lucia once told me, "We don't speak a real language; we just speak broken French." This woman didn't seem sad or angry in explaining her situation. In fact she had a sparkle in her eye and seemed pleased that I was showing interest in her language, her culture and creole folk literature. She called her form of speech "broken French" in a sort of matter-of-fact way, and no doubt she was repeating what she had been told, and what she expected I would think.

It is an old and often-repeated story, that what linguists understand as creole languages are popularly derided as corrupted and inferior forms of a "standard" language like English or French. For a long time, St. Lucian Creole has been called "broken French," and Gullah and other English Creoles have been called "broken English." Those responsible for propagating such unfair and inaccurate assessments are generally speakers of the standard languages, and particularly members of the education establishment, who would rather see the *patois* wiped out and replaced by the standard language.

Consider the following notorious assessment of St. Lucian French Creole made in the mid-nineteenth century by Henry Breen, who was a colonial mayor of Castries:

The Negro language is a jargon formed from the French, and composed of words, or rather sounds, adapted to the organs of speech in the black population. As a *patois* it is even more unintelligible than that spoken by the Negroes in the English Colonies. Its distinguishing feature consists in the suppression of the letter "r" in almost every word in which it should be used, and the addition of "ki's" and "ka's" to assist in the formation of the tenses. It is, in short, the French language, stripped of its manly and dignified ornaments, and travestied for the accommodation of children and toothless old women. I regret to add that it has now almost entirely superseded the use of the beautiful French language, even in some of the highest circles of colonial society. The prevalence of this jargon is one of the many disadvantages resulting from a want of educational institutions. It is the refuge of ignorance, and the less you know of French, the greater aptitude you have for talking Negro. (Breen 1844:185)

While Breen was especially harsh and outspoken in his evaluation of "Negro speech," such negative attitudes are not restricted to colonial authorities in times past. Even today, it is not uncommon to hear someone say that the creole "is not a real language." Especially in the education sector, wishes are sometimes expressed that this nonstandard speech variety, which is seen to impede progress and upward mobility, would join slavery and colonialism in becoming a thing of the past.

It is important to note, however, that the negative evaluations on creole languages must be seen as a matter of perspective, usually coming from people who are in a position of relative power in

the national scene but who are outsiders to the creole culture. The creole speakers themselves might accept that their language could be a corruption of a more prestigious, standard language, but that acceptance does not necessarily lead to abandonment of the creole. On the contrary, creole speakers would more likely embrace their language, and the culture and the set of relationships it represents. Why would they want to turn their backs on their rich proverbs, expressions, songs, and folktales? If the creole speakers are even aware of the international languages that are spoken in the wider context, the creole can represent solidarity, and resistance to being made to conform to someone else's standards.

Even Breen, who somehow imagined that the Patois speakers in St. Lucia were only pretending that they didn't know real French, acknowledged that they enjoyed and preferred their form of speech. He said, "The truth is, they often pretend ignorance in order to allure you into their own soft, silly dialect, whose accents are always flattering to their own ears, however imperfectly it may be spoken" (1844:186). So there is another perspective on creole that does not always get emphasized. There is a great deal of comfortableness and even enjoyment in the creole language experienced by those who are part of the culture themselves. The outsiders' point of view tends to be emphasized, because it is associated more with people who are highly educated and in positions of power and authority.

Reporter Nina Spell has written about a southern U.S. English creole, "Until recently, Gullah was seen not as a legitimate dialect, but as a broken version of English... Many languages have died under similar circumstances. Speakers are either pressed by colonizers to abandon their native speech or are shamed into giving it up voluntarily... Luckily, Gullah is still spoken by thousands of people."<sup>1</sup>

Nearly half a century ago, the noted West Indian linguist Mervyn Alleyne (1961) did research on the language situation in St. Lucia and came away with the conclusion that general attitude toward the creole spoken there was one of hostility. How would one expect a language to survive, if the general attitude toward it were one of hostility? A few years later, Douglas Midgett did a similar survey and agreed that "A very negative evaluation has continued to be placed on Patois, equating its use with all that is backward, rural, Negro, and unsophisticated.... It requires little effort to provoke comments concerning the inferior position of Patois and its role in obstructing progress in the island" (1970:160). But Midgett also saw the other side of the story. He pointed out that "In private conversations St. Lucians of all levels celebrate the Patois with their peers, while decrying it publicly and to visiting English monolinguals" (ibid).

My own experience in working with creole languages has been primarily on the island of St. Lucia, and secondarily with Gullah, spoken here in the U.S. I have had the privilege of dealing with politicians and other government officials, educators, cultural activists and organizations, and – most importantly – mother-tongue creole speakers, some of whom speak only the creole. Based on my nearly seventeen years in residence in St. Lucia, my conclusion was that the predicted death of the French Creole was greatly exaggerated. As I have said elsewhere (1993:41),

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<sup>1</sup> *The Columbia Record*, November 18, 2005.

That St. Lucian French Creole has survived as long as it has in an era when it might be considered redundant is noteworthy, but its survival would seem much more remarkable if the general attitude toward it had been one of hostility for any length of time. It is this writer's estimation that a present the general attitude toward Creole could be characterized as "enjoyment"; St. Lucian enjoy using it for interpersonal communication; they are attracted to speeches, sermons, or radio programs delivered in Creole; they love their Creole proverbs and folktales told in Creole; they say that Creole jokes are just not as humorous when put into English. There is something about Creole that tends to make the speaker more animated and the hearer more comfortable.

Similarly with Gullah and other creole varieties, the persistence of these forms of speech has seemed like an anomaly to cultural outsiders, who don't understand why the dialects (as they are usually perceived) don't just die out. Clearly, there are different forces at work. On the one hand, there are the forces of "progress" and education and integration into the national and international scenes. On the other hand, there are the forces of identity and solidarity and cultural pride. The creole language allows the speakers to communicate among themselves in a way that is comfortable and appropriate for their context – not to mention the fact that the language is seen by its speakers as rich, and a treasury of folk literature and wisdom.

Consider the two perspectives of the Union Army soldiers and the Gullah speakers they encountered when they took control of the islands off South Carolina during the Civil War. The Northerners were puzzled that the islanders could not understand basic English. Reportedly, "The incomprehension was of course mutual, and the standard Sea Island reaction to such strangers was said to be: 'Dey use dem mout' so funny.'"<sup>2</sup>

But while clearly there are different perspectives on creole languages, just as clearly, St. Lucian Creole and Gullah and many other creole languages are endangered today, especially in the New World. English, Spanish, French, Dutch and Portuguese, depending on the country, are the languages of education and upward mobility. As the world becomes smaller, the environments in which the creole languages can thrive are threatened.

The word "dialect" sometimes causes confusion, in relation to creoles and other minority languages. The statement is often made in reference to creoles that "That is not a language; it is just a dialect." But to a linguist, it doesn't make sense to say that some people speak a language and other people speak a dialect. A dialect is simply a particular, identifiable variety of a language. So anyone who speaks a dialect is at the same time speaking a language. In fact, if a language has different dialects – as is the case for most of the languages of the world – then everyone who speaks that language at the same time speaks a dialect. While popularly the term "dialect" might have pejorative connotations, to the linguist it does not. Even the association of more neutral terms like "standard" and "nonstandard" with the word "dialect" is quite problematic.

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<sup>2</sup> Quote taken from John Bennet, "Gullah: A Negro Patois" *The South Atlantic Quarterly* VII (1908), p. 340, reported in Wood (1974:190-191).

So, why is it often repeated that various creole languages are not languages – just dialects? One reason is that the people who characterize creole languages this way are just repeating something they have heard, regarding a topic they don't understand completely. But let's examine what this kind of statement might mean, if it were stated more precisely. If one were to fill in the blanks of implicit information, perhaps it means, "That is not a language *that is distinct from English (or French or Dutch, etc.)*. It is a dialect *of English (or French or Dutch, etc.)*." In the remainder of this presentation, I will try to explain how creole languages can be seen as distinct from the European languages from which they borrowed most of their vocabulary. We will look briefly at how creole languages come into existence, and examine some of the factors that lead to confusion. Through a careful examination of the linguistic and sociolinguistic facts, we can educate ourselves and educate others regarding the true nature of creole languages, and the communities of people who speak them. All along we should keep in mind that creole languages are not just intellectual abstractions, not just arbitrary codes, but rather represent real people with their own unique histories and cultures and identities, with their own distinctive traditions and modes of expression. A creole language should be understood on its own terms, rather than just in comparison with the more prestigious international languages.

Just what is a creole language? A creole is a kind of contact language. The term "contact language" is a label that refers to a language that has its beginnings in a contact situation between different language groups. There are varieties of contact languages, including pidgins, creoles and mixed languages. What sets these languages apart from others is the fact that, rather than being an evolved form of a prior-existing language, they have an identifiable time of birth. That is, these languages did not exist at one time, and then through contact between different language groups, the contact language forms did come to exist.

Creole languages are mother tongues that arise out of pidgins, which by definition are not mother tongues. The standard definition of a pidgin is that it is a type of contact language that is formed when mother-tongue speakers of different languages have to come up with a way of communicating among themselves. The words used in a pidgin come from one or more of the languages in the mix, and the grammar is drastically simplified, relatively arbitrary, and devoid of inflection and derivation. I am not going to say much about pidgins because that is not the topic of this presentation, and because I don't have any intimate familiarity with them.

There are three points worth noting about pidgin languages, however, for the present purpose. One is that they have sometimes developed into stabilized pidgins, where over time they take on a more fixed form but never become the mother tongue of a community. Secondly, there are some familiar languages that go by the name of "pidgin" but have actually become creoles. New Guinea Pidgin English existed for a while as a stabilized pidgin but eventually became a mother tongue, so it is called now Tok Pisin or Neomelanesian. Similarly, there is a language spoken widely in Hawaii that has traditionally been called Pidgin, but which is more accurately labeled today by linguists as Hawaii Creole English.

The most relevant thing to note about pidgin languages, for the present purpose, is that they are the crucible out of which creole languages arise. When pidgin languages are passed on to the next generation as a mother tongue and become the language of a community, they turn into creoles. The difference between a pidgin and a creole is not just a matter of definition, where one is a mother tongue and the other is not. Linguists debate how creole languages can be defined

and explained, but the salient point is that creole languages take on a definite, particular form that pidgins lack. In fact, a remarkable thing about creole languages is that they tend to have certain identifiable characteristics regardless of where, and what language mix, they developed out of.

One significant thing about creole languages that I have not stated yet is that, for the most part, they have arisen from a context of colonial expansion and domination. The word “domination” is significant here, because a typical starting point for many of the world’s creoles is the context of slavery. But slavery is not a necessary condition for the development of pidgins and creoles. They develop out of situations where people of different language groups either want to do business together, or are forced to. Creoles, particularly, generally come from a situation where people are uprooted from their ancestral territories and now living in a place where there is no community of people who share their mother tongue. It may be a case of enslaved Africans being relocated in the New World, from different language groups. Or it may be a case of more voluntary migration and indentured servanthood, as in Hawaii. Generally, however, it was the colonial movement that led to most of the creole languages we have today coming into existence.

It is best not to think of a creole as simply being a mixture. The term “creole” originally was used to refer to a person of European descent born in the New World. Eventually it came to mean a person of mixed, or purely African, heritage born in the New World. By extension the word “creole” was applied to foods and cultures and languages. But the term was eventually used to identify a type of language that was created in the creole context of the New World. While many of the creole languages we have today go back several hundred years, our understanding of them as a distinctive type of language goes back only several decades. Linguists were able to recognize that this New World language form that was called “creole” had a great deal in common with forms of speech that arose in other parts of the world, so it is not just New World languages that are given this label today. There are creole languages spoken in the South Pacific, in Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Asia.

If a creole language is not best described as a mixture of different languages, then what is it? As creole language specialists try to answer this question, the debate can get quite contentious. A simple explanation of creole languages that is not too controversial is that a creole language is one that, unlike other languages, has its starting point at an identifiable period of time. Regarding how creole languages in different parts of the world can have so much in common, there are different schools of thought. One is the *substratist* position, which basically says that New World creoles such as Haitian or Saramaccan are relexified forms of African languages. That is, the creole language might have vocabulary from English or French – the *superstrate* language – but the syntax can be traced to African languages – the substrate. This is, indeed, close to the idea the creoles are mixtures, except that there is a very specific kind of mixture: vocabulary from one language, grammar from another. This could explain why certain English and French creoles have so much in common, for example. In one case the African syntax is overlaid with English words, and in the other case with French.

Another view of creole languages emphasizes the input of the European languages, except that it is important to recognize that the European languages that went into the making of creole languages were not the standardized varieties we know today, but rather regional varieties that might seem strange to us today, just as creole languages do. According to this school of thought,

championed by the French linguist Robert Chaudenson and my friend at the University of Chicago, the esteemed linguist Salikoko Mufwene, approximations of approximations of approximations of nonstandard dialects of European languages resulted in the development of creoles. This is sometimes called the superstratist position, though it does not involve a substrate component.

A third theory of creole languages is called the Bioprogram Hypothesis, popularized by Derek Bickerton in his 1981 book *Roots of Language*. By taking into consideration Hawaiian Creole English as well as various Atlantic Creoles, Bickerton observed that creole languages all have a great deal in common that cannot be explained in terms of either the superstrate or substrate languages. The idea is that creole languages arise in a context where the normal transmission of language from one generation to the next is broken down, and a new language is created. The similarities of different creole languages can be explained in terms of universals of the human mind.

As linguists debate why or whether or how creoles constitute a unique class of language, we should not lose sight of the fact that we are talking about the mother tongues of real people with their own unique culture, identity, history, and forms of communication. The debate over questions of creole genesis only helps underscore the thesis that creoles constitute a misunderstood type of language. However you explain it, it should be clear that what creole speakers speak is a real language, and not just a broken or illegitimate form of a standard language.

Creole languages have two particular handicaps among languages in general, both of which contribute to their being misunderstood and endangered. One problem, to borrow the terminology of my fellow creolist Paul Garrett (2006), is a problem of historicity. The other is a problem of indeterminicity.

Creole languages have a problem with historicity. They have unique histories that set them apart. As we have already noted, while most languages are based on older forms, which in turn are based on older forms, going back not just for generations but for millenia into obscurity, creole languages have a definable starting point. This makes them different, and harder to understand. Our normal understanding of languages is that they change over time, that they can splinter into dialects, and when dialects get far enough removed from each other for historical plus geographical or social reasons, the dialects can form into new languages. Thus the Romance languages like Spanish, French and Italian grew out of Latin. The Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Iranian, etc. languages grew out of Proto-IndoEuropean.

How do creole languages fit into this understanding of language? They don't very well. Except for creole languages, every language form arises out of a prior-existing language form, and the changes from one generation to the next are incremental. Creole languages are taken to be forms of the major European languages to which they seem to be most closely related, but in comparison with the European languages, the creole seems to be corrupted. Creolists now have a much better understanding of the nature of creole languages and how they develop, but that understanding is relatively very new, and not widespread among the general population, who, if looking at creoles from the outside and without an enlightened understanding, might consider creoles to be like illegitimate children in the European language families.

Creole languages also have a problem with indeterminacy that other languages don't have, where the creole is rubbing shoulders, so to speak, with the majority language to which it is obviously related somehow. For example, Gullah is an English creole that exists alongside English. We understand Gullah and English to be two different languages, and in its purest form Gullah could not be understood by English speakers. But English is the language from which Gullah inherited much – but not all – of its vocabulary, and so we call Gullah an English creole, and we say that English is the lexifier language for Gullah. Where a creole language and its lexifier language coexist, each puts pressure on the other, absorbing lexical, syntactic and phonological features of the other, to the point where, over time, what has been called a *post-creole continuum* develops, where there are gradations in register and idiolect from one language to the other. Creole languages are formed from pidgins in a process called *creolization*, but when they are in sustained contact with their lexifier languages, they tend to undergo a gradual process of *decreolization*. To help make sense of the gradation that develops from one language to the other, the term *basilect* has been coined to refer to the purest form of the creole – the language that is farthest removed from the lexifier language – and the term *acrolect* refers to the form that has gotten closest to the lexifier. The term *mesolect* applies to an intermediate form along this post-creole continuum. While we might want to research the purest form of the creole, in some cases it has already been lost, and the closest thing to that which we might encounter today might be a somewhat decreolized, or mesolectal, variety.

From a different perspective, creole languages can have a strong influence on the majority languages that they come in contact with as well. Gullah has had more of an influence on English than many Americans realize – especially on African American and southern dialects of English. We have words that came into English from Africa by way of Gullah, including yam, goober, tote, biddy and juke (as in juke box).

Creole languages can die out, like any other language, by their speakers dying out without passing on the language to the next generation. Berbice Dutch, spoken in Guyana, Negerhollands, spoken in the Virgin Islands, Carriacou French Creole and Louisiana French Creole (not to be confused with Cajun) are examples of creole languages that are nearly extinct or extinct already. But creole languages have another way of going through a very gradual decline. They can, over time, lose their distinctive, identifying characteristics and become decreolized to the point of being indistinguishable from a dialect of their lexifier languages. As Wilson Moran of Sapelo Island, GA, put it, “I fish in the same places my father and my grandfather fished, I’ve taught my son to cast a net, I’ve taught my grandson to cast a net. The culture is not dead. We’re losing [out identity] now, because we are becoming homogenized. Our Gullah-Geechee identity is slowly fading away.”<sup>3</sup>

So what can be done, if we don't want to see these creole languages die out? If the speakers of the languages don't take pride in their own unique linguistic heritage, then there is not a lot outsiders can do except try to document the language as it is on its way to extinction. But creole speakers are quite often eager to be accepted and understood on their own linguistic terms, and while they enjoy speaking creole among themselves, they are trying to live with the situation of their form of speech being unfairly compared with a more prestigious majority language. We can

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in “A Testament to Gullah Heritage,” by Adam Parker in the Charleston *Post and Courier*, November 12, 2005, pages 1A,9A.

honor creole-speaking communities by understanding their language, and educating people about creole languages, and not expecting creole speakers to conform to our language. We can dispell the myth that creole languages cannot be written down, by publishing literature in the language. We can dispell the myth that the creole languages don't have any real grammar by analyzing and describing them and showing that the grammars are not the same as the majority languages that the creole languages are compared with, but are just as logical and valid. One of the easiest ways for linguists to reinforce the idea that creole languages are valid languages – to native speakers and outsiders alike – is by working with mother tongue speakers to produce dictionaries.

Lorenzo Dow Turner was the first African American PhD in linguistics, and he was also the first person to study Gullah and ascribe dignity to it as a valid language in its own right. His 1949 *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* was a landmark that was ahead of its time. Turner didn't live to see the radical shift in the public perception of Gullah over the past couple of decades, though his painstaking research did blaze the path for future linguists and helped lead to our more enlightened understanding of creole languages today.

Pat Sharpe was a linguist who worked with Gullah from about 1979 until her death in 2002. When she started off working with Gullah, even the Gullah speakers could not understand why she would want to give attention to their language. Pat Sharpe had a breakthrough in working with one key Gullah couple, Ervin and Ardell Greene, when she got them to go with her to Jamaica in 1985 for a conference of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics. Ervin explained, “When we were young, it was drilled into us that if we expected to get ahead, we must get rid of the Gullah. But if you take away the language of a society, you destroy the individual.”<sup>4</sup> Looking back at her eye-opening visit to Jamaica, Ardell Greene recounted, “We stepped off the plane and everyone was black and everyone talked just like us. We were like, ‘Whoa! This really is a language.’”<sup>5</sup> Ervin adds, “The fascinating thing is that we could understand each other. It was then and only then that I understood why Gullah had to be written down. . . . Folks here thought they were isolated and this was just their stupid way of speaking, but in fact there are millions of people speaking creole languages.”<sup>6</sup>

To start to do justice to the creole-speaking people, we must listen and pay attention to their voices. As Lucillia Edwards of Augier, St. Lucia, said, “*Langaj bèl. Langaj sé on bagay ki enpòtan. Mé nou ka wè signifkans langaj lè ou li langaj-la, lè ou palé langaj-la èk la ni lakopwann. Kon yon titja, mwen wè palé langaj Kwéyòl épi li langaj Kwéyòl èk lakopwann, mwen wè sa sé pli bèl bagay mwen sa janmen jwenn an lavi mwen.*” [“Language is beautiful. Language is an important thing. But we see the significance of language when you read the language, when you speak the language and there is understanding. As a teacher, I see the Creole language spoken and read with understanding, and I see that that is the most beautiful thing I can ever see in this life.”]

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in “Yes, God Speaks Gullah,” in *In Other Words*, November/December 1995, page 5.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in “Gospel According to Gullah,” by Stephanie Simon, in the *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 2005, pp. 1A,20A.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in “In the Beginning was the Word: Translating Bible into Gullah, A Labor of Love and Language,” by Tom Szaroleta, in the *Hilton Head Island Packet*, October 31, 1993, page 1A.

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