

# KRÉYÒL-KYÒLÒLÒ:<sup>1</sup> Grounds for Indigenous Knowledge in Writing Creole Dictionaries<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

*In regions where French-lexically based creoles are spoken, language strategists have singled out creole language promotion and development as a critical arena for the affirmation of cultural identity. Within local movements to legitimize kréyòl, native linguists and cultural militants have focused on the transition from orality to literacy through the creation of a writing system for kréyòl and the production of dictionaries. As a dictionary both reflects and creates an image of a language, and therefore offers a representation of its speakers, the very choice of an orthography, the selection of words to be included (or excluded) in the work, the methodology and the vision of the lexicographic project all take on significance. In privileging the written word by which kréyòl becomes both the container and conduit of indigenous knowledge and primary symbol of resistance to French assimilationist pressures, a number of questions emerge. What words are "authentically" Creole? How is the boundary between Creole and French to be defined? Within a multitude of voices, which ones will guide the work, and whose speech is to be considered authoritative or credible? What roles do ideology and science play in the search for identity and autonomy—linguistic, cultural and ethnic—and how is a balance between tradition and modernity to be achieved without compromising the endeavor? This paper will examine some of these issues and problems in the context of Creole language planning and development, using the case of Guadeloupe as a point of reference.*

## Introduction: The Problematic of Creole Lexicography

In the last two decades, several dictionaries in which the word *créole* is displayed in the title have appeared in the francophone zone from the Antilles to the Indian Ocean where French lexically-based Creoles are spoken.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by native movements to research, develop, and promote creole languages, lexicographers and creolists began to equip these vernaculars, first by designing and creating writing systems for these oral languages, then by encouraging the production of written materials from grammars and dictionaries to literary texts. While these tasks are normally distinct and accomplished in sequence, in the case of creole languages the urgency of both time and politics has contributed to merging these efforts. Thus a Creole dictionary may be not only a lexical inventory, an end in itself, but also a means to illustrate the new writing system. Similarly the Creole script is both the medium for future literary work as well as an intended goal in elevating the status of Creole from oral to written language. Hence one action reinforces the other.

Creole lexicography raises new and compelling issues. These issues are intricately connected to the historical position of these languages in the societies where they are spoken and to how they have been defined both locally and in the scholarly literature. In

French Caribbean societies which are marked by a multicultural, multiethnic heritage and a dual geopolitical linkage, creole languages have often been approached from the conceptual framework of "diglossia" (Ferguson 1959). This term proposes a hierarchical view of the language varieties present: the written and official code, generally the European language (French), occupies a privileged place and is considered the dominant norm by which all other language varieties are judged; the vernacular speech, known locally as *kréyòl*, is relegated to daily communication as a repository and vehicle of folk culture, traditionally reserved to oral domains and held in low esteem.

The power and status differential between French and Creole is central to the lexicographic endeavor and a multitude of questions that this task must grapple with. What is the purpose of a dictionary in a society which traditionally reserves its vernacular for oral communication? Is it a dictionary of a language, giving the correct spelling, pronunciation, origin, and meaning of Creole words--hence an attempt at standardization--or simply an arrangement of Creole lexical items with their French equivalences, thereby providing a translation of terms? Does the creation of a bilingual dictionary rather than a work entirely in Creole reinforce the notion of diglossia by the very fact that

the Creole lexicon is so intertwined with the French language? Is there not then a larger goal or fundamental question of a subordinate language in search of its written identity and, in conjunction with this, a people in search of their cultural, linguistic, and collective identity?

Related to this larger issue of identity and self-representation, a series of other questions emerge—technical, etymological and aesthetic. How is the boundary between Creole and French to be determined? What words are to be considered “authentically” Creole in light of French lexical interferences and borrowings which continue to operate? What spelling system will sustain the language—one that is similar to French, so that it is recognizable to its speakers who are schooled in this language, or one that is different from French in order to establish as well as reinforce Creole’s autonomy? Whose speech is to be considered authoritative, and what voice(s) will guide the work? What constitutes indigenous knowledge and how is this to be incorporated in the lexical corpus? Finally, with the growing conviction that cultural, ethnic, and national identity all hinge on the re-appropriation of one’s history and control of one’s self-definition, is this quest ultimately linked to narrative representation by privileging the written text?

Time does not permit us to examine all these issues nor to discuss how they have been handled in various creolophone countries which range from independent states with socialist governments (the Seychelles) and plural societies marked by ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity (Mauritius) to the four overseas departments of France (Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana in the Caribbean and Réunion in the Indian Ocean). We shall be able to consider some of these issues by examining the appearance in 1984 of the first Guadeloupean Creole-French dictionary. The itinerary of this lexicographic endeavor—its origins, *raison d’être*, and reception in Guadeloupe—is the subject of this article.

### **The First Guadeloupean Creole Dictionary**

The publication of the first Guadeloupean Creole-French dictionary was the culmination of a ten-year project initiated by a poet, Hector Poulet, with the aid of two colleagues, Sylviane Telchid, also Guadeloupean, and Danièle Montbrand, a French

woman—all secondary school teachers in the town of Capesterre Belle-Eau. Poulet, a cultural militant, was part of a new generation which emerged in the 1960s, eclipsing the older elite of the Négritude movement. During the 1970s he co-edited a bilingual bulletin (*Mouchach/Muchach*) on “*créolité*,” initiated a program of Creole instruction at the school where he taught, and founded a research group KRÈY with the express purpose of producing a literature in Creole.

Aside from a couple of earlier glossaries of Guadeloupean Creole, one by Père Germain and the other by A. Bazerque, the dictionary enterprise was the first of its kind in the Lesser Antilles.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this period, there had been no studies of Creole lexicology, in part because of the nature and genesis of these languages during the period of European empire-building. In the first place, French-based Creoles were not considered languages but rather deformed varieties of French or *patois* which had originated during the era of the African slave trade and the development of plantation societies in the New World. Secondly, the French state with its highly centralist tendencies and a colonial policy founded on political and cultural assimilation (i.e., *la mission civilatrice* or “civilizing mission”) did not allow for recognition of Creole as a vehicle of local culture or a medium for passing information. During the greater part of this century, there was no affirmation by the French authorities of Creole as a legitimate element of culture. This anti-Creole ideology was reinforced by local institutions, such as the school and the Catholic church, and in turn internalized by the local population. Creole was not considered respectable; it was the language of *un sal nègre* (“a dirty nigger”), associated with lack of education and lower-class status. Although for many Guadeloupeans the first language learned at home is Creole, the French national educational system in the islands privileges French as the official language and the only medium of instruction. Given the sociohistorical context which denigrated Creole, there was no impetus prior to the 1970s to give it legitimacy through the creation of written texts or even the design of a writing system. Within this background of cultural and linguistic repression in the French Antilles, anti-colonialist militants in the decade of the 1970s selected Creole as the primary symbol of group identity and resistance to French domination (see Schnepel 1990, 1993). The language was soon catapulted to emblem of anti-assimilationist sentiment voiced through an emerging nationalist movement on Guadeloupe which

was linked to island independence.

“Poulet’s dictionary” was conceived as a form of opposition to forces within and outside Antillean society which considered Creole a vulgar *patois* rejected by its speakers. The dictionary was multifold in purpose. Not only would it document and describe Creole’s richness but it would also serve as an instructional guide and resource for Creole speakers, young and old. Aware that the variety of Creole popularly spoken and heard on the radio was mixed with French, the authors foresaw that in another generation certain Creole expressions would be lost as a result of pressures and encroachment from the French language which had contributed so much to Creole’s lexicon. The primary purpose then of the dictionary was linguistic preservation in which the passage from oral to written language was viewed as a means of stabilizing Creole before more of its expressions vanished from use. With this goal in mind, the authors viewed the dictionary as a lexical inventory to nourish the language and help arrest French interferences.

The publication of the dictionary in 1984 had an important symbolic and political motivation as well. It was the first step in establishing Creole’s legitimacy as a language in its own right, capable of satisfying the functions which other languages serve. As lay researchers not academics, Hector Poulet and his research team decided that the proof of Creole’s re-evaluation lay in cultural output not in theoretical research destined for a university audience. Like other Creole dictionary writers (e.g., Alain Armand from Réunion), Poulet felt a written literary text militated more effectively in the symbolic representation of Creole by its speakers than a 300-page doctoral thesis which set out in French to prove that Creole was a language, but which ultimately few people would read.

### **A Spelling System for Creole**

As Creole lacked any real written tradition and did not possess an “orthography” in the sense of an officially accepted norm of writing, the selection of a spelling system was central to the project. The issue of how to spell Creole was related to the question of *what is Creole to become?* If Creole was to be limited to an oral language, with an occasional folkloric and limited passage into written form, there was no reason to consider a correct way of spelling as each writer would

transcribe Creole as s/he heard it. But if it were a question of considering Creole as a full-fledged language capable of being the vehicle through which knowledge is taught in school, with a central role in the written and broadcast media, there was a need to consider an oral language rising to the level of a written language. It was in relation to this stake that the choice of a spelling system had to be defined.

In 1975, following the advances in writing Haitian Creole with the *Office National d’Alphabétisation et d’Action Communautaire* (ONAAC) and the *Institut National Pédagogique* (IPN) orthographic systems, Dany Bebel-Gisler, a Guadeloupean social scientist, proposed a phonemic system for Creole. Based on the principle of one sign for one sound with no silent letters, the writing system incorporated a strict correspondence between phoneme and graphic representation. Bebel-Gisler’s system was elaborated in 1976 by Jean Bernabé, a Martinican linguist and director of the research group *Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherches en Espace Créolophone* (GEREC) at the *Université des Antilles-Guyane*. The GEREC system, as it came to be called, was adopted for the Guadeloupean Creole dictionary, and Poulet added certain graphic propositions to conform to Guadeloupe’s linguistic and phonological reality which differed slightly from that of Martinique (e.g., *ty>ky*, *dj>gy*). Through the choice of a spelling system that was phonologically based and not related etymologically to French in any way, Antillean militants sought to establish the autonomy of Creole--symbolically, ideologically, and visually--through its graphic representation.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Boundary between French and Creole**

Establishing the lexical boundary between the two languages became a more complex issue because of the genetic ties between French and Creole and the destructuring effects of the dominant language (French) on the other. In the lexicographic enterprise the authors had to determine what words were to be considered Creole as opposed to French. Taking into account all the lexical items presented the risk of having the dictionary dominated by the French lexicon and in turn Creole losing its autonomy. Conversely, leaving out all words common to Creole and French would deprive the work of an important number of words in frequent use.

In the introduction to the 1984 dictionary, the authors set forth their criteria for lexical inclusions. The main criterion was whether the word was in current use. Words which had the same pronunciation and meaning as in French, without any local particularity, were left out unless they constituted the root of words (e.g., *pyé*, “foot”; *pyébwa*, “tree”; *gwopyé*, “elephantiasis”). Words which did not seem particularly Creole, such as technology terms (e.g., *ordinateur*, “computer”; *télévision*, “television”), were not included in the dictionary. These words are the easiest to creolize in phonology and in writing (G. Hazaël-Massieux 1985:277). Older expressions which were often found in books but were no longer in current usage were also left out. In addition, the authors decided to exclude the name of flora and fauna since the dictionary was not to be an encyclopedia of Guadeloupean things. Thus only the most common expressions or generic terms were incorporated.

The authors made no attempt to chasten the language or to purify it by leaving out vulgar terms, such as sexual expressions or parts of the body, which were replete with imagery. While these words were not collected systematically for the dictionary, the authors stated in the introduction that they wanted to “give the fairest reflection as possible of the Creole language, as it is spoken in their locale, and not to play the role of moralists” (Pouillet *et al.* 1984:5, my translation). By not suppressing sexual expressions, they wanted the language to represent the social reality of its speakers and to capture the rapport between men and women where lexical expressions are so rich and colorful.

In the bilingual dictionary Creole words and expressions were presented and their corresponding meanings or translations were given in French. In order to balance the readers’ shock of seeing Creole written so differently from French, the authors illustrated Creole entries through a wealth of examples taken from oral traditions, such as proverbs, riddles, and maxims. To avoid losing Creole’s spicy content and to retain its popular, spoken, and familiar quality, all levels of the French language were used to translate a Creole expression: standard French, familiar French, argot, even colloquialisms. In this way the different registers of Guadeloupean Creole incorporating the language’s social and regional variation were captured quite accurately in the text. The dictionary then was not a simple list of Creole words with their French equivalents, but a cultural mirror which reflected and

created a new social representation of the language, and through it, an image of the Creole speaker and ultimately Guadeloupean society.

### Local Reactions to the Creole Dictionary

Popular and academic reaction to the Guadeloupean Creole-French dictionary was varied. Immediately after its publication in May 1984, the work was denounced over Radio France d’Outre-Mer (RFO) by the Martinican linguist Jean Bernabé. A trained grammarian, he faulted the ten-page introductory grammar section for adhering to a French model. Bernabé considered the section incomplete, inaccurate, and compromised by its lay quality. His rebuff raised the fundamental issue of who had the “rights” to Creole—all the speakers of the language or only university scholars trained in linguistics? It also revealed the underlying rivalry between key players in the two French islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique as different interest groups with nationalist orientations competed openly for control of the Creole question and domination of the Creole turf. Related to this controversy was the fact that the university group GEREC was launching its own project of a pan-Creole dictionary for all the French Caribbean but its members were split ideologically over the content and precise role of the dictionary. While GEREC’s membership included researchers from both islands, the university research group was overwhelmingly associated with Martinique since its two leading linguists were from that island. In light of the fact that historically Martinique has had a more commanding role in the French Antilles than its sister island of Guadeloupe, Martinicans had to swallow their pride when a Guadeloupean Creole dictionary appeared first.

In a review of the dictionary, a number of issues were raised by Guy Hazaël-Massieux, a Guadeloupean linguist who had left his native island to teach at the Université de Provence in France. He questioned whether the purpose of the dictionary was to note all the usages of a term and thus to present a faithful image of the language or to propose a norm or model (G. Hazaël-Massieux 1985:276-281). He noted that the authors were faced with the dilemma of either proposing a writing system or establishing an orthography. If the phonemic system were accepted, he questioned how mistakes would be incorporated in the language. Would transcriptions simply be the faithful notation of the pronunciation of each speaker,

or would these choices have to refer back to a norm within the community? How would linguistic variation be captured? Hazaël-Massieux faulted the GEREK phonemic notation of Creole for its potential for balkanizing the language into its dialectal, sociolectal, and island varieties. This was a real problem, especially for Guadeloupe with its island dependencies (Terre-de-Haut and Terre-de-Bas which form Les Saintes, as well as Marie-Galante, Désirade, St. Martin, and St. Bartélemy) and variation in spoken Creole.

In reaction to the phonemic system being considered for Creole, Guy's wife, Marie-Christine, a French linguist, had designed an alternate notational system which was morphosemantic and showed some etymological allegiances with the French language. This system was presented in the introduction to her collection of children's songs from the French West Indies, *Chansons des Antilles, Comptines, Formulettes* (M-C Hazaël-Massieux 1987), and it became the basis for transcribing and illustrating the Creole songs in the text. However, Marie-Christine's French nationality compromised the authority of her propositions in the eyes of Guadeloupean nationalists.

During fieldwork in the 1980s, my own informal interviews with people in the countryside of Capesterre Belle-Eau provided a range of responses to the dictionary (Schnepel 1990). Older people often remarked that the Creole in the text did not resemble their speech nor that of their parents. Others complained about the use of the letters "w" and "k" in the proposed graphic system, which are rare in French, and their own difficulty with reading Creole. However, I soon realized that the people who most found fault with the work often had not even seen it! As so often the case in the French Antilles, they were merely voicing criticism of a local endeavor or reiterating remarks they might have heard on the radio or read in the press. In contrast to these older folk, school children in Capesterre Belle-Eau who were in the Creole classes taught by Hector Pouillet and Sylviane Telchid were enthusiastic about the dictionary. They expressed great delight in learning the spelling system and seeing texts written in Creole, their mother tongue.

Within two years the dictionary had sold out and there was overwhelming interest in its being reprinted. The authors decided to rectify certain omissions in the dictionary before embarking on a second edition. In 1990 the new edition appeared and it has benefited

enormously from a lengthy and composite grammar written by a German linguist, Ralph Ludwig. The revised grammatical section gives the Creole speaker a vision of the structure and rules of the language and quells popular misconceptions that Creole does not have a grammar, but it also functions as a useful resource for foreigners wishing to learn Creole. The lexicon in the second edition has also been expanded to include many words omitted in the first edition because of their resemblance to French. In addition, lexical entries have been illustrated by sentences from current use rather than from oral traditions. In this way there has been an attempt to show that Creole is a living, dynamic language, not just a cultural artifact, and that it is capable of being used in daily communication.

### **In Conclusion**

A dictionary much like language has a dual aspect. On the one hand, it is a storehouse of data, a repository for the preservation and conservation of information, an indispensable reference in societies of written tradition. On the other hand, it serves an important commercial function as a tool responsive to the pressures of the present, with a role in capturing the changing public tastes in what has been referred to as the "market of linguistic exchanges" by Bourdieu (1977). In the case of Creole languages, a dictionary takes on added meaning. Not only is it a medium for the transition from orality to literacy but it also forms part of a "representation-revolution." Within the French Antilles, popular forces and members of the elite, in particular writers, performers, and artists, are attempting to re-appropriate their history and self-representation by brandishing Creole as the authentic repository and medium of their hybrid culture.

The authors of the first Guadeloupean Creole dictionary did not attempt to be the legislator of the Creole language but rather to let the public impose its own choices. While the dictionary filled a societal, cultural and symbolic need, a number of issues still remain unresolved. For instance, there has been no attempt to make an orthography official for Creole. Although nationalists tend to project the viewpoint that the modified GEREK system has been widely accepted by most groups writing in Creole, the fact remains that many people still write Creole spontaneously in their own fashion. Variation in written Creole can be seen on record covers or CDs of *zouk* music and on advertising billboards which

increasingly resort to the use of Creole to sell products. This points to the fact that the authority of the graphic system rests with its users, not with any imposed or legislated orthographic system.

A second and related issue is that there is no popular consensus with respect to lexical creativity--whether new words should literally be constructed from Creole roots, thus creating a rupture with French, or whether they should come through the rules of borrowing from the French language as has occurred historically. Central to this dilemma of lexical "decreolization" is whether the resemblance of Creole words to French lexical items compromises the authority and authenticity of Creole. The acceptance and spread of these new words can only be assured by those whose speech is authorial or privileged. Yet the issue remains whose speech? Is it the speech of Antillean intellectuals writing in Creole who may self-consciously devise new terminology and neologisms by putting together Creole phrases, or the speech of the masses who are in daily contact with their language, creating new terms quite spontaneously without artifice as the need arises, but who may have little recourse to reading and writing their own language? These questions will surely be determined by the linguistic marketplace as more Creole texts are produced and a faithful readership begins to develop.

In May of 1997 I attended a reception at the French Cultural Services in New York in honor of the Martinican writer, Patrick Chamoiseau, on the occasion of the English publication of his work, *Texaco* (1997), which won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in France. The English translation of the novel includes a glossary of Creole terms written in the GEREK system. One may wonder ironically if local acceptance of written Creole will increase as Antillean writers and their works receive more recognition overseas and as *créolité* captures the foreign imagination.

#### Notes

1. In the promotion of Creole, language militants and language planners have been questioning what is "pure" Creole and what variety of Creole is the most authentic. The Creole phrase *kafé kyòlòlò* refers to very weak or diluted coffee that is not pure. I have used the phrase *kréyòl kyòlòlò* because of its association with purity, but also as a play on words

with respect to the title of our AAA session, "Grounds for Indigenous Knowledge."

2. This article was originally presented at the XVI Congreso Anual, Asociación de Estudios del Caribe, "Política, Cultura e Identidad Caribeña: Cuba y las Antillas en los Años 90," in Havana, Cuba, May 21-24, 1991. A shortened version of this paper was published in *Anales del Caribe* 11:237-246 (1991), as "Ralph Ludwig, Danièle Montbrand, Hector Poulet & Sylviane Telchid: *Dictionnaire créole français avec un abrégé de grammaire créole et un lexique français-créole*, Paris/Pointe-à-Pitre, Servedit/Ed. Jasor, 1990." Data for this article was collected during dissertation fieldwork undertaken in Guadeloupe from July 1984 to June 1986, and supported by the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Program and a National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grant in Anthropology (Grant #BNS-8310440). Return trips were made to the island in May 1988, August 1990, February 1996, and May 1996.

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4. See Bentolila, ed. (1976); Valdman (1981); D'Offay & Lionnet (1982); Poulet, Telchid & Montbrand (1984); Baker & Hookoomsing (1987); Mondesir (1992); Armand (1993); Baggioni (1987); Ludwig, Poulet, Telchid, & Montbrand (1990); and Barbotin (1995).

5. In the 1940s and 50s, the cultural association known as ACRA (Académie Créole des Antilles) had begun to collect Creole words starting with the letter “A” but it had not amassed beyond the letter “C” when the work was reputedly lost. In their work the members did not discuss the issue of Creole orthography nor what variety of Creole to include in the dictionary, whether this would include only “*créole du salon*” (refined Creole) or whether it would incorporate “*créole populaire*” (the variety spoken by the masses).

6. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, distancing Creole from the dominant or colonial language which contributed to its genesis was to give the language autonomy and power. Yet in independent creolophone states, such as St. Lucia and Dominica where varieties of French Creole exist along with English which is the official language, proximity of the local Creole to the French language tends, on the other hand, to give it legitimacy or authority. For example, early attempts at writing “*patois*” (*patwa*)—the local term for Creole in St. Lucia and Dominica—frequently incorporated correspondences with the French language to give the vernacular a kind of respectability and legitimacy. This shows how differing colonial contexts, island political status, and nature of the local nationalist ideology are all variables which play a part in conceptualizing how Creole is to be represented graphically. Since the 1980s, there has been an attempt to integrate the Creole spelling system in the four Lesser Antillean islands of Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, and St. Lucia, in a kind of pan-Creole euphoria.

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