

**Interfacing with Kwéyòl Speakers:  
The Case for Standardisation**

Feature Address delivered at the Folk Research Centre's  
Symposium  
Creole Heritage Month 2009

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My initial reaction to the invitation to deliver the Feature Address at today's Symposium was "Oh no! Not again! My concern was that I am running out of fresh, new ways to excite people about the need, indeed the urgency, to treat the language we call our own, with much more seriousness than it is being accorded currently; to bring more rigour, to its development in the increasingly complex linguistic environment in which it now must be used; to stop compromising its integrity as a language in its own right. That the Folk Research Centre should once again be engaging Creole communications in the exercise of reaching consensus on how we present the language to our listeners and our readers is in itself testimony to the type of progress that has been made. There has undoubtedly been a quantitative improvement in the use of Creole in the formal sector, but this has not been matched by improvements in the quality of the communication. I am sure then that you would pardon my periodic bouts of despair!

You will appreciate as well the difficulty I had in deciding on a focus for this address. "Interfacing with Kwéyòl Speakers" is the theme for this Symposium, but its very breadth was enough to have me lose direction in the time allotted for my presentation. I thought therefore that I would spend some time in looking at the reasons why we are doing what we are doing here today. If we are going to interface with Kwéyòl speakers of all ages, in different spheres of endeavour, in varying life situations, there needs to be some common understanding of why it is worth our while to do so.

I want to suggest first of all that it is not enough for us to accept that we have a language (or do we?) which will somehow perpetuate itself without any help on our part, especially since this language exists predominantly in the oral form and in competition with a strong, more socially accepted one. Because without deliberate interventions on our part we will

perhaps be unable to stop the reversal which is referred to in the literature as “language shift” – the imbalance caused by the borrowing of words from the socially accepted language by the native/traditional/indigenous language. Indeed there are growing cases world wide where language shift has ended in linguistic genocide – the death of the indigenous language. The exercise in which we are engaged today and others like it fall into the category of language maintenance: initiatives geared towards the transmission of language from one generation to the next; the standardization of its orthography, and its grammar, the expansion of its vocabulary, the compilation of dictionaries of the language -; promotion of literacy, cultural activities and cultural industries; development of language policies. The ultimate goal of these initiatives is that of language reclamation: reclaiming people’s own voices to give them a sense of self, to protect their cultural heritage. Derek Walcott, in his poem “Sainte Lucie”, speaks to that need when he writes:

“Come back to me  
My language  
Come back  
Cocoa, Grigri, Solitaire, Ciseau...”

Otherwise, a morning could come in which we might very well ask ourselves what happened, not merely to the forests and the bays, but to a whole people. So warns Derek Walcott in his Nobel Lecture, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”. He was speaking about potential threats to our national identity, the loss of these elements that make us who we are. If we understand that and if we appreciate the role that the Creole language and culture plays in the protection of this identity, then we will treat it in a less cavalier fashion. As persons charged with the responsibility of using the language to inform, instruct, educate and

shape the opinions, thoughts and attitudes of listeners and readers we will appreciate the importance of portraying it in the best possible light. For as Franz Fanon puts it: to speak a language means more than simply using a certain syntax or vocabulary. A language supports the whole weight of a people's culture and civilization. It is this common understanding that I referred to earlier. Your use of the Creole language in your several spheres of operation will influence how people react to it and to the culture it supports.

This is why this Symposium should be taken seriously. Not as just an activity to give some substance to Creole Heritage Month, but as another boost to the commitment to promote the development of Creole and its integration into the mainstream of national life. Such integration is one of the recommendations of the Caribbean Education For All Plan of Action 2000 – 2-2015.

Indigenous languages must be sustained and strengthened even as the official languages are mastered, so that one can retain a strong sense of indigenous culture and self, and acquire mastery of a language of international communication... Any other position would be to create a false and dysfunctional dichotomy.

That position was endorsed by CARICOM Heads of Government, so there is support for it in principle.

Some of us would argue that we need to take this one step further by doing away with the dichotomy of indigenous and official language, and speak simply of a country's languages. But there is still a lot to be done with the Creole language here in Saint Lucia before we can begin to press for that status. It is not that there has not been a precedence set in the

Creole-speaking world. More than two decades ago, the Seychelles adopted Creole as one of its three official languages, without any apparent loss of face in the international community or any signs of regression as far as the development of its peoples are concerned. The Creole co-exists quite comfortably with the other two official languages – English and French – in all areas of national life. The interventions that led to its integration and the pride of place it holds were deliberate, calculated and systematically engineered. Not only was language shift reversed but the Seychelles was able to successfully reclaim its own voice. One of the main pillars of this linguistic engineering feat was the standardization of the language, so that all Seychellors were as one in the way they presented that voice to their people and the rest of the Creole-speaking world. Standardization implies a consensus or agreement on rules governing the language. If we were all to insist that we were going to do our own thing, we would most probably end up with the Tower of Babel situation, rather than a community of speakers. If we are to make ourselves understood, i.e. if we are to communicate with each other, then there needs to be rules governing the language – whether we are talking music, mathematics, sign language, codes, verbal languages – oral or written. While all of us accept this as a given in the examples quoted, an exception seems to be made when it comes to the Creole language. We seem to take the concept of its being “our” language literally. Since it is ours then we think we can do what we want with it. Not so! This is why the organizers of today’s Symposium have brought you together today to nurture this collaborative effort at building up the Creole lexicon – the vocabulary of the language to meet the needs of today’s world – the demands of modern social discourse. There have been several attempts to do so, but many have not achieved the results we would have like for all kinds of reasons – apathy, lack of funding, loss of interest. The time is right and ripe for a new attempt.

Since Creole is still unfortunately a predominantly oral language, the temptation to speak loosely and to improvise is great. Some stretch the boundaries of logic to the limit; others are just simply ludicrous. While some poetic license is allowed, the interests of Creole would be better served if all users were to bring a bit more rigour to their presentations. Modern day discourse sets a very high premium on literacy and on the written word. If Creole needs to take its place in that environment – as indeed it should – then we all need to be able to demonstrate literacy in Creole. In this regard, no one here should have any excuse for not being able to demonstrate that competence. A writing system or orthography for French Antillean Creole – the Creole shared by the islands of the Antilles – Haiti, Saint Lucia, Dominica, Martinique and Guadeloupe – was developed by a group of scholars, academics and native speakers from the region as far back as 1982 – twenty-seven years ago. That this has not become the standard for all Kwéyòl writers is a telling indictment on the lip service we have given and continue to give to the importance of Creole in our national life. The age-old excuse that the system is too difficult can no longer wash. Training has been offered from the very beginning. It is still being offered today. There have been publications in Creole; dictionaries, a television series, all geared towards taking the language to the level it needs to get to, to make it a serious contender for the status of official language. Resisting efforts and initiatives at standardization will only prolong Creole’s marginalization on the fringes of officialdom.

The development of a writing system was one of the key initiatives in the standardization process. I first presented it to the International Committee for Creole Studies (Le Comité International d’ Etudes Creoles) at its Conference here in Saint Lucia in 1980. Under the direction of the Mouvman Kwéyòl Sent Lisi, and at several workshops and island-wide consultations, it was revised, fine-tuned, piloted and eventually

published in 1982 or thereabouts. It was well thought-out with four guiding principles informing the decisions taken:

- Economy – A one-to-one phoneme/grapheme (sound/letter) relationship ensured that any given sound was represented by the same letter or group of letters.
- Ecology – This took into account the compatibility of the language with which the Creole co-exists – French in some islands, English in others.
- Technology – This addressed the availability of symbols/letters in current use on mechanical devices – principally the typewriter and its keyboard. Computers and computer software were not then as accessible as they are now.
- Universality – That was the most important principle, as the main goal was that the written form had to be mutually intelligible, so that we could share each other's work, have access to each other's documentation. If this is so between countries, how much more important should this principle be among ourselves. Yet many people insist on using their own writing system, presumably because they do not recognize the authority of the professionals who worked on it professionals from the University of the West Indies, the University of Haiti, the University of Antilles-Guyane – yet these same people complain that their work is not being embraced by the public.

I am using the occasion of this Symposium to call again on all involved in the promotion of Creole in its written form to accept and adopt that orthography so that the work of standardization can be advanced.

Another major aspect of the standardization of a language is the expansion of its vocabulary. But this is much more problematic in the case where that language exists with another that does not share the same lexical base. This is the case of the Antillean Creole in Saint Lucia and Dominica. Special efforts therefore have to be made to address that issue. We are doing Creole a graver injustice when we simply put in English loan words whenever we get stumped. I invite you to begin to address this difficulty and to recommend solutions. I have one to offer, but I am certain that others will emerge. We should consider setting up a Committee/Editorial Board which would examine suggestions proposed by members of the public or the media and make recommendations which could be then adopted by all users. Alternatively, the Committee could make recommendations and invite comments so that a consensus can be reached. We can therefore be assured of some level of standardization among users.

You must have heard people argue as to whether or not our Creole is a language. Many still cling on to the “broken French” designation, unable to accept that it does not the requirements of what a language is. We need to demonstrate to these skeptics and detractors that we are not dealing with a hodgepodge of utterances that may or may not be understood by all, but with a rules-based system of words, phrases and sentences. The grammar of a language is yet another major aspect of its standardization process. There are in fact several grammars of the Creole language already published and in use. I want to draw your attention to one such grammar first published in 1869 by the Chronicle

Publishing Office in Port of Spain. “The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar” by John Jacob Thomas, the son of freed slaves, has been described as without doubt the most interesting, as well as the oldest detailed work on French Creole. After a detailed analysis of this work, one individual concluded that far from being a mere “bastardization” of French, Creole lies at the extreme end of a type of evolution which has characterized the development of many a recognized language, away from a system in which relationships in the sentence are expressed by flexions, to one where each element in the relationship finds expression in a separate particle. A bit of a mouthful, yes, but a powerful testimony to its status on the linguistic totem pole.

The Creole that we speak today is still essentially that described by Thomas, and according to Gertrud Aub-Buscher writing from the University of the West Indies in 1968, the work remains the most valuable collection of material on the Creole in Trinidad, until a new intensive study of the language appears. You all know what has happened to Creole in the Trinidad environment – a compelling example of the language shift phenomenon I spoke of earlier. Our task is to provide that new intensive study of the grammar of Creole, to further advance the process of standardisation which we recognize today as being critical to its development in these times.

We live in a digital age and the Creole language needs to be accommodated. I would therefore also recommend the digitization of one of the current Creole dictionaries to interface with current word – processing software like Microsoft. In this way, those who rely heavily on the Spell Check facility on their computers can find that same type of support when they are working in Creole. Some of you will recall the observation made some years ago by a very prominent member of

Government that “Konmputa pa ka palé Kwéyòl.” But, they do, and Creole is as amenable to digitization as any other living language.

I want to conclude by applauding the efforts of the Kwéyòl Language Committee of the Folk Research Centre for today’s initiative, for being in the vanguard of the roller-coaster movement that has characterized our efforts at bringing Creole into the mainstream of national life. I hope that some of the issues I have raised will be seriously considered, so that we can have something tangible to show when the next Creole Heritage Month comes along.