Griffin Bassett
Professor Augustina Owusu
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Slavery and Creole Language Attitudes in the African Diaspora

Introduction

A *creole* language arises, unlike other natural languages, out of the mixture and systematization of several existing languages into one. This process begins with a simplified intermediary between said languages, known as a *pidgin*, which, upon being transmitted intergenerationally and acquiring native speakers, is naturally expanded into a full *creole* (Özüorçun 2015). Creoles are spoken all over the world, and are derived from a wide variety of languages. That said, because of the European colonization of Africa and the Americas and the Atlantic slave trade, many of the most visible and widely used creole languages today are spoken in the African diaspora, particularly in the places where European colonial powers forcibly relocated and enslaved people from West and Central Africa (A. E. Baker and Hengeveld 2012). For the purposes of this paper, this "African diaspora" refers to such places as, for example, Haiti, Belize, and the Bahamas, as well as Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Mauritius; though the latter three island countries are typically understood to be located geopolitically in Africa, they share with the first three countries a history of slavery and an ensuing widespread use of European-descended creole languages. After comparing these languages with other worldwide creoles that arose out of different circumstances of language contact, I have found that creole languages are subject to more negative internal *language attitudes* in the African diaspora than elsewhere in the world, which I suggest stems from their colonial histories. Despite this, creole languages in the African diaspora *and* worldwide are near-universally seen as positive signifiers of in-group identity, familiarity, and cultural belonging.

The Americas

The most widespread creole language in the Americas is Haitian Creole (*kreyòl ayisyen*), spoken as a first (and often only) language by the vast majority of Haiti's population of approximately 11 million (DeGraff and Ruggles 2014). Haitian Creole emerged in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) in the 17th and 19th centuries. Saint-Domingue, like many other European colonies, was highly stratified demographically: in 1788, its population numbered 25,000 Europeans (predominantly French-speaking), who lived in among the wealthiest conditions in the entire world at that time, and 700,000 Africans, who endured among the most brutal conditions of slavery in the world, *even for* that time (Coupeau 2007; Farmer 2004). The majority of African people enslaved in Saint-Domingue were native speakers of Volta-Congo languages (a branch of the larger hypothesized Niger-Congo family), and especially of West African Gbe languages (such as Fon), whose speakers comprised around 50% of those kidnapped into slavery (Lefebvre 1999). As such, Haitian Creole is today characterized by an 18th-century French lexical *superstrate*, owing to the predominance of Creole French as the lingua franca of colonial Saint-Domingue, and a Volta-Congo *substrate*, which has shaped Haitian Creole's highly analytical grammar (Seguin 2020).

Despite its enduring use by the majority of Haiti's population, internal perceptions of Haitian Creole are complex and difficult to generalize. Alongside French, *kreyòl* (henceforth referred to as Kreyòl) is one of two official languages of Haiti, and the two languages have, to some extent, a diglossic relationship: French, the colonial language, enjoys high prestige and has historically been the dominant language of education and “formal” public settings (e.g. government addresses), whereas Kreyòl is seen as less prestigious, but is far more widely used as the language of day-to-day life (Valdman 2015). This diglossia is so strong that French remains in widespread use in Haitian schooling, despite it being a second language for the substantial majority of Haitian students, which has exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities and contributed to Kreyòl’s marginalization, though the use of Kreyòl in education has been increasing since the 2010 earthquake (Daniel 2013). As such, the majority of *Francophone* Haitians express negative language attitudes towards Kreyòl, with many describing it as a “bastardized” or otherwise “bad” *variant* of French (Ulysse and Masaeed 2021).

This view is not shared, however, by the majority of Haitians, who as monolingual Kreyòl speakers have historically been excluded from studies of language attitudes in Haiti. For these speakers, Kreyòl is both the language of informal, day-to-day life *and* formal settings, such as funeral services, religious rituals, and doctor visits (Dejean 1983). Recent surveys of monolingual Kreyòl-speaking Haitians suggest that internal language attitudes surrounding Kreyòl in fact tend towards the positive, especially because of Kreyòl’s place as a symbol of Haitian cultural identity (Ulysse and Burns 2022). This suggests that Kreyòl language attitudes are reflective of Haiti’s colonial history and legacy, in which wealth and political power is largely concentrated among the French-speaking minority elite and the Kreyòl-speaking majority is socially subjugated.

This dichotomy of creole language attitudes is seen across many African diasporic communities in the Americas, all of which are united by common histories of slavery and colonization. One particularly similar example is that of Belize, a Central American country colonized primarily by Britain and characterized by a highly ethnically and linguistically diverse population. Belize's largest ethnic groups are *mestizos*, people of (predominantly) mixed Indigenous and European descent; Kriols, the descendants of kidnapped and enslaved West and Central African people and the English and Scottish people who enslaved them; and Maya peoples, a collective label of several linguistically diverse groups of people indigenous to Central America. Belizean Creole, known endogenously as Kriol, emerged in similar circumstances to Haitian Creole but with an English superstrate; it is spoken by around half of Belize's population, and is widely used and understood by Belizeans across the country irrespective of their ethnic background ("Belize" 2024; Salmon 2015).

As in Haiti, language attitudes towards Kriol in Belize are complex and multifaceted; broadly speaking, however, they are more negative than attitudes towards Kreyòl in Haiti. Kriol is discussed in Belizean classroom settings, but it is not the medium of instruction, and the language is in a position of far lower prestige than English, the colonial language. Many Belizeans and even Kriol speakers themselves refer to the language as "broken English," indicative of its public perception as "lesser" than English. Language attitudes in Belize are also subject to regional variation; the Kriol spoken in Belize City, for example, is seen as more prestigious (both in terms of "socioeconomic status" and "informal solidarity") than the localized and more divergent variety of Punta Gorda (Salmon and Menjívar 2019). Similarly, this perception reflects the colonial history of Belize and the legacy of racialized class stratification in the country, despite Belize's multiracialism.

Similar language attitudes are seen elsewhere in the Americas. In the Bahamas, English-based Bahamian Creole, is seen as less prestigious, especially among university-educated Bahamians, and is increasingly being eschewed in favor of standard Bahamian English; nevertheless, Bahamian Creole is also seen as "the language of solidarity, national identity, emotion and humour," similar in all respects to the case of Belize (Laube and Rothmund 2021). Guyana, on the other hand, is more similar to Haiti, in that internal perceptions of English-based Guyanese Creole (known as *Creolese*) are socioeconomically stratified (albeit in opposite terms to Haiti). Both agricultural, working-class Guyanans and white-collar, wealthy Guyanans perceive English (the colonial language of Guyana) as more prestigious than Creolese, but working-class Guyanans are more likely to have negative language attitudes towards Creolese, as its perception as a "barrier" to upward mobility outweighs its perception as a symbol of cultural identity (Rickford 1980; Mühleisen 2022). Throughout the Americas, the creole languages spoken by African diasporic communities are subject to a wide variety of internal perceptions; that said, either positively or negatively, these perceptions are shaped by their societies' colonial origins and the historical context of transatlantic slavery in which they emerged. Creole languages in the Americas are typically subject to negative language attitudes, and remain in positions of lower prestige compared to the colonial languages from which they are descended. However, these languages are also widely understood as signifiers of cultural identity.

Insular and Continental Africa

Even outside of the Americas, the dynamic between colonial languages and creole languages elsewhere in the African diaspora is in many ways similar to the above cases. One particularly notable case is that of Cape Verdean Creole (henceforth referred to by its formal endogenous title, *kabuverdianu*), spoken by the vast majority of the population of Cape Verde and widely used across that country's own extensive diaspora (Challinor 2013). Kabuverdianu is descended from Portuguese, with which it maintains an enduring diglossic relationship; as in

Haiti, Portuguese enjoys high prestige and is the language of “formal” situations, whereas Kabuverdianu is in a position of lower prestige, as the more informal, “day-to-day” language (though, as in Haiti, many Cape Verdeans cannot speak Portuguese). Despite Portuguese’s elevated position and the ensuing widespread perception of Kabuverdianu as “lesser,” the creole language is also widely understood as a cornerstone of Cape Verdean identity, crucial to navigating the country and asserting “in-group” membership (Carter and Aulette 2009). This parallels Cape Verde’s social history; Portuguese was historically dominant as the language of the colonizing and enslaving class, who – once again, as in Haiti – were largely insulated from the enslaved majority, who came to speak Kabuverdianu and whose descendants make up the majority of Cape Verde’s present population (Williams 2015).

Different circumstances can be observed in the case of Mauritius, a highly multiethnic former French colony located in the Indian Ocean off of the eastern coast of the African continent. Mauritian Creole (known endogenously as Morisien) is the most widely spoken language in Mauritius, spoken as a first language by 70% of the country’s population. Like Kreyòl, it is derived from French; however, because of Mauritius’s particular history and present-day demography, it is substantially different from Atlantic French-based creole languages. Unlike Haiti, Mauritius is highly ethnically diverse, with substantial Indian, Chinese, African and European communities; this is reflected in Morisien’s extensive incorporation of Tamil loanwords. That said, similarly to Haiti, Morisien’s syntax has also been influenced substantially by the Bantu languages spoken by people who were kidnapped and enslaved in Mauritius during the colonial period; the language has also been influenced by Malagasy, for similar reasons (P. Baker and Kriegel 2013). Morisien has far lower social prestige than French (as with Belizean Kriol, it is often referred to as “broken French”), and is excluded from the education system, but, as in the case of many of the creole languages highlighted above, it is understood as a signifier of national identity in Mauritius, displaying an enduring and complex connection to Mauritius' colonial history (Rajah-Carrim 2007).

Both of the above languages can be compared to Nigerian Pidgin, an English-based creole increasingly spoken as a *lingua franca* across linguistically heterogeneous Nigeria. Though Nigerian Pidgin arose in different circumstances to the other creole languages described in this paper, Nigeria shares a history of British colonial rule, which has shaped the present perception of English as the language of highest prestige and Nigerian Pidgin as a more colloquial variety (or even, pejoratively, as "broken English"). Language attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin in Nigeria are complex and, once again, difficult to generalize; however, unlike many of the countries above, positive attitudes are more dominant, and there is an increasing perception of Nigerian Pidgin as a uniquely Nigerian unifier between the country's many disparate linguistic groups (Obi 2014). This suggests that African diasporic creole languages that have originated among enslaved people are negatively impacted, in terms of internal language attitudes, by the legacies of slavery; this stands in contrast to creoles that have emerged in Africa outside of slavery, even under colonial circumstances.

Other Creole Languages

Creole languages that have arisen elsewhere in the world share certain characteristics with the languages portrayed above, but are also crucially distinct in certain ways. One particularly notable example is that of Nagamese, an Assamese-based creole spoken in the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland. As in the case of, for example, Haitian Kreyòl, Nagamese arose out of language contact between many different linguistic groups, unified in this case by the regional prestige of Assamese (spoken in Assam, the most populous state in Northeastern India) and the broader prestige of English, the colonial language of India. Once again, similar to many of the above examples, Nagamese is often pejoratively described as an “imperfectly learned version” of Assamese or even Bengali; that is to say, it is frequently subject to negative *external* language attitudes (Bhattacharjya 1994). Finally, Nagamese is often eschewed at an official level in favor of English, the colonial language, which is seen as the “key to occupational success;” that being said, only a small percentage of Nagaland’s population speaks English, and Nagamese is in many respects the dominant language of day-to-day life (Burling 2007).

The crucial difference between Nagamese and the creole languages described above is that the *internal* language attitudes surrounding the use of Nagamese are far more positive. Despite nominally low prestige, Nagamese is widely perceived as familiar, “humorous,” easy to learn, and effective as a linkage between previously antagonistic ethnic groups in Nagaland (Burling 2007). Furthermore, unlike Cape Verde and the Bahamas, in which creole languages are widely seen positively as well, the use of Nagamese across Nagaland is actively expanding, and the language is increasingly supported in educational, political, religious, and healthcare settings (Bhattacharjya 1994). This pattern is replicated across many other creole languages in ex-colonial linguistic spaces. This combination of dominant internally positive language attitudes and active expansion can be seen in Malaysia, in the case of English-derived Manglish and Malay-derived Baba Melay; Papua New Guinea, in English-derived Tok Pisin; and the Philippines, in Spanish-derived Chavacano (Leo and David 2023; Hamzah et al. 2019; Wakizaka 2009; Lim-Ramos et al. 2020).

Conclusions

Creole languages that have arisen out of slavery-induced language contact among African diasporic groups have tendencies towards simultaneous perceptions of having low prestige (negative) and demonstrating in-group identity (positive). This contrasts with creole languages that have arisen in different circumstances, both in Africa and elsewhere, which have a higher tendency to display positive internal language attitudes despite shared colonial histories. This distinction suggests that the history of slavery maintains an enduring impact on the perception of creole languages in the African diaspora. Atlantic Creole languages in particular have been defined, both internally and externally, in relation to the languages used by the enslaving class that subjugated their speakers; the explicit violence and extreme economic stratification entailed by this history has both enforced negative language attitudes (as a top-down means of continued subjugation) and creoles as symbols of national identity (as a means of solidarity against this violence). Nevertheless, it can be seen that internal perception of the use of creole languages is highly varied and complex across the world, and few generalizations of any given creole can be made without dissecting the particular sociolinguistic dynamics of the circumstances in which it is used.

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