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# THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN HAITI<sup>1</sup>

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A review of currently available research on the language situation in Haiti shows that problems which need study or re-examination may be grouped in four main areas: (1) descriptive studies of Creole and French in Haiti; (2) the sociolinguistic relationship between Creole and French in Haiti; (3) variation within Creole and its consequence for several problems of language engineering; and (4) the genesis of Creole.

(1) With regard to existing descriptions of Creole French, the principal needs are for lexicographic studies and grammars that attempt to interrelate superficially different forms and constructions. For instance, a more coherent description of Creole syntax results if reduplicative constructions of the type *Sé manjé l ap manjé*, 'He's really eating' or *Aa bèl li bèl*, 'Is she ever beautiful' are treated as special cases of embedding.

(2) The most striking feature of the relationship between French and Creole in Haiti is the diglossia which characterizes the speech of the elite (Stewart 1963; Valdman 1968). Typically, educated, diglossic Haitians will shift from French to Creole in the middle of a sentence, and these shifts are signals of subtle shifts of roles and attitudes between interlocutors. Creole is the repository of folk culture and the outsider who does not know Creole will be denied entry to many aspects of Haiti's culture. Thus in Haiti full participation in the total life of the community requires knowledge of the vernacular as well as knowledge of and literacy in the official language. On the other hand, the majority of Haitians are monolingual speakers of Creole and are totally excluded from participation in official matters, for these are carried out in French.

(3) Haitian Creole exhibits considerable variation. In addition to geographically determined dialect variation, there is considerable variation in the form of lexical items due to borrowing from French on the part of semi-literate urban (chiefly Port-au-Prince) speakers of Creole. Together with numerous lexical items, these speakers borrow cliché phrases and isolated syntactical constructions as well as, perhaps, phonological features. For instance, the vowel system of urban Creole contains front rounded vowels /y/, /ø/, and /œ/. However, these vowels are also found in some rural varieties of Creole and it would be safest to assume that apparent loans from French have a double source: the French spoken by the elite and conservative rural dialects. The important fact is that features which monolingual Creole speakers attribute to French enjoy considerable prestige and should be adopted in the elaboration of a normalized Creole usage which would be employed, for example, in literacy programs. Early literacy workers, unaware of the prestige factor in language variation, adopted a rural innovating norm rather than an urban or a conservative rural norm. This no doubt has contributed to the resistance against the creation of a suitable writing system for Creole on the part of the Haitian elite and reduced the motivation for the acquisition of literacy on the part of the illiterate masses (Hall 1953; Pressoir 1947).

(4) While it is clear that African languages have contributed considerably to the development of Creole, perhaps through the intermediary of an Afro-

Portuguese pidgin transported to the New World by African slaves and European slave traders, the contribution of French to the grammatical structure of Creole should not be underrated. Features which superficially resemble those found in West African languages are found in North American French dialects and can be shown to be derived from French. For instance the post-position of determiners (Creole *ti moun-mouen*) is generated by a set of rules which also yield popular French *un ami à moi*.

Another fact which has not been given sufficient importance by creolists is that Creole served as a means of communication among segments of the white population of the West Indian island colonies. Still today one finds in Saint-Bart two white groups each speaking Creole French dialects and the only monolingual speakers of Creole in Reunion island, off the east coast of Africa, are poor whites living in the island's highlands (Deltel 1967). The hypothesis that Creole was born of the contact between a 'maximalized' overseas northern French, used in French ports serving the colonies and in the colonies themselves, and an Afro-Portuguese pidgin is well worth serious consideration.

#### NOTES

1 Valdman (1969).

2 The concluding quotation of this article, although attributed to Bloomfield, actually is from the Introduction to Part VII of Hymes (ed.), *Language in culture and society* (New York, Harper and Row, 1964), in which Bloomfield's paper is reprinted.

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