The History of Saint Lucian Creole and Views of French Creole Today
By: Argrow “Kit” Evans

Introduction

Years ago I served as a Community Development Worker for the United States Peace Corps on the island of St. Kitts and also trained in Saint Lucia. During this time it was interesting to observe how language impacted culture. On each island there was a form of Patois/Creole spoken. In St. Kitts there was an English dialect called Kittitian Creole, which is of great difference to the spoken Standard English. In St. Lucia there was also a spoken dialect, called French Creole/Patois. In both cultures each language was spoken during daily interaction within the communities I worked in. However, after living in the community for some time, I noticed how there was sometimes a negative connotation connected to Kittitian Creole and French Creole by native speakers in the community. In schools and often outside of school the language was referred to as “ungrammatical” or “bad English”. Hearing this made me curious about the history of the dialect on the islands, how the language was developed, and how spoken Creole is viewed in their society today. For this paper it is my goal to explore specifically, the history of Saint Lucian French Creole, how the language came to be and how the use of French Creole is viewed at present.

History of French Creole in St. Lucia

Between the years 1664 and 1803 the French and British fought over the island of St. Lucia because of commercial interest clashes. Though the island’s power holders were changed many times, the French became the major settlers (Carrington, 1984, p. 2). Slaves were brought from Africa in order to work in the sugar-producing economy and worked for over 2 centuries in St. Lucia. After the abolishment of slavery in 1794, a
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greater part of the population became freed African slaves who did not use French or English as their language. The language spoken is now called Creole or Patois (Carrington, 1984, p. 3). In Carrington, H.H. Breen, an 1844 English resident of St. Lucia, describe the language as follows:

“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 features consists in the suppression of the letter ‘r’ in almost every other 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 is almost entirely superseded the use of the beautiful French language even in some of the highest circles of colonial society” (Carrington, 1942, p. 3).

Breen defines the details of what the French Creole language encompasses, however, he embraces all negative connotations associated with the language and its people. Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge the value of this language for French Creole speaking slaves in the past, and Creole speaking St. Lucians of the present. Africans were brought from their countries in Africa by Europeans to St. Lucia. Many African’s spoke different native tongues themselves. The colonizers and slave masters spoke English and French. In order to survive and communicate with each other as slaves, and with white slave masters, slaves formed their own language. This fact acknowledges their determination to live life and communicate even through harsh circumstances. It is worth it to recognize that today St. Lucians still have a language passed down from the strength of their African ancestors.
“The chief reason why the Creole or Creole-influenced language of West Indian children has not been used in education lies in the deep seated community attitudes to Creole. In the community at large, Creole language has generally been identified historically with slavery and in more recent times with very low social status and lack of education. This feeling about Creole exists in the minds of its speakers, most of whom would attempt, if they can, to modify their speech in the direction of Standard English in the presence of an English speaker, and would feel insulted if a stranger who is obviously non-Creole-speaking attempts to converse with them in Creole. In this context, even the most Creole-speaking of parents tend to regard Standard English as the language of social mobility, and would tend to think that anyone who suggests the use of Creole or Creole-influenced language in education as advocating the socioeconomic repression of the masses” (Craig, 1976, p. 101).

In St. Lucia the above quote is the reality for some French Creole speaking citizens. While observing families and schools within St. Lucia it was evident to see this reality. In the home, French Creole was highly spoken. However, in markets, around native English speakers, and especially in school, Standard English was the norm.

English is the official language of St. Lucia; however, French Creole is also used. Geographically, the language of Creole is spoken all over the island, and there are no areas where it is not spoken. Restricted Creole is not delimited in geographical terms (Carrington, 1997, p.4). Yet, a recent quote from a native St. Lucian spoke of the significance of Standard English in the urban and more developed areas of St. Lucia. She stated, “St. Lucia, especially our capital Castries, is growing. We even have a local college here. For those children born in Castries many are not taught French Creole, but only Standard English. With this generation of young people, the more educated a person is, the more French Creole is forgotten”.

Some St. Lucians see Creole as a substandard way of speaking. It is often seen as a symbol of low societal and educational development. The worth of French Creole is
limited to, “intimate private conversations, and narration of traditional stories, jokes, proverbs and curses”. “Between those who are familiar with one another Creole is readily spoken since the change of offending is limited, whereas persons outside one’s immediate sphere of acquaintances are more usually addressed in English” (Carrington, 1984, p. 7). It is seen as poorly spoken French, a form of speaking with no sentence structure. Parents usually are adamant that their children talk Standard English. Those families who embrace English in and outside of the home, often completely prohibit the use of Creole in the home, at least until the children are practically adults (Carrington, 1984, p.5).

School teachers and other educators have also embraced this opposition towards French Creole. In Carrington, one researcher noted, speaking of schools in St. Lucia and Dominica: “There, Patois is forbidden, and several postulated are pumped into the scholars’ head: ‘Patois is not a language, Patois cannot be written, Patois has no grammar, it is only broken French’, to speak Patois displays inferiority and so forth” (Carrington, 1984, p. 5). Today, the same view of Creole being “inferior” to English is still prominent amongst teachers and educators (Robertson, I. & Simmons-McDonald, 2006, p. 119).

Although stigma against the use of Creole in school is the reality, the importance of incorporating both Creole and English into education has been a goal for some. Carrington notes:

“In 1966, the Education Department of St. Lucia began to have a less virulent attitude towards Creole and although asserting that the co-existence of English and Creole posed a problem, the authorities recognized that the solution did not lie in the prohibition of the use of Creole. In fact many teachers confided that the use of Creole for purposes of explanation in the infant stages was highly rewarding. This changing attitude is partnered by a feeling among a small but
increasing number of persons that Creole represents the soul of the St. Lucian people and should be preserved as carefully as possible” (Carrington, 1984, p. 6).

There is a movement of individuals who have and are working on the use of incorporating Creole language into the instruction of the English language in schools. In 1986, Devonish presented research for “standardizing Creole languages” and using this to instruct school English. His research focused on policy in general terms and the benefit of native Creole speakers. In 1999, Craig used a vernacular program to develop literacy. The goal was to preserve French Creole and culture and also strengthen language awareness. Literacy would also be developed through the grouping of established principals from already established approaches to teaching language, such as the methods of cognitive and communicative approaches, as well as audio-lingual methods (Robertson, I. & Simmons-McDonald, 2006, p. 119).

Further research supports the need to combine Creole and English language learning. Studies suggest that language gaining isn’t language acquisition and that an individual can only learn to read in a language he or she comprehends. Tauboret-Keller suggests, “In the acquisition of literacy, as well as in all learning, it makes sense to go from the known (the spoken language) to the unknown (its written representation)” (Tabouret-Keller et al., 1997).

Acknowledging French Creole as a Language

Though French Creole as a language is sometimes seen as being connected to individuals with lower social status, the language is viewed in many ways as the soul of St. Lucian people. In reality Creole is a language in itself. Linguists have realized that
Creole is a language and not incorrect editions of other languages. Holmes speaks about Creole as its own language. He states:

“Their words were largely taken from an older language during a period of linguistics crisis to fill an urgent need for communication. This makes them appear as deformed versions of that older language. But if one examines them as linguistic systems, analyzing the structure of their phonology, syntax, and word formation, it becomes evident that these systems are quite different from those of the language from which they drew their base language. Their systems are so different, in fact, that they can hardly be considered as even dialects of their base language. They are new languages, shaped by many of the same linguistics forces that shaped English and other “proper” languages” (Holms, 1995, p.1).

Creole is the bank of tradition of the people in St. Lucia. “It is the vehicle for proverbs; for handing down traditional popular customs, ceremonies, and rituals”. Many people continue to live by traditional Creole techniques. This way of living is creative, expressive, and spontaneous (Lowenthal D & Comitas L., 1973, p. 211).

While in a Creole speaking home, it is the language of the St. Lucian people that connects that cultural uniqueness of the family. French Creole is also used as a means of communication for the older and younger generations of St. Lucians. Natives who are older did not receive the opportunity to learn English in grade school due to the needs of working in the field of agriculture at a young age.

Though there are negative stereotypes connected to the language, today French Creole and Creole culture are celebrated in many ways. St. Lucia has Flower and Creole festivals, which celebrate Creole language and culture. The feast of St. Rose de Lima is held in August and the Feast of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque is celebrated in October. The festivals include: parades, a royal court, religious services, dancing and feasting. Traditionally, these two rival Flower Societies come together and begin what is locally referred to as séances, which are weekly meetings. “At these meetings, there is one
female singer of each Society who has the task of composing Belairs (tunes which are a blend of African and French expressions) which are sung in French Creole. The choruses of these songs are usually sung in unison to the accompaniment of saxophones, violins, the banjo, or any [traditional] musical instrument.” (Discover St. Lucia, 2007). There is also a community parade where members of the Flower Societies dress up as Kings and Queens, prince and princesses, doctors, nurses, policemen and soldiers.

The entire month of October celebrates the language and traditions of Creole. It is recognized as Creole Heritage Month and includes Jounen Kwéyòl Entenasyonnal.

**Celebrating Creole through Song**

In St. Lucia it is refreshing to see the cultural traditions of natives celebrated through song and dance. For children traditional games are played in Creole, highlighting continuous traditions amongst the St. Lucian people. For adults, traditional French Creole, calypso, soca, and reggae add to the Creole cultural musical uniqueness.

Below is an example of a song sung in French Creole; it serves as a model of the beauty within traditional Creole language:

“Mèci bon Dié,
Gadé tout ça la natu poté pou nous.
Mèci bon Dié,
Gadé couman la mizè fini pou nous.
La pli tombé,
Mai poussé,
Toute ti moune qui grand gout pralé mangé.
An nous dansé Congo,
An nous dansé Pétro,
Papa bon Diè di nan ciel la mizè fini pou nous” (LetsSingIt, 2008).

English Translation:
“Thank you, God,
Look at all that nature has brought us.
Thank you, God,
Look how misery has ended for us.
The rain has fallen,
The corn has grown,
All the children that were hungry are going to eat.
Let's dance the Congo,
Let's dance the Petro,
God said in Heaven
That misery has ended for us” (LetsSingIt, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Creole is the language of the people of St. Lucia. Though it is rooted in a history connected to slavery and inferiority it still incorporates a tradition that is distinct to the natives of St. Lucia. For some embracing and using the language represents a level of social inferiority and lack of education. And for others French Creole serves as a means of cultural expression, familiarity, pride, and tradition. The acknowledgement of French Creole as a language serves as a means for celebration. Creole celebrations and song are outlets that enforce the positive reality that the language of Creole is the soul of St. Lucian people. And this truth will continue for years to come.

**References**


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