



# Demystifying Creolization, Decolonizing Creole Studies



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**SAYAN:** Within the perspective of creolization of language in Haiti since the very colonial times, the diglossic hierarchy of so called “high language” vs. “low language” seems problematic. Especially the so called “high language” is constituted and propagated within the official, governmental domains but the so called “low language” is the common one which is spoken amongst the majority population in their daily communication. This functional separation of languages must be playing a pivotal role in preventing individual grievances from the population to come to the forefront. So how do you think this problem could be addressed from the roots?

**DEGRAFF:** That’s a very important question. In fact, it’s important in two ways – firstly, in terms of linguistics, especially

in Creole studies, and secondly, in terms of social justice and human rights, especially in terms of Creole speakers' education or, rather, *mis*-education.

But there are certain facts and assumptions that I first wish to clarify before answering your interesting question. You have used two terms that are very commonly used in studies of *diglossia*: "high language" and "low language." But these terms beg for so many caveats in the particular context of Haiti. Please bear with me. This is going to be a long answer.

The papers written by Ferguson on *diglossia* during the late 1950s used examples from the Arab world, Switzerland and Greece, alongside Haiti. But, as my linguist friend and colleague, Professor Yves Dejean, pointed out, a long time ago in the linguistics journal *Word*, Haiti does not at all fit Ferguson's hypothesis.

In defining *diglossia*, Ferguson posited the co-existence of a "high language" and a "low language" that are competing with each other within different domains of usage. There was this key assumption that the "high language" and the "low language" are *dialects* of the same language. For instance, in the case of Arabic, the "high language" is the official Arabic dialect which is usually spoken and, mostly, written in the religious domain, whereas the "low language" is a colloquial Arabic dialect mostly spoken in everyday vernacular usage.

But in the case of Haiti this particular concept of *diglossia* doesn't work. This is what I wanted to clarify before I answer your question about "high" and "low" language varieties in Haiti. I would like to sketch three reasons why this concept may not be applicable to Haiti.

First of all, linguistically the concept "dialect" can be very vague, and even ill defined. Recall Uriel Weinreich's saying "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy." From that "army and navy" perspective, the notion "dialect" is strictly geo-political. In fact, others have claimed that even the very notion of "language" (in the case of, say, English, French, Spanish, etc.) is itself geo-political, especially when it comes to nation-states with imperialistic ambitions. In any case, if the criteria of what counts as "dialect" were to rely on mutual intelligibility and common grammatical constructions, common vocabularies and common phonological features (or lack thereof), then Haitian Creole is unlikely to count as a dialect of French. From that perspective, it would seem linguistically problematic to consider French as the "high variety" of a language of which Haitian Creole is the "low variety." Indeed there's a robust set of structural, lexical and phonological differences between French and Haitian Creole, notwithstanding systematic correspondences across the two languages in cognates, grammar, lexica, sound patterns, etc. These robust differences between French and Haitian Creole suggest that we're dealing with two different languages, each with its own distinct grammar, lexicon, phonology, etc.

Secondly, if we look into Haitian jurisprudence, Article 5 of our 1987 Constitution clearly casts French and Haitian Creole (known as “Kreyòl” in Haiti) as two distinct languages, and the Constitution identifies both as co-official. So the “high language”/“low language” terminology doesn’t make sense vis-à-vis the legal status of Kreyòl and French as they both are officially recognized as two distinct entities. Indeed Haitian law clearly states that Kreyòl is one of Haiti’s two official languages, and it identifies Kreyòl as our *national* language—the one language that bonds all of us Haitians together as one single speech community.

Thirdly, I wish to point out that if we take a comprehensive look into the use of Kreyòl in Haiti, it may well qualify, at least to some extent, as a “high language.” Yes, it’s been 30 years already since Kreyòl started to be used for official purposes. Even though the language is still excluded in way too many official contexts, the 1987 Constitution was written in both French and Kreyòl, and Kreyòl is used in a few documents published by government ministries and State institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture. The Haitian Creole Academy (*Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen*), a State institution of which I’m a founding member, publishes all of its official documents in Kreyòl. Recently, a colleague (Kevin Scannell) conducted an interesting study on Kreyòl vs. French vs. Spanish vs. English in the use of social media like Twitter in Haiti. Guess what? Kreyòl was ranked as the most used language in tweets originating from

Haiti. We looked at two regions – the capital, Port-au-Prince, and the second largest town, Cap-Haitien. In both regions, Kreyòl was the hands-down “winner.”

Now with all these caveats made explicit, I would like to return to your question about diglossia. No, it is not possible to posit any substantial evidence-based differentiation of French as the *consistently* “high language” and Kreyòl as the *consistently* “low language” in all the domains of use identified by Ferguson. With respect to social media to a certain extent, I would take Kreyòl as the “high language” of Internet communication, as it is more widely used among Haitian social-media users than both English and French. Moreover I have many colleagues who have been publishing scientific articles, textbooks, etc., all in Kreyòl. I myself have published many more articles and materials in Kreyòl than in French — though the bulk of my production is in English, given my affiliation with a US-based institution.

This discussion should help adjust the assumptions that underlie your question about *diglossia* and about the existence of a “high language” and a “low language.” These concepts don’t apply straightforwardly to the Haitian case. Moreover, as the one language that unites Haiti’s entire population across all major geographic areas, social classes, etc., Kreyòl is also the one language that can foster genuine nation-building.

Yet your question reminds us that the French language, alongside French (and, more generally, European) culture in

Haiti is still viewed as the most prestigious language. One can even say that French is *de facto* the sole official language in most academic and governmental spheres of Haitian society, in daily and blatant violation of both the spirit and letter of the 1987 Constitution. Moreover, if we look into formal education and formal administration in Haiti, it is clear that French as *written* language is much preferred over Kreyòl. In their writings, most administrators and educators, though they all speak Kreyòl, not only refuse to use it, but some of them have even declared to me that writing in Kreyòl gives them “headaches”! There’s even a former president and one of Haiti’s foremost intellectual (late History Professor Leslie Manigat) who has gone so far to declare, in a public speech at Haiti’s State University, that Kreyòl is an “infirmity” Imagine: our national language now viewed as a nation-wide handicap!!! This widespread attitude among intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals in Haiti has adverse effects on the quality of education, on the openness and transparency of the government and on respect of human rights.

We must stress the human-rights issue because in a nation whose population mostly communicates in Kreyòl in everyday life, any exclusion of Kreyòl in government, in justice or in education amounts to a brutal violation of human rights. This exclusion causes even worse effects vis-à-vis schoolchildren. This is one point that I wish to stress as it directly addresses your question about grievances from the population. Once they enter the school system, Kreyòl-speaking children are handicapped

by the use of French, a handicap that threatens their lifelong academic prospects as readers and learners. So, in Haiti, the real “handicap” for Haiti (or “infirmity,” in Leslie Manigat’s term) is, not Kreyòl, but the exclusionary use of French.

A child needs to be taught to read and write in their native language. The science of how we learn to read is quite well understood. As they start the learning process, the beginning reader establishes connections between, on the one hand, the sounds and the words of the native language as represented in their minds, and, on the other hand, the written symbols that represent these words on the page. Such connections cannot be reliably established when the child starts the learning-to-read process in a foreign language — because the symbols on the page do not match the sounds and words in the child’s mind. This is a pedagogically pathological situation where children are taught to read in a language that they don’t speak. That is, they are being taught what they don’t know (how to read) in a language that they don’t know! So they can only *superficially* connect the symbols on the page to some approximation of the sounds of that foreign language, without comprehending what they are reading.

In Haiti, I’ve seen children from primary schools to high schools who can pronounce or recite texts, but when they are asked comprehension questions about the texts they’ve just “read,” they cannot answer. Such bad practice has blocked generations after generations of Haitian children from getting

anywhere near academic success. Because of the exclusion of their native language in the classroom, the school system condemns these children to academic failures and to lifelong second-class citizenship. These problems urgently need to be addressed, and they are being addressed. So there's some hope.

Yes, there are educators and activists who have long recognized this problem, and who have been promoting the use of Kreyòl as one necessary, though not sufficient, tool to improve education in Haiti. One case I am very familiar with is a community school in the remote village of Matènwa, located on the island of La Gonave. The community school there was founded twenty years ago by two activists – Abner Sauveur, a Haitian educator and community leader, and Chris Low, a Chinese-American school teacher who lives part time in Boston, part time in Matènwa. The medium of education in the school is Kreyòl, and the school has been documenting ground-breaking learning gains among its students. In Matènwa, the children produce their own books in Kreyòl. This way, they become actively engaged in learning to read and write in Kreyòl. And the results are spectacular. The kids are learning much better than other kids in the same area who learn to read and write in French. The children in Matènwa not only flourish in learning science and mathematics, but they also manage to learn French. The Matènwa model is now being expanded to other schools in the area. Most recently, the school was awarded an award for innovative pedagogy by Haiti's Ministry of National Education.



This makes me believe that things are changing for the better, with the problem getting addressed from the roots—in communities like Matènwa, from the earliest grades onward.

As it turns out, the success of the Matènwa School is quite banal from a *scientific* perspective. Indeed, research in education, linguistics and language acquisition in the past few decades has provided robust evidence that the use of the native language helps build competencies in academic disciplines while also creating the foundations that enable the students to learn second languages.

From a *social* standpoint, something interesting has happened in the history of this school in Matènwa. When the school started in the 1990s the parents didn't want their children to enroll there. Why? Because the medium of instruction was Kreyòl. Given the prestige long given to French in Haiti, plus the use of French in maintaining a brutal linguistic apartheid, it's not surprising that many Matènwa parents believed, and some still believe, that French is a better language to use for teaching. But now the school has become so successful that it cannot keep up with the increasing demand for enrollment. Now, most parents in the area want their children to enroll in that school as they now believe that it is important for the children to learn in *Kreyòl* so they can succeed. The school's success has been the best argument to show that Kreyòl does improve teaching and learning, and that Kreyòl is not the "infirmity" that many say it is. On the contrary! So, that's the hope for me: once

Kreyòl is given a fair chance as a medium of instruction, the results speak for themselves!

The Matènwa case thus illustrates how the issue should be addressed from the roots, and we can go forward on that front through good scientific research and with reliable measures of academic success. I myself have published a research article about this school's success. The title of the article is: "Mother Tongue Books in Haiti: The power of Kreyòl in learning how to read and reading to learn."<sup>7</sup>

Given the history of Kreyòl in Haiti, with French having been used for so long as a language barrier for the benefit of the élites, there's also need for political will. Thinkers like Jean Price-Mars, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and many others have carefully studied how the oppressor's domination tools work best when these tools have become internalized in the minds of the oppressed. I think it's Steven Biko who described it best when he said that the most powerful weapon of the oppressor is the *mind* of the oppressed: when the oppressed is made to believe, from a tender age, in the inherent superiority of the oppressor, the oppressor's job is done. And this is exactly what's been happening in Haiti for ages. In generations after generations, Haitian political and intellectual leaders, educators and parents have convinced society at large, including children as soon as they start their

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7 <https://www.facebook.com/michel.degraff/posts/10155196871093872>

first days at school, that Kreyòl is not a worthy language for education and that they should all learn *in* French, even if they don't speak French. If the children are made to believe that French is their only possible route to success, then they condemn themselves to failure, keeping in mind that, in most communities in Haiti, Kreyòl is the only fluent language that the kids are immersed in. So there's really not any conducive environment for the general population to all become fluent in French. This is what my late colleague Professor Yves Dejean has called "an upside-down school system in an upside-down country" (in Kreyòl, "yon lekòl tèt anba nan yon peyi tèt anba" which is the title of one of his books). Yves Dejean himself, back in 1987, founded one of the very first primary schools teaching kids in their native Kreyòl. He called the school *Sant Twa Ti Flè* ("Three Little Flowers School").

So we do need strong political and public-relations campaigns in order to dislodge this imposed superiority of French over Kreyòl and discard the myth that only French can function as a valid medium of instruction in Haiti. The good news is that such campaigns are already in place and have started producing results. The communities in and around the Matènwa and Sant Twa Ti Flè schools are two such instances where the campaign has succeeded, at least to some extent – though their success is somewhat limited in scope, keeping in mind that there are still too few other schools that follow the mother-tongue model. The MIT-Haiti Initiative, which I direct

(<http://haiti.mit.edu>), is also helping change attitudes around the use of Kreyòl as language of instruction.<sup>8</sup> Such success has produced the momentum necessary to find the support and resources to enlarge the corps of teachers who believe in the power of Kreyòl and who can help other schools as well.

**SAYAN:** As a continuation to the last question, prominent efforts are being made by scholars like you to promote the Kreyòl spoken by the entire nation over the traditionally prestigious French spoken by a small minority. But can you throw some light upon the history of local attitudes about the domination of French over Haitian Creole?

**DEGRAFF:** I mentioned a bit of that in my previous answer already. But let me expand and go a bit deeper, starting with some history.

This domination of French over Kreyòl (and of other European languages over Creole and Indigenous vernaculars in the Americas, Africa, Asia, etc.) is the result of colonial, then neo-colonial, socio-economic and intellectual domination and brainwashing over centuries.

Take Haiti and other neo-colonies or “post-colonies” if you will. For centuries in Haiti, and not only Haiti, but also in most of the Caribbean, in Hawai’i and, more generally, in large swaths of the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia, indoctrination

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into language hierarchies for the sustenance of political power of the few over the many has happened very systematically, especially among communities that have fallen victims of colonization and slavery of various kinds, including what Bob Marley called “mental slavery” and what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o called “colonization of the mind.”

So I am talking, not only about slavery via physical control through chains and coerced labor, but also about a more subtle form of slavery which identifies the European language as the superior language whose speakers are empowered to rule over speakers of languages such as the Creole languages of the Caribbean, the local vernacular languages of the Americas, Africa, Hindi and Urdu in the subcontinent, and so on. This domination through language has happened all over the world. In fact we can find quite a few documents that explicitly illustrate this sort of domination.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century there was an eminent Spanish linguist named Antonio de Nebrija who wrote to Queen Isabella of Spain in 1492 to advocate for the role of the Spanish language in establishing a successful Spanish empire in the New World. He offered the Queen his treatise on Spanish grammar as an “instrument of empire.” The goal, of course, was to establish Spanish as a superior language that would help rule the “savages” of the conquered “New World.” The objective was to convince the so called “uncivilized” and “barbaric” people of the New World that, in order to become human, they had

to adopt the Spanish language and forsake their own native languages. This brainwashing would then turn colonization into a state of mind—into “mental slavery”! So the European colonial enterprise was not only about colonizing the land, but it was also about colonizing the minds of the natives—that is, their cultures, their languages, their identities.

A similar colonization process affected India as well. The objective of Lord Macaulay’s “minutes” about the Indian school system in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to impose English as the language of “civilization” in India. Macaulay wanted to create a small group of middle-class natives who would be “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” In this manner these Indians, or “interpreters” as Macaulay called them, were trained to convince the Hindi speakers and speakers of other Indian languages that in order to become fully human (on a par with the British colonizers!) they had to discard their “inferior” native tongues and adopt the prestigious English.

I hope these examples, from Latin America to India, can help us understand how the age-old stigmas that inhibit the use of our native vernacular languages whether it is Kreyòl in Haiti, Fongbe in Benin, Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria, Hindi in India, Urdu in Pakistan, Bengali in Bangladesh, Nunggubuyu in Australia etc., are part and parcel of Europe’s colonial “civilizing mission,” not for the benefit of the local populations in these colonies or former colonies, but for the benefit of

Europe's own mercantilist interests.

The need to create healthy and positive attitudes toward our native vernacular or ancestral languages is a global issue. The claim that French is superior to Kreyòl or that English is superior to Hindi or Sanskrit makes no scientific sense. No scientific linguistic principle can justify Macaulay's claim that English is superior to Indian languages such as Sanskrit. After all, recall that all Indo-European languages, including English, ultimately *descend* from Sanskrit! Similarly there's no scientific basis for the centuries-old stigmas against the local vernacular languages in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Australia, etc. The stigmas that are still harming these languages and their speakers are not intrinsically a linguistic problem, but they constitute a political problem, a social problem and also a problem for education and pedagogy worldwide.

These problems cannot be solved by linguists and educators alone. They cannot be solved by scholars like you and me working in relative isolation, though we do have key roles to play as researchers and educators engaged in this anti-colonial project. The long-term sustainable solution has to be developed, to some degree, by the people at the top like policy makers in powerful international organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank, by people in government and in the courts, by people in administration and business, by the people doing the hiring, by the people who have the necessary capital and political power for creating new

businesses, new policies, etc. It is at this point where the anti-colonial challenge becomes most difficult because it concerns social, political and economic justice, and there are people at the top who benefit from the current unjust state of affairs where those who mostly function in local vernacular languages, like the monolingual Kreyòl speakers of Haiti, are brutally excluded from those centers where power and knowledge are created and transmitted.

Consider this conundrum: If you yourself benefit from a system where certain languages have little or no socio-economic or political value, a system where you yourself, by accident of birth, enjoy a high economic and political status because of your native fluency in English, French or Spanish, then why would you ever want to change such a system which has been so profitable to you, to your family, to your clan and to your social class? This is not easy. The decolonial turn that you and I are looking for may depend *as well*, at least in part, on scholars like us who strive to deeply understand these language-and-power issues. Perhaps scholars like us do need to gather enough social conscience and courage to challenge and disrupt the status quo toward the kind of change that will open up opportunities for social justice. In my own work with the MIT-Haiti Initiative where I collaborate with a large group of colleagues in the U.S. and in Haiti, we



are carefully documenting how Kreyòl in Haiti is the optimal linguistic tool to open up access to quality education for all.<sup>9</sup>

As it turns out, Kreyòl in Haiti is also the optimal tool for the learning of international languages such as French, English, Spanish, etc. If the French want to continue to impose their language in Haiti, then I think it would be much better, even for such pro-French objectives, if Haitians could build strong academic foundations in their native Kreyòl. By learning *in* Kreyòl as our mother tongue, it would become much easier for this vast majority of Haitians who speak only Kreyòl to, then, learn French as a second language. This is especially true when it comes to learning to read and write, which is generally more successful when it happens in the native language, for the reasons that I already described and that are well understood by linguists and educators. It is, therefore, through Kreyòl that Haitians can learn French and other academic subjects with any chance for all to succeed. Indeed, it is through Kreyòl that teachers can teach better and that students can learn better, and it is through Kreyòl that they can successfully learn other languages like French, English, Spanish, etc.

In the MIT-Haiti Initiative, we have already worked with some 250 teachers in workshops on active learning in Physics, Biology, Bio-Chemistry and Mathematics, and they have realized the value of teaching and learning in Kreyòl. To date, the results

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9 <https://www.facebook.com/michel.degraff/posts/10156586592578872>

of that Initiative show that Kreyòl is indispensable for quality education that can, in principle, be accessible to all in Haiti.<sup>10</sup> The success of this Initiative makes me believe that it is possible to change attitudes toward Kreyòl in Haiti. I also believe that such paradigm shift is applicable to other communities with stigmatized vernacular languages.

In a nutshell, there's growing acceptance worldwide of the scientific fact that native or home languages are the best tools for education and also for learning other languages. So the history of attitudes toward vernacular languages such as my native Kreyòl is one that I feel optimistic about.

**SAYAN:** So this leads me to the next questions, analyzing Haitian Creole within the paradigm of decoloniality: how optimistic are you that these efforts to promote the vernacular language of the nation as the medium of instruction will succeed, and what do you see as the main obstacles to such promotion?

**DEGRAFF:** These two are key questions.

How optimistic am I? The bottom-line is that if I wasn't optimistic I could not do any work related to Haiti. And your questions suggest that you already understand why it is so difficult. Sometimes it's so difficult that it's even "funny," in a strange kind of way, especially when I give talks about my work on Kreyòl and, then, I face the most bizarre reactions from some

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10 <https://www.facebook.com/michel.degraff/posts/10154650062468872>

of my Haitian compatriots. Recently I was giving a talk in Washington D.C. The audience included prominent Haitians and influential businessmen both from Haiti and from the Haitian diaspora in the US. One of them stood up and asked: ‘How do we know that Haitian Creole is a real language?’ Well, in light of all the science available to us, Haitian Creole is a “real language” beyond any doubt, and it functions perfectly as a symbolic system to code and share information. Yet, that question, which stems from such a negative mindset about Kreyòl, is one that I’ve heard so many times, even from prominent Kreyòl-speaking scholars with PhDs, even from Haitian scholars who profess to love Kreyòl!

Then, your questions about “main obstacles” could get me quickly depressed but I won’t let these “obstacles” stand in my way. I don’t want to give up. I want to stay optimistic because I am sure that my and my colleagues’ efforts will yield positive future results—they are *already* yielding positive results, as in the Matènwa and Sant Twa Ti Flè schools, and as in the MIT-Haiti Initiative which I am so deeply engaged in, day in and day out. Please see the research articles that I’ve mentioned—one of which is published in the premiere journal of our field, the journal *Language*. Yes, our efforts are yielding positive results *already*. And I can say this with near certainty as I look both at the history of Haiti and at the history of the world.

I would ask those skeptics who militate against Kreyòl and against Amerindian, African and Asian languages to look

at the history of French, the history of English, the history of Spanish... In the past, French and other colonial languages had a social status quite similar to that of Kreyòl today. There was a time when Greek and Latin were the dominant and prestigious scholarly languages in Europe. Back then, French and Italian and Spanish, etc., were viewed as vernacular (that is, vulgar) languages. When René Descartes wrote his book *Discourse on the Method* in French in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was an outcry among his contemporaries in Europe's intellectual circles. Descartes' fellow scientists asked whether he had lost his mind. They asked: Why was Descartes writing Science in a vulgar language (that is, in French!) and not in Latin? His answer was beautiful, and this is the answer which I keep quoting because Descartes was such a deep thinker and a deeply revolutionary thinker for his time. He wrote:

*"... if I write in French, which is the language of my country, rather than Latin, which is that of my teachers, it is because I hope that those who use only their unalloyed natural reason will be better judges of my opinions than those who swear only by the books of the ancients. And as for those who combine good sense with application, whom alone I wish to have as my judges, I am sure they will not be so partial to Latin that they will refuse to grasp my arguments because I express them in the vernacular ..."*

Yes, I think that's a beautiful answer.

What keeps me optimistic is that the changes that are taking place vis-à-vis vernacular languages in the Caribbean, the Americas, Africa, Asia, Australia, etc., are of the very same sort as those that were initiated by Descartes vis-à-vis French in the 17<sup>th</sup> century already. Now French is an established language of government, law, science, literature, etc., and no one would question the status of French as a “real” language. Yet, there was a time not that long ago, a time that’s memorialized in Descartes’ writing, when he had to convince his own French-speaking compatriots that French could indeed function as a language of science and philosophy.

One more reason for optimism is the 1987 Constitution of Haiti which, on paper though not in practice yet, makes Kreyòl co-official with French. By law, Kreyòl is the language that is supposed to give the entire population access to information and education. The constitution that existed prior to 1987 didn’t recognize this fact about Kreyòl and about the population’s right to information and education through our national language. In fact, as a child I myself was forbidden to use Kreyòl in school, and I was punished when caught using Kreyòl. The same was true at home. But now the school that I attended (a prestigious private French Catholic school called “Institution Saint-Louis de Gonzague”) somewhat understands the importance of Kreyòl: the school now includes Kreyòl courses in its curriculum—though Kreyòl is still not used as language of instruction in other disciplines. Even the official state exams include an evaluation of

students' knowledge of written Kreyòl, though exams for other subjects are most often given in French only. Yet this exam for evaluating the students' written Kreyòl is a major step forward.

In a related vein, the government of Jamaica, which I last visited in August 2015, has taken important steps to boost the social and pedagogical status of Jamaican Creole (known as “Patwa” in Jamaica). There is a whole academic unit at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, that is publishing books in Patwa and promoting the use of the language in research, education, literature and, more generally, in Jamaican society, from administration to the media. My linguist colleague Prof. Hubert Devonish is the one spearheading these efforts and they too are getting much needed attention there. In fact, the Ministry of Education in Jamaica is now interested in incorporating Jamaican Creole in teacher training and in literacy projects.

Similar efforts are taking place in much of the Caribbean and in Africa as well. In Ghana, it was recently decided that they would dispense of English as the primary language of instruction, and, instead, use local Ghanaian languages for education. This is extraordinary news because Ghana became independent from Britain in the 60s, much later than Haiti which gained its independence from the French in 1803. So from the 1960s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Ghana has succeeded in moving forward — from being a neo-colonial state with English as the primary language of education to being a (quasi?) post-colonial state that values

its local languages for education. This is another major step forward, and this step forward has happened within less than half a century.

If we look into the history of French, we find that it took a relatively long time for it to become the formal language of instruction. So another fact that keeps me optimistic is what Martin Luther King said about the path of justice through time: “The arc of the moral universe is long. But it bends toward justice.” And also, if you look today into the education-related documents being produced by the United Nations, the World Bank, UNICEF, etc., then you will find that they clearly encourage the use of local languages for education and for the promotion of human rights—including children’s rights, of course. All these documents specifically mention local languages as indispensable to human rights and to universal access to quality education. It’s noteworthy that this mention of “local languages” includes not only spoken languages, but also the sign languages of deaf communities. So these documents do give cause for optimism, even when the UN, UNICEF and other international agencies, along with local governments, sometimes violate these human-rights dictates about the use of native languages.<sup>11</sup>

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**SAYAN:** Coming to the final question, I am very curious to know what, besides your extensive contributions, are the other Creole projects that are taking place around the globe? Because there is always an utter need to conjure a global platform of action toward the same goal.

**DEGRAFF:** I've mentioned the case of Jamaica a few times already. What you will find in most Creole-speaking communities in the Caribbean, alongside other communities with stigmatized local vernaculars like in Latin America and Africa, is that there are often passionate groups of linguists, educators and activists working together to promote these vernaculars.

Just a few days back I was talking to one of my colleagues from Curaçao, Myriam Lavache, who is promoting the use of Kreyòl there. She shared with me a video of her teaching Kreyòl in Curaçao. And Curaçao is an island where the local Creole language (Papiamentu) has already made major headways toward general acceptance as language of education and administration. One colleague linguist there, Marta Dijkhoff, was Minister of Education and made a big push for Papiamentu in the school systems there. Another colleague, late Frank Martinus Arion, along with his wife Trudi Martinus-Guda, founded a school that is now teaching in Papiamentu all the way up to the secondary-school level.

We see similar valiant efforts all over the world. A few weeks ago, two educators from Mauritius, Nicholas Natchoo and



Bruno Jean-François, visited me at MIT and shared beautiful books in Mauritian Creole which they are promoting as literacy materials in early grades in Mauritius. We can observe similar efforts throughout Africa, in the Pacific and in Australia as well. Hawai'i is another beautiful example where educators and linguists have worked together to successfully revitalize Hawaiian, a formerly moribund language that was endangered by the genocidal threat of US imperialism in the course of more than one century.

So this movement to promote local vernacular languages has already turned into a global movement. In fact in many of post-colonial communities in the world, Indigenous languages are being promoted by scholars, educators, activists, artists, etc.— in spite of the fact that there are still other linguists and scholars who are still victims or perpetrators of neo-colonialism and who continue to put these languages down in their own writings and actions. Their efforts are often disguised as linguistic “theory” or “research” but if you look under the hood (so to speak) you'll find in their writings intellectual traces that hark all the way back to the writings of the most racist colonial scholars.<sup>12</sup>

In Haiti too, educators and policy makers have made great strides in promoting Kreyòl. The Haitian Creole Academy (*Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen*) was mandated by the 1987 Constitution

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12 <https://www.facebook.com/michel.degraff/posts/10156075143548872>

and it has provided us with an important platform to promote Kreyòl as a tool for better education, better administration and better justice. And it's interesting to note that the Haitian Creole Academy has forged alliances with global institutions like UNESCO. This is very important because UNESCO had some major projects already back in the 1950s to document the importance of Haitian Creole in education. They came up with highly helpful data that clearly demonstrated the importance of Haitian Creole for opening access to quality education for all in Haiti.

These developments via international institutions such as UNESCO showing the importance of vernacular languages give me hope that we are on a good path, not only for Haiti, but globally. Recent data suggest that 40 percent of the world population speak languages that are not recognized in their school system. Can you imagine? It is almost half of the world's population that speaks languages that are excluded from the school system. And there are more than 2 billion people who are being mis-educated in a foreign language. That's a huge number. Thus, a major segment of the global population is still deprived of access to quality education and to any opportunity toward economic equity.

To go from the global to the particular, we can look, again, at Haiti to understand how tragic it is for Haiti to have suffered for so long through this brutal history of apartheid through language and education. You may know that Haiti

has recently suffered yet another disaster – this time, it was Hurricane Matthew. If there was sufficient education in Haiti, the hurricane-related mortality rates wouldn't have been so high. Compare, for example, Cuba and Haiti. In Cuba, the hurricane went through and it did not cause one single death. In Haiti the same hurricane went through, and more than one thousand died. Why? One reason is because Cuba has an educated population with well-organized institutions. In Haiti, most of the population remains mis-educated, and the institutions are, by and large, dysfunctional, and suffer from high levels of corruption, at all levels – some of this corruption is hard to fight because these institutions function in a language (French) that most Haitians do not really understand, including some of the higher ups at these institutions.

So these are some of the global issues that can be resolved through the use of native languages as tools for greater access to quality education and to social justice.

## **Footnotes**

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