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# Creole Speakers and Education

**An examination of the language situation of West Indian students in the French and the English schools of Montreal**

*Among the children of Montreal are many Blacks whose parents are West Indian and Haitian and who speak one or other of the creole languages. The history of development of these languages has led them at the same time to become fully viable as first languages in their own right, and yet sufficiently close to the European languages of the respective colonisers to be mistaken for merely debased versions of them. Domingue and Laferrière show the complexities arising from the various social and political aspirations of the parties involved, including parents, and how they threaten to continue indefinitely to deny to these children, especially those who are assumed to be French-speaking, the same access to education available to their differently-born contemporaries.*

In the last ten years, black immigrant students from the West Indies have arrived in large numbers in Montreal schools. Teachers, administrators, and community leaders have shown concern because these students have numerous educational problems: they are often in the lowest educational tracks and have usually poor academic results. Different types of explanation have been put forward to explain these failures. Traditional educators have found "technical reasons", stressing that the cultural and social characteristics of the West Indian students were preventing them from succeeding in Canadian schools. (This is the general view found in publications such as *TESL Talk*, 1976.) A few radical critics, following the ideas of French sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) and Baudelot and Establet (1971), have stressed that the "technical" explanations were only ways of justifying the real function of the school, that is, the legitimation and reproduction of the existing social structure and the minimal training of unqualified cheap labour. We will not take part in this debate, but will attempt to examine a "technical" school problem, that of the linguistic difficulties of West Indian immigrant students, and to show that it cannot be dissociated from the real or perceived stratification systems of both Quebec and the West Indies. We will describe briefly the black immigrant population of Montreal and the linguistic charac-

teristics of the creole languages they speak when they arrive. We will then examine some of the social meanings attributed to these creoles by French and English Canadian teachers and by the West Indians themselves in order to understand the shortcomings of a purely linguistic approach to the language problems of West Indian school children in the French and English schools of Quebec.

The bulk of the black immigration in Quebec has been very recent. Although there have been black people in Canada and especially in Quebec since the early days of colonisation, Blacks were few until the last decade. This old black community was made up of two different social groups. One group consisted of lower class or lower middle class people who were English speaking and came from other parts of Canada (Ontario and Nova Scotia), the U.S., or the West Indies — very often through the U.S. (Winks, 1971). These people have been described by Israel (1928) and Potter (1949). They were concentrated in lower class areas in Montreal, around Atwater Avenue and Saint Antoine Street. We suspect that their educational problems were mainly the results of poverty rather than of cultural differences, and that their achievement in school was not better, but not worse, than that of the lower class French or English Canadians who lived in the same neighbourhood. Another group of Blacks was nearly “invisible”, though their skin colour should have designated them easily: it was made up of professionals and semi-professionals, very few in numbers, who lived in different middle class areas of the city. Because of their high educational level and of their middle class status, these people encountered fewer problems of racism and discrimination than did their lower class counterparts.

Since the 1960's West Indian immigrants have been coming to Canada and settling in the main urban industrial areas, Toronto and Montreal. The bulk of the immigration is thus very recent (Winks, 1969; Laferrière, 1975; Dejean, 1978). This immigration is due to a “push out” factor, the depressed economy of the West Indies, and, for Haiti, the repressive nature of the political regime. Canada is often chosen because of its economic expansion and because of the closing of traditional immigration countries for West Indians — Great Britain and the U.S. for anglophones, and Cuba and the Dominican Republic for the temporary work migrations of the poor Haitian peasants. At the same time Canadian immigration laws, which had always been strongly discriminatory against non-white persons, were modified with the introduction of a new sponsorship and point system, and opened the country to both West Indian professionals and West Indian unskilled labour, workers and domestic personnel particularly (Hawkins, 1972).

Census figures which could be useful in evaluating the black and West Indian population in Montreal are very hard to utilise and to trust, for categories overlap and are not exhaustive: a person, for instance, could give as ethnicity *Black* (*Negro* in the census) but also *West Indian*, *American*, *Canadian*, or *British*, according to his or her place of birth

or citizenship. The 1971 census gives a figure of 34,445 Blacks and 28,025 West Indians for Canada, including 5225 Blacks and 5030 West Indians for Quebec. For place of birth of people residing in Canada, one finds 68,090 persons born in the West Indies, including 15,215 residing in Quebec (computed from Statistics Canada 1973 and 1974). Even if all Blacks in Quebec were not of West Indian origin, or if all persons of West Indian origin were not black, one sees that using census information only makes an estimate of the black population of Montreal very difficult. Moreover, these figures are now seven years old. If one looks at the statistics of the Quebec Ministry of Immigration, one can calculate that, between 1971 and 1975, 8303 citizens of Haiti, 1543 of Trinidad and Tobago, 1423 of Jamaica, and 189 of Guyana (from 1973 only), that is a total of 11,458 persons, were admitted as legal immigrants in Quebec (computed from Ministère de l'Immigration du Québec, 1975). Even if this total includes people who have gone back to the West Indies or have left for other Canadian provinces, one must add to it the children born in Canada of West Indian parents, and the illegal immigrants. These figures show that West Indian immigration in Quebec is both important and recent. Community leaders give an estimate of 65,000 black anglophones (personal communication from the Negro Community Center) and 20,000 black francophones, most of them from Haiti (personal communication from the Communauté Chrétienne des Haitiens de Montréal).<sup>1</sup>

Many of the newcomers are people of rural origins, who have often been living in the suburbs of a big Caribbean metropolis. They have little education, and their absence of skills (or the refusal by Canadian employers to recognise their skills) puts them in unskilled occupations. Moreover, they speak a language which is different from the local versions of "standard" Canadian French or English spoken by the Quebecers. This fact is not often recognised, however, as these immigrants are generally classified as anglophones or francophones by the authorities. It is likely that part of the difficulties encountered in school by young West Indians is caused both by their linguistic background and by the failure of the school system to recognise the specificity of that background. Understanding what this background is and how it can interfere with the linguistic expression expected in a Canadian classroom is consequently important, if one wants to give a fair chance to these particular students (Alleyne, 1976).

## The creole languages

The languages spoken as mother tongues by the majority of West Indians have been the object, in the last two decades, of a great deal of research (Decamp, 1971). The major contribution of linguists in this area has been to show that these languages are in fact quite different from the European tongues to which they can be retraced (Todd, 1976). These languages, born out of the circumstances created by the slave trade, are generally called *creoles*, and more specifically *French-based*, *English-based*, *Portuguese-based* or other *creoles*. Though there is little agree-

ment on how exactly these creoles came into being, most linguists believe that they first originated as *pidgins*, that is mixed systems of communication with restricted social functions and reduced grammatical categories. For those creoles which are of interest here, one of the components in the "mixing" has been a West European language. These systems stayed mostly reduced as long as they were only languages of secondary importance for their speakers. However, as time went by, the native languages of the Africans lost some of their importance in the vast shuffling of populations which was taking place. As a consequence, the pidgins' role expanded, and they became primary languages, that is mother tongues, for the new generations. Mother tongues, characteristically, require much more varied means of expression than temporary makeshift languages, so the pidgins (or pidgin: some scholars believe that an original Portuguese-based pidgin is the source of all other Atlantic<sup>2</sup> pidgins and creoles) expanded both in communicative function and in linguistic capabilities, drawing new material from the native tongues of the communities and from the language of the master — the dominant French, English, Portuguese, etc...<sup>3</sup> This process of *creolisation* (sometimes called *nativisation*) can be described as a second language learning process under extremely adverse conditions. The first stage in creolisation seems to be characterised by the replacement of most of the lexical items of the native tongue by words of the dominant language, the grammatical devices retaining mainly their African characteristics. The second stage in the process involves further learning of the target language to the extent that the resulting code may become very similar to the dominant system.

Different levels of creolisation have produced creoles which are more or less close to the dominant language. In situations where the dominant language speakers were removed from the creole-speaking population, further learning of the target language could not be performed and the creole crystallised somewhere between the first and second stages; this is the case of Haitian Creole, which is said to be as different from French as French is from Latin (Dejean, 1975). At the opposite end of the scale, one finds languages which have almost lost their creole character, like the Black English Vernacular spoken in the U.S., and to a lesser extent, Barbadian or Trinidad English.<sup>4</sup> In between these two poles, other systems show varied degrees of influence of the dominant language; this is the case of the Jamaican Creole/English continuum where the social class and the geographical set-up are the determinants of the variety of language used. Such a situation seems to be appearing in Haiti where, as a new development, an urban creole,<sup>5</sup> closer to French than the traditional creole, is in the making. In all cases, however, it is important to note that creoles, whether or not they resemble the dominant language, are full-fledged languages equipped equally to transmit human expression.

It is evident, from the discussion above, that the children whose production is wholly or partly creole (and these are the majority) will meet with specific linguistic difficulties in the schools, in addition to other cultural problems. Such a plight is shared by other immigrant children who speak neither French nor English. The problems of children who

speak an altogether different language are fairly easy to understand: they have to learn a completely new set of norms and may do so by attending different types of second-language programs. For the Creole-speaking children, however, the situation is complicated by the perceptions and attitudes of the different parties involved — the teachers, the parents, and the children themselves. As was mentioned above, school personnel assume, often wrongly, that Creole-speaking children are speakers of the dominant language. This opinion is reinforced by the fact that the children frequently *understand* the dominant language (they have been exposed to it in varying degrees) but are quite unable to use it for their own expression. Thus they are not given any specific help. For instance, one could find only 80 Haitians among the 1200 children who had gone through the “classes d'accueil” for immigrants of the Commission des Ecoles Catholiques de Montréal.<sup>6</sup> A census, conducted a year later, found nearly 1200 Haitian students in the schools of the Commission, and it is very likely that these children had a very poor knowledge of French. Attendance in “classes d'accueil” would most probably have helped them to learn French faster and better, though it is possible that the techniques used to teach a second language need to be adjusted for the specific teaching of a dominant language to Creole speakers (interferences and wrong interferences may be more numerous or of a different kind).

Some misconceptions about creoles also enter into consideration: a common view is that creoles are “bad talks”, *patois*, languages “without grammar”, inferior means of communication. These opinions probably stem from the structure of the creoles themselves. As they look similar in some ways to the dominant languages, while diverging significantly from them, they appear to the unprepared hearer to reflect an incapacity for speaking correctly. What the hearer does not understand is that the Creole speaker is not using French or English defectively, but is using a different system. Such attitudes are also linked to the fact that creoles were the vernaculars of lower status groups and of slaves, and that today they are often spoken by non-white members of Third World societies, the stigma attached to these oppressed societies being transferred to their languages (Bebel-Gisler, 1976).

To change these attitudes, it would be useful to give teachers an overview of what creoles are, using for instance Valdman (1968) or Alleyne (1975), so that they understand that creoles are not bad or randomly erroneous ways of talking. This endeavour would also enrich their linguistic backgrounds and their understanding of languages. It would lead them to respect the different cultural characteristics of their students. Introduction of West Indian literature in the classrooms could also help teachers reconsider the hegemony of the written “high” literature prevalent in our educational system; the study of oral literature would give other cultures a fair representation in the educational curriculum.

### **The politics of educating creole-speaking children**

These reforms, though desirable, may however encounter the opposition of both Canadian educators and of West Indian parents.

Educators in Canada, as in many other societies in search of national unity,<sup>7</sup> have very often favoured one dominant language. In Montreal, English schools have stressed the integration of immigrants to the English milieu up to very recently, leaving to voluntary ethnic associations the teaching of the language and culture of origin; although there are *de facto* Protestant "Greek" or "Jewish", or Catholic "Italian" schools (that is to say, schools where one of these ethnic groups predominates), very little has been done to recognise the specificities of these populations at the public school level. Only a few elements of culture have been introduced in the curriculum, or a few measures have been taken to better the links with the parents (creation of a Greek Liaison Officer, of a Black Liaison Officer, use of parents of different ethnic groups as para-professionals in some Protestant schools; *de facto* placing of teachers of the same ethnic origin for the Catholic Italian schools). The recognition of the stigmatised languages of stigmatised social groups presupposes an important change in the attitudes of educators and school officials.

According to the new language legislation in Quebec (Bill 101), all children entering school in the province must go to French schools, unless their parents or one of their siblings received or is receiving elementary education in English in Quebec, or unless they are only temporary residents in the province. But the subject of *which* French is to be taught is itself being debated, though the new bill stresses the importance of "good" French, that is French close to an international version (which is itself close to what the Parisian bourgeoisie speaks), and has taken a stand against the proponents of some other variety of French.<sup>8</sup> This legislation, the aim of which is to save the French language in Quebec, may also be interpreted as instituting the hegemony of a middle class type of French. Haitian Creole would have to acquire the status of a completely foreign language to become acceptable in this perspective.

The opposition of educators would be supplemented by a certain opposition from the Creole speakers themselves. In the anglophone West Indies, standard English has been imposed through the schools, and many persons understand it. Most of West Indian literature is in standard written English, and people expect standard English to be taught; teachers and parents are expected to beat their children who are caught, in school or other official setting, speaking "bad" English, a vernacular which is despised as proof of rural origin or of lower class status. West Indian community leaders in Montreal, when they suggested the institution of a separate "Black Institute of Primary Education", stressed that one of the functions of such a school would be, besides the teaching of discipline, race pride, and academic matters at a high level, the teaching of standard English (Laferrière, 1978).

Among Haitians, the problem is more complex and much more debated. According to Dejean (1975), only 2% of the Haitian population speaks French fluently, and an estimated 98% have a minimal knowledge, or no knowledge at all, of French. Although Dejean's figures may seem a bit extreme (some Haitians estimate that 10% of the population under-

stand French, but many of these people do not speak it), and although the recent emergence of the urban version of creole may bridge the gap between Creole and French, one still has to consider Haiti as a bilingual nation, where the official language, which is also the language of the upper class, is different from the language of the population as a whole. Dejean (1975), advocates for this reason the development of educational programs in Creole, in order to educate the masses faster and better than can be done with programs which require first the learning of French. These views have been supported by Haitians and American educators in Haiti, but have met with a strong opposition from the French cultural services and from the Haitian elite, who stress the links of Haiti with the francophone world community. Haitian intellectuals are now divided, some promoting Creole as the real national language, attempting to find simple ways to write it (Dejean, 1974) and promoting Creole literature, as does, for instance, the review *Sel*, published by Haitians in New York, or as did the Montreal review and publishing house *Nouvelle Optique*. In Haiti itself, a vigorous debate was carried out in reviews such as *Conjonctions*, the French cultural services publication, which usually opposes the promotion of Creole except as a tool for social development and the learning of French, and in intellectual magazines. In the Spring of 1977, *Le Petit Samedi Soir*, a weekly, had articles and letters dealing with the controversy and with the notion of "créolitude", the Haitian counterpart of Senghor's "négritude".

For Haitians in Montreal the problem is slightly different, since they will have to study and work in French. Most will not want, moreover, to admit that their knowledge of French is below par, since this would mean an admission of lower class status. The Haitian upper class, usually lighter in skin colour, has traditionally had control over sources of prestige and income, the speaking of French as well as literacy being one of the means of control. The dictatorship of Duvalier has created a new black middle class, which obtained economic rewards because of its support to the regime, and the children of which are now learning French, getting an education, and marrying lighter-skinned mates from the old mulatto class.<sup>9</sup> For many Haitians in Montreal, the learning of French is one way of moving up the social ladder. Many parents, for instance, will object to their children speaking Creole, for they want them to learn French to function more easily in Quebec and to gain a certain prestige if or when they return to Haiti. The same parents prefer to ignore the Creole reality, and will probably disregard any attempts made by educators to help their children if it means classifying them as non-French speakers.

The recognition of Creole as a definite entity could serve as a rallying banner assuring the cohesion of the Haitian community. However, according to many members of that community, the promotion of Creole in order to develop feelings of national identity is not necessary, because most Haitians have strong feelings of group identity; they see themselves as Haitians first, always considering that their stay abroad is temporary for economic, educational, or political reasons. Here again, Creole has no

specific role to play. Much the same can be said about the anglophone counterpart of the situation. On all counts, French or English emerges then as the overwhelming choice of the community.

Such parental attitudes toward the dominant languages coupled with the perceptions of the school personnel will most probably prevent the introduction of radical approaches to the education of Creole-speaking children. As we have seen, the solution to the low achievement level of these students cannot be related to uniquely *linguistic* considerations. It involves political decisions as to what the characteristics and the future of the minorities in Quebec are, and what the desires of these groups are. Language and schooling policies cannot, once more, be dissociated from moral and political issues.

#### NOTES

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1. M. Paul Dejean, one of the leaders of the Communauté Chrétienne des Haïtiens de Montréal, will soon publish a book on Haitian immigration to Montreal. Cf. Paul Dejean, 1978.
2. The term *Atlantic* used here also includes the Indian Ocean Creoles spoken in Mauritius and the Seychelles.
3. This statement is an obvious oversimplification. For more details, see Decamp, 1971, and Todd, 1976.
4. It should be noted that, even in cases like Black English Vernacular, which is quite similar to standard American English, learning difficulties seem to stem from the few differences still in existence.
5. Mass media and education, where they are available, are mostly responsible for the constant restructuring toward the target language.
6. Figures given by the Service des Classes d'Accueil and by Mr. Viateur Ravary, Director of Research at the C.E.C.M.
7. This has also been the case in the U.S. in the 19th century, or in France under the Kings (Ordonnance Villers-Cotteret), the Revolution, and at the end of the 19th century, when a religious educational system imposed French upon the local languages and dialects.
8. Some writers have advocated "joual", a variety of French rather heavily influenced by English and spoken by lower class people of Montreal, while others advocate other varieties from other regions with less English influence.
9. The Haitian stratification system is based on elements of skin colour, income, education, and language, the last two being interdependent.

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