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**Creole genesis and the
acquisition of grammar**

The case of Haitian creole

CLAIRE LEFEBVRE

CREOLE GENESIS AND THE
ACQUISITION OF GRAMMAR
THE CASE OF HAITIAN CREOLE

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Creole genesis and the acquisition of grammar
The case of Haitian creole

This study focuses on the cognitive processes involved in creole genesis – relexification, reanalysis and dialect levelling – processes which the author demonstrates play a significant role in language genesis and change in general. Dr Lefebvre argues that the creators of pidgins/creoles use the parametric values of their native languages in establishing those of the language that they are creating and the semantic principles of their own grammar in concatenating morphemes and words in the new language. The theory is documented on the basis of a uniquely detailed comparison of Haitian creole with its contributing French and West African languages. Summarising more than twenty years of funded research, the author examines the input of adult, as opposed to child, speakers and resolves the problems in the three main approaches, universalist, superstratist and substratist, which have been central to the recent debate on creole development.

Claire Lefebvre is professor of linguistics at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

**To Ken Hale and to Mathieu,
both magicians in their own way**

To an extent unparalleled in the study of languages anywhere else in the world, African language classification has been beset by persistent hypotheses of language mixture, intermediate or transitional languages, substrata, pervasive external influence far in excess of what is usually recognised as normal, and innovative exuberance unmatched in recorded language history. Perhaps the most dramatic – and preposterous – example of speculation in linguistic theory is provided by Sir Harry Johnston (1919 p. 27): ‘A great jumble of events, and lo! – new languages spring suddenly into existence.’ (Welmers 1973: 2)

Sapere aude!
[Dare to think by yourself.]
Immanuel Kant

Preface

This book focusses on the cognitive processes involved in creole genesis: relexification, reanalysis, dialect levelling and parameter setting. The role of these processes in creole genesis is documented on the basis of a detailed comparison of Haitian creole with two of its major source languages: French, its main lexifier language, and Fongbe, one of its West African substratum languages. The findings reported on in this book are based on twenty years of research that I have done on the languages involved, alone or in collaboration with colleagues and students, through various projects carried out at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

From 1976 to 1980, with Lynn Drapeau, I conducted a project on popular French (financed by FCAR, FIR-UQAM and OLF). In parallel (1975–7), I started a small project on the syntax of Haitian creole (financed by FIR-UQAM) with some Haitian students and Hilda Koopman, who was then a visiting student in our department, writing an M.A. thesis on Haitian. This project led to the publication with Karoma Press of *Syntaxe de l'haïtien* (1982), written in collaboration with Hilda Koopman, Hélène Magloire-Holly and Nanie Piou. Building on the results of this project, I began comparing the lexicon and grammar of Haitian creole with the lexicons and grammars of two of its source languages: French and Fongbe. This work was done in the framework of the project *Le créole haïtien: langues africaines relexifiées?* that I directed together with Jonathan Kaye from 1985 to 1989 (financed by FCAR). This project also involved the participation of several students: Anne-Marie Brousseau, Joëlle Brillon, Réjean Canac-Marquis, Rose-Marie Déchaine, Sandra Filipovich and Jean-Robert Cadely. The research continued with the project *The morphology and the syntax of Haitian* from 1986 to 1988 (financed by SSHRCC), in which Diane Massam and, later, John Lumsden participated as professional researchers; some of the graduate students from the first project also took part, as well as some new students who joined the team such as Rollande Gilles, Marie-Denyse Sterlin and Danielle Dumais. The results of these projects enabled me to formulate a long-term project to test the hypothesis that the mental processes of relexification and reanalysis play a major role in creole genesis.

I obtained a major grant from SSHRCC (and complementary grants from FIR-UQAM) for a project designed to test this hypothesis in detail, based on the case study of Haitian creole. This project, *La genèse du créole haïtien: un cas particulier d'investigation sur la forme de la grammaire universelle*, which I

directed with the collaboration of John Lumsden, lasted five years (1989–94). It focussed significant professional and material resources on the lexicon and grammar of Haitian creole and its source languages. Besides the two major researchers, the team included several other researchers: Elizabeth Ritter, Paul Law, Kinyalolo Kasangati, Alain Kihm (from the CNRS, France), John Singler (from New York University) and Anne-Marie Brousseau; research technicians Danielle Dumais, Monique Poulin, Andrée Bélanger and Anne-Marie Benoit; our secretary Lorraine Rainville; several graduate students, most of whom are native speakers of one of the languages under study: Anne-Marie Brousseau, Aimé Avolonto, Maxime Da Cruz, Joseph Sauveur Joseph, Hérold Mimy, Juvénal Ndayiragije, Michel Platt and Efoe Wallace; an autonomous researcher, France Martineau; visiting graduate students: Tonjes Veenstra (University of Amsterdam) and Chris Collins (MIT); a series of visiting scholars: Elizabeth Cowper (University of Toronto), Kenneth Hale (MIT), Richard Larson (MIT) and Gillian Sankoff (University of Pennsylvania); and various collaborators: Albert Bienvenu Akoha (Centre béninois des langues étrangères), Houunkpati Capo (Labo Gbè, Université nationale du Bénin), Pierre Vernet (Université d'État d'Haïti) and Marc Laurent Hazoumé (CENALA, Université nationale du Bénin). Finally, some thirty native speakers of Haitian and Fongbe were involved with the project as informants. Complementary grants in collaboration with John Lumsden entitled *Les propriétés lexicales, leur représentation dans le lexique et leur projection dans la syntaxe* (FCAR 1990–2) and *L'organisation des lexiques et des entrées lexicales* (FCAR 1993–5) also contributed to the realisation of this research. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that sufficient resources have been gathered together to make a detailed and extensive comparison of the grammar and lexicon of a creole language with those of its superstratum and substratum sources. Furthermore, this project has included original research to document the historical situation at the time of the creation of Haitian creole. Finally, it should be noted that recent developments in linguistic theory (e.g. in the theory of parametric variation, functional category theory, lexical semantic theory, the results of the MIT Lexicon Project, etc.) have provided us with precise tools for the comparative analyses.

The aim of this book is threefold. First, I present the theory of creole genesis formulated around the major processes involved and the methodology developed for testing it. Second, I present an extensive comparison of the properties of the lexicon and the syntax of Haitian with those of its contributing languages. Third, I evaluate the hypothesis on the basis of the data presented in this book. The data and analyses presented in this book draw not only on my own work on the languages involved, but also on data and analyses available in the literature and research produced by the members of the various teams involved in the projects mentioned above. Putting it all together in this book and filling the holes required a lot of additional work. Danielle Dumais assisted me in compiling the enormous amount of Haitian and Fongbe data. Olivier Tardif assisted me in compiling seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French data. Andrée Bélanger formatted the

manuscript and Zofia Laubitz copy-edited it. This work was financed by a grant from SSHRCC (1994–7). Finally, work referred to as Brousseau (1995a and b) was financed in part by a grant to John Lumsden and in part by an SSHRCC grant to me. The usual disclaimer is in order here: none of the people involved in the above-mentioned projects are to be held responsible for the views advocated in this book, nor for the particular analyses I propose to account for the data. This book was written between April 1995 and February 1997.

I would like to thank my university and my department for supporting this research and the funding agencies for making it possible. Patricia Dunn and Elaine Isabel from SSHRCC gave me invaluable support to begin and complete this research. I would like to thank my collaborators mentioned above for their work, for fruitful discussions and for the good times that we had together. I am grateful to my colleagues of the local and international community for their numerous questions, comments and even objections related to this research; their reactions contributed to making the claims and analyses more precise. Many thanks to Anne-Marie Brousseau, Mark Durie, Ken Hale, Rich Larson, John Lumsden and Lisa Travis for most insightful discussions on several theoretical issues raised in the course of the research. Special thanks to Jean-Robert Placide for sharing with me his knowledge of the Haitian lexicon and grammar over all these years. I am indebted to the following people for their comments on drafts which became part of some of the chapters in this book: Marthe Faribault, Yves-Charles Morin, Elizabeth Ritter, Pierrette Thibault, Lydia White and Raffaella Zanuttini.

Julie Auger, Anne-Marie Brousseau, Bernard Comrie, Christine Jourdan, Lisa Travis and an anonymous reader read a first draft of this manuscript; their questions and comments contributed a great deal to its final form. I owe special thanks to Andrée Bélanger, Anne-Marie Brousseau and Danielle Dumais for their friendship, support and encouragement in the final phase of this research. Bernard Comrie gave me invaluable support during the time I was working on this manuscript. I do not know how to thank Ken Hale for supporting this research throughout. I would also like to express my gratitude to Gillian Sankoff and Paul Kay, who taught me how to work. Finally, last but not least, I would like to thank my friends, my parents, my family and my son Mathieu. They were there all the time.

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative	INFL	inflection
ADV	adverb	INS	markers of insistence
AG	agentive affix	INT	interrogative
AGENT	agent	IRR	irrealis
AN	animate	LO(C)	locative
ANT	anterior	LOG	logophoric pronoun
AP	plural article	MÊME	French emphatic MÊME
ASP	aspect	MO	mood
ASS	assertive	Neg	negative marker
ATT	attributive affix	NEG	negation marker
AUX	auxiliary	NOM	nominaliser
BODY	BODY-part reflexives	Num	number
CASE	Case	OBV	obviative
CL	clitic	OP	operator
COMP	complementiser	PART	partitive
DE+LES	partitive+plural	P(A)ST	past
	determiner	PL	plural
DEF-FUT	definite future	POSS	possessive
DEIC	deictic	POST	postposition
DEM	demonstrative	PREP	preposition
Det	determiner (clausal)	PRO	covert pronominal
DET	determiner (head of DP)	PROG	progressive
DM	discourse marker	PROSP	prospective
EC	Eastern Cushitic	PROX	proximate
EMPH	emphatic	Q	question marker
FC	functional category	REF/RFL	reflexive
FOC	focus	REL	relative marker
FP	focal pronoun	RES	resumptive
FEM	feminine	SC	Southern Cushitic
FUT	future	SELF	-SELF anaphor
FUT-POSSIB	future-possibility	SEM	semantic properties
GEN	genitive	SRP	subject-referring pronoun
HAB	habitual	SUB	subjunctive
IMP	imperfective	SURP	surprise
INAN	inanimate	TO	topic marker
IND-FUT	indefinite future	VAL	validator

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