

“Creole Month Celebration: Jean-Jacques Dessalines’Month”

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Haitians are celebrating the Creole Day, October 28, as it is customary in the Creole speaking world. Some of us, Creole People, even go further to have the whole month of October as “Creole Month”. At the same time, many of us (Haitians) forget about the great black revolutionary leader (who took the lead after Toussaint’s capture by the French) and who was brutally assassinated on October 17, 1806. Dessalines, father of the First Black Republic (Haiti), sacrificed his life for all the children of Haiti.

He tried his very best to unite black and mulatto officers to fight Napoleon’s most powerful army marshaled against the Haitian Revolution (“*Bataille de Vertières*” - Nov. 18, 1803) and won that war which not only liberated all the former slaves but also created a homeland for them. What must not be forgotten also was the immense influence that black slaves liberating themselves had on millions of unfree and semi-free blacks throughout the Western Hemisphere at that time. Dessalines never had a chance to attend any school, but he was one of Haiti’s greatest leaders because he had such a great vision for the country so that all of us, Haitians, could live proudly on the land of the braves.

Thinking about a subject related to Kreyol to write about for this year’s celebration of Creole Month, Dessalines all of a sudden came to my mind and so with great pleasure and homage, I dedicate both my poem, “It’s Kreyol I speak” (1) and this article to him. As the Great Felix Morisseau

Leroy, renown “dean of Kreyol literature”, puts it in a title of one of his poems dedicated to that super hero, “Mèsi Papa Dessalines” (Thank you, Father Dessalines). Thank you Father for making me free; thank you for making me proud to speak your native language, the one you spoke with many thousands on the island of “Ayiti” (2), on that beautiful and mountainous land as the natives would have called it thousand of years before the Caribbean Sea had vomited monsters coming from nowhere to claim it their as their land, and brutally killed these first inhabitants.

In the above paragraph, I mention “a subject related to Kreyol” for there are so many that we can talk about if we were to do brain storming. Most Haitians, I would say those who can read and write French and those who have made or who are in the process of making an effort to read Kreyol, don’t have any idea of how much has been published on the Haitian language over the past two hundred years and even better, for more than two hundred years. Here, I mention that number “two hundred”, reminding me of Haiti’s Bicentennial of Independence (1804-2004) and in terms of what our country has contributed to the world linguistically speaking. So, that was one of the key ideas I had in mind when I first embarked on the my tedious and most extensive bibliography research on Haitian Creole (from 1997 -2002) to publish my latest book, *An annotated Bibliography On Haitian Creole: A review of publications from colonial time to 2000* (700 pages, 2003. Educa Vision).

Documents have been published in Haiti since colonial times (3), but it is not easy to find traces of these writings since there has not been an established formal or uniform system to protect them. This stimulated me

to work on this bibliographical research on the Haitian language. Furthermore, Haitians (both in Haiti and in Diaspora) are facing serious challenges dealing with “documentation”. Every single researcher and writer should think of how they can find a solution to this challenge or how they can collaborate to improve the situation.

Looking at the progress made in the Haitian language at the lexical level, it is a remarkable testament to the language and the people. As of now, there have been more than 20 bilingual dictionaries published on the language within the last three decades. It is necessary to have as many types of tools as possible to promote linguistic research in different areas of the rapid developing study of the Haitian Creole (Kreyol). But since documentation has been one of Haiti’s key challenges, many people were unaware of the impressive publishing ventures on our native language. *An annotated bibliography On Haitian Creole...* can also be seen as an inventory of publications, documenting publications covering a wide-range of subject areas as detailed in its Table Of Contents (*A Bibliography Of Periodicals With Publications On Kreyol (268 entries); Agriculture, Flora & Fauna (61 entries); Bibliographies (12 entries); Dictionaries, Glossaries and Related sources (130 entries); Education, Literacy and Teaching materials (334 entries); Folklores, Folk tales & Stories (230 entries); General Subjects (445 entries); Geography & History (63 entries); Grammar (72 entries); Health & Hygiene (52 entries); Historical Linguistics (88 entries); Novels & Short stories (108 entries); Orthography (112 entries); Plays (including related works, 87 entries); Poetry (204 entries); Proverbs (54 entries); Religious Writings (145 entries); Sociolinguistics (116 entries); Teaching materials For Learners Of Kreyol (41 entries); Theoretical linguistics (325*

entries); Theses & Dissertations Related To Kreyol (75 entries); Interviews With Some Haitian Creolists, Journalists & Authors (13 entries); Appendix (Part I, II & III: Part III, Theses & Dissertations related to Haiti, 308 entries).

From there, readers and researchers can have a idea how much has been published on our native language Kreyol but at the same time, Kreyol has not enjoyed the full right that the French language has been enjoying for over two hundred years in our homeland though the 1987 Constitution recognized Kreyol as another official language on par of with French and even beforehand in 1979-80, a decree was published where Kreyol would be used as that primary language during the first four years of primary school. But things in Haiti usually remain on the written level on paper whereas government never really do their jobs. Whether do to an ambiguous linguistic policy or bureaucratic inefficiency, nothing was really taken place in establishing in a systematic and serious way Kreyol in the country] Seychelles (4) would be the perfect model that government in Haiti should at in this sense.

In my research, I have interviewed one of Haiti's key editors, André Vilaire Chery (5), who has also been working with the country's largest publisher (Henri Deschamps) on the use of the Kreyol Language in Haiti. And below is a summary of that interview.

Kreyol in the schools –

Yes, it's mandatory for students of the 3 cycles of “*Ekòl Fondamantal*” (that is, from “first year” to “ninth year”) to learn to read and write Kreyol. This is the theory. However, in reality, there are many situations where that goal might be untenable or possible given the enormous challenges confronted like. Who are the social clients that attend it? Or they of the peasant class or upper mobile class? Is it located in a rural milieu? Etc... Theoretically speaking, Kreyol is “the teaching language” for the first 3 years, with the exception to teach French (for instance, French oral communication is done in French since the first year). Beginning the fourth year, the teaching language is French; that is: all the subjects are being taught in French. They continue to teach Kreyol but as any other subject (“*langue d'apprentissage*”). As I've told you before, it does not happen the same way in all schools. In what they call *grandes écoles* (great schools), the teaching language is French (due to the clients who attend them). They continue with the teaching of Kreyol through the fourth – fifth or sixth year. Why? Because at the end of the sixth year (equivalent to the old “*sètifika*” level), all students with no distinction are going to take the “official exam” entitled *Egzamen d Eta* (the State Exam) in all subject areas, that also include Kreyol. At this time, these schools have one / two hours of teaching Kreyol weekly (practicing the orthography, reading and grammar). Not too much writing to do in Kreyol.

There are many other schools, especially those hosting students from “unprivileged milieus”, and that don't have teachers who are really fluent in French, so “the teaching language” is in Kreyol, from the first to the sixth year. All the subjects are presented in Kreyol by the teacher, and the students study their lessons in French because most of the schools' manuals are written in that language. But I must tell you that there is a great volume of

manuals written in Kreyol also, especially for the primary grades. I got this information from a reliable source. At *Editions Deschamps*, we have a team specializing only in the formation of teachers; they travel around the country to form teachers, whether it's in Port-au-Prince, the provinces or in the rural remote areas.

There is another particular case that we call *cas mixte*. That is the case of the “lekòl nasyonal defavorize” a religious congregation (Catholic) is in charge of it . The clients of these schools are children who are “Kreyol monolinguals”. Teaching is done in Kreyol; the teacher repeats what was just said in French in order to give them some notions of French. There are other schools where from the beginning of the third year, the teaching language is French; it's the students who should try their best to become adapted to it even if they don't have a sufficient mastery of the language.

In what language do teachers speak in the classrooms? —

I've already answered this question. One thing that I can add is that this demarcation is not between private / public schools. Currently in Haiti, almost 85% of the scholarly education is given by the private sector. And when you say “private sector”, it's not something as a bloc. There is what is called les *grandes écoles*, in general, Catholic congregational institutions. There exist les *bonnes petites écoles* (the good small schools); there are those that have 1 or 2 level lower; there is what is called les “*écoles borlettes*”. In the *écoles borlettes*, there also exists a bunch of under-categories, ‘til you find categories of schools that are functioning under an arbor or a tree. So, it's not an opposition private vs. public. It's rather to

know in what category such and such school is located, who are its social clients, what's the qualification level of the teachers, in particular in those that have to deal with the mastery of the French language, etc. As I've told you, there are schools where all the courses are taught in Kreyol, even French courses. A special case: at the university (level), there are many teachers who choose to teach their course in Kreyol.

The Official Creole Orthography –

We follow what's called the “official orthography” in all that it requires. All books or documents published by *Editions Deschamps* respect this orthography to the letter. Maybe only one exception is the issue or “apostrophe” that we don't use after groups such as <*m ap*> (*m'ap*) [I'm in the process of]; <*sa k ap fèt?*> (*sa k'ap fèt?*) [What's going on, what's happening], etc. Naturally, we observe a space to mark the elision or contraction. As of now in Haiti, I believe that most people who are using the official orthography observe that. They don't really use hyphen (-) either (e.g, <*chèz la*> instead of <*chèz-la*>...

Kreyol and the Bernard Educational Reform –

In the beginning of the 80's, the government has been involved in many visible efforts that the government has done. That coincided with the creation of Institut Pedagogique National (IPN) and the launching of the “Bernard Educational Reform”. As it's known, the integration of Kreyol in the schools as teaching language and as subject is one of the weak points of this reform. At this time, many efforts that were taking place in the area of

preparing teacher, working on teaching manuals and other pedagogical / teaching documents and its promotion in the media, etc. IPN started elaborating books (in Kreyol) in many areas (e.g, pre-apprentice, reading, grammar, math, etc). IPN does not exist any longer since ten years. On my side, I don't see a great effort to support Kreyol really in the schools or in the media. Apart from some punctual or symbolic efforts. For example, this year, in the “Baccalaureate Exam”, the student will take their exam in Kreyol in “certain subjects”. It's also true that there are many schools having a course in Kreyol even in the highest secondary grades. In the media, the radios mostly, since 89 “Kreyol is king”, particularly for what is related to Politics (news, free antenna emissions, “free tribune”...). Jean-Claude Bajoux writes in his *Anthologie / Mosochwazi “Le créole devient la langue de la politique, c'est l'une des révélations de l'après-7 février 1986...”* (Kreyol has become the language of Politics, that's one of the revelations post February 7, 1986). That is quite right. It does prevent many Kreyol specialists to launch from time to time “des cris d'alarme” for the way they mistreat this language in the media (particularly on the radio). Pierre Vernet is one of the people who let his voice be heard from time to time against that. According to these people's point of view, it's mostly the “syntax” of the language that is threatened. What happen is that there are no efforts being done by the people who are using the language to respect the principles of the “internal structures” of the language. Since many of these people are also speakers of French, they have a tendency of plugging inpurely and only the French structure on the Kreyol one. It's true that gives sometimes funny things (as a result). For example: “*poze l kesyon pou konnen sa l panse, li reponn...*”. (cf. *le français: Questionne / Interrogé sur le point de savoir ce qu'il en pense, il a repondu...*[ask him / her the question

to know what he / she thinks, he / she answers) or “ *Li frape pa yon polisye* ”, <il a été frappé par un policier> (He was hurt by a policeman).

In short, in relation to “quantity”, Kreyol is certainly present in the media – the radios, but in relation to “quality”, that's something else. This allows me to do another discussion on the issue of “normalization”. In the public administrations, it seems that the official orthography is still not being respected. During a talk that was held 3 or 4 weeks ago in Port-au-Prince at *Université Quisqueya*, there was a Haitian participant who witnessed what I was going to say. In a short text having 6 or 7 lines that he read in a public office, he underlined 20 mistakes. Outside of the government, either in banners for ads, signs, billboard, advertising..., people still don't respect the official orthography. As we can see, despite all the big research that have been carried out on Kreyol and many publications, covering a wide range of subject areas there still remain a lot to be done and I believe the government participation in this case is crucial not only for the diffusion of the language at all levels, but also to use the available resources throughout schools in Haiti, the most important institution where the language really need to be germinated and use it also a tool to for wide literacy campaign to eradicate illiteracy and it would be a plus as the native language of all Haitians.

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FOOTNOTES

(1)

IT'S KREYOL I SPEAK

*Tank you God for making Kreyol my native language
What a beautiful language it is!
I say whatever I think in without scratching my head
No verb to conjugate,
No use of subjunctive
No forcing the lips to pronounce some words like in French
To fool the natives of country
Thank you Father for making me able to think in Kreyol
Thanks for making me born on the land of Haiti
Where this language is born
Language a bunch of great Heroes spoke:
Toussaint,
Dessalines,
Capois Lamort,
(King) Henri Christophe,
Charlemagne Peralte...
They all spoke Kreyol
It was in this language they communicated
To give me freedom
A language that did not come from overseas
One that the colonizers would love to destroy
But I am not gonna swap my language
For others that came from other continents
I am not swapping it for any reason
For those who like to remain in bondage, they'll decide
That's the language I must speak
I must dream in it
It's the one I like the most
It's my blood
Kreyol is my soul
Any Haitian who'd look down on it
Is not a true Creole
Is not a true native of Haiti
That person is rather a puppet of other countries
A puppet that has no homeland to live
One who is always waiting for leftovers
Someone with no dignity,
Someone with no roots.*

(2) AYITI (Ayti). The word Haiti came from the Indian language who were inhabiting the territory in the past. This word means: highlands, and beautiful lands. The Indians were the first inhabitants of Haiti. -- The Spaniards were the first Europeans who lived in Haiti. They seized that land and claimed it as theirs. Christopher Columbus was one of

the first Europeans who set foot in Haiti. Columbus was born in Italy in a city called Genoa. He landed in Haiti on October 5, 1493. Sometimes when reading the history of Haiti, we are told that it was this man who “discovered” Haiti. Today, there are many clarifications needed to be made in what people are writing, specially on issues related to history. -- Columbus landed in Haiti by accident in search of the best routes to India. He got lost and ended up there. Haiti soon became a Spanish colony. Columbus and the other Spanish teams that accompanied him, soon claimed that land for Spain.

(3) COLONIAL TIMES. Here, it refers to the historical periods before Haiti’s Independence (1804).

(4) SEYCHELLES. According to the constitution (as adopted on 8 June 1993), the national languages are: English, Creole and French. Literacy rate: 62% to 80%. “Creole, the mother tongue of 94 percent of the nation in 1990, was adopted as the first official language of the nation in 1981. English is the second language and French the third, all of them officially recognized. The increased emphasis on Creole is designed to facilitate the teaching of reading to primary-level students and to help establish a distinct culture and heritage... More than one-third of Seychellois can use English, and the great majority of younger Seychellois can read English, which is the language of government and commerce. It is the language of the People's Assembly, although speakers may also use Creole or French. The principal journals carry articles in all three languages.” (Source: U.S. Library of Congress (online info.)

(5) ANDRÉ VILAIER CHER. Author of: *Dictionnaire De L'évolution Du Vocabulaire Français En Haïti dans le discours politique, économique et social du 7 février 1986 à nos jours* (Tome I (A-L) & II (M-Z), editor of *Dictionnaire de l'écolier haïtien* and *Le chien comme métaphore en Haïti* (analyse d'un corpus de proverbes et de textes littéraires).