

A champion of Creole

Linguist Michel DeGraff is on a quest to give Haitian Creole its due as a respected language — and to help Haitian schoolchildren learn in their native tongue.

Peter Dizikes, MIT News Office
May 12, 2011

As a child living in Haiti, Michel DeGraff primarily learned to speak and read French. And as an ambitious student, he did so with good reason: French has been the language of the country's educated classes and social elites virtually since Haiti gained independence in 1804, even though the vast majority of its citizens speak only Haitian Creole, a linguistic descendant of French with influences from West and Central African languages.

"When I was growing up, in a middle-class family and in my school, Creole wasn't viewed as a real language," DeGraff says. "It was a given that you could only be successful in French."

Over the years, many observers have disparaged Haitian Creole as a primitive tongue incapable of expressing complex concepts, while linguists have generally asserted that it is descended from a pidgin language. DeGraff emphatically disputes this. The associate professor of linguistics at MIT has spent years presenting evidence that Haitian Creole is just as sophisticated as other languages, publishing papers in journals such as *Language*, *Language in Society*, *Linguistic Anthropology* and *Linguistic Typology*.

"It is clear that Haitian Creole cannot be taken to have evolved via some exceptional processes that would make creolization radically different from 'normal' processes of language change," DeGraff wrote in a 2009 edited volume, *The Languages of Africa and the Diaspora*.

Moreover, he argues that the whole notion of "creole" languages — those deemed a skeletal combination of other languages — is a flawed construct reflecting colonial attitudes and reinforcing the interests of the social elite.

"As far as I can tell, there is no rigorous, scientific way to determine what is a creole language," DeGraff says.

The fact that Haitian Creole is regarded as an inferior language has significant social consequences. While Creole has been recognized as one of Haiti's two official languages since 1987, French still dominates the country's educational system and government; the country's official newspaper still publishes laws, budgets, contracts and other important documents in French. For this reason, DeGraff's work includes an active interest in education policy. This year, he has created and implemented a research project, funded by the



Michel DeGraff, an associate professor in MIT's Department of Linguistics and Philosophy.

Photo - Photo: Melanie Gonick

National Science Foundation (NSF), using computers to help teach Haitian Creole in primary-school classrooms.

With Haiti still rebuilding following the devastating earthquake of January 2010, DeGraff thinks the time is right to bring Haitian Creole into schools as the main language of instruction. “Now there is a chance to do things better,” he says. Otherwise, valuable aid to Haitian schools “will enlarge the cruel divide between the few haves and the millions of have-nots,” DeGraff wrote in an op-ed for *The Boston Globe* last year.

‘Haitian Creole is very well-behaved’

DeGraff did not become a linguist via a traditional path. He left Haiti in 1982 to pursue his undergraduate degree in computer science at the City College of New York. During an internship at Bell Labs in New Jersey, in 1985, DeGraff worked on a natural language processing project intended to create computer voice-synthesis programs that would read texts such as *The New York Times* aloud for blind people. In the process, he became fascinated with linguistics. His PhD, from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992, was in computer science, but there were more linguists than computer scientists on his exam committee.

“I’ve had an unusual linguistics career,” DeGraff observes with a chuckle.

Since the mid-1990s, he has published dozens of articles making the case against “Creole exceptionalism.” As DeGraff points out, stereotypes about creoles have long existed; one linguist wrote in 1883, “Creole speech is universally accepted as an infantile jargon.” Others have written in recent decades that creoles serve as “missing linguistic fossils,” according to a *Newsweek* article from 1982, replicating the primitive form of more highly evolved languages.

DeGraff finds the notion of Haitian Creole as a special and primitive mixture of other languages to be dubious. For one thing, its lexicon is more homogeneous than that of English: About 90 percent of Haitian Creole words are derived from French, while English, a Germanic language, derives only 35 percent of its words from its Germanic ancestors.

“If you didn’t know that Haitian Creole was called ‘Creole,’ and you didn’t know what English was, you might end up with the conclusion that English is a radical creole, and that Haitian Creole is very well-behaved,” DeGraff says.

Some observers have contended that Haitian Creole, like other creoles, is only a mixture in the sense of blending European-derived vocabulary and West African language rules. But this claim also falls apart upon closer inspection, DeGraff contends. Haitian syntax does differ from French syntax — but in the same manner that Modern English syntax differs from Old English syntax.

In Haitian Creole, for instance, it is correct to say “Bouki pa konnen Boukinet” — meaning, “Bouki doesn’t know Boukinet” — with the negation word “pa” preceding the verb. In French, by contrast, one would say “Bouqui ne connait pas Bouquinette,” with “pas” coming after the verb.

But Modern English differs from Old English in the same way. Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*, for instance, says, “Quene Ester looked never with switch an eye”; in Modern English, the negation word “never” would precede the verb. In short, Haitian Creole and English have similar evolutionary paths, in terms of syntax.

Linguists still disagree about the status of Haitian Creole, but many have found DeGraff’s evidence to be compelling. “His work shows that, fundamentally, these languages are structurally and developmentally no different from other languages,” says Jo Anne Kleifgen, a professor of linguistics and education at Columbia

University's Teachers College.

"I think Michel has driven everyone to be a little more conscious of the social implications of their positions," says Salikoko Mufwene, a linguist and the Frank J. McLoraine Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago.

Bringing Creole to the classroom

DeGraff's research on Creole has only reinforced his hands-on interest in education. In connection with his NSF grant, DeGraff is working with a school in a remote mountain village on Haiti's La Gonave island to test Creole-language instruction among fourth graders. The project uses computer programs to teach mathematics in Creole, while avoiding the practice of rote memorization that often accompanies French-language teaching.

"If you go to a typical science or math class, you don't see that much science or math going on," DeGraff says. "What you see is this obsession with getting the French right — an impossible and humiliating challenge since most of the kids and their teachers live in communities where French is hardly ever spoken."

Over the years, DeGraff's advocacy of native-language instruction for Creole speakers has influenced other scholars. Kleifgen notes that her graduate students have used DeGraff's ideas as the inspiration for fieldwork projects of their own, including one education program for children in Eritrean and Somali refugee camps and another that introduced a New York City high-school curriculum meant to build awareness of Patwa, Jamaica's English-derived Creole.

"Michel inspires theoretically and empirically grounded work in education," Kleifgen says.

Attitudes about the use of Creole may be changing in Haiti, too. In April, Haitians elected as their new president Michel Martelly, a former pop musician whose songs are in Haitian Creole. Because of the deeply entrenched attitudes about Haitian Creole among the country's elites, it is not yet clear, DeGraff notes, whether any language policy changes will occur, though he hopes the use of Haitian Creole in Martelly's campaign bodes well for its application to other areas of life as well.

In any event, DeGraff will continue his own work in a career that would have once seemed improbable. At one time, he says, his parents "couldn't quite believe that my research on Haitian Creole was part of a paid job at MIT. This is the language I was not supposed to be speaking. Now they understand it's my life's work."