

Creole Pronunciation

(La prononciation du créole)

As young, basically oral languages that have been used essentially for daily exchanges and do not have long written traditions as a result, the present question facing French creoles is clearly which is the best system of written representation. Depending on when they were written, any texts that are available have either been

- transcribed according to the model that was available to the writer at the time which was French until very recently, or
- transcribed (particularly since the 1970s) in accordance with the principles of a phonetic transcription (generally the IPA) as the linguists responsible for notation had become competent in various phonetic alphabets.

True readability of a text involves not just a simple phonetic transcription but a writing system that has been developed (See **‘Written Creole’**, **link: <<http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/WrittenCreole.pdf>>**) to take other factors than just immediate phonic reproduction into account. It is important that the linguistic unit is recognisable, on the one hand because adults read by sight when reading quickly and, on the other, so that the unit can be expressed correctly when read aloud as opposed to merely repeating the pronunciation since this can change according to immediate context or to the speaker’s region of origin. If one were to settle for a simple phonetic transcription, the pronunciation would undoubtedly be correct but the ability to see each syllable would not make for easy reading, just laborious deciphering. Indispensable grammatical information can be conveyed to readers through a number of graphic elements for fast and accurate comprehension of the text in front of them.

Once transcription of the creole language has been established, it is desirable that rules of pronunciation should be formulated for any reader who encounters it. This is especially true if the reader in question is ordinarily accustomed to reading other languages (which may, for example, contain many silent letters since many are pronounced in creole as will be seen) or is new to the language. The reader will know that a letter or group of letters is not always pronounced in the same way from one language to another (for example, ‘ch’ is pronounced [ʃ] in French, [k] in Italian, and [ç] or [x] depending on the context in German) and will, quite rightly, query the correct pronunciation of each letter.

The written forms used in older texts from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries are quite heavily etymological and comprise many silent letters, however, for contemporary written Lesser Antillean Creole, it is possible to state that:

- **all letters are pronounced**, although a few digraphs should be noted, for example ‘ch’ and ‘in’ which represent one phoneme and not two successive sounds. It is suggested that a single silent letter should be introduced to facilitate the correct pronunciation of consonants, particularly nasal consonants, which are sometimes taken as digraphic elements, for example, ‘in’ is pronounced [ɛ̃] and ‘ine’ is pronounced [in] as in *chabine*, the feminine form of *chabin*;
- **letters are always pronounced in the same way.**

The table below summarises the written forms in use, both single letters and digraphs, giving their phonetic value and creole examples of each sound.

LETTER	PHONETIC VALUE (IPA)	CREOLE EXAMPLE	MEANING
i	[i]	<i>liv</i>	book
é	[e]	<i>lélé</i>	whisk made of one branch dividing into two or three smaller ones for whipping sauces
è	[ɛ]	<i>lèlè</i>	a gossip (male)
a	[a]	<i>kako</i>	cocoa
ô or ò	[ɔ]	<i>bò</i>	side, (river) bank, rim, edge
o	[o]	<i>bo</i>	a kiss, to kiss, to embrace
ou	[u]	<i>foufou</i>	hummingbird
u	[y]	<i>chuval; butin</i> (cf. note 1 below)	horse; thing
eu	[ø]	<i>keu; dufeu</i> (cf. note 2 below)	tail, bottom, handle, stalk, rear, queue; fire, light
eu	[œ]	<i>keur; seul; jeune</i> (cf. note 3 below)	heart; only, alone, lonely; young
an	[ã]	<i>adan</i>	in
on	[õ]	<i>on, yon</i>	a, one
in (written 'en' by GEREK)	[ɛ̃]	<i>chabin; fin</i>	pejorative label for a man; hunger
p	[p]	<i>papa; lapo</i>	dad; skin
b	[b]	<i>ba; bitin</i>	to give; thing
t	[t]	<i>tini</i>	to have
d	[d]	<i>di</i>	to say, to tell
k	[k]	<i>kè; kinbè</i>	heart; to hold, to keep
g	[g]	<i>gèl; gadé</i>	mouth or 'trap'; to look at, to watch
f	[f]	<i>fanm; fèy</i>	woman; leaf, sheet of paper
v	[v]	<i>voyé</i>	to send
s	[s]	<i>sòs; sè</i>	sauce; sister
z	[z]	<i>zozyo; zyé</i>	bird; eye(s)
ch	[ʃ]	<i>chimin</i>	path, lane, track, way
j	[ʒ]	<i>janmé; jounou</i>	never; knee
m	[m]	<i>manman; manjé</i>	mother; to eat, meal
n	[n]	<i>nonm</i>	man
ny (or '-gne' in word-final position)	[ɲ]	<i>nyanm; montangne</i>	yam; mountain
l	[l]	<i>lari; lékòl</i>	road; school
r	[r]	<i>diri</i>	rice
y	[j]	<i>pyé; yanm</i>	foot; yam
u	[ɥ]	<i>lanuit</i> (cf. note 4 below)	night
w (sometimes written 'ou' in certain contexts)	[w]	<i>wou; bouè</i>	wheel; to drink

Table 5.1 Written forms in use in Lesser Antillean Creole

With reference to the notes in parentheses in the table above, the following points should be noted:

1. (**'u'**) Although the realisation of a rounded palatal in some creole words, often in place of 'i', is without doubt a regional (common in Saintes) or social variable (some speakers take every opportunity to introduce the 'u' even when it is not required as it is considered distinguished), it is necessary and even constructive to make provision for its written representation due to the fact that people will not always know to replace the spoken 'u' with 'i' or 'ou' in writing. Even though the forms *chival* and *chouval* do exist and *bitin* is the most common form, they are not produced by the same speakers so it is not possible to totally forego the symbol 'u'. This is all the more true because, as can be seen below, 'u' also quite readily represents the semi-consonant [u] which is totally indispensable insofar as it is the only form available to render words such as *uit* ('eight'), *lanuit* ('night'), and *juiyé* ('July').
2. (**'eu'**) Exactly the same problems are found with this other more open, rounded palatal which is found in place of 'é' in some acrolectal and regional creole varieties. The most frequent pronunciation for these words, however, is *ké* and *difé*.
3. (**'eu'**) There are so few examples of this sound, which is really only found in a context where the French consonant is latent, that one would not expect a different notation to the one given above. It should be written as 'eu' whenever the need arises and the notation of the consonant that follows it (cf. *jeune*) will ensure any confusion is avoided and will guarantee an open pronunciation. The preferred usage almost everywhere, however, is a non-rounded pronunciation as in *kè*, *sèl*, and *jèn* with, once again, 'eu' only being found in high acrolectal varieties, some examples of which can be found in *Lapin ki vlé mandé Bondyé lèsprì*.¹
4. (**'u'**) The reuse of the letter 'u', already used for the vowel [y] above, does not present any problems given the rarity of the semi-consonant which, in any case, appears in a different environment to that of the vowel 'u'.

¹ Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, 'Lapin ki vlé mandé Bondyé lèsprì', *Groupe Européen de Recherches en Langues Créoles*, (last updated 15 July 2006) <<http://creoles.free.fr>> [accessed 1 September 2006] (link to 'Un cours de linguistique et littérature créoles').