

# Written Creole

(L'écriture du créole)

As is the case with the majority of creoles, Guadeloupe Creole has no fixed orthography due to the fact that it is essentially an oral language. Writers have very often adopted their own system of notation and one system in particular has been seen to emerge since the 1970s as a result of a certain coherence that has been cultivated by some of the writers, together with an adherence to certain rules that they have collectively laid down.

In the three publications of their journal, *Mofwaz*,<sup>1</sup> between 1977 and 1980, GEREK, together with Jean Bernabé (who revisited the subject in his thesis),<sup>2</sup> proposed an orthographic system that was very close to a simple phonetic transcription. It is now widely used in the Lesser Antilles even though such a system is bound to present communicative problems as will be shown below.

Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux put forward an assessment, first in 1987 but principally in *Ecrire en Créole*<sup>3</sup> in 1993, of the main problems encountered by an essentially oral language during its transition to writing and suggested a system of notation that would integrate very useful morphological and lexical data to make written communication easier throughout the Lesser Antilles. As a consequence, it is possible to summarise some of the problems encountered during the development of an orthographic system for a language.

## How should creole be written?

### Introduction to the problem

The idea of a written creole is still contested by many speakers in creole societies who undoubtedly assume that a language can only be either written or oral. While there have always been oral and written languages at any given time in history, the statuses of languages can change and a language that was purely oral (cf. Francien and all the Roman dialects in the Middle Ages when written communication was in Latin) can progressively arrive at written status just as French, Spanish, and Italian have, while others such as French Provençal continue to develop but remain essentially oral. Although there may have been various attempts at writing these oral languages, they have been insufficient in terms of turning them into real written languages for use in all the functions that are associated with many national languages. In short, the arrival of a language at written status, its use in multiple functions, its status as a national or official language, and so on are always a result of linguistic policy and, of course, of the willingness of the speakers themselves.

### The creole situation: the existence of transcriptions

It is certainly true that in any creole area at the present time, many samples of French creole writing are available and these are all essentially more or less phonological and phonetic

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean Bernabé, 'Ecrire le créole', *Mofwaz*, 1, 2, and 3 (1977-80).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Bernabé, *Fondal-natal. Grammaire basilectal approchée des créoles guadeloupéen et martiniquais* ([Paris?]: Harmattan, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, *Ecrire en créole* (Paris: Harmattan, 1993). Further references to this text are given in parentheses after the reference.

transcriptions rather than orthographies in the strict sense of the word. This is due to the fact that no standard has been decided on either in terms of the notation principles or the variety that should be selected from the assortment spoken in all the different countries and French creole-speaking 'départements'. Haiti is the only country where an orthography has been fixed by decree<sup>4</sup> (in 1979) but not all writers observe this orthography and it is still questioned on a number of counts.

It is clear that the transcription of creole does not present any technical problems because, as with all languages, creole can be transcribed using, for example, the IPA and observing the principles laid down by the founders of such a notation system whereby one sound equals one symbol, in other words, each creole sound would correspond to just one graphic symbol. In contrast to the French sound [o], for example, which can be written as 'o', 'au', 'eau', 'aux', and so on, all [o] sounds in creole will be written as 'o', if the rules of phonetic transcription are observed, with a distinct symbol to avoid confusion such as 'ò' or 'ô' for the open 'o' sound which also exists.

### **Differences between transcriptions and orthography**

Having established this, it is however necessary to underline the ways in which a transcription system is not an orthography. An effective orthography has to integrate more information than just the representation of pronunciation if it is to facilitate reading and the correct receipt of the message. There is a certain amount of information that can be passed on through orthography, for instance the different value of phonically identical words (homophones) can be indicated in the written form. Orthography also serves as a reminder of grammatical relations, for example, the interdependence between noun and determiner can be shown through agreement (as it is in French), by a dash, or by some other functional marker. These are just some of the elements that clearly mark the difference between a simple transcription, which is always easy to produce once the transcription alphabet is known, and a true orthography, which has communication designs beyond that of just the linguistic community and which is laid down to be used as a benchmark or norm (of both ortho- and -graphy).

### **The speakers faced with creole notations**

In order that an orthography is accepted and therefore used by speakers, however, it also has to meet with their expectations to an extent. An orthography that has been developed without taking the speakers' practices into account, which has symbols that are disconcerting, unfamiliar, or considered 'foreign', for example, can lead to its rejection.

The notation of creole presents many problems in this respect. Two systems, or more precisely a spontaneous notation which does not respond to any rules and which does not really constitute a system on the one hand and a system which basically advocates phonetic transcription with no other real developments on the other are clearly in confrontation. Each writes as it pronounces and if a word is pronounced differently in different regions, it is written down differently with the result that comprehension completely comes to a halt the moment someone does not live in the same town or even the same district of a town or does not belong to the same social class. From this perspective, a Martinican and a Guadeloupean are unable to understand each other when communicating in writing in spite of the fact that they can understand each other perfectly in oral communication even though they may notice

---

<sup>4</sup> The text of this decree of 18 September 1979 is published in *Etudes Créoles*, 3, no 1 (November 1980), 101-5.

they each have different accents. People from the south of France do not pronounce French in the same way as those from Lyon who, in turn, do not pronounce French in the same way as people from Nantes or Alsace but everyone writes in the same way and this is precisely because the representation that was proposed was not aimed solely at the exact reproduction of pronunciation.

It should be pointed out that, in the Antilles, this phonetic transcription was quite widely rejected by the public and contributed to giving creole a bad public image. It must be said too that, even if the speakers cannot always say clearly why they rejected it, it is possible to bring out some important points from their comments:

- **Force of habit:** this is certainly one of the points that must be taken into account. In the majority of French creole areas, those who write creole already write in French (or English in Mauritius, the Seychelles, Dominica, and Saint Lucia) and therefore show, a priori, considerable reluctance when it is suddenly suggested they write ‘manger’ as *manjé* or ‘courir’ as *kouri*, and so on. They also instinctively write creole words that resemble French words in accordance with French orthography, often getting the origin or the relationship of the word in question completely wrong into the bargain, for example, it is impossible to recognise the verb (*vouè*) and even less so the third person object pronoun in *moin voueille* which is so often written for *moin vouè-li* (‘I saw him/her/it’), often pronounced ‘moin vouè-y’. Not to mention the number of times *moin caille* is written for *moin ka alé*!

Comment: Force of habit cannot be permanently used as an excuse for not setting up a coherent system for creole which, moreover, must not under any circumstances be a repeat of the French system because, even if part of the creole vocabulary comes from French, it is a different language with different demands and a different history. When someone learns a foreign language, such as an Englishman learning French or a Frenchman learning German or English, they accept that the notation rules of the new language are not the same as those used for their mother tongue. From this perspective, it will be clear that, as a complete language, creole can have its own rules of representation. At the same time however, it is important, if only to facilitate learning, not to seek to systematically go against the writing conventions of the creole speakers. This is illustrated by the fact that, while ‘in’ and ‘en’ are both possible representatives of the front nasal vowel in creole, it is certainly preferable to retain ‘in’, which better suits the needs and practices of those who have gone through the French school system (cf. Hazaël-Massieux, ch. IVe), rather than ‘en’ which would in fact lead to serious confusion. Two words spelt, for example, as ‘lapen’ and ‘chaben’ would be pronounced [lapã] and [jabã] before the reader realised that the words in question were, in fact, meant to be *lapin* and *chabin*. Moreover, this latter term, which is a pejorative label for a man, forms its feminine ending in *-ine* to give *chabine*. In the same way, it seems completely absurd to suggest writing the word *peigne* (actually pronounced more or less as [pɛŋ] in creole) as ‘penny’ in an English-speaking context such as the Seychelles. While the spelling ‘penny’ would be a possibility in Haiti where it would be directed at monolingual speakers who know neither French nor English, it would hardly make sense to suggest it for English speakers.

- **Absence of redundancy:** a more serious issue is the fact that a phonetic transcription which is in line with the strict principles of the IPA cannot function as a writing system because there is too little redundancy (the IPA is used for scientific purposes,

particularly in communication between researchers studying the oral form of a language). Any communication has to have a certain amount of redundancy to be effective, that is, it must give a piece of information not just once but several times and a system which, by definition, prohibits any redundancy is deprived of functionality. Comments such as 'I cannot read creole,' 'creole is very difficult,' or 'you need to read things twice to understand them' are evidence of the fact that the burden of redundancy has passed from the writer to the reader who has to read each word or sentence twice in order to extract the meaning. Redundancy implies that the information is given with largesse rather than the reader having to send out a search party for it!

It is in this sense that the discussion on whether it is preferable to use long or short forms merits inclusion. There is actually always the option in all French creoles of expressing a sequence of words more slowly or more quickly for any grammatical elements that differ. The shortened sequence notation often hinders reading considerably by impeding identification and, in addition, different shortenings can arise from dialectal varieties within the same creole language with the result that the speakers or readers of a different variety to the one that has been transcribed will neither be able to understand the word nor identify it and reproduce the pronunciation that is normal for them. The long form notation, on the other hand, has the advantage of acknowledging any of the different pronunciations and even of allowing silent reading, which is the most frequent method of reading for all adults, where a word is identified by sight rather than by pronunciation thereby shortening reading time considerably.

This is not to advocate a creole orthography with as much redundancy as that of French and a balance should certainly be sought between too much and too little redundancy (cf. Hazaël-Massieux). Any proposals in this respect will also have the advantage of bringing about a certain unification, which is the only way in which the distribution of literary works can become possible, as opposed to maintaining the dialectal dispersion which is at odds with a widespread comprehension of the language. No editor is going to agree to print and distribute a work which, because of the way it has been notated, will automatically remain exclusive in the sense that only those from Basse-Pointe in Martinique or from Fort-de-France will be able to read it. This is certainly the problem encountered by many writers who, more often than not, have to resort to vanity publishing if they want their works printed in creole, although if it is success they are seeking, they must write in French.

In short, it is difficult to find solutions to the problem of orthography since they must reconcile:

- scientific coherence
- political factors (such as division and unification of dialects that are close to one another)
- economic factors
- psychological factors (such as representations and attitudes of the speakers)

Nevertheless, in the absence of any norm or established written form and although various issues remain unresolved, writers still write. There is a wealth of works in creole including stories inspired from oral tradition, poetry, drama, short stories, even novels and attempts at

technical texts but people rarely read these works, often confessing not only to a great reluctance to do so but also to great difficulty. The fact is that people have to learn to read creole in the same way that they learn to read any other language and it is a little naïve, when confronted with a creole text for the first time, to confess to difficulties in reading when there has been no basic learning first. After all, it would not be possible for an Englishman to automatically be able to read French or Spanish. School certainly has a role to play in this learning, to educate any readers who are interested and likely to ask for more texts, thereby encouraging writers to produce. However, the often extremist political stances of the champions of creole do not make progress in the matter any easier because they cause confusion among the most well-meaning speakers. The legitimate demand, for example, for a place for creole in schools in the French overseas 'départements', where French would be perfectly compatible with creole language teaching, is mistaken for a demand for political independence since the independent parties often present creole as the 'language of independence'. While changes in attitudes in linguistic matters are always long and difficult to achieve for reasons of linguistic insecurity, language status, and so on, they become impossible in a context where representations are distorted from the outset by deliberately sustained confusion.

### **The future of creoles**

So what does the future hold for creoles? Will these languages that are still essentially oral one day become written languages in the same way that French, Spanish, and Italian progressively replaced Latin over the centuries? The situation is, in fact, very complex because each creole is only spoken by a limited number of speakers (except in Haiti) and is also always used in conjunction with a language that has international status (French or English in French creole areas) and which fulfils all formal and written functions. These two factors, together with the current importance that is attached to schooling (often compulsory to a relatively advanced age), where only the diglossic 'high' language is used, do not leave much hope for the various creoles in the long or short term future. This is in spite of the fact that the whole population speaks creole and it is the first language children learn and use until they start school which is a very different situation to that of the French dialects in France which are spoken almost exclusively by the elderly sectors of the population.

It is therefore difficult to give an opinion as to the exact future of creoles<sup>5</sup> because there is no shortage of examples in history where a language that was reduced in one capacity or another has been able, given the right circumstances, to enjoy a real revival and to develop and prevail over the language that formerly enjoyed the more favourable status. There is no doubt, however, that writing now plays an essential role in the development and recognition of a language and if written creole is not taught and if creole is not used in all areas of expression, it is a pretty safe bet that all French creoles will end up one or two centuries from now in the same apparently barely recoupable situation that is faced by Louisiana Creole today, in other words in a situation of decline or even death.

Note: On the subject of Réunion Creole, some comments and/or examples that might be of interest are suggested by Pierre Louis Mangeard in his Master's dissertation, 'La détermination nominale en créole réunionnais. Essai de grammaire syntagmatique' (University of Rouen, September 1996), which sums up certain aspects of the problem. His

---

<sup>5</sup> For further information, cf. M. C. Hazaël-Massieux, *L'indispensable survie* (Paris: Editions Entente, 1999).

thesis, 'L'écriture du créole réunionnais. Histoire, description et essai d'analyse' (University of Réunion, 1998, p. 242), is also recommended reading.