

Sociolinguistic analysis of Haitian Creole in a Spanish-speaking region of the Caribbean

Yosbany Vidal García

(Language and Literature, ISM International Academy, Ecuador)

ABSTRACT: *The development of the sugar industry in the town Violeta (located in the central region of Cuba), at the end of the second decade of the 20th century, caused the external and internal migration of Haitians to this territory of Ciego de Ávila; whose presence has been notable not only in economic terms, but also culturally, especially in the contact between Creole and the Spanish language. However, today it is evident that the linguistic identity brought from Haiti has been weakened by a group of descendants who deny its Antillean roots; while others advocate its maintenance. In this sense, a sociolinguistic study was carried out to determine what level of conservation is manifested in Haitian creol and what are the causes or reasons that contribute to the existence of diverse linguistic realities. For this, we worked with a group of 28 informants—without distinction of sex—that correspond to Haitian emigrants and their descendants born in Cuba; those who kept the Creole language in a diglossic state, but gradually replaced it with other modes of speech. The present study focused on the phonetic and syntactic level, which shows how, from the contact between languages—and the need for the Haitian to try to learn Spanish as a second language—, a mixture of linguistic codes was produced without that a Creolization of Spanish was produced. In addition to understanding how three evolutionary trends have manifested in creol: maintenance, weakening and cancellation.*

Keywords: *Haitian Creole, diglossia, language contact, phonetic plan, Spanish syntax and language preservation*

I. INTRODUCTION

When speaking about culture, an important element that is part of it and that serves its manifestation is often overlooked: language, which influences the maintenance of the tradition of a people: “[it is] the in charge of extending over time, of ‘chronifying’ certain ways of being, doing and thinking” (Martínez Casanova, 2001: 53); that is, to modulate the continuity of a human group. In Spanish-speaking regions such as the Island of Cuba, it becomes an essential component of cultural expression—marked by the process of transculturation—which contributes to the maintenance of identity, as a psychosocial category. And it is precisely here where the Haitian presence has also had a prominent role as an example of intra-Caribbean migration to the country.

Some historical researchers (Álvarez Estévez, 1968; Pichardo, 1969) confirm that Franco-Haitian immigration to the Island of Cuba—specifically, to the extreme east—occurred at the beginning XIX century, linked to the development of coffee and cocoa plantations; crops on which they already had extensive knowledge and which later drove the process of sugar expansion towards the West.

However, Figueroa Arencibia & Orduy (2004) alludes to the Haitian presence in Cuba shortly after the Haitian Revolution, since between 1791 and 1804 French planters and their slaves arrived, affected by the revolts; although slaves and free Haitians also emigrated from the Treaty of Basel in 1795. Although the dates may be divergent, in each migratory flow the Spanish authorities offered their approval and help; interest of the

metropolis that would later be reconsidered by the United States in the early twentieth century and boosted through its capital investments in the sugar industry.

II. HAITIAN SETTLEMENT IN CUBA

With the creation of the Violeta power station in 1918 —located to the northeast of the Cuban territory of Ciego de Ávila— the planting of sugar cane and the production of sugar constituted the primary source for the economic life of this town, nowadays named Primero de Enero municipality. US capital was consolidated in this region, as also happened in other place of the country, and sugarcane agriculture grew, cheap labor was essential to enable greater enrichment for US companies. USA and to the national oligarchy; reason why the migratory phenomenon of previous centuries was continued. The absolute prohibitive extreme established by Military Order no. 155 of the intervening government of May 1902, to the occasional permission granted by Decree Law 23 approved by President José Miguel Gómez in 1913, and from here to the free entry of Antillean braceros by the Immigration Law of August 3, 1917, that it established “the most basic rules to regulate the operation of the new trafficking” (Institute of Cuban History, 1998: 113).

It was precisely in 1918 when a strong wave of Haitian immigrants arrived in the northeast of Ciego de Ávila, some directly from Haiti and others already settled in Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo and Camagüey. Although many of them had the objective of accumulating money and returning to their country or improving their economic situation, they could not escape the fact of settling in rural areas for agricultural work —and in towns such as Violeta, for industrial and domestic tasks— without the slightest legal protection. Demographic shifts made it possible for the communities of Palmarito, Tibatey, La Rea, Moratoria, Sabicú and the batey Velasco to appear from the 1920s; where Haitians would live in huts or huts of palm and guano built by themselves and, in the harvest season, some would have quarters made by the administration of the plants.

Short harvest periods and the absence of any work other than agriculture led to unemployment and the search for work everywhere and a better payment; reason why they would diminish the establishments in number of inhabitants. However, this voluntary human displacement allowed an increase in marriages among the emigrants themselves, between them and their descendants, and, to a lesser extent, both with Cuban Creoles.¹

The bracero diet, due to its low purchasing power, could have some variant, but generally it consisted of flour, sweet potato, herring and cod. In small areas of land attached to the barracks in which they lived, they managed to plant cassava, squash, yams and sweet potatoes, with which they were self-sufficient. On the other hand, they used to have for months only a change of clothes. In their henequen hammock hammocks, where he slept, they hung their typical jolongo, next to a machete and the file to sharpen this working instrument. In that party they carried from one place to another they kept their few belongings, and perhaps a güira with a cork as a cover, instead of a water jug. (Álvarez Estévez & Guzmán Pascual, 2008: 213-214)

Also, they were distanced socially and linguistically from Cubans as from their North American patrons for communication, because of their dependence on Creole or *Kreyòl*; prevailing racism that imputed pejorative evaluations to him like “language of blacks” or “patuá” —by the old *patois* dialect— that ignored the historical-social aspect of that language and its systemic integrity.

From 1920 their living conditions became precarious, because in the face of the Caribbean diaspora that legally migrated to the north-east of Ciego de Ávila another one grew clandestinely. Therefore, employment,

¹ The term *Creole* has its French ancestry in the verb «raise», and according to the criteria of Dr. Pierre Wilny Tessono: “it is located in the Caribbean region around 1670, where it was used to refer to any person of African, European origin or mestizo born and raised in the colonies” (*apud* Navia, 2008, par 18).

housing and food opportunities would be affected; reason why it would increase the poverty and illnesses between the braceros. The economic crisis of those years caused the plants to decline, which would lead to an increase in unemployment, poor working conditions, long working hours that reached ten and twelve hours a day and the low wages offered by contractors. Hunger and misery would plunge Haitians into a distressing struggle to survive that left them no other way but to set out on new paths; since Decrees 1404 (of July 1921) and 1500 (of August 1921), which announced that the unemployed braceros would be repatriated or shipped to their country, remained in force.

Although this vital sphere caused them to be dismissed as human groups in the society where they were inserted, their cultural roots remained latent without weakening or nullifying their family customs, respect and obedience towards adults, music, dance, and religion voodoo and the creole language, thanks to orality. They just adapted to the new reality, reinterpreting their culture of origin and syncretizing it; Little by little, they would capture their mark on what was called “the Cuban” (Chailloux Laffita, 2007), since the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba of 1940 stipulated that any person born in the Greater Antilles, even if they were the son of foreign parents, would be considered a Cuban more.

With the revolutionary triumph in 1959, the Agrarian Reform Law dealt a hard blow to the latifundio and laid the foundations for the subsequent socialization of the agricultural sector; the worker was freed from the paltry wages, long working hours and the constant threat of unemployment. Also, it was ordered that Caribbean immigrants who no longer worked received social security benefits in an amount of 40 pesos a month, through Resolution No. 202 of October 28, 1967, from the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. A public works and housing plan for popular benefit strengthened the stay in rural communities, although some Haitians decided to join the Violeta power plant; reason why the rural population in this region increased and became an exodus that would contribute to consolidate certain linguistic tendencies of Creole in the Spanish of Cuba.

III. FULLNESS AND DECLINE OF THE HAITIAN CREOLE LANGUAGE

The linguistic word or sign is in charge of incorporating and extending the tradition of a people, even if dissimilar languages come to be related in the same culture. In multicultural regions such as Primero de Enero, there was contact between languages —Bantu, Yoruba, Chinese and Canarian heritage, to a lesser extent; in addition to Haitian Creole and the Spanish language— which crossed their primitive borders and invaded the territory of other cultural groups without this meaning the forced disappearance of linguistic divisions (Valdés Bernal, 2006).

In this municipality of Ciego de Ávila, since the twenties of the last century, Creole became the second most spoken language by the high number of emigrants and descendants. The contact between Spanish and Creol allowed Cubans to access this language to communicate with Haitians and to become familiar with some of its words; especially those who married the descendants or the peasants who worked and lived with the Haitians, thus managing to understand them.

Instead, the Antilleans kept their language, but had to learn Spanish. In this sense, creol acquired a diglossic state; Being limited to the family, cultural activities and religious ceremonies, and not to public settings where Haitians and their descendants were forced to communicate in Spanish (Figueroa Arencibia & Orduy, 2004). Over the years, the use of this language has become variable —especially to the detriment—, since the loss of linguistic identity in some descendants and the civilizational changes in the social context have greatly influenced.

The community of Haitian speakers in Primero de Enero —for a total of 169 living people, according to statistics prepared in 2007— is made up of four generations: that of immigrants (G1, with 7.7%) and those of their descendants (G2, with 14.8%; G3, with 30.2%, and G4, with 47.3%), which have influenced the Creole language from three evolutionary trends: maintenance, weakening and cancellation. A sociolinguistic study allows analyzing each of these trends and, in turn, evidencing some of the interference features, as a result of

contact between languages. Data that have been taken from the testimony, *in situ*, of a sample of seven speakers in each generation without sexual or professional distinction.²

As members of the G1, mention Lenón Fabre, Benicio Casamayor, Acelia Pie, Luis España, Cemelia Guillaut and Ilfo Pie Eleste; those who speak Creole in a diglossic state and transmit their idiosyncrasy through sayings and riddles related to daily life (Didiez Nadal, 1984), for example:

- Zuazo ki chanté anpil pa gra (*Bird that sings a lot does not get fat*).
- Lanmou sé plézi, lo-nè sè dévoua (*Love is pleasure, honor is duty*).
- Chyin ki japé pa modé (*Dog that barks does not bite*).
- Lajan fé makak dansé (*For the silver the monkey dances*).
- Evité miyò pasé mandé padon (*Avoiding is better than asking forgiveness*).
- Koté fil fi-ni, the kouti fi-ni (*Where the thread ends, there the seam ends*).
- Chat pa la, rat bay traka (*The cat is not there, the rats give problems*).

In them, the influence of Creol on the Spanish pronunciation of the phonemes /s/ and /r/, the lack of subject-verb agreement, the omission of articles defined in the singular, the gender incoherence between nouns and adjective, and the incorporation of words in the Spanish phrase, because they did not fully learn Spanish. See the following examples:

a) The phoneme /s/ in the final position of syllables and words tends to be omitted [ø] or aspirate [s], since it does not exist in Creole; in addition to the existence of a resyllabification before vowels (recorded in bold and italic type):

- De^[s]pué[ø] del trabajo, yo enseñá la^[s] cancion sen creol.
- E[ø]tamo[ø] bien aquí, pero no e[ø] fácil tan léjo[ø] de lo^[s] pariente[ø].
- E[ø]toy bu^[s]cando la fo[l]ma de tran[ø]mití lengua un poco má[ø] cada día.
- Lo selemento[ø] de cultura cubano sé muy dive[l]so[ø].
- Lo^[s] padre[ø] son mae[ø]tro[ø] de su sijo[ø].

b) The phoneme /r/ in the final position of syllables and words is lateralized [l] and, at the end of the infinitives, it is omitted [-ø]:

- En fie[ø]ta, yo bailá solo con mi muje[l].
- Co[l]ta[ø] caña e[ø] impo[l]tante pa' l paí[ø].
- Yo pensá mucho en trabaja[ø] y gana[ø] ba[ø]tante plata.
- Yo viní pa' Cuba po[l]que seguí mi se[l]mano[ø].

c) Lack of concordance between the subject and the verb (see underline):

- Yo no sabe mucho ca[ø]tellano, pero sabe enseñá[ø] la^[s] cancion sen creol.
- Yo pensá mucho en trabaja[ø] y gana[ø] ba[ø]tante plata.
- Del campo, yo viní a trabaja[ø] en zafra, y luego regresá pa' llá otra ve[ø].

² The investigation found that, in some families of Haitians, the evolutionary trends of creol do not correspond directly to descendants born in Cuba; for several G2 speakers, instead of teaching it to G3 members, refused to pass it on. They did not want their children to pronounce Spanish in schools with a different accent, so that they would not be rejected by their peers. In this sense, we have only worked with those who fit the established pattern.

d) Creole words in the Spanish syntax:

- Aquí e[ø]tá *kouto a* de casa mía. (*kouto a* ‘el cuchillo’)
- *Machin nan* se detuvó do[ø] vece[ø] en lo calle. (*machin nan* ‘el carro’)
- Juana *pa vle* veni[ø] de[^s]pué[ø] o[^s]curece[ø]. (*pa vle* ‘no quiere’)

The previous examples show how Creol interferes with Spanish phonetics and syntax from the moment Haitians try to learn Spanish as a second language; this does not mean that there is a Creolization of Spanish. In the same way it happens with the changes of linguistic codes within the same sentence, which results from the contact between languages as a constant factor in Latin American Spanish.

In the direct descendants (G2) —Caridad Pérez, María Luisa Martínez, Felipe Torres, Imena Díaz and Antonio Poll— creol is also maintained for intra-family, cultural and religious communication; because their parents demanded to learn it. In the specific case of this group of speakers, the influence of Castilian, with greater prestige, in the pronunciation of the phonemes /r/, /v/, /z/, /ð/ and /ð/ was notable:

a) The phoneme /r/, which is articulated the same as in French [ʀ], tends to be voiced like the vibrant alveolar /r/:

- kreyòl* ‘Creol’ - [krejòl] instead of [kʀejòl].
- premy* ‘first’ - [premie] instead of [pʀemie].
- relasyon* ‘relationship’ - [relasiõ] instead of [ʀelasiõ].
- Koman ou rele w?* ‘What’s your name?’ - [komã u rele w] instead of [kõmã u ʀele w].

b) The phoneme /v/, which is pronounced the same as in French, is sometimes voiced as the bilabial stop /b/, especially between vowels:

- travay* ‘work’ - [trabaj] instead of [tʀavaj].
- kravat* ‘tie’ - [krabat] instead of [kʀavat].
- Kal, ki se ekriven, pa vini* ‘Carlos, who is a writer, does not come’ - [kal, ki se: kʀibe, pa bini] instead of [kal, ki se: krivẽ, pa vini].

c) The phoneme /z/, sometimes, deafen as the alveolar fricative /s/:

- kousen* ‘cousin’ - [kuse] instead of [kuzẽ].
- plezi* ‘pleasure’ - [plezi] instead of [plezi].
- pofesè* ‘professor’ - [pofese] instead of [pofezẽ].
- Zanmi papa Marie* ‘The friend of Maria’s father’ - [sãmi papa marie] instead of [zãmi papa makie].

d) The phoneme /ð/: [ɛ] tends to close as /e/:

- kèk moun* ‘some men’ - [kek mũ] instead of [kɛk mũ].
- lèt* ‘the letters’ - [lɛt jɔ] instead of [lɛt jɔ].
- manchet* ‘machete’ - [mãfɛt] instead of [mãfɛt].
- Kitè m pale* ‘Let me speak’ - [kite m pale] instead of [kɛtè m pale].
- Travay ke nou fè* ‘The work we do’ - [work ke nu fɛ] instead of [travaj ke nu fɛ].

e) The phoneme /ò/: [ɔ], mostly, tends to close as /o/:

- potre* ‘photo’ - [potre] instead of [pɔtʀɛ].
- koman* ‘how’ - [komã] instead of [kõmã].
- wòl* ‘role’ - [rɔl] instead of [rɔl].
- Wap fè yon banboch* ‘You’re having a party’ - [wap fe iõ bãbɔʃ] instead of [wap fe iõ bãbɔʃ].

On the other hand, with the members of the G3: Ana Delia Marcial, Felipe Nicanor, Virginia Fabre, Juana Poll, Lusiana Salomón, Magdalena Guillermo and Moisés Poll, creol is in a process of weakening; They cannot

fully master it and are obliged to learn Spanish as their mother tongue. However, in ceremonies and celebrations, the songs, prayers and invocations are said in Creole; at the same time that they urge their children, in the family context, to acquire it. The incorporation of Spanish words in a Creole syntactic construction is evident due to ignorance of the word and preponderance of Spanish in Cuba. Changes in linguistic codes in the same sentence, as in previous variants, result from contact between languages; foreseeable factor in the future:

- *Cómo sa ye?* 'How is that?' – *Cómo* (How) has been used instead of *kouman*.
- *Toujou gin patch kay tayè.* 'There are always pieces of cloth in the tailor's house' – *retazo* (pieces of cloth) has been used instead of *réta*.
- *Tout mon gen rol pa yo nam sociedad.* 'Each word has its role in society' – *rol* (role) and *sociedad* (society) have been used instead of *wòl* and *sosyete a*, respectively.
- *Vini pa'cá.* 'Come here' - *pa'cá* (here) has been used instead of *cotem*.

Note that, phonetically, in the first example the /o/ at the end of the word *how* is nasalized [komõ] and, in the third, the /s/ at the end of the *pieces of cloth* [retazoø] is omitted; trend that is still maintained by the influence of Creole speech.

In the current municipality of Primero de Enero, the vast majority of the members of the G4 —the last descendants of Haitians born on Cuba— show a linguistic cancellation of Creol, which occurs gradually for various reasons: they only know a few words of Creole Haitian, who rarely use them, or the language they inherited from their grandparents has ceased to have the character of diglossia and within the family they generally resort to Spanish. In addition, they offer greater attention to other foreign languages —English, Italian or French— for personal or professional reasons; they do not express themselves in creol to Spanish speakers for fear of being rejected or frowned upon, and they attribute pejorative evaluations to them —erroneously or in a sarcastic sense— such as “language of black slaves”, “language of Haitians”, etc. Even though this minority, in crescendo, dismisses its Caribbean roots, others (G2 and G3) insist on keeping it alive through orality as a linguistic heritage of previous centuries: identity of a culture brought from Haiti and settled in Cuba, and it is not lacking in them the expression: “that language runs through my veins”.

IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis carried out allows us to understand how contact between languages is a dynamic process, where Spanish and Haitian Creole, as linguistic systems, are in constant evolution and change based on external and internal factors that are conditioned. Study that can be extended by insisting on morph syntactic aspects —incorrectness and suppression of prepositions in Castilian sentences— and lexicon and semantics in Creole phrases used during popular tradition festivals. Likewise, it is corroborated that Creol is part of that linguistic mix that is Cuban Spanish, by incorporating words and ways of articulating some phonemes in the northeast of Ciego de Ávila; in addition to expressions and prayers typical of Haitian culture.

Paradoxically, in recent years the signs of a disappearance of the integrity of this language have been notable, amid sociocultural and religious actions implemented by the third generation born in the country to maintain it; because they do not understand that only through language we take possession of our part of the world, when saying Alfonso Reyes.

REFERENCES

- [1.] Álvarez Estévez, R. & Guzmán Pascual, M. (2008). *Cuba in the Caribbean and the Caribbean in Cuba*. Havana: Fernando Ortiz Foundation.
- [2.] Álvarez Estévez, R. (1968). *Sugar and immigration. 1900-1940*. Havana: Social Sciences.
- [3.] Chailloux Laffita, G. (Coord.). (2007). *Where are the Cubans from?* Havana: Social Sciences.
- [4.] Didiez Nadal, N. (1984). *Creole language brief manual*. Dominican Republic: Taller Santo Domingo.
- [5.] Figueroa Arencibia, V. J., & Orduy, P. J. (2004). Spanish-Kreyòl linguistic contact in a Cuban-Haitian community in Santiago de Cuba. *International Journal of Ibero-American Linguistics*, (4), 41-56.
- [6.] Institute of Cuban History (1998). *Cuban history. The Neocolony. Organization and crisis from 1899 to 1940*. (Volume 3). Havana: Politics.
- [7.] Martínez Casanova, M. (2001). A reflection on popular culture and identity. *Isla*, 43(130), 53-60.
- [8.] Navia, R. G. (2008). Speech on the international day of Creole in Cuba on October 25, 2008 [Post]. *Haitian Creole in Cuba*. Recovered from <http://creolehaitiano.blogspot.com/>
- [9.] Pichardo, H. (1969). *Documents for the history of Cuba*. (Volume 2). Havana: Social Sciences.
- [10.] Valdés Bernal, S. (2006). *Cuban national language and cultural identity*. Havana: Félix Varela.