

HAITIAN CREOLE

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Language Name: Haitian Creole. **Autonym:** *Kreyòl*.

Location: The Caribbean country of Haiti, which is located on the western part of the island of Hispaniola. Haiti shares that island with the Dominican Republic.

Family: French-based Creoles.

Related Languages: Haitian Creole is related to other FRENCH-based Creoles of the American-Caribbean region that are spoken in Louisiana in the United States, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Dominica, St. Lucia, and French Guyana, and also to those of the Indian Ocean region, spoken in Seychelles, Reunion, and Mauritius.

Dialects: Haitian Creole is divided into three regional dialects: Northern (region of Cap-Haitien), Southern (region of Les Cayes), and Western (region of Port-au-Prince). The relatively small number of variants that exist occur mostly at the lexical and morphosyntactic levels. For example, the Northern variety uses the relator *a* to express possession, as in *zafè a mwèn* ‘my things’, realized as *zafè an m*; the other varieties would say *zafè m*, without the relator. The Southern variety expresses progression through the use of the progressive marker *ape/pe*, as in *m ape manje* or *m pe manje* ‘I am eating’. In the other varieties, the same statement would be rendered as *m ap manje*.

With regard to social stratification, two major sociolects of Haitian Creole can be identified: the rural variety that is presumably spoken by the uneducated, monolingual Creole speakers who constitute the bulk of the Haitian population, and the urban variety spoken by the privileged, educated bilingual (in French and Creole) minority. The former variety is known in Haiti as *kreyòl rèk*, or *gwo kreyòl* (‘coarse Creole’). The characteristics—coarse, vulgar, unrefined—that are sometimes attributed to individuals belonging to the lower social echelons explain the labels. The latter variety is referred to as *kreyòl swa* (‘refined Creole’). Again, the label seems to reflect the more positive attributes (refinement, education, cultural sophistication) associated with this group. Paradoxically perhaps, there appears to be a consensus that the rural variety contains fewer Frenchified features and, as such, is considered “purer” than the urban dialect which exhibits a stronger French influence. This explains why it is sometimes called *vrè kreyòl* or *bon kreyòl* (‘real Creole’ or ‘good Creole’). The most salient distinctions between the two sociolects are found at the phonological level. The urban variety has three additional front-rounded vowels that are not, generally speaking, typical of the rural variety. They are *u* contrasting with *i* as in *etud* versus *etid* ‘studies’ (*études* in French), *eu* contrasting with *é* (written *e*) as in *paskeu* versus *paske* ‘because’ (Fr. *parce que*), and *eù* contrasting with *è* as in *peù* versus *pè* ‘afraid’, ‘fear’ (Fr. *peur*). Additionally, at the lexical level, some words have two variants, one considered more typical of the speech of the bilinguals than the other one. However, it needs to be cautioned that dialect contact does occur. In consequence, certain features commonly associated with one sociolect may well be produced by speakers of the other.

Number of Speakers: 6–8 million. This figure includes the number of Haitians living in Haiti, estimated at roughly 6 million, and the Haitian diaspora living abroad, mostly in the United States in New York, Miami, and Boston; Canada in Montreal; and in other Caribbean islands, primarily the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas. The Haitian population in the U.S. alone is about 1 million.

Origin and History

Haitian Creole is a language that arose in the French colony of Saint Domingue during the 17th and 18th centuries. Creolists suggest that this language developed during the expansion phase of the plantations after 1697, the date of the Treaty of Ryswick by which Spain gave the western part of the island of Hispaniola to France. From that date, French colonization consolidated itself in Saint Domingue, and the French introduced new crops such as indigo, coffee, cotton, and sugar, which required more intensive forms of cultivation. As a result of this expansion, this period witnessed the massive arrival of slaves from Africa, who outnumbered the white population. Many believed that the speech of these slaves evolved

into what is known today as Haitian Creole.

Various theories have been proposed in an attempt to characterize the speech of the slaves. These can be grouped into two major positions: the monogenetic (one source) hypothesis and the polygenetic (many sources) hypothesis. The striking structural similarities between the various Creoles led to the appeal of the monogenetic hypothesis. According to this theory, all Creoles, including Haitian Creole, are derived from one source, identified as an Afro-Portuguese pidgin that would have developed in the 15th century on the western coast of Africa because of the presence of Portuguese traders. This Afro-Portuguese pidgin was itself a contact language originating from the lingua franca used at that time by sailors and traders from a variety of regions in the Mediterranean basin.

Presumably, the Afro-Portuguese pidgin was the first European language that African slaves acquired while they awaited their shipment from the coast of Africa to the New World. Then, in the 16th century as Portuguese influence faded in Africa and as the pidgin was used in more and more contact situations, pidgin speakers drew on the dominant languages present for vocabulary expansion. The grammatical base of the Afro-Portuguese pidgin remained, but the vocabulary was replaced. This process is known as “relexification”. Thus, according to this theory, Haitian Creole has managed to retain the grammar of the original Afro-Portuguese pidgin that underwent relexification because of the contact with the language of the French traders and colonizers, which intensified in the 17th century.

According to the polygenetic view, the Haitian language is a hybrid or “mixed” language consisting primarily of French words strung together according to the syntax of one (EWE) or more than one African language. There is evidence to suggest that slave owners deliberately grouped slaves on plantations who did not share a common tongue in order to minimize the chances of revolt. As a result of this linguistic heterogeneity, slaves had to resort to some form of common language to communicate among themselves, and this language was based on the reduced variety of French spoken by their masters. (The white colonizers, believing that the African slaves were too “primitive” to understand a language as “complex” as French, deliberately simplified their speech.) Haitian Creole, which retained some features of pronunciation and grammar from the various African languages, was the result.

It is beyond the scope of this article to resolve the controversy among the different views pertaining to the origin of Creoles in general and Haitian Creole in particular. Perhaps a complementary hypothesis, which takes into account all possible sources, may well be the correct one. What is certain is that Haitian Creole is a contact language that developed in the context of French colonization of Saint Domingue in the late 17th century. It is the consensus that French is the superstrate language (the language from which the bulk of the vocabulary is derived). With regard to the substrate language (that upon which the grammar is based), heated debates persist.

In any event, historical evidence suggests that Haitian Creole was widely used both among masters and slaves through-

out the colonial period (1697–1803). Further, the first written account of Haitian Creole goes back to the 18th century. It consists of a poem titled “Lisette quitté la plaine”, written around 1757 by Duvivier de la Mahotière, a “habitant” of Saint Domingue.

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