

The appearance and development of haitian creole



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The Appearance and Development of Haitian Creole As written in Jacques Arends' "Pidgin and Creole: An Introduction," Haitian Creole first originated from a pidgin. With time, this pidgin gradually developed into a creole, later on becoming the co-official language of Haiti. Haitian Creole may be recognized as one of the official languages, along with French, however there are negative associations linked with this creole. For instance, the stereotypical view of a speaker of Haitian Creole still remains as one who is black, poor, and uneducated.

Slowly however, things are changing; Haitian Creole is becoming more accepted and the knowledge of its existence is growing as its speakers spread across the world. What made this creole grow and thrive out of its own country, transported to other nations all across the world? This paper will study the unfolding of this creole as well as focus on the way it is spoken in the northeastern United States, since studies show that is where most speakers emigrate to, as stated by Zephir in her works.

What will also be discussed is the changes the creole underwent, hand in hand with the various perspectives associated with the creole and the factors that lead to its successful spread. Before even beginning the topic of Haitian Creole's migration into the United States, it is important to learn more about the language itself. First a brief history on this creole is necessary- to know the origins of this language and the different social and economic factors surrounding it as time passed. As stated before by Arends, Haitian Creole first started from a pidgin between Haitian slaves in the 16th century.

As the years progressed, the pidgin was modified, changed, and soon developed into the creole used today. It was spread across Haiti by various media such as television and newspapers until finally in 1987 its official status became verified in the Haitian constitution (St. Fort). One would think that Haitian Creole and French would have equal standing as both co-official languages, but studies have shown that only a small minority speak French while the majorities all know Haitian Creole.

This fact has also been confirmed when it's brought up while interviewing my Haitian friend, Stephanie. She is currently a college student in another CUNY school who agreed to sit down with me for a while to talk about Haitian Creole and her thoughts about her culture in relations to her life in New York now. Stephanie exclaims that although she knows both French and Haitian Creole since she learned them in school, most of her community back home spoke in the creole. Hardly ever was French used, except in formal circumstances.

Nevertheless, French is the preferred language when it comes to formal occasions, leaving Haitian Creole behind, being considered the "second language." As Joseph had stated in his work, "The connection between French and Haitian Creole may seem like an example of diglossia, but that is not the case. Only 10% of Haitians know and understand French, while all Haitians are fluent in Haitian Creole." While Haitian Creole may not be used in formalities, the fact that it is so well-known and used more often than French in Haiti sheds some light into how Haitian Creole has spread out of Haiti.

From the percentages Joseph gives, and from what Stephanie had said earlier, one can see that if Haitians migrate elsewhere, they are more likely to bring the Haitian Creole with them instead of French. In doing so, this creole ends up expanding in the area in which it is used. St. Fort states, “ In the Diaspora, Haitian Creole is a living language spoken by more than a million living in North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and even in Africa. ” For many years now, Haitian immigrants have been pouring into the United States, mainly the northeastern states.

The author Zephir describes this Haitian movement towards the north saying, “ Haitian immigration to the United States was initially slow in the first half of the 20th century. While the United States occupied Haiti from 1915-1934, a group of Haitian immigrants came to the United States to flee the occupation of their homeland. There were hundreds of immigrants, mostly from rural Haitian areas. Then in 1951-1960, thousands more Haitians followed. After the 1965 Immigration Act, Haitian immigration shot up. From 1932 until 2000, a total of 414, 401 Haitians came legally to the United States. So we can see the reason why Haitian immigrants move to the northeastern states is again revealed by Zephir. She writes, “ The two top cities where Haitians migrate to New York and Boston, followed by Philadelphia, Florida, and other places in the Midwest. New York is especially known for having the largest concentration of Haitians as well as some of the oldest and most established Haitian communities. An estimate of the Haitians living in New York and the surrounding areas is anywhere from 200, 000- 500, 000.

In Florida, the number is around 270, 000, followed by 75, 000 Haitians in Massachusetts. " Once these immigrants have settled and communities have sprung up, there is a slow increase in aid and support, helping to link the Haitian community together. The most evident form would be through the media. Now that technology is so developed and everything is more convenient, there is television, radio, and newspapers all using Haitian Creole, catering specifically to the Haitian immigrants.

Note that although this media may help unify the community and keep the native language intact, a Haitian immigrant who knows only Haitian Creole will be unable to get out of his social circle and really prosper since he does not know English, which is the more international language. Again, in my talk with Stephanie, she mentioned being surrounded by Haitian Creole upon her first month moving to New York. She spoke the creole with her relatives, could find some Haitian Creole or French channels on the television and even some newspapers.

However, upon enrolling into the university, she felt completely lost surrounded by English speaking students. She had to learn English on her own in order to be able to move comfortably and advance in the American community. Such is the case with Haitian children who go to American schools; they must learn to separate their home life, where they may speak Haitian Creole, with their school life, where everything is taught in English and the culture is different. Since Haitian Creole is not an international language such as English, Haitian children may become frustrated since they must quickly adapt to the new school environment.

Sometimes they lose interest in the school material and give up effort. Zephir writes that in order to prevent this, “ teachers should understand the unique character of the Haitian community and view Haitian Creole as a language just as important as Spanish or French. Additionally, home language instruction is just as valuable as that in school. ” By helping Haitian children to overcome these language differences as well as cultural differences, the teacher can also help the child see his own unique identity- not only as a Haitian but a Haitian-American.

Not only Haitian children experience hardships upon migrating to the United States but older speakers who have never had a chance to go to school or learn English have an even bigger barrier separating them from the new country they have come to. Again, as with Haitian children, without being fluent in English these adults are not likely to proceed very far out of their own Haitian communities, much less find good paying jobs to support themselves as well as their children's' education.

Buxton even states in his article, “ while the low-educated parents all work at low-income jobs, even the more educated parents have not yet obtained jobs on the level they had back in Haiti. ” When I asked Stephanie about her Haitian relatives here, she stated they are not completely comfortable with speaking English and have a slight accent. She noted also that because of this, they tended to stay more within the Haitian Creole-speaking circle and communicated mostly with other Haitians. Thus, with just Haitian Creole it is very unlikely any Haitian immigrants can successfully break into the American culture and mainstream life.

It is inevitable that with these two languages- French and Haitian Creole, Haitians must face a sort of identity dilemma. Haitians might be bilingual in both languages but the connotations and instances where the two languages are used are very different from one another. French is used in formal settings- therefore the speaker is considered to be more high-class and educated, having an all-around good quality. On the other hand, Haitians are much more comfortable speaking their creole, but being viewed as a “ language for the masses” it is given more negative connotations than French.

Haitian immigrants in the United States tend to use Haitian Creole more than French, but even so since they do not know English they are unable to get very far. Only upon mastering English will these Haitians be able to progress out into the American culture. First generation Haitians who have just migrated tend to experience this difficulty of learning another language and trying to get used to life in a different country, but second generation Haitians do not have as much trouble.

Even though there are no Haitian immersion programs which help a child learn its “ mother language” and culture, the second generation Haitian children quickly pick up Haitian Creole in the home environment and then just as easily learn English at school. Compared with their parents who are not compelled to use English in a social setting like school, second generation Haitian children quickly catch on to the American culture in school and stick to it, since that is the way of their peers and others their age.

In effect, the children sometimes become bilingual in both English and their Creole, or if they are extremely attached to their new-found American culture in school, speak mostly English without practicing their creole. When I asked Stephanie about how she felt if her child later on in the future became more American rather than Haitian, Stephanie thought for a long time. Then she responded that whatever the outcome, she will be happy because she realizes that just knowing Haitian Creole is not enough to get by in this country.

If learning English leads the child to becoming more Americanized then she is fine with that, since the child would be proficient in English and have no hindrances in his life. In conclusion we can see that Haitian Creole has an extensive history, from its origins as a pidgin to becoming a co-official language in Haiti to being carried over to the northeastern States via Haitian immigrants. The creole is widely spoken all across the world and is still alive and thriving in each of its speakers. However, the fact that this creole is not an international spoken language such as English poses problems in the way it survives.

True it is being spoken by people all around the world but by knowing that one creole alone, a person could not get far in the world. So, usually a person who knows Haitian Creole also speaks another international language- be it English or French. In the United States, Haitian Creole may continue to thrive and grow however not in settings such as schools and offices. Perhaps in more casual settings like homes and neighborhood communities this creole is used, but it probably will never rise to the level of an international language.

Many Haitians are trying to enlighten others about Haitian Creole- such as Zephir and St. Fort- and offer the language in universities. Code-switching is also popular with Haitians, as Stephanie tells me more and more she uses both Haitian Creole and English when speaking with her friends at the university. Perhaps with time, Haitian Creole will die out as the generations pass and the children choose to learn more international languages. Or there might be Haitian parents that insist on teaching their child the creole, along with another language, to remember their culture and history.

Either way, Haitian Creole is unlikely to reach international status.

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