Creole Exceptionalism and Accidents of History: A Conversation with Michel DeGraff

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Recorded May 9, 2004 at the Ray and Maria Stata Center, MIT Campus

DW-So I'll start with a question about where all of this may have, in a sense, started — did you grow up in Haiti?

MD-Yes, I did. I left Haiti when I was nineteen. I went from Port-au-Prince to New York City in August 1982 and stayed there for three and a half years, getting a degree in computer science at the City College of New York where I graduated in December 1985. I eventually went back to New York, actually to the Graduate Center of the City University of New York [CUNY] in 1992, for a one-year post-doctoral fellowship in linguistics with Richard Kayne. While at CUNY, I taught a graduate seminar on generative-syntax topics related to my dissertation on Haitian Creole. At CUNY, I also worked with John Holm and other creolists on the Comparative Creole Syntax project. It's at CUNY that I convinced myself that I was finally becoming a bona fide linguist.

DW-The product of the Comparative Creole Syntax project is coming out soon, right?

MD-(laughter) Yes, that project has been in the works since 1993. For one reason or another, the projects I get involved in usually take a long time to finish. So, I do hope it gets published soon.

DW-What's your earliest recollection of thinking about language as a scientific object of study?

MD-That probably came while I was an undergraduate working as an intern at Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey, in the Summer of
1985. Back then, at Bell Labs I was a computer scientist writing programs for linguists and artificial-intelligence researchers. My first programming assignment at Bell Labs was part of a larger project on speech synthesis. The overall goal was to output the pronunciation of input texts such as articles from The New York Times. The programs would take electronic texts as input and map this input into phonemic representations that could then be pronounced as human-like speech. My first project was to get the text-to-speech programs to appropriately approximate the correct pronunciation of French names—that is, to pronounce French names as would, say, a knowledgeable radio announcer. To do this, I had to tweak the algorithm that already worked on English words, and make it correctly pronounce names like “Catherine Deneuve” for example. It’s probably then that I first thought about the internal workings of language as an object of scientific study.

It’s also at Bell Labs that I first met, up close and personal, “real” linguists, including computational linguists—people like Ken Church, who was my supervisor at the Labs, Mitch Marcus, who was to later become my thesis co-advisor, Richard Sproat, Chilin Shih, Julia Hirschberg, Mary Beckman, Mark Liberman, Janet Pierrehumbert, Osamu Fujimura. And I must be missing some names. Oh, man, was I impressed and inspired!

So, that internship at Bell Labs in Summer 1985 was a key moment in my eventually becoming a linguist. Then after finishing up my last semester of computer science at City College in the Fall of 1985, I went back to work at Bell Labs. I moved from New York City to Murray Hill, New Jersey, in January 1986.

DW-Where did you study before going back to New York, to the Graduate Center?

MD-After working at Bell Labs for 8 months or so in 1986, I went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia where I studied for six years. That’s where I received my Ph.D.

DW-Did you do your M.A. in linguistics along the way?

MD-No. You see, all my undergraduate and graduate degrees are technically in computer science. While I was at UPenn [University of Pennsylvania] there was, and there still is now, intensive collaboration between linguists, psychologists, philosophers and computer scientists. UPenn has a very strong interdisciplinary program in cognitive science, with linguistics as one strong focus. Even though I was matriculated in computer science, I was able, and even encouraged,
to take quite a few courses in linguistics. Actually my thesis committee had more linguists than computer scientists—no less than four: Tony Kroch, Gillian Sankoff, Sabine latridou, who is now my colleague at MIT and whose office is right next door, and Pieter Muysken, my external reader, who was then at the University of Amsterdam. The two computer scientists were Mitch Marcus and Aravind Joshi. My dissertation is really a linguistic study, though officially I was in computer science then.

DW—Were there particular linguists who were influential for you when you were first starting out as a linguist?

MD—I’ve already mentioned the Bell Lab linguists. The linguist that first got me thinking seriously about Creoles is Gillian Sankoff. She was one of my professors and thesis advisors at UPenn. I took her graduate seminar on Pidgins and Creoles and of course I started thinking about where my own language fit or didn’t fit within the various theories that were surveyed in class and within the folk theories I had previously absorbed about Haitian Creole.

DW—What is your dissertation about?

MD—It’s about Haitian Creole and its syntactic properties, how we can use the principles—and-parameters framework, alongside some very, very, restricted version of the Language Bioprogram Hypothesis, to understand the emergence of various structures in Haitian Creole. Actually the thesis is very humble in scope: I focused on only two sets of syntactic properties, namely subject- and predication-related properties.

DW—Where did your social-scientific perspective come from then? Is it a result of outside reading?

MD—Yes, yes, as a result of my curiosity. While I was a graduate student, most of my courses were in linguistics and computer science. I didn’t take any course in social theory or in philosophy of science. You see, even I myself never seriously questioned basic dogma in Creole Studies while I was working on my dissertation. So if you look at my dissertation and my earliest publications, you will see that I somewhat accepted some of the standard claims about Creoles, even though these claims, by and large, were contradicted by data I had access to, data that were right on the tip of my tongue, and literally so—data about Haitian Creole morphology, for example... I would write about these data only much later on, in the late ’90s... In the early ’90s, during my dissertating years, there I was with the relevant data right on the tip of

my tongue, yet when doing my linguistic work I was not using these
data to check what were sometimes quite spectacularly erroneous
claims, such as the then traditional view that Creoles, because of their
ancestry in Pidgin languages, are extraordinarily simple languages with
exceptionally reduced morphology. In fact, I didn’t even discuss the
relevant morphology data in my thesis, even though these data, as I
would understand later on, are most germane to elucidating the role of
acquisition in Creole genesis.

Eventually, as part of an introspective exercise in reflexive sociology,
I became curious as to how any linguist, including myself, could ever
believe in hypotheses that are so straightforwardly falsified by data
that are quite accessible—data that I and any other Creole speaker
have direct access to.

DW-So, the theory had for you too become the data, at least for a
certain period?

MD-Yes, that seems the right way to put it. That realization led me to
look into issues of epistemology and issues of how perception is
influenced by our positioning within certain hierarchies of power and
within certain socio-historical contexts. I kept stepping back and back
and back in order to understand how power hierarchies from the very
beginning of Creole Studies onward would influence creolists’ views of
what Creole languages look like or should look like. And then I wanted to
understand when and how, in the history of creolistics, prescription first
became description without the creolist being aware of the trumpery.

DW-Were you reading people like Foucault, Said, and Bourdieu as
you started to identify what you would eventually term ‘Creole
Exceptionalism’?

MD-That must have come later, probably while discussing these
matters with various colleagues. I really cannot remember how I first
came to read these authors. Now looking back, it seems natural that I
had to read these authors because they carefully look at the relationship
between power and knowledge. Also relevant here is that these authors
have dissected the relationship between, on the one hand, our positions
within various social hierarchies and, on the other hand, our ways of
understanding or not understanding the world. In the case at hand, I
myself was interested in the relationship between, on the one hand,
the development and structure of colonial and post-colonial societies
and, on the other hand, creolists’ mis-representations of the
development and structures of Creole languages.

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(2005): 1-34.
DW-In my case I read those authors first. When I started in Creole Studies I felt in a sense like an outsider, coming to linguistics from social anthropology. I wanted creolists to pay more attention to ideology so I spoke about this at a Caribe 2000 conference in Puerto Rico. I talked about what I saw as a general absence of discussions of linguists’ community involvement in Creole-speaking communities. That generated a lot of discussion. Lowell Fiet, the founding editor of Sargasso, suggested that a volume of the journal be set aside to this and related issues. Shortly thereafter I discovered your work, which I consider extremely relevant. That’s how I got here. Since then I’ve discussed Creole Exceptionalism at a couple of conferences. Occasionally people have reacted with a lot of suspicion. More than once I’ve been told that exceptionalism toward Creoles is something of the past.

MD-Oh, I see. That’s not surprising though. We linguists, it seems to me, like to believe that, by and large, we are a progressive and liberal bunch. So some of us may become quite testy as soon as the egalitarian credentials of our field are questioned. Well, some creolists have taken the sort of criticism you’ve read in my Language discussion note ‘Against Creole Exceptionalism’ as a personal attack on their integrity. Others feel that they have been personally accused of racism. It’s like a knee-jerk reflex. In fact, lately I have been brainstorming, alone then with some colleagues, on how to frame my critique of Creole Exceptionalism in a way that will allow creolists to feel less defensive and more empathic vis-à-vis the reflexive approach I have proposed in my recent writings.

DW-My next question is about your definition of Creoles, specifically the way you define this group of languages in ‘Against Creole Exceptionalism.’ You write that you are relying on “a language-external sociohistorical definition.” You also state that you see Creoles as varieties that “developed between Europeans and Africans during colonization.” Would this definition open up “Creole” to include Caribbean varieties of Spanish, or am I pushing it too far? I am taking the definition word by word, trying to read outside the usual set of assumptions.


MD-That’s a good and fair question. One of the points that I have tried
to make and that other people have tried to make, like Salikoko Mufwene
from the early 1980s onward, is that there is no valid structural criteria
for what a Creole is. So, if the term “Creole” can refer to any restructured
variety spoken between Europeans and Africans in the context of
language contact in the Caribbean, then why don’t we call “Creoles” the
varieties of Caribbean Spanish that you mention? Note though that in
my Language article I explicitly consider “Creoles” as an “ostensive label,”
that is, a label that I take to refer to certain, not necessarily all, varieties
that developed between Europeans and Africans in the colonial
Caribbean. In explaining my use of the term “Creole,” I do not appeal to
any “if and only if” definition: I do not appeal to any set of necessary and
sufficient conditions for the use of this term.

Be that as it may, one can reasonably wonder whether there was a
period when certain Caribbean Spanish varieties, such as those you have
in mind, were referred to as “Creoles” by contemporary observers. This
is conceivable given that such varieties were spoken by people called
“Creoles”—that is, by the locally-born—among others. But this is really
a question for historians. In the meantime, you may well be right: my
use of the term may open up these Caribbean Spanish varieties for
consideration as Creoles.

In any case, for me the label is not crucial. I don’t believe that any
grouping of “Creole” languages, under any sort of criteria, is going to
give us any special access to, say, the workings of the language acquisition
device. In other words, my hunch is that putting the label “Creole” on
some subset of the world’s languages does not automatically offer the
linguist any epistemological advantage: Creole languages, under
whatever definition, do not exclusively hold the key to Universal
Grammar or to any other scientific holy grail. The label “Creole” is really
incidental, you see. As far as I can tell, whether or not a particular
language is called “Creole” by linguists or others is a fact of a purely
sociohistorical nature. This is essentially Salikoko’s argument from the
early eighties onward.

DW-Right. But, grouping a certain variety that emerged between
Africans and Europeans with other Creoles when other creolists reject
this move for the same language seems to be a powerful statement, a
logical consequence of your definition, and to me one that underscores
what Creoles are. Varieties like Puerto Rican Spanish, Samaná English,
and African-American Vernacular English come to mind. Your definition

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allows a system of classification that would include these languages as Creoles while those proposed by others don’t.

MD-Yes, I understand what you’re saying. But I myself would not want to say that. I doubt that my use of the term “Creole” offers any rigorous system of linguistic classification. Again, I take “Creole” to be a somewhat ad hoc ostensive label that is used to point to certain speech varieties. This label “Creole” really doesn’t have any operational and strictly-linguistic theoretical criteria. I don’t take it to imply that if you have a certain broadly-defined socio-historical context, then you necessarily have Creole formation. I really meant to say in the Language article that this label “Creole” is ostensive, and the ostention—how we list the membership of the class of “Creole” languages—can happen in various ways. For example, some of the varieties that linguists call Creoles were already called “Creole” by their speakers themselves before any bona fide linguist showed up in that Creole community. So these are “Creole” languages because their speakers themselves refer to them as such, and those speakers, by and large, don’t care about any linguistic or sociohistorical definition of the term that would apply to other languages besides their own. This is true of the majority of Haitian Creole speakers for example.

In any case, calling these languages “Creoles” or “patois” or “broken French” or “x” or “y” is not going to turn them into special windows onto UG or onto language-evolution processes, pace a certain school of creolistics. You see, what I am trying to argue against is this hypothesis that there is certain feature “+Creole” with special linguistic properties and that languages with such a “+Creole” feature will teach us something unique about our language faculty. Recall that the term “Creole” was once used to single out groups of people: the “Creole” slaves versus the African-born slaves, “the Creole whites” versus the European-born whites, and so on. Later the term “Creole” was extended to the speech varieties spoken by the “Creole” people. So, if you look at the history of the term, there again it is clear that the term originally had no linguistic-structural weight attached to it. The idea then was simply that these were “Creole” people by virtue of their place of birth and family history, and so their speech was called “Creole” by extension of the ethnographic use of the term. At first, there was no claim that “Creole” speech had sui generis structural properties that invariably held across space and across time.

DW-I see. Speaking of these names, I have noticed that when you write the word “Creole” you capitalize the ‘c.’ Others don’t.

MD-Yes, I had to forcefully ask editors for the permission to do so. I still remember lengthy exchanges with several editors about my capital “C” in “Creole.” The way I see it, although the term “Creole” has no linguistic-structural correlates, we can reasonably consider Creoles—specially the classic Creoles of the Caribbean—as a group of languages with commonalities in their social history and the related geopolitics, thus the need for the capital “C,” somewhat on a par with, say, Romance or African languages.

DW-So you see the word as a proper noun and to not recognize that is to adhere to exceptional rules in terms of the rules of capitalization.

MD-Exactly. Consider terms such as “Romance languages” and “African languages.” They too rely on a variety of assumptions about sociohistorical and geopolitical, not necessarily structural, commonalities. In the case of “Creole” with capital “C,” I had to ask editors to allow that and some have actually refused. Fortunately, Language editor Brian Joseph graciously went along with my typographical practice.

DW-Another area in which creolistics may stand out from other areas of linguistics is the researcher’s fluency in the language being studied. Do you think creolists who are not native speakers should try to learn to speak the languages they study?

MD-Of course. Can you imagine a scholarly society of germanicists who by and large do not speak any Germanic language fluently. Or can you imagine a scholarly society of sinologists where little Chinese is spoken fluently? In Creole Studies many creolists are not fluent in any of the languages they study. This seems an exceptional state of affairs—perhaps another facet of Creole Exceptionalism.

DW-As you have pointed out, in 1914 Hugo Schuchardt wrote that “Creole languages have not yet been generally appreciated for their general significance.” Ninety years have passed, do you still think that’s still true?

MD-In some ways, yes, but not in all quarters. Look at the work of people like, say, Enoch Aboh, Marlyse Baptiste, Jean-Robert Cadely, Viviane Déprez, Stephanie Durrieu, Salikoko Mufwene, Pieter Muysken, Tonjes Veenstra, etc. There are many others, but these are some of the creolists that I’ve read recently, so their names are still fresh in my mind. These linguists, each in their own way, are trying to make Creoles relevant to theoretical linguistics in a coherent and constructive fashion that is straightforwardly uniformitarian. But in
some other instances—some of them quite spectacular and popular—
Creoles are still being confined to small corners of linguistic typology
in a way that makes them mostly irrelevant to general linguistics.
Indeed, as I point out at the end of that Language article, many linguists
have still not heeded Schuchardt’s judicious exhortation.

DW-Another way of discussing quarters is, I suppose, in terms of
institutions. For example, it is only recently that many major universities
have someone who specializes in Creoles on their faculty. Do you think
this can be taken as a sign of their significance being recognized, as a
sign that Creoles are now more widely recognized as languages worthy
of serious study?

MD-Yes, that’s right. We can perhaps explore another perspective
on Creole Exceptionalism by surveying creolists who teach in linguistic
departments. In what capacity were these creolists hired? Ideally, you
would want to have creolists in all branches of linguistics, being hired
in all quarters of the discipline, not only as creolists per se or as
sociolinguists per se. Of course, it’s a good thing to have some creolists
hired as creolists or as sociolinguists, but any given creolist has to be
recognized for their potential contributions to general linguistics, as
syntacticians, as semanticists, as phonologists and so on.

DW-So they would be all over the place.

MD-Yes, not only as creolists, but as general linguists as well, working
in various subfields of, say, so-called core theoretical linguistics. I am
not sure this has happened yet, but mine is only an unconfirmed
intuition—I don’t have any reliable statistics handy on the employment
profiles of creolists. We do have to be careful about broad
generalizations and I may well have the wrong impression. I hope I do!
But I suspect that there is a tendency to find creolists confined to certain
areas of linguistics. This seems an important issue to address toward
the un marginalization of both Creole languages and Creole Studies.

DW-Perhaps creolists are found most often as sociolinguists?

MD-Yes, it seems so, and for good reasons, given at least the
fascinating social factors involved in the creation of, and in the linguistic
variation found in, Creole communities. Yet we should resist any
tendency to marginalize Creoles and creolists. I see this tendency
toward marginalization reflected in textbooks. If you look at major
linguistics textbooks, the chapters where Creole languages and their
development are discussed are usually distinct from the chapters where,
say, Romance and Germanic languages and their development are

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discussed. You will find Romance and Germanic languages discussed within the context of, for example, Stammbaumtheorie models of language change. Then you get Creoles in a separate chapter as if they unquestionably were the products of distinct processes of language development—sui generis processes of so-called creolization.

It seems to me that the segregation of creolistics from general linguistics is reified in the make-up of linguistic textbooks where Creole languages are introduced in distinct chapters as if they were a special kind of languages with their own exceptional laws of evolution and their own exceptional structural profiles. This is Creole Exceptionalism to the hilt.

DW-The problem that you are pointing to, the content of textbooks, seems to guarantee that highly problematic ideas are likely to be perpetuated among future linguists.

MD-That’s right.

DW-So in that instance general linguistics seems to be rejecting certain ideas that have gained ground in creolistics, change is taking place at a slow pace. In other instances it is perhaps less so. I recently read a handout that you passed out in 1998 in St. Lucia. In it you discuss language change and language acquisition and the need for creolists to dialogue with specialists in these areas. You describe this sort of collaboration as producing “new data,” because at that point the type of collaboration you envisioned had not been systematically considered. Your handout states that there should be intradisciplinary dialogue among these subfields of linguistics. Do you think that has happened more since then?

MD-I think so. I think that people are being more constructive and more precise in their interdisciplinary agendas. People are making theoretical claims that have more empirical bite and analytical depth. We must remember that efforts to connect creolization to acquisition started quite a long time ago. So if you look at works in the nineteenth century by Lucien Adam, Auguste de Saint-Quentin, Julien Vinson, Adolfo Coelho, and so on, you can see that very early on there were claims made that creolization should be understood from the perspec-

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tive of language acquisition. But these earlier claims were very general, very broad claims. In contrast, recent efforts in that vein have been more careful and more precise. Linguists have been making lots of efforts to consider concrete datasets in trying to determine the precise nature of the relationship between acquisition and creolization—and more generally the relationship between acquisition and language change. That I find exciting.\(^3\)

DW-One of the texts that I have reread a few times recently is *Comparative Afro-American.*\(^4\) It was published in 1980 but the work that went into it began well before that. In the ‘Introduction,’ Alleyne says that when he initiated the work his interest was “overwhelmingly academic and objective.” He explains that later there were many turns of events, specifically what he calls the “Black Revolution.” He states that this gave the study of Creoles a new significance, that the study “of Creoles took on a new dimension and a new significance having become involved in the social, cultural, and political conflicts of our times.” This is exciting. When I read that I felt optimistic about the significance and potential reception of the work linguists can do. It seems that there was a point of entry available at that time, a chance for research to be utilized. Yet much later the field seems to me to still be dealing with many of the same issues. Do you find that science is more open to uniformitarian ideas about Creoles at certain historical moments and then other instances in which we are in a sense pushed back?

MD-You are probably right. Maybe these issues will always be around. In this light, the question is how many people are going to be in one camp versus the other. So if you look, for example, at a scholar like William Greenfield, an early nineteenth-century missionary, you see that in a way he was already uniformitarian. He was very much ahead of his times. One could even call him Chomskyan. Of course I mean

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“Chomskyan” before there was Chomsky. Indeed Greenfield believed that, when it comes to the history of languages like Sranan in Surinam and to the role of African speakers in the development of Sranan, the same mechanisms operated in the minds of these speakers as did in the minds of the speakers who contributed to the development of, say, English. Adolfo Coelho, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, made somewhat similar claims. For Greenfield back in 1830, as for Chomsky more than a century later, the human language faculty is the same in all climes, so there cannot be any fundamental difference in the mental mechanisms involved in the history of Creoles versus non-Creoles. But, not many people paid attention to what Greenfield was saying about the non-exceptional nature of Creole languages. Today again we have people like myself, Mufwene and others making arguments that in essence, if not in the details, are similar to Greenfield’s.

Today, though, we have many more linguists studying Creoles from within an egalitarian framework à la Greenfield. Maybe there will always be anti-Greenfield holdovers. Again we’re talking about people, and people, including creolists, always have special interests, agendas and assumptions that go beyond linguistics proper—interests, agendas and assumptions of a sociohistorical and political nature. It seems that we will always find people whose perceptions of linguistic data are influenced by factors such as socioeconomic standing and political and psychological interests, that is, by biases of various sorts. This points to the usefulness of being aware of how we perceive certain groups of people (for example, Haitians) while we are in the business of analyzing and constructing theories about the languages they speak (for example, Haitian Creole). Linguists are human beings. As human beings we allow other factors beyond linguistic data to influence our theories. This must also be true even—or, rather, specially—with people like myself. I happen to be both a creolist and a Creole speaker, and it is probably because of my particular history that I am sensitive to certain problems and got to investigate certain issues and make certain claims. At the same time, it’s also because of my personal history that I no doubt am oblivious to certain other problems. So in some sense I too am letting my personal history influence my problem-solving and theory-making practices. Who doesn’t? In my own case, I must hope, of course, that this is a good thing, although I must try to continuously

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monitor my personal motivations and their influence on my analyses, as I must continue to search for the blind spots that my personal history induce in my scientific endeavors. Not an easy task.

DW-What do you think about the emphasis on language genesis within Creole Studies? Do you think that the present focus on Creole genesis is indicative of Creole Exceptionalism?

MD-That’s a good question - why is the genesis question so important in Creole Studies? I suspect that all scientists are, in principle, fascinated by myths of geneses. How did it all start? Our universe, the earth, life, our human-ness? Where do they come from? How did they originate? This preoccupation with beginnings is not exclusive to Pidgin and Creole Studies. You know, it’s also found in fields like physics, astronomy, biology, anthropology, etc. In these disciplines as well, researchers have long been intrigued by beginnings. Think of Darwin, for example. Perhaps, the need to wonder how we got to be where we are is something that is genetically wired in our human species.

In Creole Studies this preoccupation with beginnings is related to, among other things, the too common belief that Creoles are completely new languages, the newest languages that are available to inspection by linguists. If that is true, then we creolists would of course want to use them as test tubes toward understanding the processes whereby languages are created across generations and even in the species—in the evolutionary beginnings of homo sapiens. By definition then, creolists would be empirically better equipped than other linguists to investigate processes of language genesis. The idea is that other languages like English and French were created too long ago to be successfully mined for precise hints regarding the language-genesis riddle. But then one question to ask is whether Creole languages are as radically “new” as they are so often claimed to be.

As a matter of fact, this idea of newness is one of the assumptions that I have questioned in some of my recent work. By what criteria are Creoles considered to be completely new languages? Are Creoles considered completely new because somehow we have assumed—because we have postulated by fiat—that they have to be so? Is it because we have assumed that the people involved in their formation (for example, the Africans in the colonial Caribbean) could in no way replicate any of the structures that underlie the languages they were being exposed to (for example, the European languages spoken in the colonial Caribbean). So, the story goes, these Afri-
cans and their descendants had to create completely new languages from scratch so to speak, with completely new structures. Or, as another story goes, these Africans in the Caribbean had to replicate European-sounding languages with underlying structures derived exclusively from their native African languages. I myself question all these assumptions about the development of Creole languages. I've done this in a 2001 commentary on “Neo-Darwinian linguistics” in *Linguistic Typology* and a 2002 review article on “Relexification” in *Anthropological Linguistics*.6

DW-You mean you question the idea of a break in transmission?

MD-That's right. If we start questioning these claims that there somehow existed a break in transmission in the history of Creole languages, then this act of questioning may lead us to conclude that Creole languages are not radically newer than French or English. In fact, if you select your parameters carefully then you can actually claim that in some ways the history of English and of French must have involved a greater break in transmission than the history of Haitian Creole did. If that is the case, then Creoles cannot by any means be singled out in terms of what they may tell us about genesis processes. I elaborate this argument in a chapter to appear in Kayne and Cinque’s *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Syntax* [Oxford University Press]. There is a pre-publication version of that chapter on my MIT website.

DW-That reminds me of something Alleyne says in the paper of his to be included in this volume of *Sargasso*. He presents the idea that once we depart from the issue of genesis, then Creolistics is just like any other linguistics.7

MD-Of course, I agree with Alleyne. And even when we consider their phylogeny, Creoles may not constitute a special case. Again, take the criterion of newness. Well, I doubt that we have a reliable metric for what constitutes a new language. What constitutes new-ness seems quite subjective. This is something that I discuss at length in that 2001 commentary on ‘Neo-Darwinian Linguistics’ in *Linguistic Typology* that I mentioned earlier. If you are going to define new languages in terms of speech communities, then Caribbean Creoles are definitely new

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7 See M. Alleyne’s article ‘Lest We Forget’ in this volume.
because Creole communities in the Caribbean were to a large extent created anew so to speak, made up of people coming from different places and cultures. But I am not sure that this sort of sociohistorical scenario and this sort of newness warrant the singling out of Creole languages in our investigation of language genesis. The history of the world—including the history of, say, Romance and Germanic languages—is replete of such cases where new communities are formed that adopt and adapt some pre-existing language as their new communal language. Creole languages are yet another instantiation of this quite common sociohistorical scenario where new communities adopt and adapt some so-called “old” language as their so-called “new” language. In this light, the creation of so-called “new” languages becomes a rather banal phenomenon. In fact, Meillet took this idea even further with his logically coherent claim that every instance of language acquisition is an instance of language creation—“total re-creation” he called it. By the way, Meillet also argued that various syntactic properties of French and English were completely new creations when compared with their analogues in their Latin and Old Germanic ancestors, respectively.

DW—You include an interesting quote from Saussure at the beginning of ‘Against Creole Exceptionalism.’ In 1916 he wrote, “no other subject [outside of language] has fostered more absurd notions, more illusions, and more fantasies” and then he goes on to identify denouncing and eradicating these as the primary task of the linguist. You ask what to do when prejudices, illusions, and fantasies underlie some of the foundations of Creole Studies. But one of the things I have noticed is that in describing anti-exceptionalism, which I think of as your act of eradication and denouncement, you pull from early creolists’ work. Are these early uniformitarian ideas, and the resistance to the dominant view embodied in them, also part of the foundation of Pidgin and Creole Studies?

MD—It seems that you are now going back to the 1830s and referring to figures like William Greenfield. Earlier in this interview, I mentioned that, as an egalitarian and a uniformitarian creolist in the nineteenth century, Greenfield belonged to a minority. Besides, Greenfield’s views have been neglected for the larger part of the nineteenth and twentieth

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centuries. What Greenfield was saying is that there is no intrinsic difference in the way Creoles are created versus the way non-Creoles are created. He noted that in all cases of language evolution, in all instances of language change, there is language contact. What Greenfield was saying back in the nineteenth century was a radical claim, a claim that was rejected by most of his contemporaries, including the well-meaning missionaries who were Greenfield’s colleagues.

You see, Greenfield was making his uniformitarian claims to support the idea of writing the Bible using Sranan. This was a very difficult argument to accept: back then, Africans were perceived, had to be perceived, as lesser humans with lesser cognitive capacities. After all, Africans as allegedly lesser beings were often considered as slaves by nature—designed by God to serve as slaves for the benefit of Europeans. When he was alive, Greenfield’s views were not part of what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science”—his views were then “unthinkable” in Foucault’s sense. During Greenfield’s time, as well as before and after, “normal science” and “thinkable thoughts” in linguistics viewed Creoles as exceptional, as extraordinarily simplified languages, as degenerate languages, as impoverished languages, etc. The majority of early creolists believed, had to believe, that Creoles belong to lesser realms of linguistic typology, so the parity of Creoles and non-Creoles was “unthinkable.” These anti-egalitarian beliefs form the foundation of Creole Studies.

My argument in ‘Against Creole Exceptionalism’ is that such beliefs were banal consequences of the larger sociohistorical and geopolitical context of early Creole Studies. It is that anti-egalitarian social context that made Uniformitarianism unthinkable in early creolistics. Such context, it seems to me, is important for contemporary linguists to keep in mind, specially when considering that many of the claims now being made about Creole languages are in various ways similar to these early claims that were steeped in erroneous race-based theories. Though patently erroneous, these racist theories were useful as they served to justify and maintain slavery and colonialism. These theories were partly motivated by some of the pragmatic concerns that tried to reduce Africans to lesser humans as they were exploited as slave labor, a crucial ingredient in the development of the colonial plantations where Caribbean Creoles emerged.

DW-Keeping in mind that you have done an archaeology of Creole Exceptionalism, what I wonder is whether it might be possible and
useful to do an archaeology of the opposite, uniformitarianism or anti-exceptionalism, even though people like Greenfield were few and far between and had their points of view marginalized. You mention others in your own work too, though I realize some of them only reject exceptionalism as it pertains to specific topics. Thomas, for example, goes back and forth. Saint-Quentin, whom you also mention, is also someone who cites parallels between Romance languages and Creole languages.

MD-You’re making a fascinating and constructive point here. Indeed one component of a complete archaeology of Creole Exceptionalism would involve a study of these early scholars who argue against Creole Exceptionalism. In that vein, if you look at J.J. Thomas’s views, many of which were very progressive, you see that even he was quite ambivalent about Creoles. Faith Smith does a good job of showing where some of J.J. Thomas’s ambivalence comes from. Some of his progressive views were often contradicted by some other beliefs, like his prejudices against Haitians.  

DW-It seems that something similar can be said about Sylvain’s 1936 publication. I notice that you emphasize some of her negative views and others present them as more progressive. In each case a different side of her stance is highlighted. I suppose it’s hard to make a broad generalization.

MD-Yes, this would require a different kind of work from what I have done so far. What I have done for example in that Language discussion note you’re referring to is to look at broad, very broad, trends of Creole Exceptionalism. That Language article is a macroscopic study of Creole Exceptionalism. What you are now pointing out is that we also need microscopic studies: we need to look at particular authors and to see

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how their ideas emerged and evolved across their writings. How did their views get to be so different from the majority view? That’s a fascinating question.

Toward the beginning of this interview, you asked how I myself became interested in Foucault. Actually, if I could go back to the beginning of the interview and answer that question again, my answer would be different now that we’ve already spoken quite a bit. In a way, you are pushing me to look at my own work in a microscopic way, basically to do a microscopic reflexive study of my own work. To me what I did in the discussion note was grossly macroscopic. But what you are asking me now about people like Greenfield, Sylvain, and Thomas points to the fact that they are to some substantial degree different from the rest, and not so straightforwardly classifiable vis-à-vis Creole Exceptionalism. You are asking me about the origins and the extent of their differences vis-à-vis the majority views. How did they come to be so different and how different are they really, once we start looking very closely at their often ambivalent views on Creole languages? And you are also asking me about the evolution of my own writing and the influence of my personal history therein. This is archeology of a microscopic sort, of a sort that I have not attempted yet. This is a worthwhile research project though, perhaps for a dissertation in the history of creolistics.

DW—Maybe Greenfield, Sylvain, and Thomas are different for some of the reasons that you are in a sense different?

MD—Perhaps. These reasons are what we could call accidents of history. That’s why if I were asked again the question how I came to identify Creole Exceptionalism I would answer it somewhat differently: I would probably trace it back further.

Maybe the accidents of history that I could talk about would go even further back in time. I could talk about my growing up in Haiti, my being exposed to various prejudices—virulent prejudices—against my native Haitian Creole, which many educated Haitians still consider “broken French.”

I could also go back to the times when as a child I believed that I spoke “one and a half language.” Haitian Creole, the language I was most fluent in, would then count as one “half” language whereas French, the language of prestige, of authority, of the classroom, etc., would count as one “full” language.
Then I could go back to my trying to reconcile these ideas that I believed in as a child in Haiti and these ideas that I studied later as a doctoral student in linguistics at UPenn. These accidents of history would include my trying to come to terms with these two sets of ideas, a process that actually took quite some time. Sometimes these two sets of ideas would clash—for example, vis-à-vis the generativists’ study of a Universal Grammar common to all the species—or they would overlap—for example, vis-à-vis certain creolists’ claims that Creoles emerge from a sui generis “abnormal and catastrophic break in transmission.”

Perhaps we can see some of this resolution process unfurling in the two sets of items that you have asked me about: my thesis alongside my early post-thesis publications versus my more recent work. While writing my thesis, I found myself far removed from my childhood belief that Haitian Creole was a broken half language, yet not so far removed from the scholarly dogma that Creoles are exceptional languages whose history includes a catastrophic and abnormal break in transmission. Then later on, I started realizing that, with respect to their respective historical roots and political implications, the scholarly dogmas were not far removed from the dogmas in my childhood.

DW-Then maybe there are two intertwined narratives, but getting at this latter one requires making more connections.

MD-Exactly, it takes more reflexivity. The way I discussed this earlier in the interview now seems too restricted: that earlier discussion acknowledges only one set of events. This limitation has become clear as we have continued talking.

DW-I have a quote from this same note to ask you about. You write that, “the mental processes underlying Creole genesis are similar to those underlying language change.” Why do you use the word “similar” here. Are they similar or the same?

MD-The human mind is basically the same all over—with the same basic morphology and physiology—but I would guess that no two human minds are exactly the same down to fine-grained neurological make-up. Quite early on in the history of Creole Studies—in 1830 actually—William Greenfield, whom I’ve mentioned before, made the then-spectacular, and thoroughly modern, statement that “The human mind is the same in every clime; and accordingly we find nearly the same process adopted in the formation of language in every country.” Greenfield was comparing the history of Sranan with that of English.
Something like Greenfield’s uniformitarian stance was at the core of my concluding chapter in the MIT Press volume I edited on the role of language acquisition in language creation and language change [see note 3]. As to what might account for my use of the word “similar,” rather than “identical,” well, in the case of the Caribbean there seems to have been a higher proportion of adult second-language learners in the language-contact situation as compared to other cases such as the history of, say, Faroese, a Germanic language spoken on a small island in Northern Europe, a language spoken in a relatively homogeneous community with fewer migrants than in the colonial Caribbean.

DW-You are referring to sociohistorical influences, sociohistorical circumstances that are supposedly seldom seen, right?

MD-Yes. Going back to Greenfield, one could ask whether, in principle, mental processes of a different nature might kick in when you have so many adult second-language learners involved in the language-contact situation as compared to monolingual situations. Then again, pure monolingualism may well be an illusion. There’s always language contact to some degree, there always exist different dialects, or at the very least different idiolects, that co-exist within any single community. Even in the case of the Faroese Islands, it has been shown that there are dialects that are structurally quite distinct—in terms of, for example, verb placement.

By using the term “similar” I was being cautious about the possibility that a higher degree of language contact with a higher proportion of adult second-language learners may evoke acquisition strategies that are distinct from their counterparts in more homogeneous communities with fewer or no adult second-language learners. I suppose that whether things are “identical” or “similar” depends on the granularity of the comparison. Perhaps, with the appropriate caveats, I may be content to use “identical” given my working assumptions that the human mind is basically the same across the species and that language change, like Creole formation, implicates language contact.

DW-Now a follow-up question, is creolization normal language change in extraordinary circumstances?

MD-Well, yes. (quiet laughter) Then again I may even want to question usual assumptions—here the assumption that the circumstances surrounding Creole formation were all that extraordinary. In some cases, say if you look at the history of Romance, you may not have

slavery strictly speaking, but you have conditions that were quite
"rough" so to speak, conditions entailed by various kinds of imperialism
that brought diverse populations into contact, such as in the case of
the emergence of Old French from vulgar Latin.

DW-This is one reason I think that it is useful to trace the history of
the plantation economy in the Caribbean back to what happened in
Mediterranean contexts.

MD-Absolutely. Then we might even question the use of the phrase
"extraordinary circumstances" in the case of Creole formation. I don’t
want to minimize the exceptional horror of slavery per se. But perhaps
in the history of humanity the socio-linguistic circumstances of massive
language contact aren’t really rare at all. It could very well be that these
socio-linguistic circumstances had obtained many times before, times
when diverse populations with diverse languages were brought together
by force. Salikoko Mufwene makes related arguments, and much more
extensively so, in his book The Ecology of Language Evolution.

DW-In another of your articles, ‘On the Origins of Creoles,’ to me
you seem to do two things. You document the influence of scientific
racism on ideas about Creole languages. Then you do something which
I saw as quite different, you show that many of the specific arguments
made based on data from Creole languages actually don’t even hold
up as arguments, that they are flawed in terms of their mechanics and
linguistic rationale. What I want to know is if you also see these as two
different tasks.

MD-No, I see them as parts of one and the same task, but at the same
time I can distinguish them as sub-tasks.

At first what you have is a series of claims on, for example, the
extraordinary simplicity or the degeneracy of Creole—for example, the
claim that Creoles lack morphology. Originally these claims were related
to the then-common belief that Creole speakers, specially those of
African descent, were cognitively inferior beings, and thus deserve their
low socioeconomic status in the Caribbean plantation hierarchy. I have
tried to argue that, given the geopolitical and psychological interests
of early creolists, these Creole speakers could not be considered
cognitively on a par with the Europeans who owned the Africans
enslaved on Caribbean plantations. There you have this direct link
between knowledge and power: a particular and peculiar sort of pseudo-
knowledge is produced in order to justify and perpetuate a particular,
and all too real and brutal, hierarchy of power.

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(2005): 1-34.
I’d like to believe that this early stage of Creole Studies can be distinguished from the contemporary stage. Certain creolists are still making claims that in many dimensions resemble the colonial canards whereby Creoles are primitive and maximally simple languages—some widely quoted modern hypotheses even go so far as to consider Creoles as living replicas of the earliest human languages. Yet I doubt that contemporary creolists would by and large want to contribute to the oppression of Creole speakers. I would venture the guess that most creolists see their work—at least their linguistic-theoretical work—as orthogonal to the current socio-political status of Creole speakers. In fact, many creolists are quite remote from Creole communities and quite remote from the individuals whose policies and politics directly affect the well-being of Creole communities. Yet what I am trying to say—unfortunately, in a convoluted way—is that there is a textual and ideological link between early and contemporary creolistics in terms of the spirit of certain claims about Creole structures or lack hereof. Although the two sets of scholars—from the past and in the present—have clearly distinct geopolitical interests vis-à-vis Creole speakers and their communities, there is somehow this continuity, this textual continuity that leads all the way from the theoretical claims that were made in early creolistics to the claims that are being made today in contemporary creolistics.

For me, one way to become aware of and understand and demystify this continuity is to recognize the fact that creolists like other scholars often inherit earlier claims, some of them quite erroneous, without questioning them. This is perhaps so in my case as well. You see, when I came on the stage of Creole Studies I was reading all this stuff published by eminent linguists—linguists that commanded the respect of my teachers and mentors. To reject their ideas would have appeared as treason so to speak, so I accepted these ideas too uncritically. In some sense, my goal became to confirm these ideas.

What I am trying to say is that we should be extremely careful before we adopt claims from earlier works. What we should do is to approach these claims critically, especially when these claims are about people that historically have been perceived as inferior in various dimensions, people who by and large did not participate in, and could not benefit from, the production of this knowledge and the exercise of power encouraged and/or made possible by such knowledge.

DW-I am interested in your statement that contemporary linguists are not benefiting from this relationship in the same way. Many
professional creolists are from the countries that have recently had a dominating role in history, for example the European countries that colonized the Caribbean. So in terms of larger units like nations or institutions, even maybe universities at some level, aren’t these bound up in these same power relations?

MD-Yes, that is an important issue to explore. There might be a continuity of imbalance between the relevant scholars and their object of study, in this case the people being studied—a continuity of power imbalance between creolists and Creole speakers. That’s probably true.

But I would want to be careful, here because you see, in the case of early creolists like Saint-Quentin, Vinson, Adam, etc., they were quite explicit as to why Creole structures were so extraordinarily simple, why they had to be so simple. The answer was that Creole speakers themselves were generally primitive human beings—“with limited intelligence” in Saint-Quentin’s words or “of a race that is linguistically inferior” in Vinson’s words. Scholars like Saint-Quentin, Vinson, Adam, Baissac and so on were relatively unambiguous about their racist beliefs and they expressed these beliefs in clear prose. For them, there was a clear link between lack of linguistic structures and lack of cognitive capacity on the part of the corresponding speaker. And this is exactly where I want to draw a clean break between early creolists and most, though not all, contemporary creolists.

You’re right in pointing out that we still have a power imbalance between the creolists and the people studied by creolists: the Creole speakers that are studied by creolists are by and large excluded from the centers of intellectual, economic and political power that are generally accessible to the creolists, specially those creolists who live and work in the U.S. and Europe. And the latter often derive academic prestige and economic benefits from their study of Creole languages. This tension—or ‘paradox’ if you will—reaches absurdly imperialistic proportions when some of the same linguists who argue that Creole languages are primitive, simple, poor, etc., use the study of these same languages for their academic and individual enrichment. Yet I would hesitate to say that contemporary creolists as a class look down upon and want to dominate their objects of study like early creolists did.

DW-Right. So, you want to point out that it’s much more complicated than that?

MD-Exactly. I think there is much to be gained by looking at the ways in which the relationship between Creole speakers and creolists have

changed. But as you’re alluding to, the power imbalance remains, if under a different guise. And some of the theoretical claims that are made about Creoles still reflect the early history of Creole Studies—a history steeped in the savage inequalities of colonialism and slavery. This is exactly what I am trying to alert linguists about, and I thank you, Don, for your help in this project.

DW—Concerning a related point, in the discussion note you write that it is surprising that some of the theoretically and empirically problematic aspects of nineteenth-century Creole writings are found in modern linguistics. It is surprising in a sense, it’s also alarming. But when you consider the political and economic relationships that exist now and more covert forms of racism, such as institutional racism, and even ideas about culture, it looks like fertile ground for these early notions. When these realities are centered it’s not surprising.

MD—OK, it’s not surprising, I agree. You see, perhaps I use the term “surprising” because I am trying to be generous—charitable—to some extent. You see, the fact that most contemporary creolists have altogether rejected the race-based arguments of early creolists. This is something that I point out in that Language article ‘Against Creole Exceptionalism.’ Considering the history of our field, one could have expected more reflexivity on the part of contemporary creolists, especially in light of the overtly racist tone of earlier claims and of the recurrent parallels between earlier theories and contemporary theories.

Perhaps the most striking and long-standing continuity between early and contemporary theories is the view that Creoles are primitive languages, in one way or another. Today one fashionable claim that has gained much ground among both linguists and evolutionary theorists is that Pidgins resemble the structureless proto-language spoken by our pre-linguistic homo erectus ancestors and that Creoles resemble the archetypal human language, the first human language spoken by some of our earliest homo sapiens ancestors. In effect, such claims turn Creole speakers like myself into the linguistic “living fossils” of our primitive hominid ancestors 200,000 years ago at the cusp of the evolution of the earliest human language from protolanguage! Isn’t it surprising that there is still so little reflexivity among contemporary scholars regarding these absurd claims and their textual links with the racist colonial past of our field?

DW—I follow you. Switching gears a bit, I’d like to talk about ‘Postcolonial Creolistics.’ You define this approach to studying Creole languages first as the deconstruction of two types of fallacies. You tell

us that these are theoretical and empirical fallacies concerning our knowledge and lack of knowledge about Creole languages. Second, you say that it focuses on the relationship among three things: these fallacies, the sociohistorical development of Creole Studies, and the sociohistorical environments in which these languages emerged. You write that this sort of linguistics has four characteristics; it is reflexive, Cartesian-Uniformitarian, scientifically responsible, and socially responsible. My question is — is this a call for activism? I'm not sure because “deconstruction” might mean just making things clear, setting things on the table and then being done, which makes me think it’s not a call for activism. But at the same time these are very powerful statements, full of hope and possibility.

MD-Yes, of course I do want it to be a call for activism, but not activism of a dogmatic sort. Here again, I don't want to, and I cannot, ascribe intent to and police individual creolists. This issue goes back to something that you mentioned earlier. You mentioned earlier that many linguists who study Creoles come from outside the corresponding Creole communities. I do believe that one way—perhaps the principal way—to get rid of some of the older myths on Creoles is to have Creole speakers read what creolists write about them and to eventually maximize the intersection between the two sets, between Creole speakers and creolists.

My hunch is that if scholars knew that the people they are writing about can read and understand what is being said about them, then scholars would be more careful in their writing, and their claims would be more responsible vis-à-vis the data and more respectful vis-à-vis their subjects. But too few Creole speakers have any clue what is being written about them by creolists. This state of affairs is causing lots of “junk” to be written about Creole speakers and their languages.

It makes sense to me that creolists should help engage more Creole speakers in Creole Studies. But this notion that there should be more Creole speakers involved as creolists and as equal partners in Creole Studies is, for some, a radical proposal, a proposal that is quite disturbing. In fact, in a footnote at the end of my Language article “Against Creole Exceptionalism,” I cite some creolists according to whom Creole speakers qua linguists don’t have much to contribute to Creole Studies. Can you imagine the methodological and sociological import of such claims? These, I take it, are radically exceptionalist claims about the study of Creole languages and about the role of native speakers therein.

I myself, perhaps for obvious reasons, would like to see Creole Studies open up to and attract many more native Creole speakers. This is the only way the field can ever be on par with say, Romance linguistics or Germanic linguistics. Of course there are other benefits to be gained as well—psychological benefits, for example. We must remember that there are many Creole speakers who hold negative views of their languages; these Creole speakers would benefit from learning more about their languages and perchance from contributing to scientific progress in their twin roles as Creole speakers and as creolists. And here I am talking from first-person experience.

DW-Creole speakers even deny the existence of Creole languages in some cases.

MD-Here’s one postcolonial call for activism. We creolists should help convince Creole speakers that their language is just like any other language. This is surely one way of fighting anti-Creole negative attitudes. In Haiti, for example, Haitian Creole is still being stigmatized in various domains of use. Having Creole speakers become major players in Creole Studies would certainly help elevate the status of Creole languages and their speakers, specially so if investigations are carried out and published in the languages being investigated—as Yves Dejean has done for Haitian Creole, for example. People wouldn’t be able to claim so easily that Creole languages are a cognitive handicap for their speakers or that Creole languages cannot express abstract thought or that Creole languages cannot, and should not, be used in education.

What you call activism is basically a fight against ignorance and against pseudo-science in neo-colonial linguistics. And there too it helps to show how our contemporary attitudes about culture, including language and religion, are rooted in historical events, and how historical analysis may help elucidate the causes of various sorts of still prevailing ambivalence, including the kind of ambivalence that deprives Haitian Creole in Haiti, and other Haitian cultural phenomena like Vodou, of much symbolic capital. In any case, Creole languages have long benefitted creolists materially and otherwise, so it’s now time that Creole languages benefit Creole speakers as well, at all levels of their lives: educational, cultural, intellectual, political, scientific, and whatever.

DW-One thing that is fairly consistent among Creole languages is the stigma attached to them. So, I am tempted to say that this work as I am
imagining it should be engaged somehow in countering this stigma. But I don’t see you policing creolistics or wanting to do so. You don’t go as far as to say, “this is the way things must be done.” So, is Postcolonial Creolistics just a choice, an alternative that you hope people will take?

MD-(laughter) Actually I am quite happy if some creolists may just want to identify the morpho-phonological contexts in which nasal vowels occur, in, say, Haitian Creole, and to understand the mechanisms that determine their distribution, and I am even happier if they do it well, with reliable data and elegant and insightful analyses. This type of work may seem detached from concerns of Postcolonial Creolistics, yet such work is necessary, perhaps even more necessary than the “activism” in Postcolonial Creolistics.

DW-So, do you see Postcolonial Creolistics as some sort of proposal, a suggested framework?

MD-It’s more of a warning than a framework, I think—something like a manifesto, a constructive warning toward more reflexivity in our theory-making. This warning applies specially to a subset of the claims that have been made about Creoles—those claims that make Creoles look intrinsically special in the structural or developmental sense, with the implication that Creoles by nature are primitive, or less complex, or less expressive, or less adequate, or... you name it, any claim that makes Creole languages as a class look somehow inferior to non-Creole languages. This warning does not, and cannot, address the entire set of concerns that linguists have about Creole languages.

DW-What do you think about a sort of working hypothesis that all of the subfields of linguistics, all the potential areas of investigation on Creoles, can contribute somehow to Postcolonial Creolistics?

MD-Well, let’s see... Now I am thinking that another way to promote Postcolonial Creolistics is simply to work on Creole languages the same way one would work on non-Creole languages. Much of the theoretical work currently being done on English, Russian, Japanese, Xhosa and so on gives us a partial model for this. In these cases you have linguists trying to understand the structures of these languages, coming up with fine descriptions, insightful theories that can make non-trivial predictions, and these linguists do not have to address any allegation that the languages they study are inferior, degenerate, primitive, extraordinarily simple, with abnormal catastrophic history, etc.

For example, many Japanese linguists, including native Japanese speakers, do extremely important and fascinating work. They document
intricate patterns in their language and come up with constructive theoretical analyses in order to explain these patterns. In such work, there usually is no mention of stigmas, prejudices, political concerns, etc., concerning Japanese speakers and the languages they speak or do not, cannot, speak. Unlike the anti-exceptionalist creolist, the theoretical linguist working on Japanese usually need not concern herself with suspicious and absurd allegations like, for example, some hypothetical claim that Japanese is the world's simplest language.

DW-But, if the creolist knows that exceptionalism exists among linguists and ideas of inferiority are rampant among speakers, then is the equivalent of what the Japanese linguist does on Creoles, is that acceptable according to the guideline of social responsibility that you offer for Postcolonial Creolistics?

MD-That should be acceptable, no? Why should that be unacceptable? By doing this kind of strictly theoretical work, the creolist can bring to light patterns from Creole languages that are just as complex and as fascinating as patterns in other languages such as Japanese, thus concretely showing that Creole languages have as much to offer to linguistics as other languages do.

If all that one were to read in Creole Studies is the kind of critique that I have presented in 'Against Creole Exceptionalism,' then one would become quickly bored. Notwithstanding my post-colonial political agenda, I am certainly convinced that there is also a need for work that addresses Creole languages qua languages within theoretical frameworks that make no reference and leave no room for colonial or postcolonial issues. Such work would be of the same caliber, and as useful, as theoretical work on languages such as Japanese and English.

DW-I have imagined work within Postcolonial Creolistics that was of the same caliber, but by definition the linguist was obligated to at least share it with and use it for the benefit of the community. For example, research could be used to counter ignorance about Creoles, for contrastive analysis in education, to influence language attitudes, but without these "extra" things, some sort of reinvestment, it would not be "postcolonial."

MD-I see your point. But, no, I wouldn't draw such a line between postcolonial versus non-postcolonial creolistics. Try and think of it this way. Consider, for example, generative analyses of English parasitic gaps or Optimality-Theory analyses of reduplication in Tagalog. The details of these analyses cannot so easily be shared with the speech

community per se. These theoretical investigations are of interest primarily to the community of linguists, not to the communities of English and Tagalog speakers. If you look at the bulk of work being done in syntax, work that is published in journals like *Linguistic Inquiry*, much of this work has no direct application for language pedagogy, for changing public attitudes or for other applied purposes, and is not, and cannot be, accessible to the public at large. Yet this theoretical work *is* valuable scientific work. It allows the informed reader to understand not only how English and Tagalog work, but also how the mind works.

In this vein, it *is* important to have theoretical work of similar caliber on Creole languages as well, and it is a plus if some—or, one day, much—of this work is carried out by native Creole speakers. Of course such theoretical work need not mention postcolonialism, Creole Exceptionalism, Creole-related social stigma, etc.

As it turns out, current MIT students whose works on Haitian Creole I’ve been fortunate to read and comment on do not at all seem concerned by issues of Creole genesis and Creole Exceptionalism, by issues of anti-Creole prejudice, neo-colonialism in creolistics, etc. And I find this refreshing. These students do not carry any Creole-Exceptionalism chips on their shoulders, and their high-quality work is strictly of a descriptive and theoretical nature. Some of their work is rich in empirical discoveries which would not have been possible in absence of the sophisticated theoretical framework that these students, though not the general public, are fluent in. In effect, these MIT students, and other theoreticians elsewhere who work on Creoles, are making precious contributions, not only to creolistics, but to linguistic theory at large. The increased production of high-caliber theoretical work on Creole languages will surely contribute to putting these languages on a par with English, Japanese, etc., at least on the academic level, and even more so when this work starts involving a critical mass of native-speaker linguists.

I must say that I myself am dying to get back deeper into this kind of work where I can practice good theoretical linguistics without having to monitor any postcolonial angst. I may even say that, when it comes to linguistics per se, the strictly theoretical analytical work on the syntax, semantics, pragmatics, morphology, phonology, phonetics of Creole languages is even more important than the historiographical reflexive work on creolists’ ideologies. Yet the latter work may, to some extent, be a pre-requisite for the former. For example, there are now

Creole-related conferences and proceedings with "morphology" in their titles. These would not exist if creolists were, as in the past, still convinced for ideological reasons that Creole languages had no morphology worth discussing, that "Creole morphology" was an oxymoron.

DW- Do you do fieldwork at this stage in your career?

MD- Yes, all the time, 24/7—on myself and my Haitian acquaintances. More seriously, one of my pet projects is to document various dialects of Haitian Creole. Now that I have tenure I will be able to tend to this long-term, very long-term project more seriously. Luckily I have this great colleague, Yves Dejean, who has already done an amazing amount of recording of various groups in Haiti and who has shared much of his original data with me.

DW- Are they geographically defined dialects?

MD- Well, there is variation of course. Much of it is worth studying further. Yet, as far as I can tell, there isn't any amount of variation that would prevent mutual intelligibility across varieties. Another colleague, Dominique Fattier, has lots of relevant data some of which she has described in her 6-volume dialect atlas of Haitian Creole. Regarding Dejean's data: One item on my wishlist is one day to look for speakers from the relevant dialects and have them trained to transcribe data from the corresponding dialect. This is something that I look forward to doing, some time soon I hope, though I still don't have the funding for that. One advantage of that project is that it would provide the opportunity to get more Creole speakers interested in linguistic work. As I am sure you can imagine, this is a very long-term project.

DW- And you have a manuscript on Postcolonial Creolistics?

MD- Yes, I do. It's still in the "in preparation" stage.

DW- I thought so because it's listed in the discussion note as "forthcoming." I've read the glimpse you've given of it in this discussion note many times, squeezing it for all the information I can get. Now I'm checking Amazon every few weeks to see if it's available.11

MD- (Laughter). No, no, it's not ready yet. There's still lots more work to do. I'll let you know when it's out.

DW-Has Hale’s work been influential in the development of your upcoming work and the ideas we’ve been discussing?

MD-Definitely—very much so. For someone like Ken Hale the native speaker was central to good linguistic work, not just central as an informant but also central as a linguist. For Ken the task of the linguist who studies a language that he or she does not speak natively is to not use the native speaker merely as informant, but to actually train the informant to become a bona fide linguist. And Ken had such immense passion and respect for both languages and their speakers; this should be a model for all of us linguists.

DW-You talk about and use the term “creolophobia,” and point out that in certain historical contexts it is a “sensible investment strategy.” This is in your discussion of Bourdieu and symbolic capital. It reminds me that the ambivalence on the part of Creole speakers toward Creoles is linked to having a happy life, gaining employment, coping with what’s going on in a given sociohistorical context, one in which to not invest in “creolophobia” would be an unwise move. How would Postcolonial Creolistics succeed in challenging this ambivalence?

MD-To really deal with that ambivalence you have to go outside linguistics. What I am trying to point out in the passage that you mentioned is that the ambivalence is created by non-linguistic factors. As I mentioned earlier, it is created because of a larger historical and sociopolitical context. Redressing this ambivalence entails, among other things, the creation of more socio-economic and political opportunities for Creole speakers. That’s really not the job of linguists qua linguists. That’s the job of politicians, economists, policy makers, activists, etc. Linguists can surely fill such positions, and I can think of a couple of examples of Caribbean linguists in governmental posts where they can influence the design of policies that have direct impact on Creole speakers.

Where the linguist qua linguist can help is in producing and disseminating Creole-related knowledge that will ensure that the powers-that-be, including the educational system, do not discriminate against Creole speakers on the basis of their native languages.

In Haiti, for example, monolingual Creole speakers are still being penalized as soon as they enter the school system. Creole speakers, like speakers of other normal languages, are entitled to attend schools where their native languages are used as languages of instruction. But generally this is still not the case in the Caribbean. If in school you are

constantly told that your language makes you worthless, that your language is a cognitive handicap, then you're better off quickly abandoning your native language and trying to use a soi-disant superior language, though the latter is often not so easily accessible given current demographics. That's a serious penalty. In the case of Haitian monolingual Creole speakers, which constitute the majority in Haiti, how could they ever learn before entering school a language, namely French, that they have virtually no access to in their everyday lives? And sometimes the school teachers themselves are barely fluent in French.

This sort of irrationality has been demystified by Yves Dejean in a long series of writings, some of them in Haitian Creole. The title of Yves's most recent monograph Yon lekòl tèt anba nan yon peyi tèt anba translates as "An upside-down school system in an upside-down country." The larger question is how to ensure that Creole speakers get to share power and have control over the making of policies that affect them. That larger question goes way beyond linguistics per se. It involves turning the entire community upside-up...

DW-Do you feel like Postcolonial Creolistics is a timely proposal?

MD-(much laughter) Yes, it's been timely for the last four centuries! For me in the twenty-first century, it is timely because I happen to be writing at this particular moment. Abstracting away from the possibility of reincarnation, I couldn't have done this work at any other time. I am lucky because there are people—like Salikoko Mufwene whom I have already mentioned—who started doing similar work of demystification even before I myself became a linguist.

DW-Is there any work you see as particularly urgent in Pidgin and Creole Studies in general?

MD-There's so much that's urgent... Well, in my view more attention needs to be given to description and theoretical analyses of Creole languages. To me the field would be much more exciting if more creolists were analyzing more data, with these data and analyses contributing more insights to linguistic theory at large.

The field would surely benefit from more comparative work comparing Creoles among themselves and comparing Creoles to non-Creoles such as, say, Chinese, German, Irish, Hindi, Hebrew, Hausa, etc.

There's a need for more fieldwork, more investigation of dialectal variation, more training of native speakers as linguists, etc.

Actually, if I had to rank these projects in terms of urgency, what I
would put at the top is the opening up of all subfields of linguistics to more Creole speakers. However, that project is perhaps the most difficult. Here we have a major pipeline problem. Think of this challenge in Haiti where ninety percent of

Haitians are either illiterate or subliterate. Nonetheless I think that the training of Creole speakers as linguists is particularly urgent, to make sure that we have more native speakers involved in the study of Creole languages——this is a crucial methodological issue. Having more Creole speakers become expert creolists will also help disseminate the sort of knowledge that will enhance the status of both Creole languages and Creole speakers in Creole communities and in the relevant school systems, scholarly societies, etc. When was the last time you witnessed a native Saramaccan speaker present a paper at a Creole conference?

DW-One final question, I recently read the book *Linguistic Fieldwork* edited by Newman and Ratliff in which Hale and others talk about the importance of having native speakers as linguists and other issues relevant to Postcolonial Creolistics. In his article David Gil writes something that has stayed with me. He says, “the divide between theoreticians and descriptivists can be described as blind people groping at two different points of an elephant.” Do you see things the same way, either in Creole Studies or in linguistics in general?

MD-I myself don’t see this as such an insuperable divide, especially when I think of linguists such as Ken Hale or Richie Kayne. These are great descriptivists and to me what makes them such great descriptivists is that they are great theoreticians. As we know from Creole Studies, and as I have learned through my personal history, often our data are produced, or mis-produced, or eliminated, or caricatured because of our theories. So I doubt we can really get at good data without a good theory. I am not sure that I would want to say that theoreticians and descriptivists are groping from two different places. There are no data, no description without theory. Good theories produce good data and good descriptions; bad theories produce bad data and bad descriptions. It seems to me that ideally the theoretician and the descriptivist should be one and the same.

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DW—You mean existing in the same person, embodied in the same linguist?

MD—That’s right. Because the data often coincide with the theory. Take, for example, the idea of the “word” in linguistics, and consider what a “word” is in a language like Mohawk. What in English would be one sentence with three words—“I saw her”, say—may well be just one “word” in Mohawk. But how do we know that this three-word English sentence really corresponds to one single word in Mohawk? In order to begin to make any sense of this question, we need a theory of what a “word” is. Even at this simple level of description you cannot decide whether any given Mohawk utterance is one single word or more than one word if you don’t have a reliable theory for what a “word” is. From that perspective, the often talked-about divide between data and theory seems an illusion. Of course you can differentiate between a shallow theory and a complex theory, but then in turn we can differentiate a shallow description from a complex description. The more elaborate your theory, the more intricate and complex data you will be led to.

To go back to the Language discussion note that got you here, I think that Bourdieu puts it very well when he explains that every theory is a programme of perception.\textsuperscript{13} We cannot perceive data without theory. We cannot have theory alone, without data. Well, there may be exceptions to that rule: I am not sure what to say about the apparently data-less String Theory in theoretical physics. What a theory does is allow us to perceive reality in different ways—or, at least, imagine reality in previously unimaginable ways, as in the case of String Theory. Going back to the beginning of this interview, here’s what’s important for us creolists vis-à-vis Creole Exceptionalism: before deciding to hold on to any theory, we must at the very least be reflexive and try to understand the roots of that theory. Often the roots of our theories are outside of science per se, having sprouted from our personal and collective history, from our social positioning and special interests within the world’s various hierarchies.