

WORK PAPERS
OF THE
SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
IN ST. LUCIA

Number 5:

FORMER LEXIFIER LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Jeffrey H. Allen

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Summer Institute of Linguistics
Box 1030
Castries, Saint Lucia

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Typical Creole language contexts are those in which the Creole is in continual contact with its lexifier language (i.e. respectively a French Creole and French in the larger linguistic community). This type of situation normally leads to a process of decreolization due to the two related varieties. On the other hand, the history of some countries with certain political changes has resulted in the removal of the latter of the two from the situation and has led to its replacement by another accepted language, usually European. In an attempt to return to the lexifier language that had been so influential during the early developments of the Creole, these creolophones encounter a psychosociolinguistic barrier hereby known as Former Lexifier Language Acquisition.* This paper, specifically oriented at the French Creole of St. Lucia, will briefly investigate this topic by discussing the essential elements of this phenomenon according to linguistic research while also proposing a practical application to other fields.

Creole languages, a total number between 80 and 150 (Hancock 1971 & 1977, Grimes 1989) depending on the researcher and one's method of classification, are generally considered to develop from Pidgin languages that are themselves the result of the necessity to communicate in a given linguistic community with the coexistence of two or more non-related languages in at least one domain. Background information on theories of Pidgin and Creole language genesis can be consulted in Wardhaugh (1986) and Romaine (1989). One of the languages involved in the communicative process between these speakers of various backgrounds provides the majority of lexical items and is therefore referred to as the (European) Lexifier Language (E)LL of the Pidgin/Creole by Chaudenson (1987). Even after a number of generations of linguistic development, most Creoles in the world today remain in a position of low status under the linguistic dominance of the LL. A few examples of this are the French lexicon Creoles (FLCs) of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti and Reunion. Viewing the effects of constant contact between the Creole and the LL, a number of linguists (Stewart 1964, Decamp 1971, Bickerton 1981) have discussed the existence of more than just one broad vernacular language and one standard language; their conclusions launched forth the idea of a continuum ranging from a basilectal variety of the Creole to an acrolect within the vernacular which in turn continues on through the standard variety of the language which we have thus far termed the LL. Rather than exploring the depths of various aspects of the post-creole continuum as others have done already, the author simply indicates that in societies where the FLC is dominated by standard French, the Creole speakers are able to at least distinguish between that which is French Creole and that which is French as the respective linguistic forms are different. This is especially true and realized among Creole monolinguals possessing little or no comprehension of the high variety.

*I would like to thank Norbert Dupont and Michel Kouassi N'guessan for their helpful comments as I was developing the name for this concept. I would also like to thank my colleagues David Frank, George Huttar, and Harriet Jisa for reading the manuscript and making valuable suggestions.

The case presented thus far portrays the relationship between the Creole and the LL as related varieties. Now let us turn the island of St. Lucia where a different historical development presents the case where English replaced French as the official language though not nullifying the fact that French was always the LL of the Creole spoken there. This however has not impeded the influence of one language upon another. A century and a half of contact between the two, French Creole from one language family and English from another, has begun initial stages of relexification of the Creole by vocabulary borrowed from English. One may therefore say that three general varieties exist on the island--the French Creole, a relexified French Creole by English, and English. It is not the intent of this paper to discuss in detail the subdivision of language varieties within these three general categories as this may be found in Le Page (1977). It is important to understand though that the influence of the French language upon the French Creole basically came to an end over 150 years ago though it continues still to this day on neighboring islands.

With the disappearance of French a number of generations back, the St. Lucian French Creole speakers do not tend to have the same concept of language difference as do those from Martinique and Guadeloupe concerning their mother-tongue and the LL from where it received a good portion of the lexical items. Although the general impression expressed about FLCs in the Caribbean is that they are a sort of 'broken French', such a statement made by a typical St. Lucian will come from neither having heard French spoken nor having studied it. The assumption that the FLC is simply a deformed variety of French without any contact or background knowledge of the latter can lead to some great misconceptions and confusion when attempting to acquire this European language in school or in a francophone country. Let us recall from above that a Creole is the result of a number of generations of rapid and expanding language evolution following the pidginized mixture of two or more languages for purposes of communication. On the other hand, the European language (i.e. French) remains for the most part syntactically and phonologically homogeneous over the same period of time. One can conclude from an in-depth study of both French Creole and French (the author being a Creole language researcher and French language instructor) that the former is not just a broken form of the latter; they are two separate languages.

It is now important to look at the repercussions this situation may have on language learning according to both psychological and social factors involved, even though we recognize that it is not solely limited to these two areas. Only the relationship between French Creole and French will be discussed here in order to purport the hypothesis of Former Lexifier Language Acquisition (FLLA)/ Acquisition de l'Ancienne Langue Lexificatrice (AALL) as developed by J. Allen. For psycho-sociolinguistic issues concerning language acquisition of English for St. Lucians, these can be found in Dalphinis (1986) and Allen (1992).

As stated above, the constant influence of French was removed from the island in the beginning 1800's with the final decision that St. Lucia would be a territory of Great Britain and no longer of France. Although this fact of history changed the circumstances of the dominant language and the governing legislative body, it did not destroy the

culture existing at the time that was favorably endowed with a vast number of elements brought in during periods of French dominion of the preceding century and a half. Without institutions of higher education, teaching of French as a language did not continue on the island. Such education was only available for those St. Lucians having the opportunity to study in Great Britain. Very recent changes though indicate that students can learn French in the institutions affiliated with the University of the West Indies and the French Université des Antilles et de la Guyane. It is even possible for students to learn French at the secondary level of studies according to Crosbie & Crosbie (personal communication, 1991). Research is still underway to determine all programs offered for the study of French in St. Lucia, noting of course that such language training has not been made available until the last few years. The author of this paper is convinced, until further developments indicate contrary evidence, that French study is not an option in St. Lucia until adolescent and possibly young adult years for almost all French Creole speakers thus enhancing the effects of Former Lexifier Language Acquisition.

Former Lexifier Language Acquisition (FLLA) explains the difficulties encountered along psycho-sociolinguistic axes with direct application to only a small population of Creole speakers in a situation as described in the preceding paragraph. It is the former lexifier language because this language (i.e. French in the case thus far provided) is no longer used in the realm of officialdom of the given country and as a consequence, the Creole speakers have no (or very little) contact with it at all. A new official language influences the Creole enough that lexification processes commence with the Creole borrowing words from the new dominant language. When a creolophone chooses for some reason or another, usually for economic gain, to learn the LL of his mother-tongue, Allen argues that psychological and social barriers take part in the acquisition process.

Taking the psycholinguistic perspective into account, it is possible to say that the majority of St. Lucian children speak French Creole as their first language. English, being the official language, may be considered as widely spoken but not actually the one learned during the formative years of First Language Acquisition. This subject is open for debate on a case by case study. Frank (1992:10) states that "French is essentially a foreign language in St. Lucia, spoken and understood by few". From this, Allen (1992) concludes that the matter enters into Second Language Acquisition when speaking about St. Lucian Creole speakers learning French, though St. Lucians themselves do not take that point of view.

The attitude exemplified by St. Lucians is normally that their Creole is only a deformed variant of French, although as explained above it is evident that the Creole is a language itself separate from French. As the St. Lucians are not in contact with French on a frequent basis, it is difficult to compare the two languages and notice the significant distinctions. By this assumption, they take French as a variety very close to their native language in thinking that the learning process should be a quite feasible obstacle to pass by relying on Creole (Dalphinis 1986). Unfortunately, this does not work so perfectly and results in problems for the St. Lucian who continues to try and accommodate Standard French to his own native language. That is the general idea of the FLLA hypothesis.

FLLA is more likely a case for study in the European metropolis where the Creole speakers live and work after having moved there. This notion may only apply to the specific societies of St. Lucia and Dominica, especially for those who move to Great Britain and then try to study French with France being the neighboring country on the continent. Some recent changes may greatly affect the proposed idea. The French television station RFO with programs for the French Antilles also has a relay of transmissions to St. Lucia. This could create a reversal of the FLLA idea depending on the St. Lucian audience watching the programs. If Dominica does not have such access to the television programs of RFO, it may even be possible to distinguish between FLLA for Dominicans and an adapting FLLA for St. Lucians with more contact with French.

The areas of application where FLLA is most considered are in tourism and education. The latest advertisements of Air Martinique Magazine have articles on St. Lucia in addition to Martinique and Guadeloupe. France is taking the initiative of bringing St. Lucia back under its sphere of influence of “Francophonie”. With more French travelling to St. Lucia on vacation, the Creole speakers will have a greater incentive to learn the LL. With such a boost in the St. Lucian economy due to a specific European clientele, this could lead to eventual changes in the education sector. One can visualize an increase in the number of courses of French offered in the public and private schools. This could (1) increase the problem of FLLA among Creole speakers in St. Lucia and/or (2) cause FLLA difficulties to decline due to a greater familiarity with the LL; these ideas remain hypothetical at this stage and require further research for any concrete conclusions. A sure point is that teachers and teaching assistants of French as a Foreign Language (Français Langue Etrangère) coming from the metropolis with an awareness of the linguistic context and issues pertinent to FLLA would be better equipped to provide practical learning strategies in light of the potential difficulties encountered by the St. Lucians and Dominicans due to their unusual diglossic situation.

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