

Diglossia Reconsidered: Language Choice and Code-Switching in Guadeloupean Voluntary Organizations

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A central concern of the literature on Caribbean creoles has been the development of models to explain the distribution of linguistic codes. Most linguists have argued that it is most accurate to describe cases where French-lexified creoles are spoken along with their lexifier as stable diglossic situations, in contrast to those where English-lexified creoles are spoken along with their lexifier, which are described as creole continua marked by decreolization. Still, these categorizations remain a topic of discussion (e.g., Lefebvre, 1974; Meyjes, 1995; Prudent, 1981). In this paper I consider the applicability of the diglossia model (Ferguson, 1959) for describing patterns of language use in Guadeloupe, French West Indies. Guadeloupeans, all French citizens, are generally bilingual in French, the official language, and Kréyòl, a French-lexicon creole. For the present paper, I draw on 100 hours of audio- and videotaped data to explore how people in Guadeloupe use French and Kréyòl in their daily interactions and which model best describes their language use. As a further point, I consider whether or not Guadeloupe's linguistic situation is best described as a stable one. In doing so, I will counter the argument of Meyjes (1995) that language shift is occurring in favor of French monolingualism.

1. Historical Background and Sociolinguistic Context of Guadeloupe

The French settled Guadeloupe in 1635, eventually establishing a slave-based plantation economy on the island. In 1848, France abolished slavery and all Guadeloupeans were granted French citizenship. Guadeloupe remained a French colony, though, and maintained close ties to the metropole. It became an overseas department of France in 1946, acquiring almost the same administrative status as the mainland departments (Pluchon, 1982). Other French overseas departments include Martinique and French Guyana. Guadeloupe is still economically dependent on France as the French government provides various subsidies to support Guadeloupe's economy and its people (Domenach & Picouet, 1992).

French, Guadeloupe's official language, has historically been seen as the language of prestige, spoken by the elite and the educated. In contrast, Kréyòl, widely spoken among family and friends, has historically evoked images of solidarity and intimacy but also of poverty and backwardness (Bebel-Gisler, 1976; Prudent, 1980). These simple

dichotomies, however, belie the diversity of Guadeloupe's linguistic landscape as well as the complexities and ambiguities in Guadeloupean attitudes toward their languages.

While most Guadeloupeans claim to live in a bilingual society, from a sociolinguistic perspective there is significant variation within French and Kréyòl as spoken on the island. A locally spoken variety of French has several features, primarily phonological and lexical, which distinguish it from what is called metropolitan French (also spoken on the island). Kréyòl itself has regional dialects, and there is evidence that the Kréyòl of older speakers differs from that of younger speakers in syntax and lexicon (Bernabé, 1983; Ludwig, 1996). Meyjes (1995) argues that the latter is a sign of decreolization and decreasing fluency among younger speakers, yet there is also evidence of language innovation in Kréyòl (e.g., Ludwig, 1996). While most Guadeloupeans speak at least one variety of both French and Kréyòl, not all command both codes, and levels of proficiency vary.

In the 1970s, an independence movement emerged in Guadeloupe, mobilizing Kréyòl as the main icon distinguishing Guadeloupean identity from French identity. The independence movement attracted little popular support, but Kréyòl language activists have worked to get legislation passed allowing Kréyòl to be taught and used in schools and to be featured on television and radio (Ruprecht, 1990; Schnepel, 1990). Since 2001, optional Kréyòl language and culture classes have been available in Guadeloupean junior high schools, and a teaching degree was established for this subject (the CAPES).¹ Kréyòl has also achieved greater public acceptance than ever over the past decade. Valorization of Kréyòl is no longer the exclusive domain of political activists. Cultural associations, for example, organize community events that celebrate creole cultural forms such as Guadeloupean language, dance and music, putting Kréyòl in the public sphere and giving it positive recognition.

Although cultural activities spotlight traditions associated with Kréyòl, what is most commonly heard at these events and in everyday interactions is the use of both French and Kréyòl in the same stretch of talk. Thus code-switching is an extremely common phenomenon in Guadeloupe. While often mentioned, it has not yet been the focus of detailed or systematic research. My observations suggest that Guadeloupeans code-switch between French and Kréyòl for a variety of purposes, including to create rhetorical effect, to dramatize characters and to mediate language choice in interaction among multiple speakers. The similarities between metropolitan French, local French, and Kréyòl, furthermore, create a great potential within code-switching practice for language mixing, interference, and bivalency (Woolard, 1998).

2. Linguistic Literature on Caribbean Creoles

In the literature on Caribbean creoles, two descriptive models have dominated: diglossia and the creole continuum. The creole continuum model was developed by DeCamp in 1971, using the example of Jamaica. Described as "a continuous spectrum of speech varieties" (DeCamp, 1971, p. 350), the creole continuum represents an ordering of linguistic features into various idiolects which may be placed on a continuum from basilect (most creole) through mesolect (intermediate) to acrolect (least creole, closest to lexifier).

¹ This teaching certificate, for which candidates must pass an exam, allows one to teach in junior high and high schools.

Critics have argued, however, that the continuum model implies that decreolization is in process and, further, that shift is always in the direction of the acrolect, or standard. This model has mainly been used to describe situations in which English-lexified creoles are spoken.

Most creolists prefer the model of diglossia for discussing contexts where French-lexified creoles are spoken. Ferguson (1959) developed the notion of diglossia to describe a situation in which two different language varieties coexisted in a society by maintaining separate domains of use, giving Haiti as one example.² He described the two varieties as the standard, superposed variety—the (H) or ‘high’ variety—and its regional dialect—the (L) or ‘low’ variety. Situations associated with the H variety include church sermons, university lectures, political speeches, and news broadcasts. The L variety is associated with casual conversations, instructions to servants, and folk literature. Besides functional role compartmentalization of the H and L varieties, diglossia is characterized by differential valuing of the two varieties, with H being considered superior to L. This model was later adapted to include situations in which different languages were spoken (e.g., Fishman, 1985).

3. Code-Switching and Intermediate Varieties in the French West Indies

Like Haiti, Guadeloupe and the other French overseas departments have been described as examples of diglossia (e.g., Cérol, 1991; Schnepel, 1990). These authors maintain that French is used in the formal contexts of the school, the church, and the government, while Kréyòl is used in casual, intimate encounters with friends and family. It has been noted, however (e.g., Meyjes, 1995), that today French is being used among friends and family and that Kréyòl is being used in formal contexts such as the church and the media. Some researchers have proposed, furthermore, that the boundary between French and Kréyòl may be quite permeable and that interference, mixing, and code-switching are in fact quite common in the everyday speech of French West Indians.³ Lefebvre, writing in 1974, notes the existence of varieties of French that are more creole-like as well as varieties of creole that are more French-like. She argues, however, that Martinican Creole and French do not represent a continuum but rather two separate systems with no intermediate forms (mesolects). She suggests that Creole-like French represents merely a lack of proficiency in French and that French-like Creole is a variety which only has more French-like phonology. She demonstrates that all the speakers she recorded consistently use correct Creole syntax.⁴

Prudent (1981) disputes Lefebvre’s findings, suggesting that the amount of code-switching in everyday Martinican speech renders it difficult to speak of two distinct systems. He speaks of an interlectal zone, but asserts that the situation has not yet reached the point where French and Kréyòl have structurally merged. He argues that the binary division made in the Fergusonian model of diglossia is not adequate to describe the

² Dejean (1993) criticized the use of this term in the case of Haiti, noting that only the elite in the country speak French.

³ Still others prefer to hold onto the model of diglossia because it highlights the inequalities that exist between the status of French and Creole as well as the socioeconomic inequalities between their speakers.

⁴ It should be noted, however, that her study is now over 20 years old and that much has changed since then. There has been a great increase in bilingualism, for instance.

sociolinguistic situation in Martinique or Guadeloupe, because these societies cannot be divided up that way either linguistically or sociologically.

Studies from Guadeloupe support the existence of intermediate forms there as well. Ludwig (1996) gives examples of interferences from Kréyòl into French and discusses what he calls “modern Creole.” Hazaël-Massieux (1978) notes the presence of a regional French and claims that most speak a Kréyòl that lies between the pole of French and Kréyòl.⁵ My own data confirm the existence of a regional variety of French marked by influence from Kréyòl as well as different varieties Kréyòl, some of which are more basilectal and some of which are more acrolectal. Like Prudent, I found a great deal of code-switching as well as bivalency (Woolard, 1998), complicating any effort to categorize certain utterances as one language or the other. To demonstrate this point, in this paper I examine ethnographic and linguistic data from formal and informal events of voluntary organizations in a small Guadeloupean town, focusing on the naturally-occurring speech practices of one youth group. These data were gathered during fieldwork in 1999-2001, and on a return trip in the summer of 2002.⁶

4. Guadeloupean Voluntary Organizations

Guadeloupean voluntary organizations (called *associations*) are regulated by a French law established in 1901 that guarantees every French citizen the right of assembly.⁷ Associations are organized by members who may register the association and apply for small stipends and other aid from the government. Due to the semi-official nature of these groups, they offer a useful vantage point from which to examine formal and informal language use. Associations play a vital role in Guadeloupe, providing a structure for community members to come together for a variety of purposes. Indeed, associations organize the majority of social and cultural events in Guadeloupe, including Carnival. Associations tend to organize around residence, sports, cultural activities, age group, and political issue. Associations include what in the U.S. would be clubs, teams, lobbies, and non-profit groups.

My study was located in a Guadeloupean community of nearly 17,000 people (INSEE, 2000) near the main commercial city of Pointe-a-Pitre. Residents include agricultural workers, wealthy business owners, civil servants, and workers who commute into the nearby urban center. The community spreads out from the town center into rural hillside neighborhoods that border the rainforest. In this community, there were over 200 associations registered. My research focused on a *troisième age* (retiree) group, a youth group, and a traditional dance group. I also participated in a hiking club in my neighborhood. The retiree club and the dance group were centered in town, with members living throughout the community. The youth group I discuss here was located in a rural neighborhood just outside of the center of town. It was thus a neighborhood association as well as a youth group. The association consisted of a core group of 6 friends, aged 16-20,

⁵ He retains the concept of *diglossia* though, viewing the local French as maintaining an equilibrium between the two and considers the possibility of “triglossia”.

⁶ This research was funded through grants from the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

⁷ Article 1 of the law states that “The association is the convention by which two or more persons put in common their knowledge or activities in a permanent way for purposes other than to share the profits.”

along with neighbors and relatives. During my fieldwork, the association evolved into a club focused on film-making, in accordance with the interests of the core group members.⁸

5. Language Use in Associations

As the diglossia model would predict, my ethnographic observations and recorded data confirm that French—in this case the H language—often predominates in formal association activities (e.g., meetings and receptions) and that Kréyòl—in this case the L language—generally predominates in informal activities (e.g., group outings and casual conversation during meetings). However, either language may be heard and code-switching is prevalent in all contexts. It should be noted that my presence in the associations seemed to impact language choice only when I was being addressed directly, since language choice in Guadeloupe tends to depend only on the addressee(s), not the overhearers. Aside from me, all association members were local; there were no metropolitan, or mainland French.

Language choice patterns varied by group and even individual and depended on factors such as the content and tone of an utterance or speaker's background and political inclination. The hiking club, for instance, consisted mainly of veterans and their families, many of whom had lived in mainland France. The core members actively supported an independentist mayoral candidate who was elected near the end of my stay. Their political leanings were evident in the use of Kréyòl on hikes and in meetings. The fact that many had lived in France meant, though, that some preferred French or spoke acrolectal Kréyòl. The dance group practiced a dance form, called *quadrille*, widely associated with the elderly and the elite. Although participants were middle and upper class, Kréyòl was the predominant language in its events, perhaps reflecting their focus on Guadeloupean tradition. The retirees' club also included older members, aged 50 and up. The core members were former town leaders and most were well-educated. The club leaders were of a generation for whom a French education was rare, and they took pride in speaking formal French in meetings. Other members also used French in meetings, although Kréyòl was used occasionally, for example, when disputes arose. Casual conversation among members generally occurred in Kréyòl, but French was also used, especially with those who had lived for a long time in France.

The youth group members were all fully bilingual. About half had been raised speaking Kréyòl and learned French at school, whereas the other half had been raised speaking French, speaking Kréyòl only with friends. In their generation, bilingualism is the norm as most attend at least high school. Thus, French does not hold the same cachet as it does for older Guadeloupeans. Youth group members also take pride in speaking Kréyòl, the language of Guadeloupean popular culture. In youth group meetings and in formal group events, French was the primary language, but Kréyòl was used at times as well. For instance, when the president and vice-president were unable to attend a meeting, the leader of the day's meeting (an aunt of the vice-president), used primarily Kréyòl. In informal events, Kréyòl was used most often, although one girl was infamous for speaking only French.⁹ Still, in all contexts, code-switching was common.

⁸ While some associations in Guadeloupe are larger than this one, membership tends to fluctuate and groups often disband within one or two years.

⁹ The others commented on this when she was not around, suggesting this behavior was annoying and pretentious since they had grown up together.

In the following example of code-switching from a formal reception in honor of the opening of a neighborhood center, a woman from the crowd gets up to thank the youth group members and the mayor for making the center possible. She takes the opportunity to voice her support for the mayor, who also recently repaired the neighborhood road, and to call for all those present to vote for him in the upcoming elections.

(1) Example 1:¹⁰

L: On va le tenir solide, on ne va pas le rejeter, et pour ce chemin-là il faut le tenir fort parce que il faut pas dire que Larifla est là, nou ka di i la sé bèl i ba-nou chimen-la, i ba-nou tout, mé fo nou rekompanse-y osi. Parce que nous avons vu (des choses) qu'il a fait. Nous avons vu son travail est bon. Il y aussi le chemin. Il a tout fait. On a dit c'est bon mais après est-ce que nous allons oublier ce oui-là."

We are going to solidly support him, we aren't going to reject him, and for this road, one must keep him strong because one must not say that Larifla is there, we are saying he is there, that is good, he gave us the road, he gave us everything but we must pay him back also. Because we have seen (the things) that he did. We have seen his work is good. There is also the road. He did everything. We've said that is good. But afterwards, are we going to forget this "yes."

In this example, the speaker clearly switches from French to Kréyòl and back. But in other cases where speakers code-switch, particular items could "belong" to either code. Woolard (1998) calls such items "bivalent." I found a number of such cases in my data. Since Kréyòl shares much of its lexicon with French, bivalency is common. For example, in the following conversation, which took place during an informal outing, G asks F to talk about something that happened the night before. His question is worded and pronounced ambiguously. It could be understood as either French or Kréyòl.¹¹ G's first two words may be understood either in French as the second person plural imperative¹² or in Kréyòl as a second person singular or plural imperative—the singular and plural imperative forms are not distinguished in Kréyòl. In the response, F begins in Kréyòl then asks another question in French, perhaps because the first question was ambiguous. If F understood G's request as Kréyòl, it would make sense for him to answer in the first person singular, as he does in Kréyòl at first. However, if he understood it as French, he must reply in the first person plural, as he does in French next.

¹⁰ Transcription conventions:

underline = French

italics = Kréyòl

bold = Bivalent/ambiguous

() = uncertain transcription

¹¹ It should be noted I have chosen to write bivalent items in the orthography of the language of words surrounding them since only one orthography may be used. This is not meant to suggest, however, that I consider these items as one language or the other.

¹² It could also be a second person formal imperative, but this is unlikely because these boys are best friends.

(2) Example 2:

G: **rakonté nou on swaré a yé swar**

Tell us about a party from last night

F: *a(n) pa té ni pon swaré yé swa eh eh ce que nous avons fait hier soir?*

I didn't have any party last night. Oh, you mean what we did last night?

As the conversation continues, F asks his sister, M, for a piece of fruit (a quenette). G asks if the word for this fruit is masculine or feminine. M says this is a pointless question, presumably because the name of the fruit is in Kréyòl—this is a local tropical fruit, and Kréyòl nouns are not marked for gender. But F responds that it is a masculine noun in French, using the masculine indefinite determiner (“un”). Although he seems at first to be speaking French, his wording and pronunciation are ambiguous enough to allow for one to understand certain segments as Kréyòl. Only the phrases “un quenette” and “le ‘e’ derrière” are unambiguously French because they have French determiners.

(3) Example 3:

G: une quenette ou un quenette Colette

A quenette (fem) or a quenette (masc), Collette

F: un quenette fo di

A quenette (masc) you must say

M: sé pa on kestyon

That is not a question

G: *an fwansé*

In French

F: **mé an fwansé sé un quenette, fo retiré le ‘e’ derrière**

But in French it is a quenette (masc) you must take off the ‘e’ at the end

This example demonstrates the type of language play that Woolard (1998) discusses. Here the sometimes blurry boundary between French and Kréyòl is at issue and is the made the topic of a joking exchange. The use of bivalent forms amplifies the humor of the exchange by highlighting the fuzziness of this boundary.

6. The Issue of Language Shift in Guadeloupe

It is clear from my evidence and from other studies that code-switching, code-mixing, bivalency, and interference are common in Guadeloupean speech. This, combined with the fact that French and Kréyòl are currently being used in contexts where the other was previously called for, leads me to conclude that the diglossia model does not adequately describe language use in Guadeloupe. But if diglossia is not in place in Guadeloupe, this raises the question of whether or not language shift is occurring. Diglossia, after all, has generally been described as a stable situation. While Ferguson notes that factors can move it toward language shift, Fishman (1985) stresses that diglossia, in contrast to simple bilingualism, implies stability over several generations. Eckert (1980), on the other hand, argues that diglossia may facilitate language shift. She points out the socioeconomic stratification that diglossia implies and maintains that the association of a high variety with high values precipitates assimilation.¹³

¹³ This view of diglossia resembles that favored by some Antillean linguists. While the characteristics of diglossia may not be strictly applicable in those cases, several scholars retain the

Given the ideological force of French in Guadeloupe (e.g., Bebel-Gisler, 1976; Prudent, 1980) and the evidence that the structure of Kréyòl is changing, it is reasonable to hypothesize that language shift could give way over time to French monolingualism in Guadeloupe. Meyjes (1995) makes just this assertion. He argues that Guadeloupeans have responded to the Kréyòl language development movement by attaching less stigma to Kréyòl and using it in contexts where previously only French would have been acceptable. But he argues that this optimism obscures the fact that French is gaining ground in many domains as well and that younger speakers are losing proficiency in Kréyòl. He also argues that code-switching in Guadeloupe is nothing more than a crutch for those who have lost the ability to speak Kréyòl fluently. Meyjes insists that there exists indisputable evidence of slow language shift in Guadeloupe in the direction of French monolingualism. He offers as evidence the lack of governmental support of Kréyòl, attitudinal surveys which suggest that most younger Guadeloupeans do not feel they speak Kréyòl well, and a small number of sociolinguistic interviews which include a younger speaker who is incapable of using the entire tense, mood, aspect (TMA) system of Kréyòl.

Ludwig (1996), however, suggests that some of the differences between older, basilectal Kréyòl and what he calls “modern Creole” are the result of an internal process in the Kréyòl language itself. He also argues that Kréyòl is gaining new uses and thus must evolve to express new concepts, particularly abstract ones. He notes that Kréyòl is acquiring a new relative object pronoun *kè*. He also demonstrates that subordinate clauses and prepositional phrases are replacing basilectal serial verb constructions.

My own data confirm that Kréyòl is indeed undergoing change. It is acquiring syntactic features and lexical items from French. Still, I argue that it is too soon to tell whether or not language shift is taking place in favor of French monolingualism. Kréyòl is also acquiring English lexical items (primarily via the Anglophone Caribbean) and exhibiting internal changes. And unlike the young speakers Meyjes recorded, the young Guadeloupeans I observed and recorded often spoke Kréyòl fluently. They code-switched, as did older Guadeloupeans, but this was not usually to make up for a lack of competence in Kréyòl. I also saw no evidence that they were incapable of using Kréyòl’s preverbal TMA marking system, as Meyjes suggests. This system consists of three preverbal markers (*té*, *ké* and *ka*), which may be combined. To very briefly summarize, *té* indicates a completed action, *ké* indicates a prospective action, and *ka* indicates a habitual or progressive action.¹⁴ In the following excerpt, for example, the young speakers make use of a range of the TMA system. The preverbal markers are capitalized.

(4) Example 4:

F: *I TE ni on autre..ot blag asi choulou (en kréyòl), anba goyav i TE KA (la)*

There was another other joke (in Kréyòl) about the big bear of a guy, under the guava tree he was (...)ing (there)

G: *Ahn, kek chos “KA kaka”*
Oh something “is shitting”

term precisely to highlight the socio-economic (and symbolic) dominance and threat of assimilation implied.

¹⁴ A more detailed discussion of this system can be found in Meyjes (1995).

- F: *Savédi sé an jan*
That means it is odd/off color
- G: *Jou-la nou KA vwé dé boug ki evé, on boug évé dé fizi. Yo vin chasé anba bwa-la. Lè-w gadé on boug yon dé dé boug i TE koté goyav-la é anba an déziem pyé goyav nou KA tann mmmm. Mé nou KA di boug apré nou (lésé) nou pa pa suiv. Nou KA mandé boug-la (kon ram) pou.. ka i KA fé evé dé fizi, es pou touyé zozyo. Nou KA mandé boug-la ès i biswen dé fizi pou i touyé zozyo é i KA di nou “oui” é (on biten i KA ri i KA ri). Mé nou po’o suiv lè-w gadé panan (friend’s name) KA monté an pyé bwa-la i KA (sodé)*
The day we see 2 guys who with one guy with 2 guns they just finished hunting in the woods. Then one guy one of the 2 guys he was beside the guava (tree) and under the second guava tree we hear mmm (laugh) but we say guy after we (...) do not understand we ask the guy (...)for what is he doing with 2 guns to kill birds. We ask the guy does he need 2 guns to kill birds and he says yes (something he is laughing, he is laughing). But we do not yet follow then during this time, our friend is climbing up the tree and is (spy)ing
- F: (...) *on choulou KA kaka*
(...) a big bear of a guy is shitting
- G: *nou KA tann ga choulou KA kaka la*
we hear look at the big bear of a guy shitting there

It should be noted that G and F speak almost entirely in Kréyòl here. The only French is in the first line, when F begins to use the French pronunciation of the word for “other” (“autre”), then corrects himself to use the Kréyòl pronunciation (“ot”). This is further evidence that these boys do not need to fall back on French to express their ideas.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, I argue that the extensive use of code-switching (along with bivalency) makes the diglossia model of little use in describing the distribution of linguistic codes in the French West Indies today. I suggest that Guadeloupe’s linguistic landscape is better thought of as a potentially relatively stable bilingual situation marked by widespread code-switching. In making this argument, I also counter the claims of Meyjes (1995) that code-switching in Guadeloupe evidences decreolization and language shift toward French monolingualism. My data indicate that most speakers code-switch and generally do not do so to compensate for lack of Kréyòl fluency. Indeed, in my data, young participants demonstrated fluency in Kréyòl, despite their code-switching.

Even if language shift is taking place in favor of French monolingualism, one must ask the question of which French will take the place of Kréyòl. While some Guadeloupeans, usually those who have lived in France, speak metropolitan French, most speak a variety of French that bears the mark of contact with Kréyòl at the lexical, phonological, intonational, and grammatical levels. A shift to local French would not imply the same kind of assimilation as a shift to metropolitan French.¹⁵

¹⁵ One language activist I spoke to during my last trip to Guadeloupe said he thought that Guadeloupe was moving toward a time when only one local language would be spoken.

My research indicates, however, that some factors for stable bilingualism absent at the time of Meyjes' study are in place today. For example, Guadeloupe's status in relation to France is currently up for consideration. The debates are moving in the direction of granting the overseas departments greater autonomy within the French Republic without independence. Guadeloupean language attitudes are also in flux. But perhaps the most significant change impacting language use in Guadeloupe has been limited official recognition of Kréyòl. Kréyòl is now a subject offered in schools, and it is also used on some state-run radio and television programs. The entry of Kréyòl into official spheres along with widespread code-switching in all contexts indicate that diglossia is waning and that bilingualism may remain in place in Guadeloupe.

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