Let Them Speak Cake

In an increasingly connected world, almost everyone comes into contact with a plethora of other languages, irrespective of our place of residence. Whether we sit in one of our school’s foreign language classes or listen to trending music, we experience foreign languages, and briefly immerse ourselves into a different view of the world: something that is different from our daily lives. Most people actively searching streaming services such as Spotify or YouTube must have heard Rihanna’s songs. One of her popular songs, Work, features her native language – an English-based creole. Those who have not been listening to trending music may have, at some point, listened to Bob Marley’s reggae songs which topped the charts in the 1980s. People enjoy the creole in these songs, but recently, linguists have been witnessing the endangerment of many creole languages. Owing to their oral nature, creoles drift rapidly under the influence of other languages, making them especially vulnerable. The syntax and phonology of creoles are slowly aligning with those of the parent language – the language from which the creole originated – such as French in the case of a French-based creole. If languages can be thought to encode worldviews, then each time a language ceases to be spoken, something is lost: a worldview – one’s most valuable identity. Embedded in every linguistic identity are potential ways to solve the biggest problems in the world whether through perspective on those problems, or diversity in the language itself, such as Allied use of the complex Navajo language as an unbreakable code during World War II. Can we stop the loss of creole languages and their worldviews? This paper examines why many attempts to save creole languages have failed, and whether there are ways to prevent creole languages from disappearing.
To understand why creoles and the cultures associated with those languages are dying, we must study their formation. Linguists term the birth of a creole as *creolization*. Pidgins and creoles are formed when people from different linguistic backgrounds try to communicate with each other. In the need for communication, people use a smaller lexicon: a few common words (Kaplan 383). At this stage, this small lexicon is called a *pidgin*. Sometimes it persists as a second language, and is constantly influenced by various contact languages, with the most common influence on the lexicon known as the *lexifier* language (Kaplan 384). Gradually, children start learning the pidgin as their native language and the lexicon grows. The hybrid, fully fledged language is now known as a creole. Creoles are essentially different from other languages because they exist as a continuum of varieties: *basilect* to *acrolect*. Basilect refers to the variety that is furthest from the lexifier language while acrolect is closest to the lexifier language (Stewart 96). Today, creoles exist around the world: Haitian creole, Mauritian creole and Jamaican creole, among others. Since creoles are born during the movement and contact of different groups of people, changes of behavior and relaxation of certain social norms often occur at the same time (Kaplan 383).

Due to these changes, linguists observe another aspect of creolization: the birth of a new culture. As different groups of people absorb a common language and increasing contact occurs between them, a hybrid culture begins to appear – one that inherits different aspects from the parent cultures. However, creoles require attention because their formation coincides with the birth of a specific type of cultural identity. Social anthropologists view creolization as “a process of relation that neither reduces the other to the same, nor resolves itself in a reified, unchanging
form” (Voicu 997). During creolization, the emerging society is centered around a homogenized identity, instead of several identities co-existing together. While studying several creole-speaking nations, Stewart noticed this homogenized identity, and explained how this cultural identity is distinct from other ones. The figure below is based on Stewart’s description of cultural identity based on differences and diversity. The vertical axis relates to differences in views about the society and the horizontal axis relates to diversity within a society.

Figure 1. The relationship between culture and identity in different societies. (After Stewart 164)

To picture the difference between cosmopolitanism and creolization, we can consider cosmopolitanism to be a fruit salad. If we make a fruit salad with pieces of different fruits, the same pieces are still visibly distinct at the end. Using this metaphor, the pieces of fruit are co-existing identities in a cosmopolitan society. However, a creole can be pictured as a cake. Unlike the salad, one cannot see the individual ingredients, but the mixture of the ingredients forms a single structure or entity – a cake. The cake can take several forms depending on the proportion
of ingredients, and it will be completely different without any one ingredient. In this analogy, the ingredients are the identities which invest select aspects of their cultures in the formation of a new one. Nearly homogenized cultures are born out of heterogeneous ones. This aspect of creolization is important in understanding the disappearance of creole languages and crafting mechanisms to save them.

The number of creole-speakers across the world is decreasing at a fast pace. Out of 96 creoles in the world, 43 are critically endangered (Lee 68). Linguists term this phenomenon as decreolization. This rapid decrease can be explained by the lack of inter-generational transmission: fewer youngsters are learning a creole as their native language. In 2018, Lee indexed the intergenerational transfer in several creole-speaking countries and revealed the extent of this decreolization problem (Lee 58). Even if creoles become stable over time, they remain oral languages, which means learning normally does not occur in an academic setting (Stewart 170). Even if youngsters learn creoles as their native language or as a second language, they learn a variety that is closer to the lexifier language – the acrolect variety. In the case of French-based creoles, youngsters would be speaking a version is closer to the French language. However, creoles should not be evolving in the same direction as their lexifier language but pundits are observing a shift towards the lexifier language (Kaplan 384). Former colonial countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Portugal actively promote their lexifier language in their former colonies through cultural institutes such as the British Council, the Alliance Française, and the Instituto Camões, respectively (Stewart 22). In order to prevent decreolization from happening, we must understand why creoles are becoming less desirable and why parents want their children to learn lexifier languages as their native languages.
The trend away from a particular language is known as language shift. Language shift is occurring faster now because creole languages are a less desirable trait in this increasingly connected world (Kaplan 412). One pressure causing the shift away from creoles is the internet. With the rapid evolution of technology, people are more exposed to the world’s major languages. And, considering the current hegemony of English and other major languages, people are more inclined to use these dominant languages (Lodge 667). People begin to nativize these languages, and, in the case of a creole which is a contact language, the advent of the internet can accelerate decreolization. Unfortunately, no research has been conducted to determine the influence of the internet on creole languages. But, consider the case of the “English-ization” of Mandarin Chinese: Mandarin speakers have started communicating with a more flexible Mandarin syntax over the internet. The adopted syntax models the syntax of the English language (Gao 301). If this can happen with Mandarin, which is a non-contact language, it can definitely happen to creoles since creoles are contact languages. They exist as a continuum because they are born out of contact of different languages and are continually influenced by other languages (Kaplan 384). This influence is particularly accentuated by pressures such as the internet.

Another pressure threatening creoles is global capitalism. Global capitalism renders creoles non-economically viable languages. Market trends add an economic potential to many languages and promote a hierarchy among languages. This process is known as “language commodification.” A specific language becomes a utility, and people mastering the current utility have a better chance to succeed (Shankar and Cavanaugh 364). Below are comments from
interviews from the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the Ministry of Education in Seychelles – a creole-speaking country:

Economically we have to rely on English speaking countries, therefore the need to learn English is greater. (40-year-old teacher).

Most of our textbooks we get from abroad which are written in English. For everyday use, most of our products are imported and instruction are in English. (18-year-old NIE teacher trainee) (Laversuch 379).

Teachers are reluctant to introduce creole in an academic setting, claiming that it gives their students weaker prospects in the economic setting. In order to have a better future, parents teach their children the “commodified” language as their first language. The trend away from creoles cannot be prevented – there exist only about 124 millions creole speakers in the world and their economies are frequently dependent on other countries, often countries with lexifier languages as official languages (Kaplan 385). Language policies that have tried to revitalize the creole language in these cases have failed (Laversuch 376).

There are many reasons why language policies in the creole-speaking world are failing. To model the evolution of languages, we will build on Bromham’s claim that tools can be swapped between language evolution and Darwinian evolution (Bromham 864). Suppose foxes started to hunt an increasing population of rabbits or a potent disease started spreading across the rabbit population. Rabbits having traits such as bigger legs could outrun predators and those with strong immunity could survive the epidemic. The environmental factors which affect the likelihood that certain traits are inherited by offspring are called selection pressure. In this analogy, the rabbits are the languages, and the pressures are the market trends and the internet. Parents want their children to learn the lexifier language instead of the local creole because the
use of the lexifier language confers better economic prospects. Language policies also fail because they improperly address the issue. The language policies currently in place try to promote creoles in situations when pressures do not normally favor creole languages. These policies try to implement creoles in the academic setting when there are no materials published in creole languages and where acquisition of concepts in creole languages is not helpful for the future (Lodge 667). The different pressures dictating the evolution of languages bring about lingual loss of creoles; trying to curb this pressure is impossible. Just as rabbits with short legs cannot outrun a rapid fox, the relatively small number of creole speakers in the world cannot prevent the influence of the internet or the global market. Instead, language policies should be reinforcing the link between creoles and culture in an attempt to revitalize or promote creole languages.

Some creoles, such as the Haitian creole, show little signs of endangerment (Lee 61). Unlike Seychelles’ language policy, Haiti’s integration of a creole institute has been successful. In the mid-1980s, the Haitian Government introduced a standardized system called ‘ótograph IPN’ (Kaplan 389). Since creole dictionaries set specific boundaries within the creole language by writing down the meaning of associated words, this codification prevents added or diminished meanings. It confines the language to the basilect - the variety furthest to the lexifier language. It remains unclear whether contact languages can stop evolving, but an intriguing aspect that might contribute to the ‘robustness’ of Haitian creole would be its online presence. Google Translate can translate to only one creole: Haitian creole (Languages - Google Translate). It seems that Haitian creole’s online presence might be preventing decreolization from occurring. Research for this paper was unable to turn up any studies examining the effect of technology such as the
internet on the revival of creole languages. However, there have been instances of endangered language revival through mobile applications.

When the mobile application Duolingo launched an Irish language course in August 2014, the number of speakers increased from 100,000 to 2.3 million in four years. The president of Ireland extended his thanks to Duolingo for this mini-revival of the Irish language (Steinmetz). In an attempt to promote endangered languages, the company seeks to add Hawai’ian creole to its online learning program. Hawai’ian creole will be promoted alongside its lexifier language, English (Steinmetz). But, in this case, the policy will be using the pressure – the internet - to its advantage. Languages policies that try to integrate creoles into the internet break a “digital divide,” giving users platforms to speak and write creoles as well as other languages (Stewart 343). Paradoxically, the technology that erodes creoles can also be part of the solution when it comes to saving them. Language policies should be adapting to the current widespread of the internet in order to prevent decreolization.

However, in many cases of endangerment, the creation of an online dictionary is not viable; there are not enough speakers to create dictionaries or the prestige of the creole language is not strong enough to promote learning (Lee 70). In order to prevent decreolization from happening in those cases, one possible solution would be funding revitalization initiatives based on cultural identity. An important aspect of creole societies is that each of them in existence today has its own version of blues – a musical genre combining guitars and vocals (Eriksen 10). That singular cultural identity could be through music – an allegiance to those blues. The link between the creole language and the cultural identity should be strengthened. Policies should
focus on reinforcing the identity associated with the creole language to encourage the acquisition of this language.

Gitanjali Pyndiah, a researcher in Cultural Studies at the University of London, explains the implications of strengthening the cultural identity in a creole society. In the study titled “Sonic landscape of seggae: Mauritian sega rhythm meets Jamaican roots reggae,” Pyndiah looks at the increased popularity of a local music – the seggae. Kaya, a Mauritian artist, combined sega, a local genre, with Jamaican reggae (133). The lyrics were always written in the native Mauritian creole and his songs were extremely popular. Pyndiah points out how Kaya’s songs “re-center[ed] knowledge systems around the sonic landscapes of the creole language (133).” His songs expressed views on current affairs, and people turned toward him for insights about the culture. In this example, the advance of the creole language as popular culture reinforced the status of the language.

Language revitalization initiatives that do not try to reinforce this identity cannot prevent decreolization. In Cape Verde, where a significant reduction in linguistic diversity has been observed, the musical landscape is very different. In his article about the decreolization of Cape Verdean creole, Filho shows how the music influence accelerates decreolization. He quotes concerns expressed in the local newspaper:

Most young people are moving away from tradition, which instead needs to be cultivated. When some people…write lyrics that are played with rhythms from Martinique and Antilles…they are impoverishing our music. We do not need other rhythms because ours is very rich (Jacqueline and Trajano 343).
In this article, the author argues against the intrusion of music from the Antilles. The foreign version of blues/genre works against local cultural identity. The best option would be to reinforce this identity: possibly funding songs written in the native language, similar to Kaya’s in Mauritius. As long as this cultural identity remains alive, and youths actively adopt the culture, they will remain in contact with the language. Just as the reinforcement of cultural identity in Mauritius led to the increased viability of Mauritian creole, this pattern can be reproduced in other creole-speaking countries. While creoles seem not to be effectively taught nor learned in academic settings, intergenerational transfer does occur through popular music.

Popular music has proven to be a strong force in creole preservation. Jamaican creole shows no sign of endangerment in spite of its close proximity to the United States - an English-speaking country - and increasing contact with the lexifier language. This “robustness” can be credited to the fact that Jamaican creole’s cultural identity is strong both locally and globally. Jamaican creole spread outside the creole world, and its status increased tremendously when outsiders started to adopt the language in a sub-genre of the musical industry. While market trends favor certain languages for employment, Jamaican creole became an adaptable trait for the reggae industry. In a 2018 study of global reggae and appropriation of Jamaican creole, Gerfer documents that the number of Jamaican creole speakers across the world has increased, and some artists have “acquired Jamaican creole to different degrees of competence and use in their everyday speech (680).” The dominance of Jamaican creole in this music industry pushes people to learn Jamaican creole in order to satisfy their customers:

Jamaican creole features, predominantly pronunciation features, are used by group 1 artists [ a group under study] in their ‘everyday’ speech, be it because through intense contact with Jamaicans Jamaican creole has become their natural
way of speaking English, or because they actively try to perfect their command of Jamaican creole to pay tribute to Jamaican culture and music … Popular culture products cross national boundaries and can therefore reach audiences from all over the world, which opens up new perspectives in the research on language attitudes and perception by music consumers (Gerfer 680). In her study, she notices the appropriation of Jamaican culture alongside the language. Even people who are shielded from the creole culture or language have started to favor Jamaican creole in the musical setting. It is interesting to observe the fundamental difference between Seychelles’ failing trilingual policy and the popularity of Jamaican creole. Through the intricate link between culture and the creole language, Jamaican creole partially transcends the pressures that cause decreolization. Youngsters remain in contact with Jamaican creole, and still learn the lexifier language in school. It seems clear that the key to preventing decreolization is to promote the culture along with the language.

So, can creole languages be saved? The key to saving creole languages lies in cultural identity and its diffusion through mass media. In order to revitalize or save creole languages, we must reinforce cultural identity locally, and expand cultural reach internationally through mass media – primarily the internet in the 21st century. While we cannot possibly create another Bob Marley or Kaya, we can promote specific aspects of different creole societies. Clearly, the resistance to pressures such as the internet does not work; the advent of the internet has changed the landscape for policy makers, who need to embrace these pressures while crafting mechanisms to save vulnerable creole languages. Culture and language need not be barriers to communication, but instead they should be cradles of diversity. And, in fostering cultural diversity, we will foster a diversity of worldviews. This diversity is a gift that humanity must cherish and preserve. During World War II, the United States army used the Navajo language’s complexity for transmission of
secret messages. It was crucial in conducting surprise attacks. While creoles do not have any immediate traits for military use, we never know if the major breakthroughs in technology or human society might stem from an endangered creole. The loss of any language is only detrimental to the world. Preserving the diversity of languages, creoles and non-creoles alike, comes with significant advantages, and policy makers should be adapting to promote this diversity.
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Works Cited


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