

*Creole Genesis and the Acquisition of Grammar. The Case of Haitian Creole*, Claire Lefebvre, 1998, collection Cambridge studies in linguistics, n° 88, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Silvia Kouwenberg

Volume 28, numéro 2, 2000

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/603201ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/603201ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Université du Québec à Montréal

ISSN

0710-0167 (imprimé)

1705-4591 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Kouwenberg, S. (2000). Compte rendu de [*Creole Genesis and the Acquisition of Grammar. The Case of Haitian Creole*, Claire Lefebvre, 1998, collection Cambridge studies in linguistics, n° 88, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.] *Revue québécoise de linguistique*, 28(2), 129–136.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/603201ar>

## CREOLE GENESIS AND THE ACQUISITION OF GRAMMAR. THE CASE OF HAITIAN CREOLE

Claire Lefebvre, 1998, collection Cambridge studies in linguistics,  
n° 88, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Silvia Kouwenberg  
University of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaïque) et  
Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities  
and Social Sciences (Wassenaar, Pays-Bas)

### 1. Introduction

The view that adult speakers of African languages, uprooted and transplanted to the plantation societies of the Caribbean, used their native linguistic knowledge to mould the new inter-ethnic vehicles for communication which became creole languages, is known as *the substrate hypothesis*. The work of Lefebvre and associates at UQAM takes a particularly strong view of the extent to which African linguistic knowledge underlies the formation of creole languages. While strong views are often at the center of controversy, to the point where those who hold them may find themselves exposed to ridicule and abuse, it is also the case that controversial viewpoints are catalysts of progress in ways that consensus views are not. For instance, it is the very controversial nature of Bickerton's Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (Bickerton 1981, 1984) which inspired an avalanch of research and publications throughout the 80's aimed solely at disproving his position, often by demonstrating that the data presented to support that position were incomplete or biased, at times even erroneous. His subsequent work has not received this level of attention, simply because it does not present such a strong, uncompromising, and therefore controversial position. In the meantime, a younger generation of creole linguists has inherited his legacy, and brought research on the child language acquisitionist view of creole genesis to a point where it has gained wide recognition.

The work of Lefebvre's research group currently finds itself at the center of a similar controversy. Hopefully, the dust will soon settle to reveal their contribution to creole studies. While few outside of this group share Lefebvre's particular view of the central role of relexification in creole genesis, one of the most important insights which has emerged from her work, viz. that of the difference between lexical and functional category items in creole genesis, has gained wide acceptance and has found a robust basis in recent generative approaches to syntax. Also, current work on the mechanisms of substrate transfer which takes markedness as a measure of transfer often looks much like a toned-down version of Lefebvre's relexification hypothesis, and is surely indebted to it. Furthermore, the consistent dedication of Lefebvre's research group to the use of mainstream theoretical frameworks has paid off in the form of a flood of publications on both Haitian and Fon, providing insightful analyses of structural properties of these languages as well as opening the floor to debate and controversy.

## 2. The relexification hypothesis

*Creole genesis and the acquisition of grammar. The case of Haitian creole* reports on the results of over twenty years of research by Lefebvre and associates at UQAM on *the relexification hypothesis*. Briefly, relexification involves the building of a parallel lexicon into which all the lexical and functional items of one's native lexicon are copied, while the phonological forms of these items are replaced (*relabelled*) by forms from another source. This study presents a scenario in which such a parallel lexicon was built by speakers of (dialects of) Fongbe on plantations in Haiti from the mid seventeenth century onwards; they are claimed to have drawn on the (dialects of) French to which they had (limited) access to create new phonological forms. The selection of French phonetic strings for relabelling is based on perceived (partial) semantic overlap between the lexical entry copied from the substratum lexicon and the superstratum form. Such semantic overlap is deduced by substratum speakers from the use of the superstratum forms in specific semantic and pragmatic contexts. Lefebvre contends that this process played a central role in the creation of Haitian. It is further assumed that the semantic and syntactic properties that define particular lexical entries interact with independent principles of grammar to yield the particular grammars of particular languages. Since the semantic and syntactic properties of Haitian lexical entries are claimed to be like those of their Fongbe progenitors, this scenario amounts to a claim that Haitian

grammar is in many respects identical to that of Fongbe. The conclusion which forces itself upon the reader is that Haitian creole can be said to constitute relexified Fongbe. But here we run into a problem: *the author refuses to draw this conclusion*. Having carried out a systematic comparative study of the properties of Fongbe lexical and functional items with those of Haitian and French, having consistently suggested that the properties of the Haitian items can be accounted for by relexification of Fongbe items (sometimes accompanied by other processes; see below), claiming to have presented evidence that adult native speakers of (mainly) Fongbe “used the properties of their lexicons and grammars” in creating Haitian creole (p. 394), Lefebvre states that her study does *not* imply “that Haitian is a relexified version of Fongbe” (p. 67). Despite such assertions on her part, her readership has consistently read this conclusion into her work, and will likely continue to do so.

### 3. Contents and structure of the book

After a brief statement of her view of the problem of creole genesis (chapter 1), Lefebvre provides in chapter 2 an overview of the application / applicability of the notion of relexification to different language contact phenomena (mixed languages, pidgin formation, second language acquisition, creole genesis), and of its relationship with other cognitive processes which are claimed to occur in language contact situations (reanalysis and dialect levelling). The range of phenomena is perhaps too wide to be adequately covered in just about 35 pages, but at times the author appears to display an over-enthusiasm for reading her particular interpretation of the processes involved into the different phenomena.

The historical demographic context out of which Haitian arose is sketched in chapter 3. This chapter relies heavily on Singler 1993, who documents—inasmuch as historical sources allow this—the linguistic origin of the slaves sent to French colonies. The picture that emerges is that Gbe languages were an important presence during the relevant period in Haitian history, but numerically dominant only for part of that period. The selection of (dialects of) Fongbe for the research on which this book reports was made on arguments relating to cultural rather than numerical dominance (p. 66f.). It is perhaps important to note that at the start of the project in the 80s, much of the historical demographic data which is now at the disposal of creolists was not yet available.

The following chapters are dedicated to a presentation of the data and their analyses as regards nominal structure (4), preverbal markers (5), pronouns (6), complementizers and other clausal operators (7, 8), properties of verbs (9),

derivational morphology (10, 11) and some parametric properties (12); the application of the methodology to a selection of these will be discussed below. Chapter 13 summarizes the results and evaluates the success rate of the relexification hypothesis in accounting for these results. Lefebvre concludes that a combination of relexification proper (including relexification by null forms), reanalysis of relexified items, and levelling of differently relexified forms by speakers of different dialect background accounts for most of the data.

A list of available Haitian texts over the period 1776-1936, a phonemic inventory and the conventions of Haitian orthography, and a sample of about 60 non-matching derived words in Haitian and French — illustrating the independence of Haitian derivational morphology vis-à-vis that of its lexifier — have been appended.

#### 4. A selective discussion of the methodology and results

The dual use of the definite article *la* as a nominal modifier and a clausal modifier (discussed in chapters 4 and 8, respectively) is one of the most striking properties of Haitian, and possibly constitutes the most important show-piece for the relexification hypothesis. Furthermore, Lefebvre and Massam 1988, which first presented Haitian data to support an analysis of the determiner as the head of DP, has been an influential publication outside of creole studies proper. In contrast, the analysis of the Haitian deictic markers (chapter 4; presented earlier as Lefebvre 1997) has recently run up against severe criticism of, first, bias in the representation of the earlier literature on this subject, and, second, of the validity of some of the data presented to support the analysis (see DeGraff, *forthc.*, Lefebvre, *forthc.*).

Apart from striking similarities — including the head-final DP, verb doubling or predicate cleft constructions, and the selectional properties of certain classes of verbs — Lefebvre has also had to come to terms with a number of dissimilarities between Haitian and Fon, most notably: (i) the fact that several overt functional items of Fon are not found (in overt form) in Haitian; (ii) the fact that several Haitian forms have no identifiable Fon precursor; (iii) the fact that the ordering conventions of Fon and Haitian differ in some constructions. Let us consider these in turn.

With respect to (i), we need to recall that relexification requires some semantic overlap between the substratum lexical entry and a superstratum form. It often being the case that functional items lack semantic content, Lefebvre asserts that these are either relexified by a null form or fail to relexify and are

lost in creole genesis. The pronominal system of Haitian (chapter 6) will serve to illustrate the methodology. Relexification accounts quite straightforwardly for the fact that Fon and Haitian share the property that pronouns are invariant for subjective / objective case, and that the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons plural are referred to by the same pronoun. Relexification further accounts for the fact that the same pronouns appear as postnominal possessive pronouns, but only if one accepts Lefebvre's contention that the Fon genitive case marker which appears in such a construction has been assigned a null reflex in Haitian. Compare the following (after p. 144-5):

- |     |          |             |       |      |     |
|-----|----------|-------------|-------|------|-----|
| (i) | Fongbe:  | [xwé        | [ny   | tòn] | lê] |
|     | Haitian: | [kay        | [mwen | Ø]   | yo] |
|     |          | house       | me    | GEN  | PL  |
|     |          | 'my houses' |       |      |     |

The fate of the Fongbe logophoric pronoun is a tad worse on the relexification scale than null-relexification: it was lost altogether. Whether such a pronoun is truly semantically empty is debatable. An argument that it has semantic content is perhaps provided by its restriction to non-first person reference in Fongbe. Furthermore, one might expect relexification to have similar results for similar (semantically empty) types of functional elements. Logophoric pronouns are similar to reflexives in having no independent reference, but differ in having a discourse-related function: they mark continuity of reference to an earlier introduced referent, and thus usually appear in domains larger than those in which reflexives appear. Despite the similarity, the Fongbe logophoric pronoun is claimed to have been lost, whereas the reflexive is argued to have been relexified by a null form. The reflexive use of Haitian pronouns is illustrated for instance in *Li wè l* (3sg see 3sg), with a variety of interpretations involving either disjoint reference or coreference of the subject and object pronouns: 'She/he saw her(self) / him(self) / it' (p. 161). Lefebvre assigns the structure [<sub>NP</sub> Pronoun [<sub>N</sub> Ø ]] to the reflexively interpreted pronoun, parallel to Fongbe [<sub>NP</sub> Pronoun [<sub>N</sub> -dèè ]], where the reflexive NP has an overt head, but she offers no independent argument for such a null head for the Haitian reflexives. This treatment is thus an easy prey to accusations of arbitrariness.

Lefebvre accounts for the second type of dissimilarity (Haitian forms which lack a Fongbe precursor) by arguing that the output of relexification feeds processes of reanalysis and dialect levelling. We will not consider reanalysis, which appears to have been of little import (it is called upon as having played a role in the development of the future marker *ap*; chapter 5). For dialect levelling, the presence of other (mostly Kwa) West-African languages is called

upon. Their speakers are hypothesized to have relexified their lexicons as did Fongbe speakers, with variation in the community as an expected result. The process of dialect levelling reduced this variation. While this line of argumentation preserves several properties of Haitian from loss for the relexification hypothesis, it is not entirely clear how the cases in which contributions by (speakers of) other languages are conceded have been selected. One such case is the non-Fon reflexive use of bodypart expressions (Haitian *tèt* + pronoun). Here, Lefebvre calls upon the presence of other Kwa languages, which —like Haitian, but unlike Fongbe— have bodypart-reflexives. Their speakers, just like Fongbe speakers, relexified their lexicons, and thus were responsible for the development of these Haitian reflexives (p.169f). The result is the availability of two ambiguous options: the null-marked reflexives of putative Fongbe origin are ambiguous between reflexive and non-reflexive interpretations in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person (plus reciprocal for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronoun), and the bodypart-reflexives of putative Kwa (but non-Fongbe) origin are ambiguous between a literal and a reflexive interpretation. To the unsuspecting reader this seems to offer an ideal context for dialect levelling, but this is in fact a situation in which dialect levelling failed to apply. A question which Lefebvre does not address is that of the conditions under which dialect levelling operates. This method has the appearance of introducing dialect levelling where convenient rather than where potentially relevant. Despite the recognized typological unity of the Kwa languages, similarity tends to break down at the micro-level. Lefebvre engages in a detailed study of different constructions, at the level therefore where we expect to see variation in the lexicons of speakers of different Kwa languages. To call upon such variation only where (overt or null) relexification of Fongbe items fails to provide an appropriate account raises suspicions of *ad hoc* usage.

Finally, with respect to the third type of dissimilarity, Fongbe displays more head-final constructions than does Haitian. Thus, it shares the head-final DP with Haitian, but in addition Fongbe has head-final quantifier phrases, nominal postpositions which take a complement on the left, a sentence-final negative marker (as well as preverbal negation), some clause-final aspect-marking, and preverbal complements in certain aspectual contexts (see Aboh 1997); Haitian consistently has head-initial constructions corresponding to these. Lefebvre takes a position outlined earlier in Lefebvre and Lumsden 1992, according to which it is possible for word order properties to be established differently for lexical and functional items in relexification. It is proposed that the relabelling of major category lexical items by phonetic strings identified in the superstrate results also in the acquisition of the directionality properties associated with the superstrate item. In contrast, relexification of functional

items does not have such a result because the relexifying substrate speakers have insufficient access to the superstrate to identify superstrate functional items. In the relexification of substratum functional items, the ordering properties are thus preserved. As we saw above, this result is at times achieved by postulating null-relexification. This position, while accounting for much of the word order properties of Haitian, weakens considerably the strength of the relexification hypothesis. Thus, Lefebvre's contention that in relexification, the lexifier language's lexical entry "is deprived of features" (p. 17) — which is a strong position — is contradicted by her claim that relexifying adults acquire the directionality properties of major category lexical items with the superstrate phonetic string.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The book's title presents somewhat of a misnomer: Lefebvre's view that speakers of African languages are the agents of creole genesis, and that relexification constitutes the central process in this development, implies that acquisition of grammar is not pertinent to creole genesis. Quite the contrary: the grammar of the African languages involved being largely maintained, learning is reduced to the acquisition of (some of) the phonetic forms of the superstrate. This is a strong hypothesis about creole genesis, and hypotheses which make strong claims about creole genesis have found little support from within the creolist community, even more so where their presentation has been uncompromising and exclusionist. In contrast, vaguely formulated and hence untestable hypotheses (such as Alleyne's 1971 *acculturation* view of creole genesis, and the currently popular *convergence* views) have generally escaped harsh criticism. But despite appearances, Lefebvre's case study presents a considerably weakened version of the relexification hypothesis, requiring several auxiliary hypotheses (null-relexification and loss of functional items, dialect levelling, acquisition of superstrate directionality properties) to account for cases where relexification appears to have failed. Independent constraints on these auxiliary hypotheses are required to maintain the falsifiability of the relexification hypothesis. Unfortunately, the conditions under which these apply are insufficiently delimited in the present study.



## References

- ABOH, E.A. 1997 *From the syntax of Gungbe to the grammar of Gbe*, PhD dissertation, University of Geneva.
- ALLEYNE, M.C. 1971 "Acculturation and the cultural matrix of creolisation", in D. Hymes, *Pidginization and creolization of languages*, p. 169-187. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- BICKERTON, D. 1981 *Roots of language*, Ann Arbor, Karoma
- BICKERTON, D. 1984 "The Language Bioprogram Hypothesis", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 7: 173-221.
- DEGRAFF, M. forthc. "Empirical quicksand: Probing two recent articles on Haitian Creole", *Journal of Pidgin and Creole languages* 14: 2.
- LEFEBVRE, C. 1997 "Relexification in creole genesis: the case of demonstrative terms in Haitian Creole", *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 11: 231-313.
- LEFEBVRE, C. forthc. "On the empirical reliability of some Haitian data", *Journal of Pidgin and Creole languages* 14: 2.
- LEFEBVRE, C. and D. MASSAM 1988 "Haitian creole syntax: a case for DET as head", *Journal of Pidgin and Creole languages* 3: 213-43.
- LEFEBVRE, C. and J.S. LUMSDEN 1992 "On word order in relexification", *Travaux de recherche sur le créole haïtien* 10: 1-22, Université du Québec à Montréal.
- SINGLER, J.V. 1993 "The African presence in Caribbean French colonies in the seventeenth century: documentary evidence", *Travaux de recherche sur le créole haïtien* 16-17: 1-236, Université du Québec à Montréal.