

Lexicographical Analysis
of the Varieties of French in American and Caribbean Regions

Good evening,

First of all, I wish to say that I am very happy to participate to your meeting and to be a member of the Dictionary Society of North America. Montreal is a beautiful city and I will remember it.

The purpose of my communication is to present several lexicographic aspects of the French variation in the American and Caribbean regions.

This geographical and linguistic area comprises the francophone regions from North America (Louisiana, Quebec), South America (French Guyana), Greater Antilles (Haiti) and Lesser Antilles (Guadeloupe and Martinique).

In my presentation, I will insist, above all, on the lexicographical data that we have for the regions where varieties of French coexist with Creole languages; this particular type of linguistic contact is, moreover, the main topic of my research.

At first sight, we can observe the relatively small number of lexicographical sources for the regions just mentioned. This situation is doubtlessly explained by the fact that the language here had, for a longtime, an essentially oral character.

Linguists have often said that the Antillean lexicography is the least represented within the francophone lexicographical landscape.

Lately, researchers have progressed in this field, but a lot of things still must be done and a lot of ideas are, for the moment, still on drawing board.

I will briefly present you the main lexicographical sources and I will highlight the particularities of each of them.

We can make the distinction between

sources where lexical data are scattered here and there, because the main topic of these sources is not the vocabulary of a variety of French (we will call them *indirect sources*)

and

sources having the variations of French as the main topic (we will call them *direct sources*).

I will begin with the indirect sources.

Here, we have some bilingual and trilingual dictionaries (Creole-French, French / Creole or Creole-French and English).

The research on Antillean French can benefit from the analysis of these Creole dictionaries. The language of the Antilles Islands is characterized by a permanent one-to-one contact between French and Creole (French linguists call this situation a «continuum linguistique» because every French word can have a Creole graphic form, and vice versa).

An example: *zanmi / ami* is a lexical (in French, *type lexical*).

Thus, in these kinds of dictionaries, a lexicographer can find very useful data (above all, data concerning the meaning and the use of the words).

For **Guadeloupien French Creole**, we have three important dictionaries:

Ludwig Ralph, Danièle Montbriand, Hector Pouillet, Sylviane Telchid, *Dictionnaire créole français (Guadeloupe)*, Servedit, Éditions Jasor, 2002

Tourneux Henry, Barbotin Maurice, *Dictionnaire pratique du créole de Guadeloupe (Marie-Galante)*, Paris, Karthala, 1990;

Barbotin Maurice, *Dictionnaire du créole de Marie-Galante*, Hamburg, Helmut Buske Verlag, 1995.

The two last dictionaries have almost the same content (word lists, commentaries). We can observe that the second edition (1995) has just one author: the Reverend Maurice Barbotin. He thought that in the first edition (1990), the importance of his contribution was unjustly minimized (his name was placed the second on the cover, after the name of the researcher Henry Tourneux who was in charge of the first edition). This fact outraged the Reverend Barbotin who had spent more than thirty years on the island of Marie-Galante studying the language of the inhabitants.

For the **French Creole of Martinique** we have two important sources:

The first is a doctoral thesis, published in 1957, written by a researcher from Martinique, Élodie Jourdain. She proposes a rich glossary of terms classified by semantically. Unfortunately, not all the etymological explanations are true. The words of unknown origin are automatically considered to have an African or an Amerindian origin.

The second is a Creole - French bilingual dictionary authored by Raphaël Confiant published in two tomes in 2007.

Although the focus of this dictionary is French Creole from Martinique, in it, we can also find French regionalisms (so French graphic forms) in the definitions of the Creole words. I discovered 309 regionalisms in the two tomes of the dictionary. But here, Confiant is not systematic. I couldn't say exactly why he chose to give the French graphic forms to only 309 words. We can suppose that he did this only for a few words that have a certain frequency in the common usage of the people and that these terms attracted his attention. Here are some of these words:

à l'embusqué "type of haircut"

abricot-pays "a kind of apricot from Antilles"

acôrer "to stop", etc.

For the **Greater Antilles**, we have at least three important dictionaries:

Valdman Albert (dir.), *Haitian Creole-English Bilingual Dictionary*, Bloomington, Indiana University / Creole Institute, 2007; an example of a good Creole dictionary;

Peleman Louis, *Dictionnaire créole-français*, Bon Nouvel, Port-au-Prince, 1978

This dictionary is the result of fifteen years of research on the Creole spoken in the north-western part of Haïti;

Faine Jules, *Dictionnaire français-créole*, Montréal, Leméac, 1974

This dictionary has 27 000 words and their equivalents in Haitian Creole. The French words without a direct Creole equivalent are defined through circumlocution. The terms expressing abstract concepts such as *divinité* (*divinity*), or objects or beings unknown in Haiti, such as *écureuil* (meaning *squirrel*) were omitted.

For **French Guyana** we have just one dictionary; it is written by Georges Barthélemi (*Dictionnaire créole guyanais-français*) and published in 2007.

It was written with a didactic purpose, as the author of the preface, Serge Patient, indicates. It has almost five thousand words and the only criterion used in choosing these words is their frequency. Unfortunately, the definitions of the Creole words are very short (often, synonymic) and this fact doesn't justify the presentation of the material in a column on each page. Here are some examples:

gan Gant "glove"

garaj Garage "garage"

For the **French Creole of Louisiana**, we have a trilingual dictionary:

Valdman Albert, Klingler Thomas A., Marshall Margaret M., Rottet Kevin J., *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1998.

Now, I'd like to make some general remarks on Creole dictionaries:

- the sociolinguistic and historical dimensions of these dictionaries are less evident. These remarks can also be applied to the dictionaries of regional French (I will speak about them later). The preface writers of these dictionaries indicate that their works are based on sociolinguistic investigations. Unfortunately, in the articles, there is little proof attesting these investigations. It is thus almost impossible to find out if the meaning of a word is more frequently or whether it is current or outdated. Of course, there are also exceptions: in the dictionary of Louisiana Creole, various modern pronunciations listed after the part of the speech are followed by two letter codes indicating where the variant was attested. We can therefore observe here a geographical variation. Also, Raphaël Confiant specifies in his dictionary whether a Creole word is rare or not.

- some of these dictionaries don't neglect the contribution of folklore to the lexicography. Jules Faine says in the preface of his dictionary: «To illustrate the meaning of a lot of words, I resorted to sayings, proverbs and historical anecdotes in which our folklore is so rich. Their history and the commentaries that I added, allowed me to write about the beliefs and the lifestyle of the people: this gives some flesh and muscles to the too rigid frame of a dictionary.»

2. Creole grammars.

The Creole grammars also have a lexical interest because, sometimes they contain some material presented as belonging explicitly to Antillean French. Thus, analysing the work entitled *Creole grammar* written by Robert Germain, I discovered some words that have French graphic forms:

zombie, chadron, canari, pou de bois, blesse, gourmer, souvamment, par conséquent, quio [tchip].

3. Footnotes with an explanatory value.

The footnotes have a particular function in Antillean novels. Very often, they give explanations for the regionalisms that can pose problems to the reader. Thus their main function is to make the comprehension of the text easier. They are an important support for the readers, but they do not satisfy the lexicographer who is looking for a complete description of the words.

4. The lexicography of standard French.

Finally, the dictionaries of standard French (also called «français de référence»), represented by such dictionaries as the *Trésor de la langue française* or the Robert Dictionaries, have articles dedicated to regionalisms. These regionalisms are usually marked by the abbreviation *rég.* followed by the name of a region (Antilles, Guyana, Canada, etc.). As for the French for the Lesser Antilles, in the *Trésor de la langue française* we first find words having specific meaning in different francophone areas (take for instance *habitation*, a word that in the Lesser Antilles and in French Guyana refers to a plantation) and then we find words having an Amerindian origin (for example *agouti*, noun that refers to an animal).

We shall now go over the direct lexicographic sources for the French of the Atlantic region.

The first is a doctorate thesis written in the '60 by Pradel Pompilus. He wrote in the third part of his work, dedicated to the vocabulary, a list of words from Haitian French variety. The

vocabulary is divided in three categories: haitianisms, anglicisms and influences from seventeenth and eighteenth century French. For the most part, the author presents some data on the usage of the words. He then illustrates the usage by several quotations taken from journals. Pompilus doesn't pay particular attention to the historical dimension of his articles and when he does, his commentaries are often imprecise and even completely wrong. For instance, the origin of the noun *meringue*, a type of dance, is explained by the English *merry ring*, which is false. In reality, the word has an African origin and it first referred to a dance that the slaves from Mozambique brought to the Dominican Republic.

The second direct source (chronologically), but the first from the point of view of the interest, is a dictionary of the French of the Lesser Antilles. It was written by Sylviane Telchid, a teacher of French and Creole, from Guadeloupe. As of now, it is the only dictionary of Antillean French that we have and this aspect makes the book interesting, in spite of its several shortcomings.

Firstly, the dictionary is not exhaustive. The number of the words treated is relatively small.

Secondly, it doesn't specify systematically if the words are used more often in Martinique than in Guadeloupe or on the small islands. Sylviane Telchid defends this choice with the fact that the French varieties spoken on the two islands are relatively similar.

There is then the fact that the dictionary has some mistakes from a technical point of view (the definitions are not always substitutable into the examples, the meanings of the words are not always expressed clearly, etc.)

In spite of all these imperfections, this dictionary is a good stepping-stone toward writing a more complex lexicographical work of this kind.

Another direct source is a glossary written by a doctor interested in lexicology, René Hénane. The title of his work published in 2004 is *Le glossaire des termes rares de l'oeuvre d'Aimé Césaire*. The words analysed by Hénane are connected to a lot of disciplines. We have scientific words, archaisms, regionalisms from Antilles and new words created by Césaire.

The author's sources include some interviews with the poet Aimé Césaire himself and the analysis of some dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

René Hénane knows that his glossary is not complete, but he says:

«This work suffers from some imperfections but, in a paradoxical way, this feeling of incompleteness delights us. An incomplete and uncertain work carries in itself the way to completion and it lets shine the hope of an embellishment.»

This «embellishment» came without delay. More precisely, it is an article written by André Thibault, Professor at the Sorbonne University (*L'oeuvre d'Aimé Césaire et le français regional antillais*) and published in the proceedings of a scientific meeting that took place in the honour of Aimé Césaire at École Normale Supérieure in October 2008). This new article proposes an improvement of the commentaries made by Hénane.

Another source is the Dictionary of Louisiana Creole .

Another direct source is the business correspondence of Sévère Hérault, the son of a notary from Nantes, established in Guyana at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The four thousand letters are kept today in a good condition in the Archives of the department of Loire-Atlantique. These letters were written by Hérault's friends or by costumers from Guyana. They give us a large number of regionalisms attested for the first time. They are very interesting for lexicographers. Patrick Brasseur studies these words in his article:

«Les regionalismes du français dans la correspondance de Sévère Hérault, colon nantais en Guyane (1805-1825)», published in *Études creoles*, tome 14, n° 2 (1991), 9-52.

Finally, some articles recently published can be included in the category of direct sources available for the study of varieties of French in the Atlantic area. Written by André Thibault their subject is the commentary of the regionalisms from a literary corpus (the novels of the Antillean writer Joseph Zobel). The author even comments on some regionalisms from a diachronic perspective. He observes that some of them are present in both Antillean French and Quebec French and writes about this similarity in the article «Français des Antilles et français d'Amérique: les diatopismes de Joseph Zobel, auteur Martiniquais» published in *RLIR*, in 2008.

Other articles written by the same author:

«Français d'Amérique et créole / français des Antilles: nouveaux témoignages», RLiR, 73, 78-137, 2009

Les diatopismes dans La rue Cases-Nègres (1950) de Joseph Zobel, published in *Richesses du français et géographie linguistique : Recherches lexicographiques sur les variétés du français en France et hors de France*, (t. 2), Bruxelles, Duculot / De Boeck, 2008

I cannot finish this part of my communication without mentioning my small contribution to the study of French regional terms:

an article on the words of Amerindian origin:

Zanoaga Teodor-Florin, «Mots d'origine amérindienne du français régional des Antilles dans un corpus de littérature contemporaine», dans *Çédille*, n° 6 / 2010 (téléchargeable en ligne à l'adresse <http://webpages.ull.es/users/cedille/seis/zanoaga.pdf>)

and another article about the words related to magic and superstitions.

«Mots du vocabulaire de la magie et des superstitions dans un corpus de littérature antillaise contemporaine», communication présentée aux Linguistik Tage, 2-4 mars 2010, Freiburg-im-Breisgau.

To finish, I'd like to present some on-line lexicographic sources.

The BDLP (in French «Base de données lexicographiques panfrancophone») is a collaborative project sponsored by the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie that makes available freely, on-line, the differential vocabulary of more than a dozen regions where French is either the everyday or official language. Since September 2009, this database has a section dedicated to the French of the Lesser Antilles. There are just 214 words in this section for the moment, but it is expected to grow in the coming years. The BDLP is not a dictionary strictly speaking, but a lexical database whose importance is comparable to that of the International Corpus of English.

Our computer database is hosted by the servers of Laval University in Quebec. From it, we can access some lexicographic articles that are even richer in information than those of dictionaries published in paper format. In the BDLP, the data are fragmented into separated fields. In this way, the reader can find complex data more quickly than he could in a publication in paper format.

I decided to stop at this database because in BDLP-Antilles there is a small contribution from my part. More precisely, I have analyzed and completed 39 among the 214 words of this section:

à-tous-maux, herbe-à-tous-maux, agoulou-grand-fale, agouti, alcali, alliancer, anoli, baboules, bailler, bain-démarré, balaou, bal-titane, banc-fainéant, bankoulélé, bébélé, belleté, bête-à-feu, biguine, biguine-vidé, blaff, Blanc-France, Blanc-pays, bobo, calalou, calenda, calendé,-ée, chabin, -ine, chaltouné, choubouler, cocagneur, CRS, décollage, décontrôler, dépendez-moi-ça, djimbé, douciner, dodine, doudou, doudouisme.

I would now like to note some examples.

Bankoulélé means “disorder”.

I found this lexical type attested in the Creole of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Guyana. The origin of this noun is interjectional in nature. We can easily distinguish in its structure the Creole onomatopoeia *ouélélé* and the lexical structure *bang* that can be an alteration of the onomatopoeia *bank* expressing the sound of an explosion. I found this word attested for the first time in 1986, in Patrick Chamoiseau’s novel, *Chronique de sept misères* and in two novels of Ernest Pépin, a Guadeloupian writer. The word has a nominal value. The interjection underwent a change in grammatical category and became a noun.

The second word I’d like to discuss is *biguine*, the name of an Antillean dance. The word is known in Guadeloupe and in Martinique and its origins are now uncertain. Élodie Jourdain has postulated that it could be a derived nominal form from the English verb *to begin*. The word appears also in *Trésor de la langue française* (abbreviated *TLF*) with the mention «probabl. mot des Antilles». Unfortunately, this hypothesis doesn’t have enough arguments to be supported. It is safer in these circumstances to state that the origin of this word is unknown. As for the first attestation, the *TLF* gives the year 1935. Nevertheless, we discovered an older attestation (1929) in the Google Books database.

The third word is *blaff*. It refers to an Antillean court-bouillon, very spicy dish, prepared with fish. Its origin is most likely the Dominican English word *broth* which means “stock”. I found this word attested for the first time in a written source in 1986 (in P. Chamoiseau’s *Chronique de sept misères*).

Finally, the last word that I will speak about is *chabin*. It refers to a person belonging to the African race, with blond hair or red hair, whose skin has a very light tone. I found this word in Guadeloupian Creole as well as in Creoles from Martinique and Haiti. In some French dictionaries of the XIXe century, the word means “little animal, a result of the mating

between a billy goat and an ewe”. The Antillean meaning is metaphorical, because it refers to people who have a mixed phenotype. I found the word attested for the first time in 1961 (in Pompilus Pradel’s thesis).

Seeing that my time is already up, I will now conclude.

Sylviane Telchid’s dictionary is a necessary tool for the reader who wants to find out some information about the lexical particularities of the French used in the Atlantic area, but it doesn’t offer an exhaustive image of its lexical richness. That is why, André Thibault has been considering the idea of establishing a complex dictionary for this variety of French. It should include both the older and the recent contributions in this field. The dictionary should have also a diachronic dimension. Of course, this is just an idea for the moment, because there is still a lot of work to do:

- Regionalisms of the Antillean writers and their status in literary corpus must be analysed;
- Ancient sources must also be analysed. Here is a list of books that can offer interesting data for the history of the words:

Biet A., *Voyage de la France équinoxiale en l’isle de Cayenne... Avec un dictionnaire de la langue du mesme país...*, Paris, 1664.

Du Puis (Le P. M.), *Relation de l’establissement d’une colonie françoise dans la Guadeloupe, isle de l’Amérique, et des mœurs des Sauvages...*, Caen, 1652.

Du Tertre (Le P. J.-B.), *Histoire générale des isles de S. Christophe, de la Guadeloupe, de la Martinique, et autres de l’Amérique*, Paris, 1654.

Id., *Nouvel examen des Langues des Antilles avec notes sur les langues arawak-maipure et caribes et vocabulaires shebayo et guayana (Guyane)*, dans *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris*, N. S., XXXI, 1939.

Hallay (le P. J.), *Relation des Isles de la Martinique et de Saint-Christophe...écrite en 1657*. Publiée dans la *Nouvelle Revue Rétrospective*, 1902, tome XVII, pp. 73-95.

Labat (le P. J.-B.), *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l’Amérique*, Paris, 1722, 6v.

Le Febvre de la Barre, *Description de la France equinoctiale cy-devant appelée Guyanne...*, Paris, 1666.

Le Hirbec (D.), *Voyages de Daniel Le Hirbec de Laval aux Antilles, aux Pays-Bas et en Italie, 1642-44, ... publiés par Louis de la Beauillère. Avec une préface et des notes de Emile Moreau*, Laval, 1890.

Rochefort (C. de), *Histoire naturelle et morale des Iles Antilles de l’Amerique*, Paris, 1658. Contient un lexique méthodique français-caraïbe.

Satineau (M.), *Histoire de la Guadeloupe sous l’ancien régime*, Paris, 1928.

- This presentation has been just a short incursion into the interesting lexicographic landscape. Other important sources should be taken into account:

- for the words having Amerindian origins:

Breton Révérend Père Raymond, *Dictionnaire caraïbe-français*, Édition présentée et annotée par le CELIA et le GEREK, IRD-KARTHALA, 1999

Friederici Georg, *Amerikanistisches Wörterbuch und Hilfswörterbuch für den Amerikanisten*, Hamburg, Cram, De Gruyter, 1947

or African origins:

Anglade Pierre, *Inventaire étymologique des termes créoles des Caraïbes d'origine africaine*, Paris, Montréal ; L'Harmattan, 1998

for the words related to travel:

Arveiller Raymond, *Contribution à l'étude des termes de voyage en français (1505-1722)*, Paris, Éditions d'Artrey, 1963.

In conclusion, the lexical and the lexicographical study of French varieties in the Atlantic region is an exciting intellectual adventure. There is certainly a degree of monotony associated with this work, because the analysis of these sources takes a lot of time, because it is often difficult to fill the blanks of the historical evolution of the words and because of the difficulty in putting together disparate data. In the end, satisfaction is found by solving the puzzle. I think that Dr. Samuel Johnson really hit the nail on the head when he said humourously that lexicographers are “harmless drudges”.

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