

The sociolect of 17th-18th century French settlers: phonological clues from French Creoles

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In this paper, I will show how linguistic data of Creole languages can shed some light on the dialectal and sociolectal varieties of French that were spoken in America in the 17th and 18th centuries. There is a widespread assumption in the literature on French Creoles (*e.g.* Chaudenson 1979, Lefebvre 1998) that the phonetic shape of Creole words reflects the pronunciation of the corresponding words in the 17th-18th centuries French. There is also a consensus on the geographical origins of the settlers who emigrated to the Antilles, an origin they shared with those who colonized New France. French settlers in America were mainly from western and central regions of France (Brasseur 1997, Chaudenson 1979, 1994, Hull 1975, 1994, Valdman 1978, 1979). However, there is no consensus on the actual dialects and/or sociolects spoken by the French settlers, particularly for pronunciation. Either the settlers were “patoisants” speakers – i.e. speakers of a regional dialect of French that diverged strongly from the norm of Paris – (Asselin & McLaughlin 1981, Barbaud 1984) or they were speakers of French (Charbonneau & Guillemette 1994; the contribution by Chaudenson, Hull, Morin and Poirier in Mougeon & Béniak 1994). Moreover, the settlers were speaking either a basilectal, popular French (Brasseur 1997), or a mesolectal French (Hull 1994), a local variety of the Parisian norm, referred to as Regional Standard French. This latter view, as I will show, is the most consistent with the linguistic data.

Within the limits of this paper, I will confine my demonstration to the phonetic realization of Creole words that correspond to French words with an initial aspirated /h/. The data was gathered by compiling all available documentation on the pronunciation and on the lexicon of five Atlantic French Creoles. In most Atlantic French Creoles, the initial /h/ was reanalyzed by the velar fricative /ɣ/ (written ‘r’ in the orthography), while in St.Lucia and Louisiana Creoles, the aspirated /h/ was maintained as is. For example:

| (1) <u>French</u> | <u>Haiti/Fr.Guyana/Martinique-Guadeloupe</u> | <u>St.Lucia/Louisiana</u> | <u>Gloss</u> |
|-------------------|--|---------------------------|---------------|
| hache | rach | hach | ax |
| haïr | rayi | hayi/hai | to hate |
| haillon | ranyon | hanyon/hayon | rags |
| héler | rele | hele | to hail, call |

Interestingly, in all five Creoles, the initial consonant is realized only in those words of French beginning with an aspirated /h/. Neither /h/ or /ɣ/ shows in Creole words corresponding to French words with an initial vowel or initial mute /h/. This suggests that, during the period where the various Creoles were formed – i.e. mid-17th to mid-18th century (Lefebvre 1998, Singler 1993) – the French settlers were actually pronouncing the aspirated /h/, a feature missing from Popular French of the period (Bonnard 1982, Pierret 1983, Rosset 1911, Zink 1991) and most characteristic of the Parisian norm (*cf.* Thurot 1881-83 and the grammarians cited therein).

Thus, the data on the aspirated word (as the data on /r/ and on the diphthongs, for instance) argues against views that French settlers in America were speakers of either patois or Popular French. The fact that other realizations of /h/ that characterize many patois of the western and central France are never found in the French Creoles also militates against the patois hypothesis.

Keywords: sociolects – historical French – French Creoles

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