

CREOLE ON THE TRINIDADIAN GROUND: REVISITING THE CONCEPT

Criollo en Trinidad: revisión del concepto

Joanna TRZECIAK¹

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RESUMEN: Este artículo examina la multiplicidad de las definiciones de “criollo”, aplicada por los investigadores sociales, lingüistas y antropólogos, desde que fue acuñado en el siglo XVI en las colonias fundadas por los portugueses y los españoles. Basado en los datos recogidos durante el trabajo de campo etnográfico en tres escuelas secundarias en el corredor este-oeste de la Trinidad (de Trinidad y Tobago), revisamos estos conceptos y sugerimos que sólo la investigación etnográfica adicional puede proporcionarnos el entendimiento del concepto contemporáneo de “criollo”. En este artículo sostenemos que el concepto de criollo tiene diferentes connotaciones en Trinidad cuando se refiere a la lengua y cuando se utiliza para describir el origen étnico. En el primer caso, implica la inclusión y la unidad entre los trinitenses, mientras que en el último significado tiene connotaciones dudosas y que podría referirse a “nosotros”, los trinitenses, orgulloso de la diversidad (de nuevo, lo que implica la inclusión), o por otra lado, excluyendo los indios orientales en Trinidad o los indios trinitenses del ámbito de aplicación (por lo tanto, lo que indica la exclusión).

PALABRAS CLAVE: criollo, criollización, Trinidad, etnicidad, lengua, los Indios Orientales, africano.

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the multiplicity of the definitions of “Creole” applied by social researchers, linguists, and anthropologists since it was coined in 16th century in the colonies founded by the Portuguese and the Spanish. On the basis of the data gathered during the ethnographic fieldwork in three Secondary Schools in the East-West Corridor of Trinidad, we revisit the definitions of

¹ Joanna TRZECIAK – social and cultural anthropologist. She graduated from the international programme of Social and Cultural Anthropology at VU University in Amsterdam. In 2007 graduated from CESLA under the supervision of prof. Dr. A. Dembicz. Currently – research and editorial assistant at the Department of Organization Sciences at VU University in Amsterdam.

Creole and suggest that only further ethnographic research might provide us with the understanding of the contemporary concept of Creole (or creole, various spellings have been used). In this article we argue that the concept of Creole has different connotations in Trinidad when it refers to language and when it is used to describe ethnicity. In the first case it implies inclusion and unity among Trinidadians, whereas in the latter meaning, it has dubious connotations and it might refer to “us”, the Trinidadians, proud of the diversity (thus again implying inclusion), or, on the other hand, excluding Trinidadian East Indians or Indo-Trinidadians (therefore indicating exclusion).

KEYWORDS: Creole, creolization, Trinidad, ethnicity, language, East Indian, Africa.

CREOLE: THE MULTIPLICITY OF DEFINITIONS

Creole Languages, Pidgins, and Creole Continuum

The establishment of pidgin and Creole language studies as an academic discipline took place in the 1950s and 1960s. The lack of interest in this area was due to the fact that these languages were perceived as “corruptions of «higher» European languages”² and their speakers were seen as “semisavages”. Creole languages have pidgins in their ancestry and they are spoken “natively by an entire speech community, often one whose ancestors were displaced geographically (...)”³.

Pidgin results from the contact of people who have no language in common, but need one so as to communicate verbally, very often for the purposes of trade. They are not the speakers’ native languages and are characterized by a reduced and simplified structure, with elements of at least two languages. As Jourdan notes, the speakers of the pidgins “had a native language to fall back on, Creole speakers had only Creole to rely on”⁴.

² J. Holm, *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 1.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴ Ch. Jourdan, “Pidgins and Creoles. Blurring of categories”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, No. 20, 1991, p. 192.

For centuries Trinidadian Creole and its varieties, used mostly by the Trinidadians in informal settings, were looked down upon. Nowadays, it is embraced by its speakers and less often seen as a “stigmatized” code. Standard English, the official language of Trinidad and Tobago, may still be perceived by many of the Trinidadians as a vestige of the colonial period, but it is also seen as a global language, *lingua franca*⁵.

The definition of Creole as a language (on the Caribbean grounds, here, specifically in the Trinidadian case) still causes (a few) ambiguities on the island of Trinidad, but mainly in terms of 1. the name by which it is referred to (the author came across a variety of names in Trinidad, among which “dialect”, “our language”; “bad English”; “broken English” or even “slang” in the case of male youth), and 2. the lack of clear boundaries between what can be defined as Creole and what still belongs to English. In the second case what we observe instead is “Creole continuum”. Trinidad does not have a deep basilectal Creole and it is more difficult to identify what belongs to English and what belongs to Creole: “In Trinidad the creole vernacular has decreolized considerably in the direction of Standard English and the public perception is that creole is merely a deviant dialect of English”⁶. There is a distinction between the Creoles in rural areas which are less varied and in urban areas where rural, mesolectal and the standard variety can be spoken. Thus, rural speakers might be disadvantaged because of having access to just one variety⁷. On top of that, there may be a gap not only between urban and rural areas, but also within them, between different social or ethnic groups. In reality, English and Creole overlap each other and are in constant interaction, as DeCamp suggests:

there is no sharp cleavage between creole and standard. Rather, there is a linguistic continuum, a continuous spectrum of speech varieties ranging from the “bush talk”

⁵ J. Trzeciak, *Voicing the Identities of Trinidadian Youth. Creole Language and Identity in Trinidad and Tobago*, MSc thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2008.

⁶ D. Winford, “Sociolinguistic Approaches to Language Use in the Anglophone Caribbean”, in: M. Morgan (ed.), *Language and the Social Construction of Identity in Creole Situations*, Center for Afro-American Studies, Los Angeles 1994, p. 54.

⁷ M. Morgan (ed.), *Language and the Social Construction...*, op. cit., p. 3.

or “broken language” of Quashie to the educated standard of Philip Sherlock and Norman Manley (...)⁸.

There are no clear-cut boundaries but, although English and Creole are constantly overlapping, there also some discontinuities between the two.

Despite the multiplicity of names and blurring of boundaries in terms of what belongs to Creole and what does not, the term “Creole” when referring to a language encompasses all the Trinidadian nation in opposition to “Creole” describing ethnicity, or ethnic identity, which we explore further below.

Creole Is More Than a Language

Various societies applied the concept of Creole differently. For example, Spanish “criollo” (attested in 1590 by Jose de Acosta in *Historia natural y moral de Las Indias*), demarcated the ones born locally, but having Spanish roots. The British used the term to refer to slaves as well as colonizers born in the New World. French Creoles would mostly have French ancestors, but sometimes the name could also refer to any white Roman Catholic Europeans born in the New World and very often the term was associated with good family and high status. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, professor of Comparative Literature, states that not all born in the New World might be included in Creole society and to his mind it excluded the ones born outside the plantation economy as they were outside the relationship between slaves and European owners⁹. Creole Jamaica, in Brathwaite’s eyes, was a “juxtaposition of master and slave, elite and labourer, in a culturally heterogenous relationship”¹⁰.

The question which arises is: is creolization then restricted only to “amalgamations, appropriations and inversions of African and European cul-

⁸ D. DeCamp, in: M. Morgan (ed.), *Language and the Social...*, op. cit., p. 46.

⁹ E. Stoddard, C. Grant, “Cosmopolitan or Mongrel? Reading Creolite and Hybridity via “Douglarisation” in Trinidad”, in: R. R. Premdas (ed.), *Identity, Ethnicity and Culture in the Caribbean*, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine 1999.

¹⁰ E. K. Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971, p. vxi.

tural forms”?¹¹. Nettleford claims that to this we can add all the ones that arrived later because it is a dynamic process that still continues¹². Hannerz, a Swedish anthropologist, puts creolization next to other terms of mixture, such as, for example, synergy, transculturation, or hybridity¹³. Sidney Mintz criticizes him for decontextualizing the concept and borrowing it from its historically, chronologically, and geographically specific setting¹⁴.

“The Creole” was a figure on the alien ground, but the term did not imply hybridity or mixedness in the first place and even after the end of slavery, in some regions, it remained unclaimed “as an intentional predicate of Afro-Caribbean collective identities associated with such cultural forms (...)”¹⁵. It could be perceived as a pejorative concept (in terms of language and ethnicity), associated with the colonial times, away from which the inhabitants of the Caribbean have been moving each century, more towards the appreciation of their past. By the twentieth century *criollismo* started to demarcate “uncreole”, “pure”, thus “outside the nation”¹⁶. According to Palmié, after the decline of Caribbean plantation economies, two main conceptions of “Creole” emerged, which “impart specificity to local conceptions”¹⁷. One of them relates to differentiating/contrasting ethnic differences, maintaining ethnic boundaries: in Trinidad and Guyana, the term “Creole” excludes Amerindians and East Indians, in Jamaica, it excludes East Indians, Chinese and Maroons¹⁸. Thus, it is apparent it means something else in different regions; in Trinidad the East Indians are excluded from the creole

¹¹ E. Stoddard; C. Grant, “Cosmopolitan or Mongrel? Reading Creolite and Hybridity via “Douglarisation” in Trinidad”, op. cit., p. 219.

¹² R. Nettleford, *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica*, Center for Afro-American Studies, Los Angeles 1978.

¹³ U. Hannerz, “Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology”. Published in Portuguese as “Fluxos, fronteiras, híbridos: palavras-chave da antropologia transnacional”, *Mana*, No. 3 (1), Rio de Janeiro 1997.

¹⁴ S. W. Mintz, “The Localization of Anthropological Practice: From Area Studies to Transnationalism”, *Critique of Anthropology*, No. 18 (2), 1998.

¹⁵ S. Palmié, “Creolization and Its Discontents”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, No. 35, 2006, p. 440.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 439.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 441.

¹⁸ D. Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1971, p. 32.

game¹⁹. The second of the conceptions brings forward the creolization discourse, with the emphasis on defining a common culture, which is seen as the basis of national identity, which might have been a result of the rise in independence movement in Americas²⁰.

As presented above, with the multiplicity of the definitions of “creole”/ “Creole”, we are faced with ambiguity and confusion, but fascination and eagerness to unfold and grasp them at the same time. In order to better understand the contemporary concepts of “Creole” on the current Caribbean ground, below we will further explore the definitions of “Creole” that were presented to us by Trinidadian youth during the ethnographic research, and we will try to confront them with the theoretical debates and concepts discussed above. First, background of the respondents and ethnic composition of Trinidad and Tobago will be provided.

CREOLE “IN THE FIELD“

Multi-ethnic Composition of Trinidad and Tobago

The mixing of different racial and ethnic groups in Trinidad was mainly a result of plantation economy, slavery, and the later incoming of the indentured workers from India, China, Portuguese islands (Fayal and Madeira), West Indian islands (Antigua, Barbados, and Grenada), Africa (Sierra Leone and the island of St. Helena), and some of the European countries. It has produced the following multiethnic composition of the country: East Indian 40%, African 37.5%, mixed 20.5%, European 0.6%, Chinese 0.3%, other/not stated 1.1% (2000)²¹. Other sources present a slightly different picture: 1) according to “Ethnologue.com”: Afro-Trinidadian 40%, East Indian²² 41%, mixed 14%, white 1%, Chinese 1%, other 1% (1980-1993); 2)

¹⁹ Ch. Stewart, *Creolization. History, Ethnography, Theory*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek 2007, p. 4.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/td.html> (accessed: 26.04.2013).

²² Term “East Indian” refers mainly to the immigrants from Eastern region of India and their

according to Population Census²³: African 39.59%, Indian 40.27%, mixed 18.45%, Caucasian 0.65%, Chinese 0.38% (1990)²⁴. These statistics reveal two groups which together make up Trinidad and Tobago: Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians.

Informants

All of the three Secondary Schools visited during data collection are located in the East-West Corridor of Trinidad and Tobago. The first school visited and the one in which most fieldwork time was spent was a mixed (girls and boys) government school. Because we wanted to acquire a broader, more varied and reliable picture, the other two schools where data was gathered were of a different type, namely government-assisted schools: a girls' school and a boys' school. In all of them we were working mainly with pupils from form²⁵ 6 (aged 11-13) and the last form (aged 17-19), which was either form 5 or 6 (upper 6), depending on the school. This enabled us to gain a general impression how their ideas have evolved and changed in their school years. We also managed to interview teachers in each school, so as to compare how children's and teenagers' ideas differ from theirs. Ethnographic knowledge was produced on the basis of non- and semi-structured formal and informal interviews, participant and non-participant observation, as well as projecting and enabling techniques (drawings, etc.). Much of the data presented here comes from the interviews with students and teachers, many of whose statements were triggered by the discussion about their language, ethnicity, and what "Creole" means to them.

In each school we interviewed three or four teachers and had ample opportunities to spend time with many of them and converse in informal

descendants. However, it can be also loosely applied to the people coming from all parts of India, or even Southeastern Asia.

²³ J-A. S. Ferreira, *The Sociolinguistic situation of Trinidad and Tobago*, n.d., <http://www.-unb.br/il/liv/crioul/textos/ferreira.htm> (accessed: 16.10.2007).

²⁴ It is interesting to note that there is a marked difference between the country's two islands: Afro-Trinbagonians constitute a clear majority in Tobago.

²⁵ Grade school levels in Trinidad and Tobago are called "forms" in secondary schools and "standards" in primary schools.

(lunch time) and more formal (staff room) settings. With older students (form 5 and 6) fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, which they agreed to be recorded. With the youngest ones (form 1) around thirty informal chats (non-structured interviews) were held, mostly on the basis of the drawings they had made.

Division vs. Unity

Trinidadians tend to attach the label to the whole Trinidadian society when it is associated with the language. Creole language is not linked to particular ethnicity and the most of the Trinidadians interviewed who believe that Creole is the main language spoken in their country would say that it is “we language” (“our language”) or a “Trini ting” (“Trinidadian thing”). As soon as they are asked about what Creole means as an adjective describing not necessarily a language, they react: “Ohh, in that sense” and follow with the list of things that can actually be Creole, starting with food, people, clothes etc. Especially older students, from one of the most prestigious, high-level government-assisted schools, refer to “Creole” as anything coming from the Caribbean, culture born there, something native to the country or the Caribbean region. This is what they are mostly taught at school, as one of the students pointed out,

You know, usually if some people think Creole, they think African. Because that’s what they think. Caribbean is mostly African.... What we have learnt is Creole is anything coming from the Caribbean.

(Siddiqua, 18 years old, Indo-Trinidadian, girls’ government-assisted school)

A descriptive picture of what Creole means was sketched by another student, Nicholas. For him “Creole” embraces the whole Trinidadian culture. It is something to be proud of; it is the common man, but not only: “big people” in Trinidad are also Creole. His Creole type is dougla²⁶. This part of conversation continues after I brought up the word “Creole” not in the context of a language, but as an adjective, and then it can signify various things.

²⁶ Dougla(s) in Trinidad refers to an individual who has East Indian and African heritage. Douglarization means interculturalization of African and Indian elements.

N (respondent): Ohhh, that's like... now I know, that's like the culture for instance. I am sure that where you come from they don't eat roti, doubles... what is the name of this next meal.... No, we have like all the set of the Creole food. The word "Creole" signifying where we come from, or the places like where we living, mostly in the Caribbean, you will get those kinds of things.

JT (interviewer): Does it also refer to the people? Creole? Can you name somebody... somebody that is Creole?

N: Yeah. Let me see now... hmm... the Prime Minister. ...Prime Minister is Creole... what is his name...Patrick Manning²⁷, Basdeo Panday²⁸. All those election guys are named Creole. They might have the descents signifying where they are from, Indian, African, Chinese, those kinda things, it's a rainbow...

JT: You mentioned a couple of names and said that they are Creole.

N: Yeah yeah.

JT: But why them, particularly them?

N: No, everybody, but for big Prime Minister, he is not an ordinary person in the road, I can say he is Creole. It have blending thing as far as he/it look. You could get a name over Creole person, you know not just because all the looking and that kinda thing also, behaviour, culture yeah playing drums and like that, yeah you could see, you could see it, the reason why I called big people is because Creole is more than just the ordinary man.

JT: But can you refer to yourself as Creole?

N: Yeah, but my Creole is, as a dougla, so that is my type, there is dougla, Indian, Africans, all the mix up, but still Creole, so I refer to myself as that, just because I deal with my culture too, all ah we deal up with the same culture. I am not really a Carnival person, but that doesn't mean that I am not Creole.

(Nicholas, 17 years old, mixed government school)

Nicholas's understanding of Creole is pretty much in line with the one of the definitions of Creole that Palmié suggested. It emerged after the decline of the Caribbean plantation economies and it encompasses common culture, including East Indians, and it even has some connotation of hybridity (Nicholas's Creole was a "dougla type", as he called it). Mixture and ethnic diversity of Trinidadian society tend to be symbolized by a metaphorical colourful rainbow Nicholas referred to – a united nation consisting of distinct groups who coexist together and are "united in diversity"²⁹. Tension between Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians seems though deep and in-

²⁷ At the time of the interview (2008) it was a Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the leader of People's National Movement.

²⁸ Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago from 1995 to 2001; the leader of United National Congress.

²⁹ A. Khan, "Good to Think? Creolization. Optimism, and Agency", *Current Anthropology*, No. 48 (5), 2007, p. 658.

evitable. In the conversation with a 16-year-old student of East Indian background we were presented with the definition of Creole excluding the East Indians, but at the same time the importance of unity was brought up. Nevertheless, here it was not clear if it regarded the definition of “Creole” encompassing whole Trinidadian society or it was rather the importance of unity, diversity and tolerance, as such, that was stressed.

A: What, Creole? All right... Creole, OK... if you... sometimes it has something called “racialness” (author’s note: meaning racism)... If you are a Creole and I am an Indian it does have a split between that, like some people just naturally racial. They don’t like Indian people and some Indian people don’t like Creole people... I don’t know...for whatever reason.

JT: So who are Creole people?

A: Ehh?

JT: Who are Creole people?

A: Creole people are the ones... all right... like you see how my hair’s straight?

JT: Yeah.

A: Creole people is the one that their hair is being... like Miss... (here the surname of Afro-Trinidadian teacher was brought up). Right? But sometimes some people just call people “Nigga”, which not supposed to be... “Nigga” meaning... somebody who does tote (author’s note: meaning carry) load on their head and Negro means... I cannot remember what Negro means that much. I find, to be honest, I find that God make us as one and people shouldn’t be getting on about religions, races that kinda thing. We all should be living as one. No matter who is Indian, who is Chinese, who is Japanese. It doesn’t matter...

(Amanda, 16 years old, Indo-Trinidadian, mixed government school)

Because in some cases the term implied exclusion, ethnic differences and division, it was sometimes an uncomfortable and sensitive issue to discuss. Andre (12), who is Indo-Trinidadian, during the informal interview, which we had in the school library, said Creole might also mean a type of people contrasting it with “the others” like East Indians or Chinese. When asked who would be called Creole, he lowered his voice, leaned closer and whispered: “the guy sitting over there”, discreetly pointing with his head at one Afro-Trinidadian student. His classmate, Tariq, when asked if he would refer to somebody as Creole kept silent for some time, became a bit timid and did not say anything. After the question was paraphrased, he said: “No...everyone is one”. It differed according to individual cases among both students and teachers. While some would feel uncomfortable when confronted with this question, the others would say openly who falls into “Creole

category”. Nadia, a 12 year-old Indo-Trinidadian girl when asked the same question said the name of her Afro-Trinidadian friend loudly and in her company, pointed at her and said “just like she, I think”. When discussing the first concept of “Creole”, the one implying division, the associations of it being a derogatory term were inevitable to discuss.

V: The first thing... when somebody says Creole, the first that comes to my mind is like a race. That’s the first thing, but the second thing that comes to mind is like the entire culture associated with race and their language and everything about them.

JT: Why race?

V: Mhmm, because usually when people say Creole here we mean people of like African descent... usually... so that’s why we say race and most of the time if somebody say... we use the word Creole very loosely.

JT: But is it derogatory... do you know the word? Is it like offensive?

V: Ohh, mhmm, no. Not really. It’s at the same level as opposed as if you would say: like Creole and Indian. To me, to me it’s the same, as opposed some people would find it is offensive. But at the same time it’s not a word that everybody would just go shouting and saying: “Oh, you are Creole”. You know...

(Vahni, 18 years old, Indo-Trinidadian, girls’ government school)

Some teachers implied that “Creole” is not always a derogatory term, but indeed a sensitive one.

Creole is a Negro person. Indian would say: “he is Creole or she is a Creole woman” meaning Negro (...). It is not derogatory, when you say that somebody is Creole it is not derogatory. I have never heard they use it as derogatory. But when you talk about race, it’s a sensitive thing in this country. I don’t know why, but it is.

(Alana, a teacher)

Yet, another teacher said that Creole people are indeed of African descent, but they might take it as offensive to call them that (she was Afro-Trinidadian herself) and only the more educated ones are able to understand that it is not so; another female teacher, Donna, claimed that only ignorant people from the country would call themselves Creole openly. In her opinion East Indians would not call themselves Creole, but also they would not “call us Creole” (she said it meaning people of African origin) because they would get “a slap on their face”.

A number of students and teachers would say that Creole means “us”, anything coming from the Caribbean, which implies a uniting force; some of them would contrast it with the “others” or “us” (either Creole meaning “us” – of African background as opposed to “others” – East Indi-

ans, or more often “others” – Africans as opposed to “us” – East Indians). Two definitions of Creole (one excluding East Indians, the other one encompassing whole Trinidadian nation or even the Caribbean region) were coming to light during the ethnographic research and deeper understanding and conceptualizing of which by the respondents depended on the context, as well as their ethnic background and education.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we briefly reviewed various definitions of Creole on the basis of the ethnographic fieldwork in Secondary Schools in Trinidad. In Trinidad children and teenagers, as well as teachers, tell a story of both division and unity. They give the examples of splits in the society, but continue with the remarks as, for instance, “I am not racial”, or “But I think everybody is one”. When a term “Creole” is brought up, dubious associations and meanings follow. Even though, at schools in Trinidad the students are taught that Creole means everything being from the Caribbean (as Aisha Khan suggests, the Caribbean nation states have set themselves a challenge of establishing “unity in diversity”³⁰), the historical context and bigger social context has implications for other understandings and definitions of it, such as the one meaning African, and at the same time excluding the East Indians from its spectrum. We suggest that further examination of the process of creolization should be done in a bigger global, historical, and social context but at the same time with the means of producing ethnographic knowledge, which connects us with the “concrete”. Furthermore, ethnographic work is useful not only because it puts us in touch with the “specific” but “because it puts us in touch with viewpoints that are often overlooked and that sometimes have the power to challenge ideas that we or other theorists presuppose” (Handler in Khan³¹). Better understanding of the contemporary concept of creolization on the Caribbean ground can provide new tools for the analysis

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 667.

not only for the theorists, but also education policy makers and school textbooks writers, and provide us with the insights into modern Caribbean societies.

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