

Creole languages

Languages and identity are closely connected. While a number of factors including gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, etc. influence our identity, the language we use represents an important part of our sense of who we are.

In the [Ladino](#) and [Environmental justice](#) resources, we explored how protecting endangered languages helps to preserve cultural heritage and enables knowledge to be passed on from generation to generation. Like many other minority or non-official languages, and compounded by the marginalisation experienced by Creole-speaking populations, many Creole languages have now become extinct. However, in recent decades there has been a revival of interest in Creole languages, which has led to them being studied more and officially acknowledged in some countries.

In this resource we will explore some Creole languages that are related to French, German and Spanish.

WHAT IS CREOLE?

A Creole language is one that has been formed by mixing different languages. Creole languages have grammatical rules, lots of vocabulary and are learned by children as their native language.

Jamaican Patois is a Creole language that has West African (Akan) and English influences. It is spoken by most Jamaicans as a native language and there are large Jamaican Patois-speaking communities in South Florida, New York, Toronto, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, as well as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham! A variant of Jamaican Patois is also found in parts of Colombia because Jamaican Maroons (escaped slaves) took it there. Find out more in our [Benkos Bióho](#) resource.



Discussion point:

Are you familiar with any Creole languages or cultures? Share your thoughts!

DID YOU KNOW...?

The study of language is called 'linguistics' and the people who study it are called 'linguists'. The study of Creole languages is referred to as creology and people who study about creole languages are 'creolists'.

RESEARCH TASK

Find out which of the famous linguists from the column on the left said each quotation in the column on the right.

1	Noam Chomsky	A	"No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality."
2	Ngugi Wa Thiong'o	B	"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. "
3	Edward Sapir	C	"A language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language."
4	Ludwig Wittgenstein	D	"Let us call people by what they call themselves."

Answers:
1C, 3A, 2D, 4B,

Reflective/discussion point

What are your responses to these quotations?

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF CREOLE?

The majority of Creole languages that we know about developed as a consequence of the European period of colonialism in settlement colonies in the 16th and 17th centuries. However, linguists now know that Creole languages did not just develop during that time and under those particular conditions.

The term 'Creole' comes from the word 'criollo', which was originally a term that was coined by Spanish colonisers to describe people who were born in the Americas and who were of Spanish descent. It is now used to refer to people who speak Creole languages or who have Creole language-speaking heritage.

While Creole languages were once considered dialects and inferior to European languages, linguists now reject this and understand that Creole languages are equally as important as other languages.

Reflective questions

What is the difference between a dialect and a language?

Dialects and languages are both used to communicate. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that dialects are ‘the form of a language that is not formally written or standardised’; ‘dialect’ is usually the term used to refer to the method of communication of a specific group of people (based on religion, ethnicity, etc.). A language, however, is widely used and represented by a country. Language hierarchies (or the way in which languages are ranked according to authority or status) are not scientifically valid; they are artificial distinctions based on paradigms of privilege and power.

A linguist called Max Weinreich said, “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy”.

What do you think Weinreich meant by this? What is your response to this? Are you familiar with any dialects or non-official languages? What are the contexts or reasons for these languages being regarded as dialects or non-official languages?

Below is a map showing one interpretation of dialects of the British Isles.

Is any of this information familiar or surprising to you? What does this image fail to capture in terms of our increasingly multicultural and multilingual contexts?



RESEARCH TASK

Look at your local borough or council website and talk to others to find out about the languages and dialects spoken in your area.

Compile as extensive a list as possible of languages in your surrounding area and present it in whatever format you like. (You might want to use a word cloud, for example.) Take care to ensure that you don't perpetuate any hierarchies (rankings) in your presentation of the languages by making some appear more important than others. This is an opportunity to celebrate the rich linguistic diversity in your area!


Reflective task

Do you have experience of knowing or speaking a language that is not valued in the same way as others? In which contexts is this significant? Why is this? You might want to think about the languages you are able to learn at school and those that are not taught. You might want to think about ways in which some forms of language are encouraged, and others are not!

Ian Cushing, a raciolinguist, is interested in the connection between race and language and believes that beliefs about language are never neutral because they reflect institutional power dynamics. His work looks at the way that Black pupils in the UK can face discriminatory linguistic racism when their speech is deemed to differ from 'standard' or 'academic' English. What is your experience of or response to this?

RESEARCH TASK

Where is Creole spoken? Label the blank world map to show where each of these Creole languages is spoken.

French-related Creoles	German-related Creoles	Spanish-related Creoles
Haitian Creole	Unserdeutsch (Papua New Guinea)	Chavacano (Philippines)
Antillean Creole (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, St Lucia)	 <p>This is the flag of Papua New Guinea. The flag was designed by a 15-year-old who won a national competition! It depicts a raggiana bird of paradise. It also includes red, black and white, the colours of the German Empire, which had colonised New Guinea.</p>	Palenquero (Colombia)
Louisiana Creole (US)		Annobonese Creole (Equatorial Guinea)
Guianese Creole (French Guiana, Suriname, Guyana)		Papiamentu (Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao)
Karipúna Creole (Brazil)		Pichinglis (Equatorial Guinea – Bioko Island)
Mauritian Creole		San-Andres-Providencia Creole (Colombia)
Seychellois Creole		
Réunion Creole		
Tayo (New Caledonia)		



LANGUAGE TASK

Have a go at matching the Creoles to the German/French/Spanish translations.

English	French	Haitian Creole (1)
I don't eat red meat.	Je ne mange pas de viande rouge.	
English	German	Unserdeutsch (2)
I don't eat red meat.	Ich esse kein rotes Fleisch.	
English	Spanish	Chavacano (3)
I don't eat red meat.	No como carne roja.	

A
i ni essen
rote fleisch.

B
mwen pa manje
vyann wouj

C
Hindi ako kumakain
ng pulang karne

Answers
1 = C, 2 = A, 3 = B.

CREATIVE TASK

Take inspiration from the Papiamentu Creole wall art below. Design your own graffiti to express an idea in a Creole language that you already know or in one that you have encountered in this resource. Wikipedia may be a helpful research tool for this. In addition to the word or phrase you choose, try to incorporate images or representations that illustrate the origins of the Creole language (e.g. Akan in the case of Jamaican Creole).



A large, empty rectangular box with a blue border, intended for students to design their own graffiti.

Reflective/discussion point

Read this poem:

“I am Creole. I am not a seasoning, a type of food or a myth. I am a culture. I am a roux of the intermingling flavours that were native to this land and new to this land. I am story. I am language. I am tradition. I am family. I am every shade. I am proud of my culture and will not deny it to make you comfortable.”

(Rashanna Dupre, Louisiana 2021)

What is your response to these words? How do you understand these words in the context of the history and marginalisation of Creole languages and Creole language-speaking peoples? Do these words resonate with you and your own experiences or sense of identity at all?

FURTHER READING

Ian Cushing (2021) ‘Say it like the Queen’: the standard language ideology and language policy making in English primary schools, *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 34:3, 321-336, DOI: [10.1080/07908318.2020.1840578](https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2020.1840578)

RODRÍGUEZ, ENCARNACIÓN GUTIÉRREZ, and SHIRLEY ANNE TATE, eds. “Front Matter.” In *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations*, i-vi. Liverpool University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gn6d5h.1>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Panford is a Senior Lecturer at St Mary’s University in Twickenham, with over 14 years’ experience teaching languages in secondary schools in London. She has studied and worked in Spain and Peru. Lisa is passionate about counteracting discriminatory practices in the secondary MFL classroom and is dedicated to the principle that all pupils should be given an opportunity to appreciate the enriching and transformative experience of studying languages. Lisa is the co-founder of the Decolonising Secondary MFL Curriculum (Decolonising the Curriculum - Association for Language Learning (all-languages.org.uk)), elected Member of the Council for the Association for Language Learning and a Member of the Advisory Panels at the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies and the British Academy.

Explore the rest of our resources on [diversity and inclusion](#).

