

PERSPECTIVES

Toward racial justice in linguistics: The case of Creole studies (Response to Charity Hudley et al.)

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In their target article, Anne Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, and Mary Bucholtz (2020) have challenged linguists to constructively engage with race and racism. They suggest three core principles for inclusion and equity in linguistics: (i) ‘social impact’ as a core criterion for excellence; (ii) the acknowledgment of our field’s ‘origins as a tool of colonialism and conquest’; and (iii) the elimination of the ‘race gap’ that ‘diminishes the entire field ... by excluding scholars and students of color’. Here I amplify Charity Hudley et al.’s challenges through some of my own critiques of Creole studies. These critiques serve to further analyze institutional whiteness as, in their terms, ‘a structuring force in academia, informing the development of theories, methods, and models in ways that reproduce racism and white supremacy’. The latter is exceptionally overt in the prejudicial misrepresentations (a.k.a. ‘Creole exceptionalism’) that we linguists have created and transmitted, since the colonial era, about Creole languages and their speakers. One such misrepresentation, whose popularity trumps its dubious historical and empirical foundations, starts with the postulation that Creole languages AS A CLASS contrast with so-called ‘regular’ languages due to allegedly ‘abnormal’ processes of emergence and transmission. In effect, then, Creole studies may well be the most spectacular case of exclusion and marginalization in linguistics. With this in mind, I ask of Charity Hudley et al. a key question that is inspired by legal scholar Derrick Bell’s ‘racial interest-convergence theory’, whereby those in power will actively work in favor of racial justice only when such work also contributes to their self-interest. Given this theory, how can we sustainably implement any agenda, including Charity Hudley et al.’s, that stands to undermine the ‘structuring power of white supremacy’, including the power to choose whose research gets funded or whose subfield is included in ‘core’ linguistics? Bell’s theory might also bear on my proposed FUNDER PRINCIPLE for the intellectual history of Creole studies. I suggest that it is out of self-interest that the European FUNDERS of the colonial enterprise in Africa and the Americas helped create the power-knowledge structuring force that accounts for the genesis and transmission of Creole exceptionalism through centuries—in spite of mounting evidence against it. I end with an optimistic note about what might constitute ‘success’ in linguistics.

Keywords: Creole studies, Creole exceptionalism, racial justice, social justice, education, ‘funder principle’

I am a Creole speaker from Haiti and a linguist at MIT where one of my favorite and most challenging projects targets the intersection of linguistics, education, and social justice. As such, I enthusiastically welcome this target article by Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz (2020) on race, racism, and linguistics. Charity Hudley et al.’s arguments hit close to my professional and personal homes:

- (i) to my professional home as a linguist/creolist and faculty member at MIT since 1996, and
- (ii) to my personal home as a Haitian Creole native speaker who cares deeply about Creole languages, both as complex objects of theoretical study and as indispensable tools for education, liberation, and development for Creole speakers.

In light of this agenda, I can venture to say that, from a social-justice vantage point, Charity Hudley et al.’s target article may well be one of the most important articles to ever appear in the pages of *Language*. Reading it, I often felt that the authors were talking to me directly, giving recognition and added value to my work, especially as I am one of these ‘many scholars of color [who] choose to carry out their research in applied

contexts where they can have a greater beneficial impact on their own communities' (pp. e220–e221). In my case, this 'beneficial impact' is wedded to the fact that my theoretical linguistic research is coupled with both: (i) critiques of anti-Creole myth-making in Creole studies (DeGraff 2005a, 2019a,b); and (ii) work on the ground in Haiti's 'applied contexts', where, for the past ten years, I have led an interdisciplinary 'MIT-Haiti Initiative' team of educators, scientists, mathematicians, and so forth, engaged in projects involving linguistics, education, and technology (DeGraff 2016a,b, DeGraff & Stump 2018a,b, Miller 2019). It is through the lessons learned from my theoretical analyses in Creole studies and from my interdisciplinary language-and-education projects with the MIT-Haiti Initiative that I too am striving to help the field of linguistics reach these three fundamental objectives sketched by Charity Hudley et al.:

- (i) 'to see social impact as an inherent part of research and a valued contribution to scholarship, not as an optional addendum' (p. e221);
- (ii) to 'fully acknowledge the ongoing legacy of the field's history of racism and colonialism' (p. e212);
- (iii) to interrogate and resolve the 'race gap' in our field, a gap that 'diminishes the entire field of linguistics by excluding scholars and students of color, whose lived experiences yield important theoretical insights and epistemological perspectives that can broaden and transform the discipline' (p. e221).

These three desiderata quickly become personal AND professional challenges AND opportunities since I am in a department where I have been the only Black person for nearly twenty-five years (I thus embody the 'race gap'!) and the only one whose research and writings keep unmasking white supremacy in linguistics (e.g. DeGraff 2005a, 2019a) while considering and promoting 'social impact' as a defining aspect of my work.

In his 1962 essay 'As much truth as one can bear', James Baldwin put it so well: 'Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced'. Charity Hudley et al. make us linguists face the history of white supremacy in our field. My commentary will help us face, and perhaps resolve, additional facets of this history via analyses of certain claims about Creole languages—these claims are yet another reflex of white supremacy. So I trust that, as we face such details of the history of our field, we will come one step closer to healing from, and going beyond, this scourge of racism that Charity Hudley et al. want to eradicate.

As it turns out, the social processes that Charity Hudley et al. (p. e201) describe as 'racial classification' and other 'racialization processes', including (pseudo-)scientific racism, have played a structuring role in the genesis and transmission of basic dogmas in Creole studies. These racialization processes were part of a broader colonial project to enlist the humanities and social sciences as tools for establishing degrees of humanity that, in turn, would help maintain certain hierarchies of power subservient to European imperialism in Africa and the Americas starting in the seventeenth century (DeGraff 2005a, 2019a, Mufwene 2008).

My commentary here will thus amplify some of Charity Hudley et al.'s points with SOME concrete data and observations both from the (perforce) racialized field of Creole studies and from the history of my own resistance to these racialization processes. I emphasize the 'some' because there are many other points in their article that are germane to my own experience—from my years as a student at the University of Pennsylvania to my twenty-four-plus years at MIT as faculty—that cannot be addressed in this relatively short commentary. But I hope I can still make it clear that virtually all of Charity

Hudley et al.'s insights connect, in principle, to my personal history, concerns, and agenda. For that, I am immensely grateful to them.

As a roadmap to the rest of my commentary, here are the questions from Charity Hudley et al. that I answer in turn from my perspective as a Haitian and Kreyòl-speaking linguist, creolist, and educator:

- (i) How does 'institutional whiteness[, as] a structuring force in academia, inform[] the development of theories, methods, and models in ways that reproduce racism and white supremacy as structural social processes rather than simply acts of individual ill will'? (p. e201)
- (ii) How does 'the field [of linguistics] continue[] to exclude, marginalize, and colonize the experiences of racialized groups'? (p. e224)
- (iii) 'How can linguistics dismantle racist structures within the discipline and profession' (AND BEYOND)? (p. e222)

Let us start with two signposts in Charity Hudley et al.'s title—'race' and 'racism'—while keeping our eyes on the prize that is named there, namely 'racial justice'.

- (i) **How does 'institutional whiteness[, as] a structuring force in academia, inform[] the development of theories, methods, and models in ways that reproduce racism and white supremacy as structural social processes rather than simply acts of individual ill will'?** (p. e201)

Looking at one of Charity Hudley et al.'s definitions of 'race' as a belief system (p. e210), I was struck by how closely this definition corroborates my analysis for the racist origins of the various dogmas that postulate exceptional properties as criteria for Creole languages and their development (e.g. Creoles as 'simplest', non-'regular', 'abnormal', 'lesser' languages that have allegedly emerged through 'abnormal transmission'). I have gathered and analyzed these dogmas under the umbrella term CREOLE EXCEPTIONALISM (DeGraff 2001b, 2003, 2004, 2005a). Charity Hudley et al.'s definition of 'race' and the uses thereof can be straightforwardly extrapolated to Creole studies where the dogmas that constitute Creole exceptionalism can be considered as a quite banal consequence of 'race as a set of beliefs and ideologies about human differences that serves as a basis for the inequitable distribution of material and symbolic benefits and resources' (p. e210). Put this way, one can rely on Baldwin's insights, again, and posit that the anti-Creole dogmas of Creole exceptionalism, like whiteness itself, are 'metaphor[s] for power, and that is simply a way of describing Chase Manhattan Bank' (Baldwin 1981:59). In other words, Creole exceptionalism dogmas are simply yet another set of 'tool[s] of colonialism and conquest', in Charity Hudley et al.'s terms (p. e213).

This argument about the racist origins of contemporary beliefs about Creole languages is detailed in my 2005a paper on 'Creole exceptionalism [as] linguists' most dangerous myth'. Though I call Creole exceptionalism a 'fallacy', we must reckon with the fact that, back in the colonial period inaugurated by Christopher Columbus's mission in the Americas, this was a 'fallacy' that made perfect sense from the perspective of 'institutional whiteness[, as] a structuring force in academia'. Back then, academia in Europe was wholly embedded in Europe's *mission civilisatrice* whereby Black lives (and Black languages!) certainly did not, and could not, matter. Or, if they mattered, they did so only to the extent that they could be used to (pseudo-)scientifically prove that White Christian males from Europe were distinct from, and wholly superior to, all other 'races'—in Africa, in the Americas, and everywhere else. Yes, let us remember that the first creolists in Africa and the Americas were funded by, and were in service of,

Empire—or the ‘Chase Manhattan Bank’ of the colonial era, keeping in mind Baldwin’s definition of ‘whiteness’.

Creole studies, thus, illustrate a paradigmatic case of a field of linguistics that clearly originated as, in Charity Hudley et al.’s terms, ‘a tool of colonialism and conquest’. At the origins of Creole studies too, the scientific linguistic enterprise was enlisted as one extra means to solve—or, rather, excuse—the paradox of slavery in light of Christianity and the universalism of the Enlightenment. In other words, linguists back then, like philosophers and other scholars engaged in the human sciences, had to justify slavery and convince themselves and everyone else that Africans and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and beyond were naturally destined to be slaves due to their supposedly inherent inferiority. Therefore, their languages as well had to be considered ‘lesser’, as a reflex of their lesser humanity—with grades of humanity defined by European norms.

The ultimate objective was for Africans and Indigenous peoples to be used as machines producing wealth for capital owners in Europe. The latter were the very founders AND funders of the ‘colonialism and conquest’ project structuring the production and transmission of knowledge about Creole languages. Salikoko Mufwene (1996) has borrowed from the field of population genetics the term FOUNDER PRINCIPLE to describe the disproportionate impact of early settlers on the linguistic traits of the respective Creole languages emerging in specific language-contact situations. Mufwene’s hypothesis is that, irrespective of their eventual fate in the social history of the colony, the linguistic groups present at the FOUNDING of a language-contact situation will have a major impact on the eventual linguistic norms of said contact language. Extrapolating Mufwene’s founder principle to the intellectual history of Creole studies while keeping in mind the racist ideology of the colonial capital owners who initially financed (i.e. provided ‘seed FUNDING’ for) early Creole studies, I here coin the term ‘FUNDER principle’ in order to evoke the disproportionate intellectual influence of the early FUNDERS of Creole studies on the structuring of past AND present beliefs about Creole languages, their structures, and their development. For these early funders (i.e. for the European colonialists and enslavers and their apologists in academia, including philosophers, historians, anthropologists, linguists, etc.), the humanity of Africans, Amerindians, and other Indigenous peoples and their descendants in the Caribbean and elsewhere did not, and could not, matter, given the economic interests at stake in the upholding of the slave-based system of colonial exploitation. Therefore, it would have been UNTHINKABLE for African, Amerindian, and Creole languages to be analyzed on a theoretical par with European languages. So, if my ‘funder principle’ is anywhere valid, then the very history of Creole languages and Creole studies would entail this most banal consequence: today still, Creole exceptionalism dogmas continue to devalue Creole languages and their speakers in spite of mounting scientific evidence, from various theoretical frameworks, contradicting these dogmas (see e.g. Blasi et al. 2017 for additional recent evidence against Creole exceptionalism).

Charity Hudley et al.’s thesis about the structuring force of white supremacy in academia is, thus, certainly related to the larger epistemological and political envelopes around the lessening of Creole languages (i.e. the MISUSE of languages and linguistics for measuring degrees of humanity, with lesser languages for lesser people, etc.). These linguistic hierarchies became ‘normal science’ (à la Kuhn 2012 [1962]) with the advent of certain, though not all, intellectual trends in early Neo-Grammarians historical linguistics. What I have in mind is specifically August Schleicher’s analytical framework where historical linguistics became part and parcel of an approach to language where morphological distinctions (e.g. the differences between isolating languages like Man-

darin Chinese vs. inflectional languages like Latin) were enlisted to measure ‘grades of man’ and ‘classify humanity’.

Schleicher (1821–1868) was perhaps the first to apply Darwinian-like evolutionary theories to historical linguistics. He was the one to develop the family-tree model of language change that is so popular in linguistics. Since this family-tree model is so frequently taught in introductory linguistics classes, it is worth quoting Schleicher at length so we get a better sense of the ‘repugnant history’ at the root of this model, a history that is too rarely explained to linguistics students. It is an unfortunate fact that these students are often left to enter the discipline with major blind spots in their understanding of the structuring impact of racism on their field of study (see DeGraff 2001b for a critique in the context of Creole studies).

As for Schleicher himself, he made it abundantly clear that one objective of his linguistics framework was to rank ‘grades of man’ from primitive to advanced—for Schleicher, Chinese is an example of ‘primitive’, while examples of advanced languages include ... surprise, surprise ... Indo-European languages such as Latin:

One can classify animals according to their morphological structure. For humans, however, outer appearances now seem to me to be a matter relatively insignificant and passé. To classify humanity we need, so it seems to me, finer, higher criteria, exclusively proper to man. This we find in language.

But language is of significance not only for the elaboration of a scientific systematization of humanity, but also for the evolutionary history of man. In previous work I reached the conclusion that language above all characterizes man as human and that accordingly the various stages of language are to be considered as the perceptible, characteristic traits of various grades of man. ... Now language has revealed itself to science as something that has evolved gradually, as something that once didn’t even exist. The comparative anatomy of languages shows that the more highly organized languages evolved very gradually out of simpler language organisms, probably in the course of very long time spans. Linguistics finds, at least, no contradiction of the assumption that the simplest expression of thought through sound or that the languages of simplest structure are descended by degrees from vocal displays and mimicry, such as possessed by animals ...

The languages that to date have been dissected into their ultimate elements and those that have remained on the simplest stage of evolution show that the oldest form of language was everywhere the same. The oldest material of language was sounds designating objects and concepts. There was as yet no expression of relations, nor differentiation of word classes, nor declension, nor conjugation. All such developments obviously developed later. In this regard indeed some languages have never evolved to this level at all, and others have not reached this stage to an equal degree. To name just one example, Chinese to this day has no phonic differentiation of word classes. True verbs, in opposition to nouns, I have found in the languages known to me only in Indo-European languages. (Schleicher 1983 [1865]:79–80)

(ii) How does ‘the field [of linguistics] continue[] to exclude, marginalize, and colonize the experiences of racialized groups’? (p. e224)

In Creole studies today, it is Creole languages that appear to have replaced Chinese as languages that, in Schleicher’s terms, show ‘no phonic differentiation of word classes’ and that are made to contrast with European languages that show ‘word classes ... declension ... conjugation’. With such a ‘repugnant history’ as in Schleicher’s historical-linguistics framework, it will not surprise the reader that Creole exceptionalism dogmas stand tall as examples of ‘how the hegemonic whiteness of our discipline has been profoundly damaging both for linguistic scholarship and for linguistics as a profession’ (Charity Hudley et al., p. e211). And I can add, from personal experience, that this hegemony is perhaps even more damaging to Creole speakers and other racialized communities that are still oppressed in neocolonial predicaments. These are communities whose languages are still excluded, marginalized, and colonized in school systems and governments that still promote the languages of the (former) colonial powers (e.g. French in Haiti; English in Jamaica; Dutch in Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire; French, Spanish, Por-

tuguese, and English in Indigenous communities in Latin America and Africa; etc.). In the case of Haiti, these damages are documented in some of my work and the references there (DeGraff 2017a,b, 2019a,b).

But I am relatively lucky that, in my own personal history, the damage done to me by thoroughly colonial education systems was eventually mitigated by what may well be sheer luck—or a blessing in disguise. I remember my 1992 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, where I was enthusiastically quoting Bickerton's (1984a) LANGUAGE BIOPROGRAM HYPOTHESIS as part of the general framework for my research, not even realizing that there were data at the tip of my tongue (quite literally so, from my native Kreyòl) that contradicted some of Bickerton's basic claims about Creole languages being of utmost simplicity due to their postulated origins in hypothetical Pidgins (which, as it turns out, have hardly been documented in the history of the Caribbean; see Mufwene 2020). Worse yet, back then I had no clue how racist the epistemological underpinnings of Bickerton's hypothesis was—with his absurd notion that the hypothetical Pidgin origins of Creoles, similarly to patterns in ape talk and two-year-old children's utterances, could and should be insightfully compared to 'living linguistic fossils' of Protolanguage in prehuman hominids (Bickerton 1990). In retrospect, my blissful ignorance of the racist subtext of Bickerton's language bioprogram hypothesis is a perfect example of how 'the dearth of interdisciplinarily informed theories of race within linguistics as a whole reproduces inaccurate representations of racialized groups' (p. e221)—in this case, 'inaccurate representations' of Creole speakers like myself! Yet it must be noted that Bickerton's 'living linguistic fossils' and related hypotheses are still relatively popular among linguists, psychologists, and other cognitive scientists interested in language evolution (see e.g. Tallerman & Gibson 2012).

It is yet another accident of history that provided the wake-up call for me to enlist, as a Creole speaker from Haiti, my own 'lived experiences [as] yield[ing] important theoretical insights and epistemological perspectives that can broaden and transform the discipline' (p. e221). Poetically enough, this accident of history happened while reading another article in the pages of this very journal (*Language*) from more than twenty years ago (McWhorter 1998). Reading this article in print in *Language*, and even though I had seen and commented on early versions of parts of it, I was struck to see my native Kreyòl flagged as a 'most creole of creoles' (McWhorter 1998:809) and contrasted, alongside other Creole languages AS A CLASS, against ... the class of so-called 'regular' (!) languages. Seeing this 'creole' vs. 'regular' contrast repeated throughout an article by an African-American linguist in the premiere journal of our field was the wake-up call. That is when I started to become #Woke—long before #Woke became a hashtag! In that case as well, I was eventually able to use Creole data right on the tip of my tongue, coupled with analyses based on a comparison of, say, Haitian Creole with English, French, and other non-Creole languages, in order to disconfirm the characterization of my native Kreyòl and other Creole languages as non-'regular' languages (DeGraff 2001a,b, 2003, 2004, 2005a,b, 2009, Aboh & DeGraff 2017).

There are many more articles documenting various fallacies in Creole exceptionalism and showing that the emergence of Creole languages is rooted in the very same cognitive processes and developmental paths as the emergence of non-Creole languages (see e.g. Aboh 2015 for a book-length treatment based on Mufwene's 2008 framework of competition and selection). Recently Blasi et al. (2017) have showed that 'grammars are robustly transmitted even during the emergence of creole languages', yet another refutation of the hypothesis that Creoles emerge from the postulated 'linguistic meltdown' of structurally reduced Pidgins (also see Mufwene 2020).

This accident of history via the journal *Language* in 1998 made me start questioning the very history (a VERY long history) of similar allegations that Creole languages are exceptionally simple languages, with such claims going back to the seventeenth century. That is when I started reading scholars outside of linguistics such as Anténor Firmin, Jean Price-Mars, Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and so forth. These scholars, writing outside of linguistics, helped me dig up and understand the archeology of these links between racial categorization and the postulating of linguistic hierarchies whereby Creole languages are considered ‘lesser’ in various dimensions. And now the rest is history: it is indeed these scholars’ ‘interdisciplinary informed theories’ that, through my publications, have, I think, contributed to some degree of broadening and transformation of Creole studies. Perhaps linguistics at large will be transformed as well, if we eventually succeed in duly integrating into our field the study of Creole languages as perfectly ‘regular’ and ‘normal’ languages. Speaking for myself, I feel that, if I had read these scholars—especially Fanon, Bourdieu, and Foucault—as a student, I might have written a very different, and much better, dissertation. Now, in my MIT class on ‘Creole languages and Caribbean identities’, I never fail to introduce fundamental insights from these scholars’ analyses of hegemony.

To recap, my hunch is that Creole studies may well be a most spectacular case of exclusion and marginalization in linguistics. This marginal status is reified in our canonical textbooks. Dear Reader: If you are sitting near your bookshelf or in a library or have access to online linguistic textbooks, please look up ‘Creole languages’. My bet is that you will find the index entries for ‘Creole languages’ (or more likely ‘creole languages’ with small ‘c’, another symptom of marginalization)¹ in a separate chapter labeled ‘Pidgins and Creoles’ or ‘Language Contact’—or some other title with the word ‘other’ in it. That is, our linguistics textbooks reify the ‘othering’ of Creole languages as ‘exceptional’ languages whose study is ghettoized in a separate chapter of our introductory textbooks. Indeed, Creole studies belong to these disciplines that are ‘often devalued within linguistics’, and so are creolists often devalued in their own rights as professional linguists. (And I just found out, while submitting this commentary on January 31, 2020, that even the online submission portal for *Language* includes neither ‘Creole studies’ nor ‘Linguistics and education’ in the drop-down menus to select primary or secondary ‘fields of linguistics’. So I had to describe these fields as ‘other’—yet another instance of ‘othering’ at the highest level of our professional association.)

¹ The choice of ‘c’ vs. ‘C’ in the label ‘creole’ vs. ‘Creole’ seems, to me, a deeply entrenched ‘minoritization’ tendency, even in Creole studies, and even among progressive creolists. For me, this small ‘c’, in the stead of a capital ‘C’, is another symptom of marginalization, unlike, say, the case of ‘Romance languages’, ‘Germanic languages’, ‘Balkan languages’, ‘African languages’, ‘Native American languages’, and so forth. Creolists might well be a rare group of linguists who resist capitalizing the label for the group of languages they study. I myself was so happy when, back in 2003, Brian Joseph, the then-editor of *Language*, agreed with my reasoning that our tradition of writing ‘creole languages’ instead of ‘Creole languages’ is yet another reflex of Creole exceptionalism. Really, it should not take too much intellectual effort to recognize and accept that Creole speakers, too, do have a right to their own ‘imagined community’ (à la Andersen 1995) of fellow Creole speakers, on a par with speakers of Romance, Germanic, Balkan, Native American languages, and the like. We, Creole speakers, do share a history marked by similar sociopolitical processes, including (neo)colonization and, then, the disenfranchisement of Black and Brown peoples, then our continued resistance to hegemony for the past few centuries. My use of ‘C’ in ‘Creole’ is another effort at resistance.

The following two videos, I think, very well illustrate some of the sociohistorical unity, plus the joint political activism, of Creole speakers across space and across boundaries of traditional language families: <https://www.facebook.com/michel.degraff/posts/10155326550903872>; <https://www.facebook.com/mithaiti/posts/300251593659512>.

The exclusion of Creole languages AND Creole speakers in Creole studies reaches its most extreme point as a ‘structuring force’ for white supremacy in writings by white scholars such as the eminent creolist Albert Valdman. The latter has trained many well-known Haitian linguists, including Yves Dejean and Flore Zéphyr, and became famous by (co)authoring, often with Haitian linguists, important dictionaries and descriptive grammars for Haitian Creole and other Creoles with French ancestry. Yet it is also Valdman who doomed Creole languages, as a class, to language death via decreolization and who wrote an entire article to dismiss the importance of research by linguists who are native Creole speakers—on the grounds that their linguistic intuition, because they are educated, thus bilingual, cannot be trusted, so they must defer to linguists who can collect reliable data from monolingual Creole speakers. Strangely enough, it did not seem to occur to Valdman that the Haitian linguists he collaborated with on Haitian Creole dictionary projects are all multilingual and that linguists in the Global North are often educated and multilingual as well, though their linguistic intuitions are not as cavalierly dismissed on the grounds that they speak too many languages.

Now it is quite ironic, if understandable, that Creole exceptionalism, in spite of all its negative consequences for Creole-speaking communities (especially their impoverishment through the exclusion of Creole languages in education), has been enlisted by some creolists as one strategy to give Creole languages letters of noblesse. Creolists’ search for prestige and intellectual capital, which cares so little for Creole speakers’ actual profiles and needs in terms of education and socioeconomic progress, was deployed most forcefully by Derek Bickerton, who once wrote ‘Creole is still king’ (1984b). For Bickerton, Creole languages’ ‘royalty’ was based on epistemological grounds with respect to our inquiries into the origins of Language in the human species. Bickerton spent much of his professional life in linguistics arguing that it is among Creole languages that we find languages that ‘most clearly expressed the inborn capacity for language that all of humanity shared’ (2008:139). And the reason for that is, according to Bickerton, because ‘[Caribbean] sugar plantation islands [as the birthplace of Caribbean Creoles] came *as close to blank slates as anywhere in human history*’ (Bickerton 2008:153, emphasis mine). This quote represents the extraordinarily catastrophic Pidgin-to-Creole narrative with Creoles emerging ‘ab ovo’ from the ‘linguistic meltdown’ of the Pidgin—a scenario that flies in the face of what today’s historians and anthropologists know of the Caribbean: this zone of population contact *par excellence* has always been too rich in history and culture to ever be a ‘blank slate’. Consider Haitian culture, for example, with all the complexity of its religion, folklore, music, dance, and so forth. Haitian history, like elsewhere in the Caribbean, is definitely no ‘blank slate’ except in the fanciful hypotheses of creolists vested in dogmas where it is the stipulated primitiveness or simplicity of Creoles that make them ‘still king’ in linguistics! How about the nobility ranks of creolists in these myths? Are we as ‘royal’ as the languages we study? And where do these myths leave Creole speakers who don’t happen to be linguists and whose languages are still excluded from formal education because of some alleged lack of structural complexity or adequacy? As it turns out, these are the same Creole speakers who, by and large, are still unable to access quality education because of linguistic barriers.

Here is an example of Bickerton’s romantic verve, whose spirit and letter seem to have inspired other ardent defenders of Creole exceptionalism:

[Creoles] are the purest expression we know of the human capacity for language. Other languages creak and groan under the burden of time. Like ships on a long voyage, they are encrusted with the barnacles of freaky constructions, illogical exceptions, obsolete usages. Their convoluted recesses facilitate lying

and deceit. But Creoles spring pure and clear from the very fountain of language, and their emergence, through all the horrors of slavery, represents a triumph of all that's strongest and most enduring in the human spirit. (Bickerton 2008:247)

We find similarly colorful, though less poetic, claims in the *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*. For example, there is this often-repeated concern that counterarguments to Creole exceptionalism (i.e. the claim that 'there is nothing structurally particular about creole languages') runs the risk of 'cutting off the branch [that the field of Creole studies] is sitting on' (Parkvall 2001:149–50). So, for Parkvall and other creolists of similar persuasion, one main purpose of Creole studies is to document how distinct Creole languages are from non-Creole languages! The repeated expression of such concerns suggests how hard modern creolists have tried to bestow prestige on their fields (and on themselves?) via a construction of Creoleness as an exceptional typology with exceptional genesis, notwithstanding the negative societal consequences of their claims. At least now, with the right amount of archeology of power/knowledge relations, we can understand the historical origins of such fanciful hypotheses, even when they keep being rehashed in the pages of respected journals (like the *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* and even in *Language*) and in trade books from prominent publishers with titles like Bickerton's (2008) *Bastard tongues: A trailblazing linguist finds clues to our common humanity in the world's lowliest languages*.

What about those creolists like me and other Caribbean-born linguists who happen to speak these so-called 'lowliest languages' and who want their work to uplift lives and have 'social impact as an inherent part of [our] research'? It is not uncommon for us to be asked by influential colleagues in the Global North whether our research really 'counts as linguistics' or is 'corrupted by ideology'. Many of us Caribbean linguists trade such stories when we meet at meetings of the *Society of Caribbean Linguistics* where our presentations often address concerns that are embedded in issues of education and social justice. Like many of my Caribbean colleagues, I do take satisfaction and pride in the fact that my work has shown that Creole studies, WITHOUT Creole exceptionalism, can contribute both to linguistic theory (e.g. DeGraff 2005b, 2009, Aboh & DeGraff 2017) and to a 'model for linking theoretical racial knowledge to the real-world contexts in which language users go about their day talking, writing, learning, and expressing themselves' (as in Charity Hudley et al., p. e209) (see DeGraff 2016a,b, DeGraff & Stump 2018a,b, Miller 2019). And I hope that such work can inspire new generations of students entering the fields of linguistics and Creole studies.

(iii) 'How can linguistics dismantle racist structures within the discipline and profession' (AND BEYOND)? (p. e222)

Consider the core universalist-uniformitarian-egalitarian credo among most contemporary linguists, namely the belief that ALL languages share similar principles of structures and development and are equally worthy of scientific study. Let us take some inspiration from Edward Sapir, even though, in the spirit of Charity Hudley et al., we need to cautiously abstract away from Eurocentric biases regarding 'cultural advance'. In Sapir's terms, every language is 'an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people' (Sapir 1949 [1933]:1). Sapir further explained, in direct contrast with the above-cited Schleicher:

[A]ll attempts to connect particular types of linguistic morphology with certain correlated stages of cultural development are vain. Rightly understood, such correlations are rubbish. ... Both simple and complex types of language of an indefinite number of varieties may be found spoken at any desired level of cultural advance. (Sapir 1921:234)

Yet, recall that decades after Sapir's pronouncement, an article in this very journal (*Language*) would contrast linguistic structures in Creole languages with that in (so-called) 'regular languages' (McWhorter 1998). In a related vein, the hypothetical 'abnormal' developmental history of Creole languages has been contrasted with 'normal transmission' in the history of non-Creole languages (Thomason & Kaufman 1988). In one of the most quoted articles in one of the most cited anthologies in Creole studies, Whinnom (1971:110) claims that, because of their very structures (e.g. an alleged lack of morphology), Creole languages are a 'handicap to [Creole speakers'] personal intellectual development' (see DeGraff 2005a for an overview and critique of similar prejudicial claims spanning the entire intellectual history of Creole studies).

In a related vein, intellectuals, educators, and policy makers in Creole communities still consider Creole languages (such as my native Kreyòl) to be a handicap for school children, who, in turn, are forced to study in a language that they barely speak, if at all—French in the case of Haiti, English in the case of Jamaica, and so forth (Devonish 2007, DeGraff 2017a,b, 2019a,b).

Here we reach a troubling paradox whereby linguists' universalist-uniformitarian-egalitarian credo contrasts with: (i) general ambivalence about the development and the typology of Creole languages (claimed as 'simplest' languages that originate in Pidgins, a claim that is both empirically and theoretically controversial; see Mufwene 2020), and (ii) the exclusion of Creole languages in the education of Creole speakers.

Fortunately, this paradox also offers an opportunity for us linguists, in alliance with educators, activists, and so forth (exactly as suggested by Charity Hudley et al.), to right the wrongs that are entailed by Creole studies' 'origins as a tool of colonialism and conquest, a repugnant history that continues to haunt the discipline' (p. e213). Indeed the exclusion of Creole languages (and any other language, for that matter), due to the belief that they are somehow 'lesser' languages, strikes at the heart of our training and mandate as linguists. It is us linguists who have the best available scientific toolkit to show parents, educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders that every language, no matter accidents of history (colonial history or otherwise), is indeed 'an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people', exactly as Sapir claimed a century ago!

So, the LSA's (2019) Statement on Race should also be taken as a statement on linguistic equity that would prevent the classification of languages into 'regular' vs. non-'regular' languages, 'normal' vs. 'abnormal' languages, and so on. In this interpretation, we should also insist that, as far as linguistics is concerned, there are, to date, no such scientific criteria whereby languages can be classified AS A WHOLE as 'simplest' languages of OVERALL lesser complexity than other languages. The *Language* editorial staff should also be encouraged to become self-aware of their own epistemological blinders, unchecked truisms, and so forth, when it comes to reviewing manuscripts that either reinforce linguistic (mis)analysis for establishing 'degrees of humanity' or that take a stance against such (mis)classification.

Meanwhile, Charity Hudley et al. suggest concrete ways for us linguists to help communities all around the world, especially those that are impoverished and racialized, to implement this right to use their native languages for access to education and for the enjoyment of all other human rights. We linguists can look for inspiration and for best practices in the history of social-justice work on the part of some of the scholars and scholarly organizations cited by Charity Hudley et al.

One case in point is the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the National Council of Teachers of English, with their 1974 statement on 'Stu-

dents' right to their own language' (Charity Hudley et al., p. e208). According to recent numbers from UNESCO (2016), some 40% of the world's population still lack access to education in the languages that they speak most fluently and are, thus, deprived of access to quality education!

The MIT-Haiti Initiative, launched with funding from the National Science Foundation,² has taken a stab at this global challenge—with focus on my native Haiti. And I would like to offer this Initiative as yet another example, in addition to those described by Charity Hudley et al., of what is possible when linguists escape their intellectual silos to make alliances with like-minded scholars toward ushering in a new kind of linguistics where 'social impact [is] an inherent part of research and a valued contribution to scholarship, not [] an optional addendum' (p. e221).

From a language-and-education perspective, the key aspect of the MIT-Haiti Initiative is the promotion of the systematic use of Haitian Creole ('Kreyòl') in developing pedagogical resources for active learning in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and beyond. Such innovative use of Kreyòl triggers the development of new lexical items to express scientific and technical concepts. This work further documents that Kreyòl, presumably like any other language, has no inherent limitation on its expressive capacity. Furthermore, as we survey Haitian teachers' evolving attitudes around the use of Kreyòl for the teaching of STEM via interactive pedagogy, we can document the impact of such use toward the incremental elimination of prejudices against the language (DeGraff 2016a,b, DeGraff & Stump 2018a,b, Miller 2019). More recently, we have launched a collaborative platform (<http://MIT-Ayiti.NET>) where Kreyòl-speaking educators, in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora, and MIT-Haiti team members can co-create and share lesson plans and other materials in Kreyòl in all disciplines and at all levels.

The one major 'social impact' benefit of this initiative is the fact that it is opening up access to quality education in STEM and other disciplines through the use of a language (Kreyòl) that has heretofore been disenfranchised, even though it is Haiti's single national language. In Haiti, Kreyòl is spoken by all (some 12 million Haitians), a majority of whom (some 95% at least!) have, to date, been excluded from accessing knowledge in their sole native language, Kreyòl—as they have been forced to use a language (French) that they are barely fluent in, if at all. With this opportunity in mind, the 'social impact' of the MIT-Haiti Initiative is a direct instantiation of Ken Hale's criterion for success in linguistics, where success is to 'be measured by the extent to which work on the language is integrated in a meaningful way into the life of the community of people who speak it' (Hale 2001:76, 100).

Envoi: Back to founders and funders. Let us now ask, in way of a conclusion: With all of the above challenges, opportunities, and benefits in mind, why don't we find more linguists engaged in the sort of interdisciplinary boundary-crossing work that can have extraordinarily positive impact in the lives of these speakers' whose languages give linguistics its 'bread and butter'? How come so many of these same languages that are so cherished by linguists as objects of study are still excluded in the school system of these communities where linguists do their fieldwork? In other words, why does the 'bread and butter' go to linguists, while there is so little 'bread and butter' for the speakers of these languages that linguists build their studies and careers on? Recall that, for 40% of

² In addition to NSF funding, other funding and support came from MIT, the Wade Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Fondasyon Konesans ak Libète (FOKAL), the Government of Haiti, and the US Embassy in Haiti.

the world's population, formal education excludes these very languages that we linguists study. (Rickford 1997 analyzes a related predicament in the specific case of African-American English.) So it seems that we have not yet escaped the scope of the above-mentioned 'funder principle', to the extent that the material benefits of our scientific research with speakers of the world's languages, as published by academic journals like *Language*, still go one-way in favor of linguists.

The reason why I find Charity Hudley et al.'s article so inspiring is because it offers us suggestions toward a systematic way out of this paradox. Their suggestions also stand to make linguistics a more just and inclusive discipline for linguists too—independently of their respective (non)racialized histories. But the next steps will not be easy, as they will require us to deeply rethink our answers to these fundamental questions:

- (i) What is linguistics?
- (ii) What is the social/moral responsibility of linguists, if any?
- (iii) What determines the 'core' areas of linguistics that linguistics departments MUST include in their curricula?
- (iv) What future can we imagine for a 'better' linguistics that is, among other things, more inclusive?

But perhaps the most difficult question, and one that is not directly raised by Charity Hudley et al., is: What to do with the remnants of the funder principle in contemporary linguistics education and research? If Charity Hudley et al. (p. e201) are right that 'institutional whiteness [is] a structuring force in academia', then our going beyond this 'institutional whiteness' (a.k.a. 'white supremacy') will require our dismantling the impact of the funder principle. In order to usher in a new sort of inclusive linguistics, we need 'seed funding' from new funders that have truly progressive egalitarian ideology, in contradistinction to that 'institutional whiteness' at the inception of the field with its 'origins in colonialism and conquest'.

How have the US National Science Foundation (NSF) and other similar foundations (see n. 1) interacted with 'institutional whiteness [as] a structuring force'? This question is too broad and complex to address in the space of my commentary. Yet it is now encouraging to see 'social impact' taken into account as one factor in NSF reviews of grant applications. And it is certainly a good sign that Charity Hudley et al.'s research on language, linguistics, race, and education (like my own research on linguistics and education) has been so generously funded by the NSF and similar institutions. As I remember Anne Charity Hudley's recent talks at MIT (in October 2019) on racism in linguistics, I feel optimistic that the amount of funding that is now dedicated to the kind of research illustrated by Charity Hudley et al. (and by the MIT-Haiti Initiative) may lead to a tipping point in our definitions of what 'linguistics' is and in the impact of these definitions in terms of inclusion and racial justice, starting with our criteria for curriculum design, admissions, and in job searches.

Meanwhile, this search for new beginnings may present additional challenges (or more opportunities in disguise?) when we consider legal scholar Derrick Bell's 'racial interest-convergence theory', whereby those in power will actively work in favor of (apparent) 'racial justice' only when such work also contributes to their self-interest. Here it is worth quoting Derrick Bell's explanation of this theory, which also amounts to a most vexing dilemma:

Rule 1. The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of whites in policy-making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm.

Rule 2. Even when interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of whites, particularly those in the middle and upper classes. (Bell 2004:69)

If Bell is right, then we need to ask if our work for racial justice in linguistics must also factor in the self-interest of those who, to date, have promoted exclusion and marginalization against those who are now demanding justice. It would be helpful if Charity Hudley et al.'s counterpoint to this commentary could provide some guidelines around Bell's 'interest-convergence' dilemma, especially for these linguistics departments that derive (apparent?) superiority and prestige via the devaluation and exclusion of certain subfields of linguistics and the constituencies thereof. But again, perhaps more importantly, if we do not heed Bell's caveats, then even with our best intentions to implement Charity Hudley et al.'s strategies, what we might achieve for racial justice in linguistics might turn out no better than the less-than-stellar consequences of the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, as detailed in Bell 2004.

These dilemmas constitute no small challenge. But again, as Baldwin reminded us: 'Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced'. We should be so immensely thankful for Charity Hudley et al. for having us face glaring injustice in our discipline and for their courage to make recommendations toward justice.

Now, is the next challenge at the doors of funders and other structuring institutions that are looking for convergence of interests? And what to do if/when interests DIVERGE in substantial ways?

In light of my proposed 'funder principle', this new challenge seems related to the old challenge of Creole exceptionalism as well. Indeed, it is out of self-interest that the European FUNDERS of the colonial enterprise in Africa and the Americas helped create the power-knowledge structuring force that accounts for the genesis and transmission of Creole exceptionalism through centuries—in spite of mounting evidence against it.

Now at last, there are groundbreaking and sustainable projects in place for us to use and analyze Creole languages (and the languages of other racialized communities) on more robust theoretical, sociohistorical, and educational foundations that include 'social impact as an inherent part of research'.

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