BLACK LIVES MATTER
John Rickford v. Creole Exceptionalism

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When I grow up, I’d like to be like John R. Rickford. Or, more realistically, I’d like to help push forward some of John’s intellectual and political agendas as a linguist and activist for whom Black lives—in the Greater Caribbean and beyond—have always deeply mattered. Like John, I am a native Creole speaker—he from Guyana, I from Haiti. Like John, I went to UPenn—a few years after he graduated.

Like John, I wrote my thesis on a topic related to my native Creole language. Like John, I’ve enjoyed the intellectual camaraderie and political solidarity at the Society for Caribbean Linguistics (SCL) conferences—and the food and dancing at SCL parties. And like John’s, my current research and writings bring together theoretical issues that are centrally connected to the lives and livelihoods of our fellow Creole speakers. Indeed, I’ve long been inspired by John’s writings and activism in the face of formidable neo-colonial challenges related to educational and social justice in the context of communities whose identities are defined by Creole languages and their kin, including African American English.

When it comes to linguistics, education, and social justice, John’s work around the Oakland ‘Ebonics’ controversy and related issues in language and education has fueled my own, especially my work in Haiti with the MIT-Haiti Initiative, alongside my teaching at MIT about ‘Black Matters’ and ‘Creole languages and Caribbean identities.’ Through his articles and his Stanford ‘Open Office’ videos, John has been a constant presence in these classes, helping my MIT students (who are too young to remember the Oakland debate about African American English) analyze how language, be it in the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, etc., can be enlisted, alongside race, gender, religion, and so on, as ‘technologies’ for domination or liberation. And now John’s article with Sharese King, in the journal Language, so clearly documents linguicism against Rachel Jeantel in the George Zimmerman’s trial. Their paper is a lucid and powerful analysis of why Black lives will not matter until our languages also matter—as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the respect of our human rights. In my classes at MIT, we discuss how John and Sharese’s analysis extends to all cases of linguistic discrimination, no matter the skin color of the speaker—a fact that’s been central to John’s ongoing plea for the importance of linguistics as a universal tool for social justice.

So it’s largely thanks to John that my students and I got to understand that the struggles around African American English and now around the Black Lives Matter movement are global struggles that hark as far back as to the Haitian Revolution, which first asserted, in 1804 already, universal equality. Haiti’s liberators, especially Jean-Jacques Dessalines, already understood that ‘race’ is not rooted in biology, but it is a social construct that can be enlisted as a weapon in struggles around the creation
and transmission of power—race as a “metaphor for power” in James Baldwin’s (1981) terms. So Dessalines decreed that all Haitians, no matter their skin complexion, would all be legally ‘Black.’

Linguistic hierarchies as well (for example, the age-old belief that certain groups of languages are more sophisticated, more expressive, more complex, etc., than others) are metaphors for power—or linguistic ‘bluest eyes,’ to adopt and adapt an apt phrase from Toni Morrison’s title for her first novel. Nebrija expressed it most clearly when he gave Queen Isabella his grammar of Spanish in 1492, with the promise that this grammar will be an instrument for empire. John’s insights—from his work on Creole continua in Guyana to the Ebonics debate in Oakland to linguistic discrimination in courts—have helped me demystify linguistic hierarchies in Creole studies. One such hierarchy is what I have called ‘Creole Exceptionalism’ (DeGraff 2005), an age-old dogma in our field whereby Creole languages are singled out on linguistic structural and developmental grounds. John’s work has helped me understand that the real basis for closing off Creole languages, alongside African American English, in epistemological ghettos is, not at all scientific, but deeply political—the linguistic equivalent of the power/knowledge interaction at the core of Michel Foucault’s ‘archeology.’ John’s work (on language and education, on language in the courts, etc.) tells us that the way out of these ghettos has to be political as well, with our politics firmly shored up by solid theoretical analyses, furthering Frantz Fanon’s dreams for liberation from colonial and neo-colonial oppression.

Ultimately, it’s our lives and livelihoods that are at stake when some of our languages are considered lesser on various scales. Our Black lives will not matter until our languages matter as well. Yes, our languages are on a par with all other languages, and should be treated and used as such. That is, our languages should be honored as the core of our identities and cultures, and as assets for our dignity, well-being and socio-economic and political prospects. Thank you, John, for showing us the way forward in such a protracted struggle against hegemony.

_Viktwa a se pou nou tout! (The victory is for all of us . . .)_

References