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## Linguistic, Racial, and Ancestral Tensions in Creole Louisiana

# Linguistic, Racial, and Ancestral Tensions in Creole Louisiana

Megan E. Melançon

## 1 Introduction

Most of the research done on the Louisiana Creole community has concentrated on the vocabulary and folklore of Creole French. To date, there has been no methodological examination of the sociolinguistic parameters which affect the community. In this paper, the results of a survey on the linguistic attitudes and cultural, ancestral, and racial identity of 240 African-Americans with Creole ancestry in South Louisiana are discussed. The sample was stratified by age, sex, Creole ancestry, and degree of fluency in Creole French. Preliminary results from this research were presented at NWAVE 25 in Las Vegas in 1996; results on language maintenance and usage were presented at NWAVE 26 in Quebec in 1997 (Dubois & Melançon 1998); the complete study can be found in Melançon 2000. In this paper, the most significant data detailing linguistic, racial, and ancestral identity are discussed and analyzed. As is the case in many language communities, sociohistorical changes have had an effect on the synchronic manifestation of self, community, and 'other' identity.

## 2 Clarification of Terms

Researchers generally posit the existence of three types of French in Louisiana: Colonial French, Cajun French, and Creole French. Colonial French is the name given to the variety of French spoken by the earliest inhabitants of the colony. While it is generally noted that Colonial French is extinct in the state, it is more accurate to say that the dialect (and the people who spoke it) did not die out *per se*, but rather adapted to the other forms of French and the other cultural norms which were brought into the colony.

The most important form of French (numerically speaking) that was imported into the colony was the code spoken by the descendants of the Acadians expelled from *L'Acadie* (present-day Nova Scotia, Canada) by the British between 1750 and 1785. This diaspora scattered the exiles along the east coast of the American colonies, France, and Haiti, but the majority ended up in the Louisiana territory. Today's Louisiana Cajuns (a phonological adaptation of 'Acadian') still speak French, although the number of remaining fluent speakers is the subject of intense debate, there are few schools and few media or religious services that use French today, and there a definite age-graded French language diminishment can be discerned (Dubois and Melançon 1997). There

are efforts underway to revive the language, but they are mostly culturally based, and language attrition is readily apparent and on-going in the community. The third strand that is woven into the French ancestry and language quilt in the state is that of the Creoles. As far as language is concerned, the Creole spoken by this group today is unlike other Creoles around the world because of its unique genesis (Marshall 1997, Speedy 1995, Klingler 2000). As is argued in Dubois & Melançon (1998), the French spoken by Creoles in Louisiana today is a mixture of the vernacular spoken by the founding population of the colony and a mixture and restructuring of the multiple French varieties used in the state throughout its history. The English spoken by both the Cajuns and the Creoles has also been a subject of recent study, and has been shown to be quantitatively different from African-American Vernacular English, Southern English, or Standard American English (Dubois 1999). In the cultural and social domains, the received view of the word 'Creole' in Louisiana is manifold, and encompasses a variety of racial and ethnic attributes. Today's reality is that neither of the extant French groups (Cajuns or Creoles) can be viewed in simple black or white terms because of the racial, linguistic, and ethnic mixing of many groups in the southern part of the state since its genesis. More ominously (in terms of French language survival), English has invaded all facets of modern-day life, leading to code-switching, code-mixing, borrowing, and diminished use of both of the French dialects.

### 3 History

In 1682, a vast area in the present-day United States was claimed for France by the explorer Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle, and named *La Louisiane* in honor of the French king Louis XIV. Prior to the American purchase in 1803, the area was the site of a nonstop struggle between France and Spain. Under French possession, in the beginning of the colony, laying claim to one racial group or another did not have the importance it acquired later. As Hall (1992) noted, "French (Louisiana) was a brutal, violent place ... and notions of racial and/or cultural and national superiority were a luxury in the attempt to eke out an existence." Although in the beginning of the colony almost any race or ethnic group could be indentured and used in the capacity of a slave, social and economic forces ensured that it was the newly imported Africans who began to be used exclusively in the positions of menial and unpaid labor.

Although colonial administrators attempted to halt the practice, miscegenation between whites and blacks occurred in the colony from its genesis. The offspring of these unions were referred to as mulattoes, quadroons, or octoroons (depending on the amount of African blood) and their addition to the colony led to the establishment of a tripartite racial classification system composed of white, colored, and black people (Dominguez 1986, Hall 1992, Fairclough 1995). Although the word 'Creole' first appeared around this time in legal

documents such as marriage, death, and birth certificates, it served to designate first generation native-born colonists, whether they be the children of European settlers, other immigrants, black slaves, free people of color, or the offspring of racially mixed unions in (Hall 1992, Hall 2000), rather than a term that distinguished between racial and ethnic traits.

The process of the establishment of a Creole elite, which included both mulattoes and whites, began during the brief Spanish reign of the colony, which started in 1763. Although the inhabitants reacted with hostility to the taxes and impositions placed on them by the Spanish crown, it was at this point in time that "free persons of African descent ... made their greatest advances in terms of demographics, privileges, responsibilities, and social standing" (Hanger 1996:2). In direct contrast to the enslaved blacks, the mulattoes, also called the *gens de couleur libres* (free people of color), came to acquire an exceptional degree of wealth, education, and freedom, and the term Creole at this time had evolved to apply only to whites with no Acadian heritage and free blacks, both of whom occupied almost the same rung on the social and economic ladder of colonial Louisiana.

This changed rapidly and radically with the approach of the American rule of the colony. The area was bought from France in 1803 (Spain had traded it back earlier) and achieved statehood in 1812. With statehood came hordes of land-hungry Anglophones and the beginning of a differentiation in the racial classification system in the state. The new Anglophone inhabitants were contemptuous of the native French colonists, and the ethnic gulf was widened by religious, cultural, geographic, and linguistic divisions between the two groups. In addition, the easy acceptance of interracial relationships and the lack of marked differences between the two racial groups already inhabiting the area did not sit well with the new arrivals. Due both to the influence of the Anglophones and the changing situation in the country as a whole, the division between whites and those with any African ancestry at all became more and more marked. The approach of the Civil War heightened tensions considerably between the races, and white Creoles began to dissociate themselves from the Afro-Creoles and to adopt both the language and the customs of the newly arrived Anglophones, leaving those with African heritage as the repository for the Creole language and culture in the state.

The aftermath of the Civil War kept Louisiana in chaos for many years. The freed slaves and the Afro-Creoles were thrown together in the eyes of the white community and were seen as the 'common enemy' of whites, and both occupied the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder until well after the Civil Rights movement. Louisiana's laws of racial classification were expanded in 1940 to say that "any degree of traceability was sufficient for Negro classification" (Brasseaux, Fontenot, & Oubre, 1994:123), and remained in place until 1970, when the state legislature passed an act stating that 1/32<sup>nd</sup> black blood was sufficient for African-American identification. Between being legally and

socially forced into choosing between being black or white, and the colossal effect that the Civil Rights struggle exerted on America's black population during the 1950's, 60's, and 70's, an increasing number of Afro-Creoles began to look at black identification as a "badge of honor" (Brasseaux et al. 1994:124).

The changes imposed on the Louisiana Creole community have not been without effect. Special tabulations made by the U.S. Census Bureau show that of the 6,310 people who claim to speak Creole French at home, 89% also claim to be black (Dubois and Melançon 2000). This numerical dominance of African-Americans who claim to speak Creole, along with the sociohistorical changes described above, the quasi-extinct white Creole population, and long familiarity with the racial situation in the state led to the decision to use only African-Americans as a basis for this study of the community.

#### 4 Methodology

To determine the synchronic effects of the diachronic changes experienced by African-Americans with Creole ancestry, a survey was conducted in two Creole communities (Breaux Bridge in St. Martin Parish and Opelousas in St. Landry Parish) in south Louisiana. The randomly chosen sample of 240 African-Americans was divided by age, (20-39, 40-59, 60 and older), gender, and geographical region. In addition, informants were asked about their linguistic ability in Creole French. The linguistic ability and background of the informants proved to be important and intertwined, therefore an index was built called the LAB (linguistic ability and background) index, following Dubois (1997). There were 60 informants in each LAB category, as detailed below:

- 1) Fluent: fluent speakers of Creole French who have Creole French ancestors (parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc.)
- 2) Semi: individuals who speak Creole French but not fluently, with Creole French ancestors
- 3) No CrF, CrA: English (only) speakers with Creole French ancestors
- 4) No CrF, No CrA: English speakers without Creole French ancestors.

The research instrument was a verbally administered questionnaire. There were 46 questions in the survey, asking about issues such as education, attitudes toward Louisiana Creole French (LCF), the teaching and learning of LCF and other French dialects, Creole identity, type of social network, and degree of exposure to LCF. The questionnaire was developed using a template from Dubois (1997); it was subsequently modified after analyzing the results obtained from piloting it with open-ended questions and including the suggestions and comments of the pilot respondents. Once the fieldwork was done, the responses were coded and entered into a computer database. StatView 4.5 was

used as a statistical tool and results were obtained using cross-tabulations and stepwise regression analysis.

## 5 Hypotheses

One of the most problematic issues in Louisiana today is the idea of a 'standard' being taught and promulgated. The French groups in the state are not a monolithic entity which can be subsumed under the 'Cajun' rubric, nor is the French spoken by either group considered a prestige language among those who study and teach French. Both Cajuns and Creoles are quite aware that the languages they speak are not the French of France; this is reflected in the disparaging comments they make toward their own language and the French of the 'other' group in the state. The first hypothesis, therefore, was that linguistic insecurity might have been (and may still be) fostered among Louisiana Creoles by the fact of their African heritage, their dialect (which is different from Cajun French), and the lack of institutional or educational support.

A second hypothesis was that, as a form of resistance to being taken over by things Cajun, the respondents in this survey might choose instead to actively cultivate a sense of community pride. This would be reflected in their attitudes toward their language, leading to Creole French (re)acquiring the status of an important facet of community life, rather than the language just being a symbolic remnant of earlier times.

The third hypothesis was that it is possible that the language attitudes of the Creole speakers in Louisiana would be adversely affected by the fact that their code is not recognized or taught in schools. Although there has been a renaissance of the French culture in Louisiana, the concomitant linguistic revival has been weak, and its proponents rarely address divisive issues such as the types of French spoken in the state, demographics of Louisiana French populations, Louisiana French educational materials, and the use of native Louisiana French speakers in classrooms. The varieties of French which have been re-introduced into the public schools in the state have been foreign French varieties taught by teachers from Belgium, Quebec, France, or academic (school-taught) French based on the standard written system.

## 6 Results

Although the picture which emerged in the data about the linguistic attitudes and racial and ethnic identification of the informants was quite complex, an interplay of three factors (race, ancestry, and linguistic ability) most heavily influenced the results.

### 6.1 Linguistic Security/Insecurity

For the results on the linguistic security or insecurity of the group as a whole, race was the only significant factor, and nearly all of the informants, regardless of ancestry or linguistic ability in Creole French, viewed the language in a positive light. Using categories built from the pilot survey, participants in this study were asked how they would characterize the quality of Creole French: "as good as French learned in school", "not very good French", "very bad French", or "not French at all". Sixty-seven percent indicated that Creole French is considered "as good as the school-taught variety" ( $n=154$ ), while only 33% viewed it more negatively. No one characterized it as "very bad French" or "not French at all". Eleven respondents chose not to answer.

LAB	As Good As		Not Very Good		TOTAL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Fluent	37	65	20	35	57	100
Semi	43	74	15	26	58	100
No CrF	41	70	18	31	59	100
No CrF, No CrA	33	60	22	40	55	100

Table 1. Quality of Creole French and the LAB Index

Neither the influence of age nor geography affected these results when they were analyzed using the LAB index, although distinctive behavior was exhibited by the semi-speakers, as shown in Table 1. Although 35% of fluent speakers claimed that Creole French is "not very good French", only 26% of the semi-speakers did so, leaving 74% of the semi-speakers who believe their code is "as good as the school-taught variety". It is the informants with neither Creole linguistic ability nor ancestry (No CrF, no CrA) who show the harshest judgment toward Creole French: 40% claim that it is not very good French.

The responses of those who believe that Creole is as good as Standard were cross-tabulated with the LAB index and age. This is shown in Figure 1. Although the pattern is not completely clear, due to the interaction between the variables, the important tendency is that the middle age and older fluent speakers demonstrate less positive attitudes than do the younger fluent speakers.



Fifty-five percent of the older and middle-age groups indicated that Creole French is "as good as the school-taught variety", while 75% of the youngest group claimed this, indicating a more positive attitude. The LAB index is not significant for the semi-speakers in any age group: all show a strong positive attitude. This pattern of the younger group holding more positive attitudes is reversed among those with Creole French ancestry, but no Creole French language ability. For this group, it is the older respondents who indicate that Creole French is "as good as the school-taught variety" (80%), followed by 70% of the middle age group, and a slight majority (55%) of the young age group.

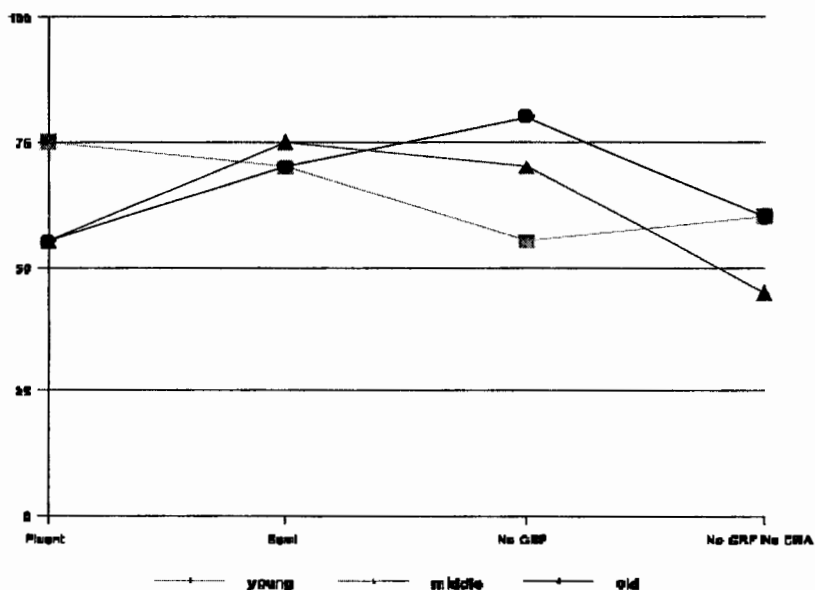


Figure 1. "As good as Standard" by LAB index and age

For those with neither ancestry nor language ability, the judgment is most harsh among the middle age group. Only 45% of them claim that Creole French is "as good as the school-taught variety", while 60% of both the older and the younger age group respondents claim that Creole French is "as good as the school-taught variety."

## 6.2 Linguistic Pride

When asked about the language status at the local level, pride in community, and the Creole language as an important facet of daily life, ancestry was the overriding factor which influenced the results. The informants with Creole ancestry assigned a higher status to Creole French and considered it best for the state, while "outsiders" indicated that it was a lower status language than Standard French and Cajun French. When asked which type of French is best for Louisiana, respondents were able to choose Standard French, Cajun French, Creole French, all three, or some combination of the languages. Thirty-six percent of the respondents chose all three languages, 29% chose Creole, 12% Standard, 10% Creole and Cajun, 6% Creole and Standard, 4% Cajun, and 3% refused to answer. Of the people who selected a single language, (either Creole, Standard, or Cajun), 64% chose Creole, 27% chose Standard, and 8% chose Cajun.

	Creole		Standard		Cajun		Total
	n=69	%	n=29	%	n=9	%	n=107
LAB							
Fluent	21	72	5	17	3	10	29
Semi	20	83	4	17	0	0	24
No CrF	16	62	7	27	3	11	26
No CrF, NoCrA	12	43	13	46	3	11	28

Table 2. Best Type of French for Louisiana (Single Language Option)

The influence of the LAB index on these responses is shown in Table 2. Seventy-two percent of the fluent speakers and 83% of the semi-speakers view Creole French as the best type for the state. A majority of those with Creole ancestry but no linguistic ability in Creole French claimed this (No CrF: 62%), while those with neither characteristic viewed it more negatively (No CrF, No CrA: 43%). The respondents with no Creole ancestry contain the largest percentage of those claiming that Standard French is best (46%). Much smaller percentages of Standard French adherents are shown among the respondents with Creole ancestry: 27% of the non-speakers chose Standard as optimal, while only 17% of the fluent and semi-speakers did.

	Creole		Combination		Standard		Total
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
<b>YOUNG</b>							
Fluent	10	50	10	50	0	0	20
Semi	2	10	16	80	2	10	20
No CrF	6	31	11	58	2	11	19
No CrF, No CrA	2	11	11	61	5	28	18
<b>MIDDLE</b>							
Fluent	7	35	8	40	5	25	20
Semi	11	55	8	40	1	5	20
No CrF	5	27	13	68	1	5	19
No CrF, No CrA	6	30	10	50	4	20	20
<b>OLDER</b>							
Fluent	4	22	14	78	0	0	18
Semi	7	35	12	60	1	5	20
No CrF	5	25	11	55	4	20	20
No CrF, No CrA	4	21	11	58	4	21	19

Table 3. Best Type of French with LAB Index and Age

When these results were broken down to include the combination options for the best type of French for the state, and cross-tabulated with the LAB index and age, a different picture emerges, as shown in Table 3. The first tendency shown by these results is that age influences the responses of the fluent speakers. Of this group, 22% of the older speakers, 35% of the middle age fluent speakers, and 50% of the young fluent speakers selected Creole only, again indicating a gradual increase in more favorable attitudes toward Creole as age decreases. The only fluent speakers who chose Standard as best for the state were the middle age group (25%), while none of the older or younger fluent speakers exhibited this behavior.

A second tendency is the choice of a combination of languages as being most representative for the state by all the age and LAB divisions except for the middle age fluent and semi-speakers (only 40% opted for this). Those with no Creole French and those with no Creole French and no Creole ancestry all chose a combination of languages as best, regardless of age. Their second option tends to be Standard French, while the strongly preferred option of the fluent and semi-speakers (not choosing a combination) is Creole. This behavior is most extreme among the young and old fluent speakers: none of these people chose Standard as a good choice for the state.

### 6.3 Teaching/Learning

For the results on questions about the teaching and learning of the varieties of French, the separation between those with language skills in Creole French and those without was the defining factor. Informants with linguistic ability in Creole showed more positive attitudes toward both the learning and teaching of Creole French, while those with no Creole French ability viewed Standard French as the best code to use in the educational realm, and Creole French as the worst. When the question was posed to the respondents whether all young people should learn to speak French in Louisiana, nearly 94% of the informants indicated that young people should learn French. When asked what type of French young people should learn, the highest percentage of those picking a single option embraced Creole French (28%,  $n=68$ ), followed by Standard French (23%,  $n=54$ ). Given the option of combining the varieties of French, 53% of the responses included Creole in a mixture (i.e. Creole, Cajun, and Standard; Creole and Cajun; or Creole and Standard).

When cross-tabulated with the LAB index, the results show that having linguistic ability in Creole French strongly influences the choice of Creole as being the language the young should be taught. As shown in Table 4, 73% of the fluent speakers chose Creole as the preferred language of instruction. In contrast, those having no Creole ancestry and no language ability tend to choose Standard French as the language of instruction (56%). There seems to be a fairly strong division established between those with any language ability

at all (the fluent and semi-speakers) and the informants with no language ability (with and without Creole background). A majority of those with no language ability claimed that Standard was the language of choice for the young (53% and 56%, respectively), while only 27% and 38% of the fluent and semi-speakers selected this option.

LAB Index	Creole		Standard	
	#	%	#	%
Fluent	24	73	9	27
Semi	13	62	8	38
No CrF	14	47	16	53
No CrF, No CrA	17	44	21	56

Table 4. LAB Index and the Choice of French to be Taught

When these results were cross-tabulated with age, as shown in Figure 2, it can be seen that it is the young fluent (82%) and semi-speakers (83%) who demonstrate the most positive attitudes toward the teaching and learning of Creole French. The fluent speakers in the other two age groups demonstrate similar positive behavior, as is shown by the fact that 73% of the middle age and 64% of the older age group claim this.

The middle age semi-speakers show somewhat deviant behavior, as only 33% of them claim that Creole is the language which should be taught to the young (compared to 83% of the younger semi-speakers and 50% of the older semi-speakers). This graph also shows that it is the fluent speakers and the young semi-speakers who tend to cluster together on the positive side of teaching Creole, while those of the groups with no linguistic ability are bundled together on the lower end of the scale (this is also a tendency for the middle, older, semi-speakers).

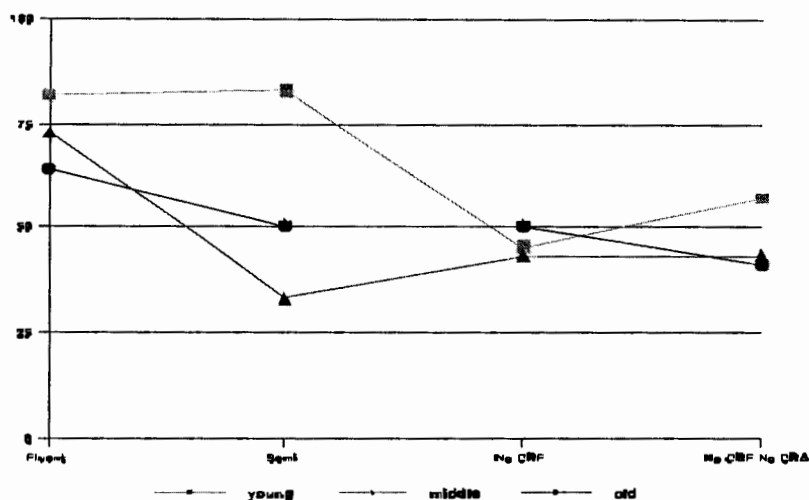


Figure 2. Learn Creole French by LAB Index and Age

## 7 Discussion and Conclusion

The explanation for the overall positive attitudes discussed above lies in the fact that, regardless of age and of the insider or outsider status of the respondents, the common denominator of race seems to override differences and insure that all Creoles exhibit similar attitudes in given contexts. The same factors which exerted a tremendous force upon the black Creoles have affected the black community at large. Although some blacks view any ties with the French community in general to be a remnant from slavery days, the outsiders and those without linguistic skills in Creole French are backing the language community. The middle age group, who demonstrate more negative attitudes, are behaving as a block, whether they speak Creole or not. It is precisely this age group which was the most heavily stigmatized in the rush to embrace English in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, to a lesser extent, in the push to revive Cajun French in the 1960s. Creole speakers were viewed as second class citizens, and the language became a badge of shame rather than an ability to flaunt or use. The older speakers escaped the worst of the ravages of this stigmatization: their earliest linguistic environment was still heavily French dominant, and they were no longer in the work force nor as mobile as the middle age group during the linguistic repression of French. The younger respondents, on the other hand, have benefited from the more recent push to accept and acknowledge French heritage and background in the state.

So, with the exception of the tendency shown by the middle age group, the respondents, in general, indicate positive attitudes toward the Creole lan-

guage. The small resurgence of pride in the Creole French language shown in the results can be attributed to the fact that the Creole French groups have profited from the spill-over effect of the rush to embrace everything French in the southern part of the state. Although this rush was primarily driven by the Cajun elite and supported by Cajun advocates, the very fact that Creoles speak French and participate to some degree in the French network in South Louisiana has guaranteed them some access to this spectacle. Ancelet (1994:xxii) remarked on this when he stated, "[a]mong the black Creoles, long preoccupied with racial issues, the linguistic renaissance has been much slower, though an interest in this part of their heritage has begun to emerge as the problems of segregation are increasingly resolved." The bottom line seems to be that there has been a reversal of negative attitudes among some members of this speech community, and that a weak revival movement is underway insofar as linguistic insecurity is concerned.

The picture which emerges about Louisiana Creoles' language attitudes is complex. However, several trends can be discerned. There seems to be an overall effort on the part of Louisiana's Creoles (especially the fluent speakers and the young Creoles) to maintain and (re)establish pride in the language, culture, and ancestry. Rather than simply "passing" as Cajun, some Creoles seemingly are maintaining and promulgating their cultural distinctiveness. Other members of the community seem to embrace a linguistic and racial insecurity which reflects itself in their negative attitudes toward their code and their identification as Creole (Melançon 2000).

These different behaviors can be explained by looking at the results obtained in light of the type of question asked. When the questions were based on the linguistic security or insecurity of the group as a whole, the responses reflected the allegiance of this group to their race. Questions about the quality of Creole French were influenced more heavily by the fact that the informants were African-American rather than by other social factors. When asked about the language status as the local level, ancestry was the overriding factor: those with Creole ancestry assigned a higher status to Creole French and considered it best for the state, while the outsiders indicated that Creole French was a lower status language. For these questions, the informants in the study with Creole ancestry were treating "being Creole" as being part of an ethnic group, and one which outsiders have no claim to because they lack Creole ancestry. Answers to the questions about the teaching and learning of Creole were divisible in yet another way. It is the separation of those with language skills in Creole French and those without which seems to be *the* defining factor in the attitudes about the teaching and learning of the varieties of French. Although race was the driving force behind the linguistic security exhibited by the respondents, and ancestry was the dividing line for the beliefs about the language at the local level, it is linguistic commonality which drives and motivates the

beliefs of the respondents for the questions about learning and teaching Creole French.

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