FRANK MARTINUS

Creole Identity through Chinese Wall
Affinities between Papiamento and Chinese

The origin of the concept ‘creole’

T he best derivation of the form ‘creole’, to my mind, is from crio de, in the Proto-Afro-Portuguese creole that originated in the fifteenth century on the west coast of Africa. In the dialect of the Windward islands of the Cape Verde group, the past participle of Portuguese verbs in -ar ends in -ode instead of -ado. So the past participle of criar ‘to breed’ becomes criode instead of criado as in the Leeward creole. Criode, originally ‘created, bred’, also acquired the meaning of ‘home-made; native, versus imported’. It referred to man as well as animals, to blacks as well as whites. The Proto-Afro-Portuguese creole was later exported to the West Indies. Here the Portuguese lexicon was replaced by the vocabulary of the different linguistic regions of the Caribbean, in a process called relexification. The orginal form criode underwent several changes. First the d shifted to l, producing crio le. Criole became, in Portuguese orthography, criollo, written with two l’s up to 1911, when the spelling became crioulo. The Portuguese spelling with double l probably occasioned the Spanish pronunciation [krioyo], which also passed into Papiamento. In Sranan, the l of criole changed to r, producing krioro. Under the influence of the French verb créer ‘to create, to bring forth’, criole must have become créole (with an acute
accent). The English borrowed the term from the French – as they so often do – but dropped the accent.

In Praise of Creoleness

In 1998 I wrote a response to a programmatic essay, *In Praise of Creoleness*, by three writers from Martinique, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant.1 Although I do not believe in the ultimate success of their programme, I find their terminology “Americanness,” “Caribbeanness” and “Creoleness” useful for the present discussion. They explain these notions as follows:

… Americanization and its corollary, the feeling of Americanness, describes the progressive adaptation, and with no real interaction with other cultures, of Western populations in a world they baptized new. […] Americanness is, therefore, in many aspects, a migrant culture, in a splendid isolation.2

Bernabé et al. describe Caribbeanness as the process of americanization of Europeans, Africans and Asians in the Caribbean archipelago. It does not necessarily include creoleness. They come to the conclusion that Caribbeanness also remains a migrant culture in splendid isolation, and offer Cuba as an example, “where entire regions were affected only by an Americanization of Andalusian colonists, Canarians or Galicians and knew no Creolization whatsoever.” Creoleness to them is “the interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history.”

The diminishing black element

Bernabé et al. are looking at creoleness from the white side of the equation, so to speak; I tend to do so more from the black side. But this is not important, since creoleness as we understand it nowadays is basically a ‘miscegenation’ of white and black. And this phenomenon is becoming weaker because of the fact that the black element is fading away, at least in the Netherlands Antilles. There are no more blacks coming from Africa, neither as slaves, musicians, heads of state, missionaries nor even tourists. Black immigration has stopped.

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2 Bernabé et al., *Éloge de la Créolité*, 91–92 (emphasis in the original).