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Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology

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LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND CARIBBEAN THEOLOGY

Prof.   Erica Campbell

Head of the Department of Humanities and Lecturer in Humanities, Theology, and Biblical Studies

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Introduction

"Who am I?" is a question that we all ask consciously or subconsciously. Everyone has an identity, but not everyone has a sense of that identity or a sense of the worth of that identity. Caribbean people have their own unique challenges with acknowledging and accepting who they are. This, of course, inhibits any movement towards self-actualization, for this presupposes self-knowledge. And so, any attempt at redressing economic and social imbalances must include, as a matter of course and a matter of priority, the 'renewing of the mind'. Why has it been so difficult for the Caribbean person to seek, as Bernard puts it, "an actualized self within an affirming and liberating environment"?[1] The story is told of Monkey and Fish:

> It seems Monkey and Fish got caught in a flood. As the waters rose higher and higher, Monkey found a tree and climbed to safety. As he got above the water level, he looked down and saw his friend, Fish still in the water. So, out of concern for his friend, he reached down, rescued Fish, and held him tight to his chest as he climbed higher in the tree.[2]

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[1] April Bernard, "Emancipating Spirit: Decolonizing the Caribbean Religious Experience". *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and Its Diasporas* 11 (2) (Spring/Summer 2008): 49.

[2] Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 32.

Caribbean people can identify with Fish in as much as, for most, their ancestors were wrested from the place of their identity, and, over time, there have been attempts to shape a new identity for them. At the outset, they were ascribed the new identity of slaves, regardless of their status prior to arriving in the Caribbean, and later of subjects of the Crown, a Crown whose interest was not in their development, but in the development of the Colonising Power it represented. So, there is a clear point of divergence between the Story and their History. It lay in the motive ascribed to the 'Rescuer', for theirs had no noble and honourable intent. For, as Kortright Davis declares: "Europeans conquered these lands for their own mercantilist expansion"[3], and it was in order to achieve that end that they "[procured] African bodies and [suppressed] African souls."[4]

The slave and subject, though he did not accept slavery and subjugation, and, therefore, fought for and eventually gained Emancipation and Independence, found it a tremendous challenge to overcome the emasculation of his selfhood. So, the fight for Emancipation, the fight for Independence still continues. This is a fight against mental slavery. It was easy to identify the injustice of physical enslavement. It has been easy to identify the injustice of economic exploitation. It has been easy to identify the injustice of social stratification and political victimization. But, it has not been so easy for the oppressed to be conscious of the bonds of 'identity indoctrination' and its relationship to the other forms of bondage.

Alexander the Great understood this relationship. He recognized that to truly conquer the world, he had to Hellenize it. And, Greek culture did become the world's culture. An important element in his battle on the cultural front was the philosophers, whose weapons were words – potent weapons indeed, as language is "a medium for projecting social identities".[5] Like Alexander the Great, our former 'rescuers', the imperialists and colonialists of old, did not under-estimate the impact language could have. It was the major means by which they engaged in the identity indoctrination of the Caribbean people. They, therefore, used words to belittle and degrade and suppress the colonized; and they made distinctions between *their* languages and those of their 'subjects' which reinforced that sense of deficiency. Language was used as a tool of exploitation.

Language: A Tool of Exploitation

Language was an immediately obvious distinguishing mark between the European masters and the African slaves. With "some ten million Africans captured and deported to

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[3]Kortright Davis, *Emancipation Still Comin': Explorations in Caribbean Emancipatory Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 17.

[4]Ibid., 50

[5]Hubert Devonish and Karen Carpenter, "Towards Full Bilingualism in Education: The Jamaican Bilingual Primary Education Project." *Social and Economic Studies* 56 (1/2) (Mar/Jun 2007): 285.

the Americas"[6], there existed a considerable language barrier. It is a barrier that was bridged by the whip and other forceful methods. But, the time did come when that barrier was also bridged by the development of Creole languages.

Imperialist Propaganda

With Creole narrowing the language gap, the imperative that the message of the colonialists be clearly understood led some to give instructions in it. Hubert Devonish points out that in the Danish Virgin Islands, the desire to communicate was so great that a writing system for Dutch Creole was created. The result was an unusually high literacy rate. Then, in Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, Papiamento became the medium of religious instruction to the extent that there were translations of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark into that Spanish/Portuguese based Creole. And, in St. Domingue, now Haiti, French Creole was used to issue proclamations.[7] For example, says Devonish, a "proclamation written in Creole and dated 1801,[8] was sent by the First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, to the rebellious blacks of St. Domingue, demanding their loyalty to the French Republic."[9] The latter scenario is most obviously a use of Creole to reinforce the socio-economic order that had been established by the plantocracy. But, institutions such as the Church and the School were not disinterested parties whose sole purpose was to 'enlighten' through the gospel and through personal development those who had been dislocated through the enterprise of slavery. According to Devonish, they were instruments used by the State to produce "ideological acceptance of the status quo among the black population of the Caribbean".[10] For both Church and School, the Bible was a sourcebook for this indoctrination.

The Church's and School's, as well as the Consul's use of Creole was a demonstration of the 'language policy' in operation in the Caribbean. Creole was used to issue edicts to the so-called emancipated slaves. It was used to instil moral and ethical values that would benefit the plantation system. But, it was *not* used in the writing of laws or for any other official purpose of communication. And, "in those colonies where English emerged as the dominant European language alongside an English-influenced Creole, the use of the Creole language in even as restricted an area as religious instruction was ignored. This was the experience of countries such as Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua."[11]

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[6] Jacques Arends, Pieter Muysken, and Norval Smith, eds., *Pidgins and Creoles: An Introduction* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 1995), 17.

[7] Hubert Devonish, *Language and Liberation: Creole Language Politics in the Caribbean* (Guernsey: Karia Press, 1986).

[8] It is interesting that just three years later, Haitians declared their independence from France.
[9] Devonish, *Language and Liberation*, 48.
[10] Ibid., 46
[11] Devonish, *Language and Liberation*., 51

There was an underlying message about the value of that which belonged to the colonialists in relation to that which belonged to the subjects. One *may* graciously condescend to communicate in the language of the people if one deems it beneficial, but certainly Creole is not to be ascribed equal or even comparable worth to the languages of Europe. And so, even when the north state of independent Haiti, after the assassination of Dessalines, wanted to make a statement that they were distancing themselves from their colonial masters, and so affirmed[12]: "Next to the change of religion, a change of language is the most powerful method of altering the character and manner of a nation"[13], they did not accept Haitian Creole as their official language. Instead, "it was resolved in council … that instruction should be given in the English tongue, and after the English method."[14] This definitely indicated a reality that consumed all plantation societies:

> Habits of thought that had emerged out of the particular social relations of slavery continued to influence society well after slavery had been abolished, for hegemony during the slave period had involved not only the legal ownership of slaves but also a whole belief system that entrenched the white oligarchy as the economic, political and cultural leaders of colonial society.[15]

Interestingly, even when people have been able to appreciate all other areas of cultural expression, and repudiate any suggestion of their inferiority, the legitimacy of their own language for use beyond everyday conversation and story telling has been hard to accept.

Language and the Question of Development
There are many arguments against making the Creole of a given state its national language. These arguments are often founded in pragmatism. Why promote a localized, parochial mode of communication in this age of globalisation? It must be a retrograde step. Why lessen the people's chance for progress, for development just to make a nationalistic statement? Haiti has moved beyond its reticence to accept Creole, and so has made such a statement. Has it, therefore, blighted its prospects for economic recovery? For some, this is a rhetorical question. The argument for the use of Creole seems to them to be an argument for self-denigration and 'self-oppression'.

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[12]This statement was made by De Vastey who was an official in the administration of Christophe who ruled Haiti's northern state after the assassination of Dessalines in 1806.

[13]P. De Vastey, *An Essay on the Causes of the Revolution and Civil Wars of Hayti* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1828 (1969), 214. Quoted in Hubert Devonish, *Language and Liberation: Creole Language Politics in the Caribbean* (Guernsey: Karia Press, 1986), 47.

[14]Ibid.
[15] Patrick Bryan, *The Jamaican People 1880-1902: Race, Class and Social Control* (Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 2000), ix-x

Selden Rodman posits that "unquestionably, Creole has played a part in keeping the peasant isolated on his acre".[16] His acre is all he knows of the world. One reason is that he is being 'educated' in what Rodman calls "a half-foreign language"[17] instead of in Creole; therefore, he can hardly master the concepts he is supposedly being taught – concepts which will help him understand and gain access to the world beyond his acre. So, although it can be made to appear that Creole itself is at fault, the problem is really systemic. And, it is a system created and sustained by elitism, both from without and from within.

The peasant is isolated because the powers of this world isolated Haiti politically and economically. This isolation was a deliberate attempt to punish her for her "audacity of hope"[18]; it was retribution for the Revolution. She dared to think that she could govern herself at a time when white hegemony had thought itself well established. There was no way she would be allowed to succeed. She was to be "an example of black incapacity for self-government."[19] And, Haiti's own, those who took charge after the Revolution, were not as concerned for the betterment of the masses as they were for personal status and prestige. This, they, in part, achieved through becoming more proficient in French.

> The continued official use of French in revolutionary St. Domingue and the spread of its use among the new elite, perfectly served the interests of this emergent ruling class. It served to ensure, as a French speaking elite, their access to and control of the various sections of the state apparatus. Simultaneously, it served to help dissipate any illusions among the Creole-speaking masses that they (the masses) were the true inheritors of the state and its economic base.[20]

Haiti's new leaders had become what their masters were. Haiti, therefore, experienced oligarchic rule for much of its history, both pre- and post-independence.

But the issue raised by Rodman concerning the Haitian's isolation goes beyond responsibility. If the continued use of Creole by the masses helps maintain a distinction between them and the ruling class, and leaves them unprepared for leadership, it is reasonable to say that the solution is to be found in making the people literate in French. Then, it will no longer be a "half-foreign language". But, Rodman, almost in rebuttal, points to a question asked by "advocates of a Creole education": "Is it more important to turn the peasant into a Frenchman with a consciousness of the problems of the outside

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[16] Selden Rodman, *Haiti: The Black Republic*, 2nd rev. ed. (Old Greenwich: The Devin-Adair Company, 1973), 33.

[17] Ibid.

[18] An expression made popular by the forty-fourth president of the United States of America, Barack Obama.

[19] Bryan, *The Jamaican People*, ix

[20] Devonish, *Language and Liberation*, 46.

world or to equip him to cope with the problems of his own environment by his own means?"[21] Although this question could be answered in terms of preference, there is no need to do so since the options are not mutually exclusive. To establish a place of credibility for any Creole is not to undermine the significance of knowing other languages or other cultures. It is just to acknowledge people's right to what is legitimately theirs, to what identifies them as distinct, but not inferior. Caribbean people cannot afford to accept the identity created for them by anyone else, but God. Additionally, establishing this place of credibility is to defy a system that makes isolation and discrimination a reality for the masses of not only Haiti, but of the Caribbean as a whole. By not accepting Creole while accepting European languages, we are ceding ground to that system of discrimination.

This matter of Creole use in the context of a global economy is understandably of great concern. Both proponents and opponents of its use often argue from the standpoint of socio-economic development. But, it is not only at the governmental level that the issue has currency. The Church too has had to contemplate the issue.

The Church and the Question of Language

What would make it difficult for the Church, in particular the Church of the "English-speaking" Caribbean, to use Creole for instruction, and for worship in general? Ashley Smith contends that "the dominance of the culture of the plantation" has been one of "the enduring spiritual and psychological consequences of slavery."[22] Harold Sitahal points out one of these consequences: "In the Caribbean, the churches have been historically involved in the establishment of a white Eurocentric religio/cultural institution".[23] And, this persists, in essence, with some exchanging "American" for "Eurocentric". Churches "seem content to perpetuate the administrative structures and liturgical expressions of European [or American] churches."[24] For, as with the political order, those who replaced the European church leaders were well prepared so to do. And thus, they propounded the "missionary theology" they had learnt. It was a theology of denial. It denied the reality of the Caribbean peoples: it denied the authenticity of their expressions; it denied that the human spirit required a form of worship that was related to the substance of its true identity; it denied the need for religion to be more than personal, that it had to treat with issues of public policy as well. It denied all these and more. According to William Watty:

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[21] Rodman, *Haiti: The Black Republic*, 33.

[22] Ashley Smith, *Emerging from Innocence* (Jamaica: Eureka Press, 1991), 10.

[23] Harold Sitahal, "Caribbean Theology of the People/for the People". *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 20 (2) (September 1999): 7.

[24] Hans Ucko, Syncretism: A Challenge to an Ecumenical Discussion on Gospel and Culture. *At the Crossroads: African Caribbean Religion and Christianity* (Trinidad and Tobago: CCC, 1995), 42.

[T]he greatest threat to theology is the threat of unreality…Unreality is the great threat that hangs over any language or category which one might use to talk about God. Unreality is the threat which hangs over any kind of theism and any kind of atheism, over not only what may be branded as heresy but what may be accepted as orthodoxy, over not only attempts at particularizing the theological discourse but equally over whatever may have traditionally been purveyed as universal and catholic. Precisely because theology is discourse about God, who by His very nature can never be exhausted by the categories of human thought, and precisely because it is a discourse conducted by and between human beings who are by their very natures finite beings, and by their very circumstances limited in their understanding, then there is no theology which can ever claim to be entirely satisfactory or above criticism.[25]

European Christian theology was accepted uncritically. The result has been a Christianity that is not as impacting and effective as it could be. Many there are, therefore, who live a life of dualism. Edward Seaga puts it this way:

Faith dwells both in Jehovah as well as in balm yard. Sunday morning is Jehovah's time; Sunday night many of the same observers 'jump revival'. There is no conflict: different spiritual powers are needed to deal with the problems of life and there is more than enough faith in our folk culture to embrace God, the Trinity, archangel and prophets, as well as the spirits of the dead.[26]

Seaga's point is well taken. The description is understood. The rationale has basis. But, it warrants deeper analysis. Why do people engage in activity and practice which they have been taught contradicts the dogma of the "other religion" to which they say they adhere? Should it not be a case of choosing one over the other? Is it that each meets a need that the other does not? John Cole speaks of the dualism of spirituality[27], but dualism extends beyond the balm yard and the revival table. People, who have accepted the admonition of the clergy and so do not mix "religions", also find great difficulty living an integrated life. Does this mean that Christianity is inadequate? Does it mean that the claims of Christ are not sufficiently relevant to the Caribbean person? Or does it mean that the message of the gospel has been poorly communicated, and, therefore, misunderstood? The latter is a question that goes beyond language. It speaks to attitude and to disposition, to presentation and to application. And yet, the issue of language has to be addressed as part of the bigger equation.

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[25]William Watty, *From Shore to Shore* (Barbados: CEDAR Press, 1981), 2.

[26] Edward Seaga, "Popular Religion: Its Dimension and Types". *Caribbean Quarterly* 43 (1) (March – June, 1997), 88. Quoted in John Cole, "What can the Euro-Christian Churches in the Caribbean Learn from Indigenous Caribbean Religions?" *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 21 (1) (October 2007): 19.

[27] John Cole, "What can the Euro-Christian Churches in the Caribbean Learn from Indigenous Caribbean Religions?" *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 21 (1) (October 2007).

Here are verses of three hymns that are still being sung in some Caribbean churches:

> When careless of His rich repast
> We've sought, alas, to rove
> He has recalled His faithful guest
> And raised His banner – Love (Anonymous)[28]

How many persons in the average congregation understand these words: "repast"; "alas"; "rove"?

> Thy love we own, Lord Jesus,
> In service unremitting;
> Within the veil Thou dost prevail,
> Each soul for worship fitting:
> Encompassed here with failure,
> Each earthly refuge fails us;
> Without, within, at war with sin,
> Thy name alone avails us. (W. Yerbury)[29]

Many persons have their understanding impeded not only by the unfamiliar vocabulary in these hymns, but also by their unfamiliar structure. Yet, congregations insist on singing them. To what end? For what purpose? Worship? Worship should come from the heart. How many can sing these songs from the heart? Can people sing from the heart that which they do not understand? Or, is worship so mystical that understanding is unnecessary? Some criticize Muslims for proclaiming the mystical benefits of reading the Koran in Arabic even when they do not understand it, calling it absurd, yet behave in similar fashion, using, in worship of God, language that a great number of the congregation do not understand well.

> The higher mysteries of Thy fame,
> The creature's grasp transcend;
> The Father only that blest name
> Of Son can comprehend.
> The sweetness of that name of love
> The Father gives us now to prove. (Adapted from J. Conder)[30]

It seems that there are those who want God to remain mysterious. The question is: "Does God want to remain a mystery because of language barriers?" Paradoxically, the God

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[28] Hymns taken from *Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Ontario: Believers Bookshelf Inc., 1993)
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

whose infinitude will always make Him mysterious wants to be known, and actively seeks to reveal Himself.

     Let us consider another worship song:

Faada Gad, yu ina klaas bai yuself
And, abov Yu, mi se nobadi els
Onggl yu aluon kyan mek mi fiil dis wie
Laad mi fiil yu prezens roun mi die bai die[31]

Songs like these are sometimes discounted, and, certainly are not the regular repast – let us rephrase that – certainly do not constitute a regular part of the worship experience. Yet, the words are understood,[32] and the structure is familiar.

That which has been identified as a problem in the liturgy of worship in song is also true of preaching and teaching and general interaction around the Word of God. George Mulrain contends: "If all that a worshipper has heard … in church are incomprehensible technical terms [and] theological jargon, then how can [he or] she be expected to have a longing for worship?"[33]

Many have been robbed of a truly authentic worship experience. And so, language has been a tool of oppression even in the hands of Caribbean church leaders who, by continuing in the tradition of their 'former' masters, may have inadvertently used it in that way. The psyche has certainly been affected by centuries of indoctrination.

Another reason it has been so used is ignorance about the nature of Creole and its use in relation to other languages.

Language: A Tool of Liberation

Constructing a New Reality: A Linguistic Response
People are often afraid to encourage the use of Creole because they believe it is broken English or French or Spanish or Portuguese or Dutch. But, is this really so? In the Caribbean, "the masses speak a vernacular which differs significantly in grammar and idiom from an official language with which it co-exists; but the vernacular and the official language, nevertheless share the majority of a common vocabulary."[34] Despite

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[31] Patrick Douglas, *Class by Yuself*, Scroll V2: "Under Construction". Canute "Neil" Ellis (Executive Producer), 2006.

[32] They are very familiar when transmitted orally, but not so familiar when transmitted in written form, for many of us are not as **yet** used to the phonetically determined spelling system

[33] George Mulrain, "The Use of Senses in Worship". *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 17 (2) (September 1996): 34-35.

[34] Dennis R. Craig, *Teaching Language and Literacy: Policies and Procedures for Vernacular Situations* (Guyana: Education and Development Services Inc. 1999), 1

sharing vocabulary with the official European languages, Caribbean vernaculars or Creoles are to be considered languages in their own right. They were formed in response to the new situation into which the Africans found themselves. Having been brought forcibly from various parts of West Africa, they faced the challenge of being able to communicate neither with the colonizers nor among themselves. Just as they were brought together by force, so did Creole languages develop "as a result of linguistic violence."[35] This was no "natural transference of a language over generations"[36] but the development of one by a disparate group of Africans in order to meet an immediate and urgent need. These new languages, Devonish explains:

> could be learnt comparatively easily by speakers whose native language was a Niger-Congo language. The reason was that the new language variety tended to retain many of the syntactic, phonological and semantic features[37] common to the Niger-Congo languages. [This] helps to make us understand the reason for the strong similarity which all Caribbean Creole languages share, irrespective of whether the main source of their vocabulary is English, French, Dutch, Spanish or Portuguese. [38]

But, why didn't the slaves simply learn the language of their masters? Not learning the European's language had nothing to do with their level of intelligence. It had, in great measure, to do with their level of exposure to these foreign languages whose grammatical structure was so different from their own. It is difficult enough for an adult to learn a foreign language, but this difficulty is considerably lessened through language immersion. This was not the case for the slave. Even the house slave, though having access to the slave owner, was not sufficiently integrated into the owner's world to properly learn his or her language. Segregation, not integration, was the mantra of the plantation economy.

In any case, if the circumstances had been different, and there had been integration between Africans and Europeans, the result would likely have been an interchange between languages rather than the complete dominance of one language over the other, as will be seen from an examination of the origin and development of Koine[39] Greek, French and English.

George Hadjiantoniou explains the origin of Koine Greek thus: From among the many Greek dialects, Attic emerged as the "literary language of Greece". When Alexander, the Great put together an army to conquer the world, since his recruits came from all over

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[35]Arends, Muysken, and Smith, eds., *Pidgins and Creoles*, 4.
[36]Ibid.
[37] It should be of interest to note that Chinese resembles many Creole languages in its grammar. See Arends, Muysken and Smith, *Pidgins and Creoles*, 5.
[38]Devonish, *Language and Liberation*, 51.
[39]*Koine* means 'common'.

Greece, "a dialect gradually formed, which having the Attic as a basis, served as a common means of communication among all men of the army, and later among the merchants who followed the army into the conquered lands."[40] As the language of imperialism, it was no wonder that it became a universal language. Notably, its universal use outlasted the Greek empire as it gained the acceptance of the subsequent world power, Rome, which meant that there was no real attempt to usurp it as the dominant language. According to Gleason L. Archer, it was "accurate in expression, beautiful in sound, and capable of great rhetorical force"[41], a perception seemingly shared by many in the world of circa 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.

Like Greek, French, emerged out of modification of the language of invading forces. In this case, that language was called Vulgar Latin because it was the language of the people – the average Roman citizen. Interestingly in France, it was regarded as the language of the educated. Arends, Muysken and Smith trace the development of French. According to them, Modern French developed from Old French which developed from Vulgar Latin and other linguistic influences, and Vulgar Latin developed from Classical Latin which developed from Archaic Latin.[42]

The development of English was also gradual. The Saxons, Angles and Jutes occupied Britain in the fifth century. Their inter-related languages developed into Old English. Then with the invasion of the Normans and, thus, the introduction of Old French, further changes took shape in the language spoken in Britain. This new language has been called Middle English. This was the language of the masses. The elite spoke French. Over time, the language of the masses became the accepted language, but it still was not stable; it was continually changing. With the invention of the printing press came stability and standardization, and Early Modern English. Changes occurred thereafter as is to be expected because language is dynamic, but these changes were not as significant as was formerly the case. A comparison of Chaucer's works to the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible as against the KJV and a more modern translation will reveal very little similarity between Middle English and Early Modern English, and noteworthy similarities between Early Modern English and Late Modern English.

It can be seen from the history recounted above that (1) languages developed from interaction with other language forms; (2) there was a tendency to use language to cement a distinction between the masses and the so-called upper classes of a society; and (3) the speech of the common man eventually became an esteemed language, in some cases even

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[40]George Hadjiantoniou, *Learning the Basics of New Testament Greek* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1998), 3.

[41] Gleason L. Archer, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* Vol. 3, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 870.

[42]Arends, Muysken and Smith, *Pidgins and Creoles*, 4.

turning out to be the language of the elite and a distinguishing mark between them and "others."

Like the languages examined above, Creole languages developed from the interplay of language forms, in this case the interaction of European and African languages, but within the former British colonies, they have not yet become accepted, much less esteemed. Instead, they have been an indicator or mark of low social and economic status. Those who are articulate in English are seen as educated. And, the well-to-do are expected to speak it. May, however, an understanding of the history of Creoles and of other languages lead us to contend with firm resolve that "creole languages are not in the slightest qualitatively distinguishable from other spoken languages"[43] If this is acknowledged, communicating in Creole will not be seen as "talking down" to people. This perception has caused individuals to believe that in speaking Creole they are either (1) doing their listeners a favour for which they should be grateful or (2) belittling them and reinforcing negative stereotypes. Neither is a necessary response. A Creole is as much a language as any other, and there is as much justification for its use in oral and/or written form as for any other.

In some territories, their Creoles are established written languages. In others, like Jamaica, there is a movement to standardize their use.[44] There is great hope among some scholars, especially Caribbean linguists that the translation of the Bible into Jamaican will contribute greatly to this process. Then, instruction in Jamaican will be closer to becoming a reality, a reality which could pave the way for such an initiative in other countries.

The question about development is bound to resurface at this point of the discourse. However, teaching people to read and write and think in their own language, far from impeding national development, may prove to be its catalyst – all other variables considered[45]. People naturally think in the language with which they are most accustomed. Teaching them to read and write first in a foreign language (which these European languages are to most Caribbean people), inhibits their personal growth and development which in turn inhibits national growth and development. Of course, there are many who have achieved success in the current language environment. But, they have done so in spite of, and not because of how language education is done in schools. The exception proves the rule. It is not the rule.

Etienne Gerin, soon after Haiti's declaration of independence, recommended that Creole should be made the national language:

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[43]Ibid., 4, 5
[44]Standardization will not make local dialects obsolete.
[45]Other variables include issues of political stability and political will, both national and international

in order to integrate the Creole speaking sectors of the population effectively into the education system … He proposed that only when the basic skills[46] had been imparted that a transition to French should take place. In order to support his proposal, he wrote a Creole grammar intended for use in the infant classes within the schools.[47]

His proposal was refused. Gerin's proposal is similar to that made by Caribbean linguists such as Hubert Devonish. The particular Creole spoken by the majority should constitute that people's national language. Since no language is innately superior to another, the 'heart language' of a people should drive any conversation about national issues. An appeal to the limitations of Creole is not a legitimate, though understandable excuse for it not to drive such a conversation. All languages have limitations in relation to others. Those limitations are linked to the speakers' limitations. As people are exposed to new experiences and concepts, they create or adopt new words into their oral and written 'lexicon'. The dynamism and adaptability of language must not be under-estimated. Creole will, therefore, adapt to meet the new challenges imposed on it.

Additionally, the point must be reiterated that an endorsement of Creole is not a rejection of other languages. More and more people worldwide are recognizing the advantages of being multi-lingual. And, we must too. We cannot afford to thwart our development goals by being myopic. Therefore, the argument for instruction in Creole is not an argument against instruction in English or any other European language. In fact, linguists believe that a firm foundation in one's own language leads to a better grasp of another's. And so, as the Language Unit of the University of the West Indies engages in its 'Jamaican Bi-lingual Primary Education Project' in which it seeks to teach both Jamaican and English to primary school students, it

> expect[s] that after 4 years, the pupils in this project, relative to their peers outside, would i) show superior self-concept in language and related areas ii) demonstrate superior literacy skills in both languages, and iii) manifest superior control of the material taught in content subjects."[48]

These are all commendable, desirable, and even necessary objectives. But, the primary argument for the use of Creole is an argument for the facilitation of a people's understanding of their reality, and of their reshaping that reality.

Constructing a New Reality: A Hermeneutical Task

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[46]It is best that one learns comprehension and critical thinking skills in the language in which one most naturally thinks.

[47]Devonish, *Language and Liberation*, 48.

[48]Devonish and Carpenter, "Towards Full Bilingualism in Education", 288.

Language is more than a means of communication about reality; it is a tool for constructing reality. Different languages create and express different realities. They categorize experience in different ways. They provide alternative patterns for customizing ways of thinking and perceiving.[49]

Caribbean reality needs reconstruction. It was constructed with language as a tool of oppression. This has led to a loss of identity – a loss of our true identity. It has led us to demean what is uniquely ours while we embrace what is not ours nor can be – the life and identity of our oppressors. This is part of the reality that we need to deconstruct before reconstruction can take place. The Church has a critical role to play in this process.

Emphasis has been placed on the Church as an instrument of an exploitive state. The Bible was used, in large measure, as a sourcebook to validate the condition in which we as Caribbean people had found ourselves. And for this reason, many reject it today. But even in the days of colonialism, there were elements within the Church who brought a liberating message. The Word from God is essentially a Word of liberation. And so, the Church, into whose guardianship it has been placed, needs to present the message that God intended and in the way that He intended.

According to Donald K. Smith, "the Message we have received is for giving, not for keeping. This means that Christian workers must give primary attention to the business of communication."[50] This will mean bridging the gap between the Word and its recipients. As Anthony C. Thiselton explains:

> Understanding takes place when two sets of horizons are brought into relation to each other, namely those of the text and those of the interpreter… On this basis understanding presupposes a shared area of common perspectives, concepts, or even judgments … understanding as it were presupposes understanding.[51]

 "What is the writer saying and how does it relate to me?" is a question the reader is bound to ask. But, though the words of the text convey a message, they in themselves do not convey meaning. That is why Thiselton contends that "traditional approaches to language usually carry with them an inbuilt limitation".[52] When we "concentrate attention on the language of the ancient text and do not attempt to bring about a fusion of horizons between the world of the text and that of the interpreter",[53] the result is that the

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[49] James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group, 1979), 17.
[50] Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding: A Handbook for Christian Communication across Cultural Landscapes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 7.
[51] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 103.
[52]Ibid.
[53]Ibid.

Word is not made applicable and relevant to its audience. True understanding does not take place. It is important to establish the significance of the words in *our* context because "any given symbol cannot be counted on to represent the same reality in more than one culture."[54]

For the average Caribbean interpreter, there are multiple barriers to understanding the Biblical text: there is the barrier of the temporal, cultural, historical and geographical distance of the text from his/her own; there is the barrier of the original languages in which the text came to us; and, there is the barrier of the language into which the text was translated. The first will be true for all persons. The second is true for all, but obviously less problematic for those who have studied Biblical Hebrew and Greek. The third is not true for all. Those whose first language is one of the European languages do not have this challenge, for the Scriptures have been translated into these languages. For most of us in the Caribbean, these are supposedly second languages, and some do speak them with a great level of fluency, but many are not at all proficient in them. And so, for these persons, the third impediment is even more of an obstacle.

If communicating meaning is critical, why not bridge the gap as much as possible by translating the Word into the language of the people and by speaking the language best understood by the them? It is in an effort to bridge the gap for the Jamaican people that the Bible Society of the West Indies has undertaken the task of translating the Scriptures into Jamaican. But, there are persons who have expressed reservations about this Project. Some of the arguments relate to issues already discussed. But, there are other lines of reasoning, like the cost/benefit analysis that some proffer. But, to argue that the Bible should not be translated into Jamaican because so few will benefit in relation to the monetary cost to be incurred is to devalue the individual, and to devalue the community for which it is being done. Why does smallness of number matter if the persons have worth? There is rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner that repents because that one sinner is important. Once the goal of effective communication of meaning will be enhanced, the enterprise should be encouraged. It bears repetition: Meaning does not reside in the words themselves. Meaning lies in what the speaker/writer wants to be understood and in what the audience actually understands.

Where the Bible is concerned, there are multiple speakers and writers, and, therefore, different assignments of meaning. Hence, one cannot communicate a message with its original meaning only. Much transference of meaning takes place before it reaches the twenty-first century audience. The original speaker/writer has his own meaning. The original recipient who may in turn become speaker/writer has his; the translator has his; the listener/reader has his, and he, in turn becomes a "translator" for someone else. It is a never-ending saga. It is for this, among other reasons, that there are revisions in translations. As the matrix of understanding changes from one generation to another, or

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[54]Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, 240.

even within a generation, there is need to re-engage the Text so as to engage the new reader. For, as Smith posits:

> communication effectiveness is enhanced when we 1. Understand the models held in people's minds. Different groups as well as different individuals will have different mental models. The 'general' model of a people must be learned first and then, through dialogue the specific model of the individual with whom we are communicating. 2. Understand how information is transferred in the specific culture and situations where we seek to minister 3. Transfer sufficient information so that the recipient can reconstruct a meaning closely approximating that which is intended[55]

To speak of reconstructing the meaning of the Biblical text to reach a Caribbean audience is to speak of a radical shift in perception. In fact, Gosnell Yorke argues that Bible translation plays a pivotal role in shaping culture and identity and suggests that it should take place using an Afro-centric approach.[56] Such a suggestion at first glance seems heretical. It is easier to understand the concept of translating the Scriptures into the particular languages that African people groups speak, or in the case of the Caribbean into Creole languages; we can understand the need to apply the Scriptures bearing in mind the African or Caribbean context; we may even understand the creative reading of the Bible through the lens of African or Caribbean reality. But, the approach proposed by Yorke seems to involve a distortion of the Word of God. However, what Yorke is proposing is the redressing of decisions made by past and present translators. Felder, an African-American New Testament scholar, makes the point as follows:

> European/Euro-American biblical scholars [and Bible translators?] have asked questions that shaped answers within the framework of the racial, cultural, and gender presuppositions they held in common. This quiet consensus has undermined the self-understanding and place in history of other racial and ethnic groups.[57]

Their intentions may not have been malicious but

> presuppositions, preunderstandings (*sic*) and biases, of whatever kind, invariably impose limits on us—limits which no amount of formal education or life-experience seems able to eradicate entirely. It is this fact of life which John Elliott, the white American New Testament scholar, captures in his own creative

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[55] Smith, *Creating Understanding*, 59
[56] Gosnell Yorke, "Bible Translation in Africa: An Afrocentric Perspective". *The Bible Translator* 50 (1) (January, 2000).
[57] Ibid.

way. He says: "All perception is selective and constrained psychologically and socially; *for no mortal enjoys the gift of 'immaculate perception.'*"[58]

Since these limits are not imposed by the text itself, but by the translator, it behoves those who do not have those particular biases to correct them through retranslation. Yorke gives a number of examples. Here is one where the rhetorical question in Jeremiah 13:23 is translated in a way that could suggest that an Ethiopian may want to change the colour of his skin:

In the NIV, the entire verse reads as follows:

> Can the Ethiopian change his skin
> or the leopard its spots?
> Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.

First of all, Bailey correctly points out that the verb in the Hebrew translated as "can" is not *ykl* as one would have expected. Instead, we find the hé-interrogative with the imperfect form of the verb, that is, *hyhpk*. A better translation, then, is:

> *Would* the Ethiopian change his skin
> or the leopard its spots?

The unarticulated response is: of course not. Why would they want to do that? They are quite happy the way they are already! Jeremiah's point is that just as there is no desire on the part of either the Ethiopian or the leopard to change his skin or its spots, so there is no desire on Israel's part to change from her erring ways.[59]

The suggested retranslation of Jeremiah 13:23 projects a positive and affirming image of blackness in contrast to the negative one reinforced by a number of translations in circulation today. Retranslation has the potential of "valorizing [the vulnerable]"[60].

Yorke's proposal concerning African-centred translations would benefit a Caribbean audience, not only an African one. But, Caribbean people must undertake for themselves their own translations.[61] They must bring their own perspectives to bear on the text – not uncritically, and not without a basis which the text itself gives. And, they must determine to take an approach which, though limited in itself, removes the limits that were placed on them. One advantage that they definitely have as a people is their rich cultural

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[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Philip L. Wickeri, Janice K. Wickeri, and Damayanthi M.A. Niles, *Plurality, Power and Mission: Intercontextual Theological Explorations on the Role of Religion in the New Millennium* (London: The Counsel for World Mission, 2000), 94.

[61]Some have been translating the Scriptures into Creole.

heritage. They are diverse in ethnicity, and if all contribute to the hermeneutical task, they will limit their limitations. And, they will play their part in the transformation of their societies.

Conclusion

"You change a society by changing the wind"[62], not by recognizing the direction in which the wind is blowing. Wind changers are people who change the course of history. If the Church, as a whole, were to accept Creole as a legitimate, appropriate way to communicate the message of the gospel and to develop the mental capacity and skill set of Caribbean people, could it be a wind changer? Could it not impact people's self-understanding, leading to essential transformation? According to Burchell Taylor, "The Church needs to [discover] and [come] to terms with what the Spirit [is] saying to the churches of the Caribbean context and [respond] to the call to act in obedience for new life and hope for the people of the region."[63] Analysis is good. Criticism is useful. But, they are not ends in themselves. They are a call to action. It is time for the Caribbean Church to act decisively. It must articulate its own theology and live it out. It must be bold enough to contend with the forces of discrimination in a given society. And, it must be radical enough to use the language of the people to communicate with the people.

As we have seen, there are those who think that "breaking away from the Euro-American tradition is the watering down of Christianity."[64] They have to be confronted in a way that challenges them to rethink their position. They must be helped to see the faultiness of the presuppositions that undergird their worldview, rooted as they are in the ideology of those whose agenda was to oppress. They need to see that 'the Noble Savage' is not free simply because "the Noble Savage has mastered the masters' language."[65] He is not truly free until he accepts his own.

Language has been a tool of exploitation. Now it is time to reclaim this gift from God by using it as a tool of liberation. We must, therefore, listen to the arguments of the linguists and acknowledge the worth of Creole languages.[66] And, we must respond to the hermeneutical imperative and seek to construct a new reality. For, if God's Word is translated into the language of the people, and if it is repositioned through both retranslation and the contextual presentation of that Word to show that God does side

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[62] Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 22.

[63] Burchell Taylor, "Engendering Theological Relevance". *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 20 (2) (September 1999): 24.

[64] Lewin Williams, "What, Why and Wherefore of Caribbean Theology". *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 12 (1) (April 1991): 37.

[65] Ibid.

[66] It is not good enough to communicate in Creole. The colonialists were willing to do so for practical reasons, but still did not acknowledge its inherent value, even as they did not acknowledge the value of those whose language it was.

with the oppressed, then the relevance of Christianity and the sufficiency of Christ will be more evident to Caribbean people. As Jean-Bertrand Aristide attests:

> We are not looking for a God living off in the distance. God …has taken the close and immediate form of justice; Jesus was the king of justice … [F]ighting for justice means following the direction of our faith.[67]

Clive Abdullah concurs: Christ came "to liberate all men from the slavery to which sin has subjected them: hunger, oppression and ignorance, in a word, that injustice and hatred which have their origin in human selfishness."[68] And, these forms of slavery are overcome through liberation of the mind. Liberation of the mind makes liberation beyond the mind that much more possible. And, in any case, it certainly frees us from the most oppressive hold any human being can have over another.

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[67] Jean-Bertrand Aristide, *Jean-Bertrand Aristide: An Autobiography*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 165.

[68] Clive Abdullah, "Any Word from the Lord" in *Troubling of the Waters*, ed. Idris Hamid (Trinidad: Rahaman, 1973), 16.

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