

## *Haitian Demographics and Creole Genesis*

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The article by Claire Lefebvre and John Lumsden entitled “Les langues créoles et la théorie linguistique”, which appeared in the September 1989 (34:3) issue of the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* devoted to creolization, contained a grave error of fact which, if left uncorrected, could seriously mislead scholars in the field of creole studies.

After claiming (probably correctly) that Haitian Creole must have developed at some time in the period between 1668 and 1740, the authors state that adults, rather than children, must have created the creole. On p. 207 they adduce, as sole support for this claim, “l’absence presque totale de reproduction de la population au moment de la période cruciale et le taux élevé de mortalité infantile”, and they further claim that “les données démontrent le taux très bas de la population enfantine dans la période initiale de formation du créole haïtien.”

Unfortunately the data, which are readily available in the archives of the Ministère de la France d’Outremer at Aix-en-Provence (Série G1: Recensements, État-Civil), do not demonstrate anything of the kind — rather the exact opposite. Very thorough and detailed census records kept by the French authorities from 1681 onwards reveal that, for the entire period between 1692 and 1740, the percentage of the Haitian slave population formed by children never fell below 24% and on occasion rose as high as 36%.

Given that Lefebvre and Lumsden fail to cite this data source and indeed seem entirely unaware of it, some details may be of interest. In 1681, the population of the island of La Tortue and those adjacent coastal areas of Santo Domingo that the French had colonized stood at only 6, 448, of which little more than a third were non-white. The non-white population was broken up as follows:

Negres	1063
Negresses	725
Negrillons et negrilles	314
Mestis, mulatres. indes et indiennes	210

In other words, 16 years before the colony of Haiti was recognized by the Spanish, almost 15% of the black population already consisted of children.

No further data are recorded until 1692. For the period 1692–1710, census data are restricted to particular areas of Haiti; it was not until 1713 that the first colony-wide census was taken. The 1692 census of the Quartier du Cap et dependences gives a total of 808 blacks, of whom 254 (31%) were children, while a census of the Quartier du Port de Paix in 1699 shows 141 children (28%) out of a total black population of 496. Barely a decade later, in 1710, the black Port de Paix population had risen to a total of 6,798, but the child population now accounted for 2,364 (35%) of this figure, while in the Quartier du Cap, a black population of 5,652 contained 2,030 (36%) children.

Subsequent censuses for the period between 1710 and 1740 show that throughout the period, despite a continued massive influx of (mostly adult) slaves from Africa, the child population maintained itself at around a quarter of the total slave population. The first of these censuses, taken in 1713, contains even more revealing information. Here the black population was divided into slave and free: out of 24,156 slaves, 27.2% were children, whereas out of 1,119 free blacks, no less than 583 — a massive 52% — were children. This shows that slave status did indeed depress the percentage of children far below that of a free population; and yet despite this, more than one slave out of every four was a child.

The child population underwent little change during the remainder of Lefebvre and Lumsden's "période cruciale". In 1715 it was 25.5%; in 1717, 25.4%; in 1720, 24.7%; in 1722, 24.9%; in 1730, 29%; and in 1739, 28.8%. Over the period 1713–1739, the slave population practically quadrupled, from 24,000 to 93,000, yet the proportion of children varied by only a few percentage points.

It will be clear that the statistics summarized above can in no way be reconciled with Lefebvre and Lumsden's claims about the absence of children in Haiti prior to 1740. They might, of course, argue that among the "negrillons et negrilles" the French included many who were in fact adolescents or young adults. But this is extremely unlikely. Granted, no age limit is specifically given for the black population; however, in accounting for the white population, the cut-off point for children is given as 12. It is unlikely that a higher cut-off point would be selected for slaves, since these were required to work from the age of about 5 onwards; it is therefore most

likely that by “negrillons et negrilles”, the census takers were referring to children under 12 years of age.

It might also be argued that many of these children were slave immigrants rather than native-born Haitians. It is undoubtedly true that some were. However, it was not general slaving policy to import children, at least not during the period in question. The main demand was for healthy young adults. The young children of such adults might sometimes be included in the cargo, or children might be used to make up an otherwise incomplete cargo, but there is no way in which imported children could have constituted more than a small fraction of imported slaves. Even if as many as 20% of Haitian children had been African-born, the slave population would still have contained from 20 to 25% of native-born children throughout the “période cruciale”.

Why should linguists care how many children there were in Haiti in the early 1700s? The case advanced by Lefebvre and Lumsden, and indeed by all the contributors to the issue of the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* that contained their article, is that creole languages were formed by a process of relexification: specifically, in the Haitian case, that speakers replaced Fon-Ewe morphemes with French morphemes of roughly similar meaning. For such a process to be carried out, it is essential that the speakers concerned first be thoroughly familiar with Fon-Ewe. This could hardly have been the case for children born in Haiti; such a process is only plausible if adult native speakers of Fon-Ewe alone were involved. Therefore, in order to support the relexification hypothesis, it becomes necessary to claim that there were virtually no children present during the early years of Haitian settlement.

If, however, there were large numbers of children in Haiti and other creole-speaking colonies, then the case for relexification is correspondingly weakened. It is unlikely that children, with their greater access to the *faculté de langage* and their much more limited access to their parents' languages, would have either required or been capable of the relexification of those languages. Given that all children require a native tongue, it may well seem more probable that they, rather than their parents, were the true authors of Haitian Creole and that they employed quite different processes in achieving this goal. Wherever the answer lies, awareness of the true facts about the numbers of children in Haiti should help scholars in the field to reach their own conclusions.