

When you have a need for Kreyòl

Interview with Haitian Linguist Emmanuel W. Védrine On the Occasion Of His Ten Years Of Research On The Kreyòl Language.

Gotson Pierre, October 2000 -- Journalist at SICRAD

“The year 2000 marks the 10th anniversary that Haitian linguist Emmanuel W. Védrine has been conducting linguistic research and publishing documents on the Kreyòl language. This includes articles, books, comments, interviews and theses completed over a period of 120 months. In all, Védrine has published more than 300 titles...

The research of this Haitian linguist, who left for the United States when he was young, touches on different aspects of the Kreyòl language and culture. Among the many subjects that Védrine has dealt with during this period of time in his career as a researcher are: Teaching Kreyòl, Kreyòl in the media, literature, and literacy are among the many subjects, etc.

In order to get to know him and to know his thoughts on Creole issues, we asked him a few questions. In his replies, he also asked questions in response, such as 'Does the Haitian state have an interest in the ‘dissemination of the Kreyòl language throughout schools in Haiti’ and at all levels in order to continue its development?' ... Védrine asked many other questions ‘that deserve much thought’, as he said.]

As of the year 2000, 10 years of Védrine had conducted research and publishing documents on the Kreyòl language. Between articles, books, comments, interviews and theses during this 120 months, Emmanuel W. Védrine has published more than 300 titles.

SICRAD: When and under what circumstance did you leave Haiti?

E. W. VÉDRINE: I left Haiti in February 1976. I was supposed to arrive in 1974. I was a teenager when I came to the U.S.; it was my parents' decision.

SICRAD: Can you tell us about your university and professional experiences in different countries (moving back and forth between countries)?

E. W. VÉDRINE: In terms of my university and professional experiences going back and forth), you can just take a look at my autobiography (on-line) - www.hometown.aol.com/ewvedrine/Dizan.htm

SICRAD: As a Haitian living in the U.S, what raised your interest to work in / on Kreyòl?

E. W. VÉDRINE: Ah! A great question! If you are researching on Kreyòl, you will see that most Haitian creolists have some kind of French influence; so, I am not excluded from the list. The type of education we receive in Haiti makes us develop more love for the French language and literature instead of developing this love for our own language and literature. Globally speaking, there is a colonial influence that is very strong among people who were colonized. There is not really a great change that has taken place in Haiti in this sense and this change, I think, should be a top-down process (that is to say: it is leaders, educators, professionals, Haitian scholars who should start making the change as a model for the young generation and for those to come).

Since in Haiti, they tell you that Kreyòl is a dialect [not in the sense linguists give it] but they see it not as a full-fledged language, one that should not be used in public or in some social contexts. These ideas were floating in my head (even when I was a student of Letters). But when I started studying Linguistics, there was a radical change, that occurred in my mind (that linguistic science regards language, the

philosophy and reality behind it). That way, I had as one of my first professors, Mrs. Ambrose Grillet, who holds a doctorate in linguistics from the Sorbonne. Her approach teaching a foreign language was quite different from other professors, who were not linguists and didn't have a linguistic background. Dr. Grillet considered me one of her best students; she always respected me and as a researcher, she always showed an interest in Creole Studies. I attended some of her linguistics talks and some by her colleagues (who had an interest in this field also).

That first experience with Professor Grillet's led me to go further (to focus also on Hispanic Linguistics). I continued that way with Professor Esther Torrego (a colleague who worked with Noam Chomsky in the field). Dr. Torrego is from Madrid; she is one of the rare female linguists (specialized in Hispanic Linguistics) who is still teaching/conducting research in the U.S and Spain).

I can't forget Dr. Ricardo Navas Ruiz from Spain, who was one of the best professors I had and who, at the same time, had an enormous knowledge in Hispanic Letters and Linguistics. I have learned a lot from his wisdom. For example, while researching I discovered his linguistic research on Portuguese along with a lot of experience he has in teaching at many universities in Europe, North and South America where he taught. He holds a second doctorate from Harvard University. His doctoral dissertation, "Ser Y Estar" (presented at Universidad de Salamanca in 1959) on the Spanish verb system, is a very important linguistic research work for researchers in the field. On his advice, I have made several trips to Spain for research.

After gaining this background, I started studying Kreyòl (at the linguistic level) with Dr. Marc Prou, who still teaches at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. After all these works, I started teaching at secondary level as Teacher of Social in Studies in the Haitian Bilingual Program (Boston Public School) in 1987. It was a real laboratory for me as a young teacher teaching young Haitians who recently arrived

from Haiti, who had not yet mastered the English language to transition more rapidly, and it was a place where I also started putting these linguistic theories in practice.

Not only have I done three times the work of an American teacher, but I also faced a problem of a lack of teaching materials. In the Social Studies Program, there were courses on culture and language, but I didn't really find materials available for Haitian students. Moreover, you face a problem of grade level (not all students were functioning at the same grade level). Some students had left Haiti at an advanced level; others were at a very low level and lacked writing skills in French and Kreyòl, and most of them had not yet mastered the English language. In my classroom, students had the choice of writing in one of the 3 languages (French, Kreyòl or English); that way, there was no excuse if a student didn't do his /her assignment. I tried to simplify the problems, though there were other teachers who did not want to hear about Kreyòl (especially those who had taught in Africa). The younger generation of Haitian teachers didn't have this attitude, although they would use the Kreyòl language more at the oral level with students in their classroom, and used English more at the written level.

I found myself doing a series of translations in Kreyòl for the students. Imagine you are teaching a U.S History course, you have a big textbook in English, and your students have just arrived from Haiti! Just the size of the books traumatized them, and they were not written either in French or in Kreyòl, so, you have to be conscious of this reality and find all possible means to help these children by letting them know that they can master the English language in a wink of time while doing some little translations for them in French / Kreyòl. Speaking English in the classroom help them. Thus, it was really a pleasure for me to teach Haitian youngsters, share both my negative and positive experiences with them, and show them the shortcuts to success.

SICRAD: How do you view the Kreyòl language during the past ten years?

E. W. VÉDRINE: I am not living in Haiti, but I am not disconnected from the reality of the native country. The stereotypes which used to be made by Haitians about Kreyòl when I was young in Haiti, I believe, have diminished during the past 20 years, but they have not disappeared. First, we can see this evolution through the Media under the Duvalier's dictatorship. There was a press that participated in the people's struggle and it's one of the reasons many journalists were forced to go into exile in the 80s (among them Jean Dominique).

Let me say to journalists, don't think that your job is limited to journalism only. A journalist (if organized and disciplined) can be one of the best researchers, historians, writers, humanists, if conscious. They have access to many documents, but the question is: how do they protect these documents for history? How are they going to present them? I like to make comments and give my viewpoint sometimes. We can take the examples of some renowned writers such as Albert Camus (French), (Nobel Prize in Literature), Gabriel García Marquez (Colombia), (Nobel Prize in Literature), and many other famous writers who had a journalistic past. It is the journalists who use the people's language, and there are a series of new words entering the Kreyòl language; some journalists emphasize them and they make their way into the language easily; people use them or, in conducting interviews with the people, you hear some new words and they are emphasized. The words thus continue to make their way into the language. That is to say, for researchers in Linguistics (especially in the domain of Kreyòl), I believe our research would lack some salt if we were to leave behind Haitian journalists. It is in this idea that I mention the importance of their presence in conferences related to linguistics and literature, seminars that should be held to help them even though they are not linguists; their contribution is very important in the evolution of the language. They are the ones going everywhere in the country, collecting information, talking to the people.

So, in this regard, I believe our linguists (if they value their journalistic work) should even organize some particular seminars for them, talk about techniques to maintain documents (especially through the internet nowadays). It is important for the journalists to not only maintain documents (periodicals, tapes, videotapes, etc.), but also to work on their transcripts (which helps a lot in documenting research on the language). You can see this evolution in a twofold sense: 1) Oral journal (oral level), the participation of journalists in the people's struggle in the last decade, trying to find a political change and, as we know, oral journal plays a crucial role in communication with the people, since, most Haitians can only listen to the news, and the communiques, but can't read due to the literacy problem still present at home. 2) We can see the volume of research written on Kreyòl (mostly in the universities abroad), although we can't deny small publications in Haiti, in the diaspora on Kreyòl from time to time, what some lesser-known authors are publishing, but most researchers doing research on Kreyòl (native and non-native) reside abroad.

We also know that the 1987 Constitution recognizes French and Kreyòl as two official languages of Haiti. This was a great historical step for the Kreyòl language, but it shouldn't stop there. What are Haitian professionals in all areas going to do to support the language? That's another question, and they shouldn't think that the work remains only in the hands of linguists, creolists, and writers, as many people think. It is true that these authors and researchers have already done their part: *Georges Sylvain, Jules Faine, Suzanne Sylvain-Comhaire, Felix Morisseau-Leroy, Pradel Ponpilus, the Dejean brothers (Paul Dejean, Yves Dejean), Carrié Paultre, Ernst Mirville, Pierre Vernet, Jan Mapou (and the "Sosyete Koukouy" team), Bob Lapierre, Jean Targete, Edner Jeanty, Pauris Jean-Baptiste, E'mile Celestin Megie, Deita (Mercedes Guignard), Kesler Brezault (Keslèbrezo), Georges Castera fils, Jeannot Hilaire, Jean-Claude Martineau, Féquière Vilsaint, Maude Heurtelou, Michel-Ange Hyppolite (Kaptenn Koukourouj), Michel DeGraff, Jowel Laguerre, Papadòs, KIPKAA, Jean-Claude Bajoux* and some foreign researchers such as *Robert*

Hall Jr, Albert Valdman, Fayo (Raphël Urciolo), Paul Richard Orjala, Gille Lefebvre, Bryant Freeman, Claire Lefebvre (et al.), Marilyn Mason, Jeff Allen, Dominique Fattier... What can we learn from their works and publications on Kreyòl and apply that to Haiti in all domains (particularly in the area of education where Kreyòl is the language in which students learn best)? How far does the Kreyòl language go in education in Haiti today? Are there textbooks available in Kreyòl today (including those that were developed in the Diaspora) in use in schools in Haiti? Does the Haitian government have an interest in the diffusion of Kreyòl throughout schools in Haiti and at all levels in order for its development to continue? How many teachers are there at the high school and university level who lecture in Kreyòl? Can Baccalaureate students choose to write their exams in one of the two languages? So, talking about the evolution of Kreyòl, and then leaving some key questions such as these behind, would be like food that has all the good spices, but lacks salt. It is true that a Kreyòl evolution exists at the oral and written levels, but the application of the language in Haiti (the mother country) is another issue.

SICRAD: What major walls must come down in order for use of Kreyòl to spread?

E. W. VÉDRINE: Well, I see that you mention “major” that means what would be the most important one? Here, it would be Politics, a fragile area to touch in Haiti. It is the government that has supreme power everywhere in the world. So, what is the power of the Haitian government here? Are there some international organizations that are there secretly, manipulating the issue so that Kreyòl doesn’t spread? Talking about the “Government”, you encounter the legal aspect here also (that the State should have taken into consideration) and, globally speaking, we can point to the 1987 Constitution that declares two official languages: that is to say, everywhere that French is present, Kreyòl should be present also.

The second wall would be with people who had the opportunity to go far in school. Whether they are living in Diaspora or in Haiti, they are still Haitians. They should get rid of all the bad colonial mentality within themselves in order to feel that they are a nation, that they have their own language and culture, and they should learn to appreciate that. In this second group, you can see professionals in all domains: they are the ones who should be models for the young generation. We have already mentioned the press; it should take its responsibility and do its part around the communication issue. We need more people who write in Kreyòl. Most Haitian authors write in French; they should start learning how to write in Kreyòl. Most Haitian linguists don't publish in Kreyòl, apart from some rare ones such as Yves Dejean, who makes a difference. If linguists who do research on their own language can't write or publish research in their native language, that turns into a comedy, a whole circus in this sense of analyzing the extension of colonial mentality. You can ask yourself this question: Are they doing and publishing research for the advancement of the Kreyòl language in Haiti or just to make foreign universities talk about them as "great researchers" who are writing on Kreyòl in a foreign language but who don't and can't write anything in Kreyòl? As polyglot myself, I am not against the fact that they are writing and publishing in the language of others; on the contrary, the more one can speak other languages, the better it is for that person. But, we (especially linguists), should have a commitment toward the native language and we should serve as models for the generations to come.

SICRAD: In a time where there is much talk of "globalization" and where the English language is the dominant one in the world, how can the Kreyòl language serve to pull Haiti out of her isolation?

E. W. VÉDRINE: Well, we can't deny the reality of the English language in terms of "Globalization" and everything related to it. English has become a second language almost everywhere in the world. First, we can see how English

predominates already in the domain of technology, science and commerce in general. Latin enjoyed such privilege at a certain time, but don't regard that in a negative sense. I see it more at a "communicative" level. So, it would be an error if schools in Haiti don't put emphasis on the English language in their curriculum; we should start teaching it very early in school (as they do in the Scandinavian countries). Not only would every student like to pass the English portion in the Bakaloreya Exam, but there is a reality: many universities in the world (where English is not the language of these countries, including Haiti) use English textbooks in a range of subjects and, in Haiti, the English language would appear as a third language. So, there is nothing wrong with encouraging its teaching early in schools.

We have a generation of Haitians in the Diaspora for whom English is the dominant language. For many of them, Kreyòl would be a second language, or they would not speak it fluently, but many are proud to say they are Haitians or that their parents are Haitians. Language doesn't isolate us; rather, we isolate ourselves. At the age of ten, I was already bilingual (speaking Kreyòl and French) and I started learning Spanish and English through music and books. Nevertheless, I blame myself for being able to speak only 6

languages; I had the opportunity to master more. If you see any problem of isolation related to Haiti, please don't think it's caused by Kreyòl or French. It is true that stereotypes exist between the two languages, but at the same time let's try to not make them responsible for Haiti's problems.

Language is not just a medium and a means to communicate. Language is also a tool, but it depends how we use it. There is only one country in the world that speaks Japanese; there aren't two or three. Does the Japanese language serve to isolate the Japanese? Let's look for the real cause of Haiti's problems, and talk about them to see what exactly would isolate us: Is it politics at home? Is it leaders that we don't really have? Is it Haitians who don't believe in their potentiality to meet challenges?

Is it the colonial trap that compels us to not take our responsibility as adults? These are several questions that call for reflection.

(End of interview -- English translation: Emmanuel W. Védrine)