

## THE POLITICS AND SYMBOLICS OF CAPE VERDEAN CREOLE

Luis Batalha

The interest in Creole languages began to emerge in linguistic circles of Europe in the late 1800s. Addison Van Name's comparative study (1869-70) of the Creoles found in the Caribbean (French, Spanish, Dutch and English) is considered by some as the beginning of the scientific study of Creole languages.<sup>1</sup> In Portugal, Francisco Adolfo Coelho published his studies of Cape Verdean Creole in the *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, titled 'Os Dialectos Românicos ou Neo-Latinos na África, Ásia e América' (The Roman or New-Latin Dialects in Africa, Asia and America), between 1880 and 1886.<sup>2</sup>

The pioneering scholars who reflected upon Cape Verdean Creole understood it as a sort of broken Portuguese a view that passed on to the Cape Verdean colonial elite and which served their agenda of 'assimilation' with metropolitan culture.<sup>3</sup> They saw Cape Verdean Creole as the result of the incapacity of the African negroes to speak Portuguese properly, which was seen as much too complex a language to be spoken by 'uncivilized' and 'uncultured' peoples. However, they forgot that the Creole language was the language not only

<sup>1</sup> John Holm, *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2000) p.24.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Morais-Barbosa, ed. *Estudos Linguísticos Crioulos*, Lisboa: Academia Internacional da Cultura Portuguesa (Lisbon, 1967) p.xiii.

<sup>3</sup> A. de Paula Brito, 'Dialectos Crioulos Portugueses: apontamentos para a gramática do crioulo que se fala na ilha de Santiago de Cabo Verde', *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, 1887, 7ª série, nº10, pp.611-669; F. Adolfo Coelho, 'Os Dialectos Romanos ou Neolatinos na África, Ásia e América', *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, 1880-86, 2ª série, nº 3, pp.129-196; 3ª série, nº 8, pp.451-478; 6ª série, nº 12, pp.705-755; Dulce Almada, *Cabo Verde: contribuição para o estudo do dialecto falado no seu arquipélago*, Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, Centro de Estudos Políticos e Sociais (Estudos Políticos e Sociais, Vol. 55) (Lisbon, 1961); Edmundo Correia Lopes, 'Dialectos Crioulos e Etnografia Crioula', *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, 1941, 59ª série, 9-10, pp.415-435; Baltazar Lopes da Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda (Lisbon, 1984 [orig. 1957]).

of Negro slaves but of everybody else, including the erstwhile white elite. This may be true for Creoles in general: "There is considerable evidence that at the time of the Creoles' early development Europeans often spoke them more fluently than has generally been assumed."<sup>4</sup>

Being dominated by an assimilationist view of colonization, the Cape Verdean colonial elite viewed Cape Verdean culture and language as mostly determined by the Portuguese cultural contribution, which they saw as prevailing over everything else: "In Cape Verde, the Portuguese language had to struggle fiercely with the Negroes' languages. The Portuguese language came out as a winner from that struggle, but not unhurt. The blows it suffered left it with so many scars that it lost its shape."<sup>5</sup>

The African Negroes' contribution was seen as having been 'pathological' and deleterious to the language formation in Cape Verde: "The Creoles (Negro-European languages) are the result of the miscegenation of human types. We know that the Portuguese brought the vocabulary and grammar, which the Afro-Negro simplified. It was to him the pathological modification of the Portuguese that led to the creation of the Creole language."<sup>6</sup> This rejection of the African cultural and linguistic contribution to the formation of colonial societies is understandable in the light of the cultural context of the colonised Creole subjects. As Frantz Fanon points out:

"To speak (...) means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation (...). Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural

<sup>4</sup> Holm, *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, p.70.

<sup>5</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.11 my translation.

<sup>6</sup> Baltazar Lopes da Silva, 'Notas para o Estudo da Linguagem das Ilhas', *Claridade*, 1936, August, p.5.

originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation that is, with the culture of the mother country.”<sup>7</sup>

Or in the words of Murdoch:

“The ordeal of being forbidden to speak Creole at school – and, among the burgeoning middle classes, even at home – on pain of punishment creates a situation in which the colonial subject is forced to develop a psycho-linguistic double consciousness’, in which he or she adopts a language determined by the social context or even, in some cases, by the interlocutor.”<sup>8</sup>

## II

Despite the overall view being that Creoles were broken dialects resulting from the mixture of Portuguese and African languages, some of the earlier analysts had insights that matched the most modern ‘theories’ about Creole languages, as in the case of some of the remarks made by Rodrigo de Sá Nogueira in the prologue to Silva’s grammar of Cape Verdean Creole published in 1957.

In the quotation below a ‘substratist’ stance is implicitly assumed by admitting that the African languages supplied the rules to Creole language: “Those Negroes did not learn Portuguese under the rule of school. In order to speak Portuguese *they were guided by the rules of their own languages.*”<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes, as can be seen from the words of Sá Nogueira in the prologue to Silva’s grammar of Cape Verdean Creole, scholars thought that it was the Portuguese language which influenced the African languages, assuming thus a ‘superstratist’ stance: “There is in the scientific study of the African languages,

<sup>7</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham, MacGibbon and Kee (London, 1968) pp.17-18.

<sup>8</sup> H. Adlai Murdoch, *Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel*, University Press of Florida (Florida, 2001) p.21

<sup>9</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.12 my translation and emphasis.

amongst others, some value which many scholars do not recognise. By this I mean *the influence exerted by the European languages over the African languages ever since the Europeans began to establish themselves in Africa.*"<sup>10</sup>

The general 'pre-scientific' view on Creole languages is well summarised in Holm's words:

"What earlier generations thought of pidgin and creole languages is all too clear from their very names: *broken English, bastard Portuguese, nigger French, kombuistaaltje* ('cookhouse lingo'), *isikula* ('coolie language'). This contempt often stemmed in part from the feeling that pidgins and creoles were corruptions of 'higher', usually European languages, and in part from attitudes toward the speakers of such languages who were often perceived as semi-savages whose partial acquisition of civilized habits was somehow an affront."<sup>11</sup>

### III

Sometimes the Cape Verdean Creole was compared to the dialectical forms of the Portuguese in the archipelagos of Azores and Madeira, pointing out that the great difference was that in these archipelagos there had been no African influence. So, African influence was seen as the corruptor of the metropolitan Portuguese, and the African natives were seen as incapable of learning the 'complex' structure of Portuguese language, as can be seen from the following quotations:

"In the Azores the Portuguese is the same as in the metropolis, only with minor scratches. In Cape Verde, the Portuguese is deeply wounded in its phonetics, morphology, semantics and

<sup>10</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.9 my translation and emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Holm, *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, p.1.

syntax. (...) The language spoken in the Azores is properly called Portuguese, while in Cape Verde is called Creole."<sup>12</sup>

"Judging from the Cape Verdean speech, the Creoles in that archipelago are nothing but the Portuguese profoundly changed in the mouth of the Negroes, either in its phonetics, morphology, semantics or syntax."<sup>13</sup>

"It was the morphological part which suffered most of the mutilations, particularly in terms of verbal morphology, which was reduced almost exclusively to the infinitive. *The morphological structure of Portuguese must have looked too complex to the dominated people.*"<sup>14</sup>

"The culture of the peoples dominated by the Portuguese had not yet led them to the creation of certain words since the concepts those words represented were unknown to them. (...) If we look into the child's language we will see that she only plays with words that express the meaning of concrete objects or which are related to them. *The child in this case represents the mentality of the dominated peoples.*"<sup>15</sup>

#### IV

The standpoints of Silva, Nogueira and other contemporaries during the first half of the twentieth century represented an advance in relation to the traditional nineteenth-century view on Creole languages, which was well expressed by Lima:

<sup>12</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.11 my translation.

<sup>13</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.12 my translation.

<sup>14</sup> Dulce Almada, *Cabo Verde: contribuição para o estudo do dialecto falado no seu arquipélago*, Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, Centro de Estudos Políticos e Sociais (Estudos Políticos e Sociais, Vol. 55) (Lisbon, 1961) p.18 my translation and emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Almada, *Cabo Verde: contribuição para o estudo do dialecto falado no seu arquipélago*, p.23 my translation and emphasis.

"[European teachers] who pronounce Portuguese correctly without the corruption of the African Creole (*ridiculous slang, monstrously assembled from the antique Portuguese and the languages of Guinea*, which the people value highly and the whites enjoy imitating)."<sup>16</sup>

Nogueira assumes a critical standpoint towards this sort of remark, excusing Lima for his lack of proper scientific and linguistic knowledge of Creole:

"If we consider the Creoles ridiculous and monstrous just because they represent an adulteration of the metropolitan Portuguese, then we should also consider ridiculous and monstrous the varieties of the Portuguese spoken in the Azores, Madeira and Brazil. Furthermore, we should then consider the Portuguese itself and all the other roman languages as nothing else than adulterated forms of Latin."<sup>17</sup>

Silva shows some division between his allegiance to the Portuguese cultural 'origin' of Cape Verdean Creole and the necessity of affirming Creole as an independent language capable of representing the Cape Verdean 'culture' as a world of its own.

Rodrigo de Sá Nogueira clearly states that the Creole languages have a grammar of their own and are not gibberish talk without rules.<sup>18</sup> Silva says that the Creole of Guinea-Bissau is derived from the Cape Verdean Creole due to the Cape Verdean cultural influence in that colony:

<sup>16</sup> José Joaquim Lopes de Lima, *Ensaio Sobre a Statistica das Possessões Portuguezas no Ultramar*, Imprensa Nacional (Lisbon, 1844-46) quoted in Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.13 my translation and emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.16 my translation.

<sup>18</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.18.

"I think that the Creole spoken in Guinea did not emerge from the indigenous contact with the Portuguese but was instead derived from the Cape Verdean Creole brought in by the numerous Cape Verdeans used as colonizers."<sup>19</sup>

This reflects the fact that the Cape Verdean intellectual and political elite always looked down upon the Guineans, who they saw as more African-like and as culturally inferior and less capable of being assimilated into the Portuguese culture. They also saw themselves as the spearhead of Portuguese culture in Guinea-Bissau.

## V

Silva considers the existence of two main Creole dialectal variants in Cape Verde: the windward and the leeward variants.<sup>20</sup> He then considers subvariants within each regional dialect. In the windward there are the subvariants of Santo Antão and São Vicente and that of São Nicolau. In the leeward there are the subvariants of Santiago, Maio and Fogo, and that of Brava. This means that instead of a 'national' Cape Verdean language there are a number of dialects, which equate differences in the way the people of the different islands construct their identities vis-à-vis each other. Silva uses phonological and lexical linguistic arguments in order to base his claims about dialectal variance in Cape Verde.

Veiga reexamines the idea of two different forms for the Cape Verdean Creole, i.e. the windward on the one hand and the leeward on the other.<sup>21</sup> He considers that the Santiago variant is the mother of all the others and that the variant of São Vicente, though more recently developed, is socially and politically important. He clearly puts the Creole of Santiago before any other and uses the

<sup>19</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.31 my translation.

<sup>20</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, pp.35-6.

<sup>21</sup> Manuel Veiga, *O Crioulo de Cabo Verde: introdução à gramática* (2nd ed.), Instituto Caboverdiano do Livro e do Disco (Praia, 1996[1995]) p.12.

argument that other scholars from São Vicente have themselves admitted that the variant of Santiago is the one that should be considered when it comes to the patterning of the Cape Verdean Creole.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the analysis of the Cape Verdean Creole this division reflects the way in which the Cape Verdeans represent themselves in terms of regional identities. The fact that the Cape Verdean population is a mixture of Europeans and Africans, creates a divide between being 'European' and 'African'. Some islands are seen as more 'European' while others more 'African', but overall Cape Verde is viewed as undoubtedly 'European' in culture. As Silva writes, "I do not know of any form in the morphology of Cape Verdean Creole which does not derive its origin from the Portuguese."<sup>23</sup>

While Silva admits some African influence in the leeward part of the archipelago, he denies its importance in relation to the windward part (where his home island is situated). He thinks that the Cape Verdean Creole is grammatically simpler than the Portuguese, in the same way that the Portuguese and the other romance languages are simpler versions of the Latin. By considering that in the archipelago the metropolitan Portuguese has been easily 'contaminated' by the African languages of the slaves, there exists in his work a certain notion of 'impurity' and 'contamination' of the European cultural and linguistic elements by the African culture.

## VI

Modern-day views on Creole languages represent a different stance from those held by mid-twentieth-century Cape Verdean linguists like Silva (1984) and Almada (1961), as well as by the colonial and postcolonial elites in power. But they are relatively recent as Holm points out:

<sup>22</sup> Veiga, *O Crioulo de Cabo Verde: introdução à gramática*, p.12.

<sup>23</sup> Silva, *O Dialecto Crioulo de Cabo Verde*, p.38 my translation.



"It is only comparatively recently that linguists have realized that pidgins and creoles are not wrong versions of other languages but rather *new* languages. (...) Their systems are so different, in fact, that they can hardly be considered even dialects of their base language. They are new languages, shaped by many of the same linguistic forces that shaped English and other 'proper' languages."<sup>24</sup>

The more traditional nineteenth- and early twentieth-century views, which expressed the asymmetry between Europeans and natives in terms of differences in 'civilization', were later replaced during the second half of the twentieth century by explanations based on the 'power asymmetry' between coloniser and colonised. Creoles are no longer the languages of 'inferior' peoples but of 'oppressed' ones. Past theories stated that the natives were not capable of learning the superior languages of their masters because of their innate incapacity to learn complex languages. Today's theories say that the natives did not learn European languages because they were not sufficiently exposed to them. In technical terms, the natives or slaves received a poor input, in terms of quantity and variety, of 'superstrate' languages.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the emergence of Creole languages is not a question of capacity but one of opportunity.

Also, while past theories saw pidgins and creoles as imperfect versions of the superior superstrate languages, today's theories view creoles as languages in their own right, retaining the essential structural characteristics of any language system. This is clearly expressed by Trudgill:

"The scientific study of language has convinced scholars that *all* languages, and correspondingly *all* dialects, are equally 'good' as linguistic systems. All varieties of a language are structured,

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<sup>24</sup> Holm, *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> Michel DeGraff, ed. *Language Creation and Language Change*, MIT Press (Cambridge Mass, 1999) p.5.

complex, rule-governed systems which are wholly adequate for the needs of their speakers."<sup>26</sup>

The emergence and growth of the 'scientific' study of Creole languages was made possible by the political developments that led to the independence of the European colonies in the Caribbean. According to Holm, "the early growth of creole linguistics [in the early 1950s and 60s] was probably related to the movement toward independence in the British West Indies, which helped shift the perspective on language from that of the colonizer to that of the colonized."<sup>27</sup>

## VII

Despite modern linguist 'theories' pointing out that Creole languages are not inferior versions of former European languages, most of the postcolonial Cape Verdean elite still think that Creole is not mature enough to be the sole official language. At present, Portuguese is the official state language in Cape Verde, which means that it is used in schools, administration, and in every formal domain of Cape Verdean society, whereas Creole, despite being the lingua franca, is viewed as the language of informal contexts. As a result, it still requires time for it to become the national language side by side with Portuguese. Although the postcolonial political elite has vowed to make Creole the national language, in practice little has so far been done. It seems that the postcolonial elite are still held hostage by the old prejudices about Creole-speaking that emerged during centuries of colonialism.

The local political and intellectual elites use the existing regional divides within the archipelago as an excuse not to take seriously the adoption of Creole as the sole national language in Cape Verde. The regional identity divide between

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: and introduction to language and society*, Penguin Books (London, 1974) p.8.

<sup>27</sup> Holm, *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, p.44.

*badiu* and *sampadjudo* (or even more detailed varieties according to each island's spokespersons) Creoles seriously hampers any attempt to introduce a standard written form of Cape Verdean Creole and to make it the official language. In the 1970s, when the first bilingual programs were introduced in the Boston area of the US among Cape Verdean immigrants, families from the islands of Brava and Fogo refused to allow their children be taught the Creole variant of Santiago, which they saw as an African stronghold. Regional and racial divides within the Cape Verdean society, both within and without the archipelago, hamper the acceptance of Creole as the real national language of the country.

For the local elites the use of Portuguese as the state and official language gives them an edge over the masses who are speakers of Creole and illiterate in Portuguese. The elites use Portuguese as the contact language between Cape Verde and Portugal, which represents its most important trade and political partner and which hosts the largest Cape Verdean immigrant community in Europe. The fact that Portuguese is also the language in schools gives an advantage to the elite's children who use it to gain entrance to Portuguese universities.

So, despite a quarter of a century of independence, Cape Verde and its political and intellectual elites are still being shadowed by old colonial identity representations. The country remains essentially diglossic, a situation that is still common among the many of ex-colonies. As Sebba points out:

"It is those who have power within a society who are able, by and large, to define what is 'standard' and what is 'inferior': During colonial times, the colonial masters—expatriates and the locally born elite were able to define the standard language of the colonising country as the norm, with local languages, including pidgins and creoles, as inferior or substandard. Independence has swept away the expatriate elites in many countries since about 1960 – but the status of pidgins and

creoles in many places is unchanged. Even where there have been positive changes in status for developing languages, often there has been little practical improvement. This may be due to power being held by an elite who can comfortably use the official Standard or lexifier language."<sup>28</sup>

Manuel Veiga, who is possibly the only official voice seriously in favour of Creole (he is a linguistic expert and politician at the same time), argues that the Cape Verdean Creole should be taught as the first language and the Portuguese as the second. Neither of the two should be taught to the exclusion of the other. If Cape Verde really wants to be a bilingual country it should promote the formal teaching of Creole while at the same time keeping Portuguese as a foreign second language.

Finally, the strongest argument against making Creole the school and official language is a financial one. It would require a significant amount of money to comply with all the necessary requisites for replacing Portuguese with Creole in schools (books written in Creole, teachers capable of teaching it, and so forth). Therefore, it seems that Cape Verde will have to wait a few more years until serious thought is given to the adoption of Creole as the *de facto* national and official language. And as acknowledged above, the fact that the postcolonial elites have a vested interest in keeping political control over culture works against the promotion of Creole to a national language.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Sebba, *Contact Languages: pidgins and creoles*, St. Martin's Press (New York, 1997) pp.236-7.

<sup>29</sup> Sebba, *Contact Languages: pidgins and Creoles*, p.237.