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The Sociolinguistic Situation and National Identity of Cape Verde

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Melissa Oquendo is a senior majoring in Sociology. Her research on the languages of Cape Verde began

during the winter of her junior year when she traveled to Cape Verde as a part of the Language Study Tour with Dr. Fernanda Ferreira (Foreign Languages) and six other students. Melissa researched the sociolinguistic situation of Cape Verde to gain perspective on Cape Verdean cultural identity. Melissa's passion for both language and identity is what drives her journey in learning languages and exploring, cultivating, and understanding her own cultural identity. Thus far, Melissa has learned to speak Spanish, and read Portuguese; and she has a fair understanding of Cape Verdean Creole.

Cape Verde is a West African country located in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Senegal. The archipelago is composed of 10 islands, 9 of which are populated (Santo Antão, São Vicente, São Nicolau, Sal, Boa Vista, Maio, Santiago, Fogo, and Brava). Santa Luzia is the only uninhabited island. Cape Verde was colonized by the Portuguese and therefore includes a rich mix of Portuguese and African cultures.

Because today's Cape Verdeans are descendants of both the Portuguese and West Africans, there are elements of both in their languages, traditions, history, and development as a nation. These Portuguese and West African influences are seen on a daily basis in Cape Verdeans' choice of languages. This paper focuses on the linguistic situation of Cape Verde, where two closely related languages or dialects are used by the same linguistic community. This particular linguistic situation is called *diglossia*, a term coined by Ferguson in 1959. Later, Bright (1964), Fishman (1967) and Giglioli (1972) elaborated on what sociolinguists mean by the term, explaining that a diglossic situation occurs where there are strong differences in form and function between the formal and informal styles of a language. In the case of Cape Verde, the diglossic situation includes Portuguese, the official language, and Cape Verdean Creole (or Kriolu, as expressed by its speakers), which is the "national language," also known to Cape Verdeans as "the language of the heart" or the "mother tongue." These languages exist side by side in the community, each playing a linguistic role in the way Cape Verdean society functions and reflecting Cape Verdeans' cultural identity. The official language of Portuguese is used by the government and taught in schools. The national language of Cape Verdean Creole is the language used informally by the community (Ardilo & Ramos, 2007).

Like many other diglossic and bilingual communities, Cape Verde has a language that unifies them (Kriolu) as well a language that connects them to people in other parts of the world (Portuguese). Kriolu does not have the same high regard as Portuguese. "The superposed variety [in this case, Portuguese] is referred to as 'High' or simply H, and the other variety or varieties [Kriolu] as Low, or L. The most important stamp of diglossia is the functional specialization of H and L. In one set of situations, only H is appropriate, while in another, only L is" (Romaine 1989, p. 31).

As in other language contact situations, the colonial language is referred to as the “lexifier.” In the case of Cape Verde, Portuguese is the colonial language which gives the vocabulary or lexical items to the restructured creole. To be sure, Kriolu is a Portuguese-based creole. According to the article “The Creole Language” (2010), “Cape Verdean Creole consists of 90 percent from the old Portuguese. The rest is borrowed from the African, French, English, and other European languages...all of those languages whose people influenced the island’s history and past.” The Portuguese word for “creole” is *crioulo*, which derives from the verb *criar* (“to raise or to bring up”), and Cape Verdeans make that word their own as Kriolu.

Kriolu is used among family, friends, and in informal situations, such as at the market, connecting people as a community and helping them establish their collective identity of Portuguese colonization and African roots. Kriolu is the language of choice in Cape Verde, but everyone comprehends Portuguese. In addition to legal and government situations, Portuguese is used in schools, hotels, banks, and many other workplaces, as well as on television. It is also the language of navigation and development. According to the CIA World Factbook, 84.3 percent of the population can read and write in Portuguese as well as speak Kriolu. The only people in Cape Verde who do not comprehend Portuguese are those who did not attend school or who stopped going to school. Today, most Cape Verdeans can fully comprehend Portuguese; it is the older generation that lacks some literacy. Cape Verdeans have to use both languages on a daily basis; they speak in Kriolu but read signs in Portuguese. They must consistently select the language according to the context.

Today, there is some resistance towards Portuguese as the only official language of Cape Verde because both Portuguese and Kriolu are consistently used. Some Cape Verdeans living there and abroad believe that Kriolu should be recognized officially. Kriolu has historically been viewed as an inferior language, especially during the colonial era. In the article “Cape Verdean Kriolu in the United States,” it is stated that “after the slave trade ended, Portuguese remained the language of empire, the official language of the state institutions of justice, education, taxation, and defense. In colonial culture, using Kriolu was a mark of social inferiority” (Gonçalves, n.d.). Gonçalves explains that among workers and intellectuals, especially, there was an element of resistance towards Portuguese colonialism. Although Cape Verdeans accept the Portuguese language as a major part of their culture, many feel that Kriolu needs to be accepted on the same level as Portuguese. They believe that Kriolu retains the culture of the community and creates a unified bond among Cape Verdeans—something that needs to be preserved.

The Kriolu language is one of the elements that keep Cape Verdeans connected to each other throughout the world. There are about 500,000 Cape Verdeans living in Cape Verde and over a million outside of Cape Verde. Most traditional Cape Verdean music has Kriolu lyrics, often focusing on missing the motherland and being away from those they love. There are many generations of Cape Verdeans abroad who have learned how to speak Kriolu because their parents wanted to pass down their native language. This is observed here in the United States where there are several Cape Verdean Student Associations created by second-generation Cape Verdean Americans who keep the culture alive, especially through traditional music and dance. Even though Portuguese is the language of education, Kriolu is what is used to keep the culture alive anywhere there are Cape Verdeans. Cape Verdeans clearly take pride in speaking Kriolu; they make it known to the world that speaking their Kriolu is not inferior to Portuguese. For most Cape Verdeans with whom I have interacted, Kriolu is the language that best represents them; it is closer to their cultural essence.

While Kriolu remains alive in the Cape Verdean culture, no one can deny the benefits of having Portuguese as an official language in Cape Verde. For instance, Portuguese has a unifying effect for Cape Verdeans among all nine islands. That is because some dialects of Kriolu are not mutually intelligible. When communicating with people on another island, Cape Verdeans use Portuguese. Furthermore, Cape Verde is able to maintain a partnership with seven other countries whose official language is Portuguese: Angola, Brazil, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé e Príncipe, and East Timor, as well as Portugal. Together, these countries form the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries, known by its Portuguese acronym CPLP. According to UNESCO, the objective of CPLP is “cooperation in all matters, including education, health, science and technology, defense, agriculture, public administration, communication, justice, public security, culture sports and social communication.” Cape Verde is part of this community supported by UNESCO not just because Portuguese is Cape Verde’s official language, but also because Cape Verdeans identify with other Africans who are descendants of Portuguese colonizers.

If Kriolu were the official language of Cape Verde, the population would not benefit from the advantages of being part of the world-wide CPLP. Being in the CPLP community allows Cape Verde to develop in many different areas as a country, and allows the people of Cape Verde to maintain productive relationships with countries worldwide and getting help when needed in many different projects related to social development. For example, many Cape Verdean high school graduates receive scholarships to go to college in Brazil and Portugal, due to

the excellent relationship between these countries. By already speaking Portuguese, Cape Verdeans are able to easily adapt and excel overseas. Because Cape Verde lacks natural resources, its major resource is its people who, by succeeding abroad, are able to contribute to the overall development of Cape Verde.

Portuguese is also important because the education system implemented in Cape Verde was based on the Portuguese educational system which allows Cape Verdeans to be at the same literacy level as students in many developed countries around the world. Cape Verdean culture is founded on such linguistic and cultural flexibility that, while Kriolu maintains their national identity, Portuguese is their gateway to global opportunity.

Most people of Cape Verdean descent become not just bilingual, but multilingual. This is greatly due to the fact that most Cape Verdeans immigrate to Europe, the Americas, or Asia. Not only do they speak Kriolu and Portuguese, but they also learn a third language. This is less challenging to do, just for the mere fact that they are brought up already speaking two languages (Poplack, 1980). They are constantly switching between languages, a practice that provides them with neurological benefits. It is contended that both young and old will have benefits in brain health and attention. In the article “Being Bilingual: Beneficial Workout for the Brain,” Wheeler explains, “for aging subjects, learning more than one language builds their ‘cognitive reserves,’ the capacity that helps adults maintain their mental skills as the brain deteriorates. And babies exposed to multiple languages do not get confused, but quickly learn to distinguish between languages and build a stronger ‘perceptual vigilance’.” (Wheeler, 2011, Benefits of Linguistic Conflict, para.3). This suggests that there are benefits to using more than one language on a regular basis which Cape Verdeans have to do. In other words, Cape Verdeans have significant benefits from being multilingual, not just because of the global connections, but also because of physical reasons.

Recently there has been a lot of discussion about standardizing Kriolu and even making it the official language of Cape Verde. Standardizing Kriolu poses several potential problems. Even though Kriolu is considered one language, there are different dialects on each island. There are common words that enable Cape Verdeans on different islands to speak with each other; however, there are also many differences. Each island has its individual pride and would not necessarily agree to another Kriolu dialect designated the official language for the country. Some dialects have more African influence while others have more Portuguese structures. The type of influence from island to island is in direct correlation to geographic location. The *barlavento* islands tend to identify more with Portuguese colonizers. *Barlavento* is a Portuguese word meaning “windward.”

The *sotavento* islands are closer in cultural affinity to Africa. *Sotavento* is the Portuguese word for “leeward.”

Standardizing one dialect of Kriolu as an official language of Cape Verde would cause cultural identity conflicts among people who speak other dialects. In my conversations with Cape Verdeans from the islands of Brava, Santiago, Fogo and São Vicente, they relate a sense of defeat when imagining one single dialect across the islands. According to “The Creole Language” (2010), a lot of English is heard in the Kriolu of São Vicente, and the Kriolu of Santo Antão sounds more like French. These two islands are right next to one another, yet their dialects of Kriolu differ a lot. Differences increase between islands that are further apart. The diversity of dialects among islands is so vast that Cape Verdeans traveling between islands often resort to Portuguese in order to communicate with other inhabitants. In that sense, Portuguese as the official language contributes to the unity of the country, while the different dialects of Kriolu contribute to pride in national identity.

Cape Verdeans also express linguistic pride in speaking Portuguese because it is a European language with similarities to other Romance languages such as French and Spanish. With that strong foundation in Portuguese, Cape Verdeans are able to grasp other world languages which are beneficial to them. The current diglossic situation allows Cape Verdeans to flourish and does not create confusion about cultural identity. That is, they are both proud of speaking their dialect of Kriolu and of speaking a Romance language. Being Cape Verdean means coexisting with all these variations of language and culture.

The diversity of dialects of Kriolu and its coexistence with Portuguese fortifies Cape Verde’s layers of identity. Although each island has its own version of what it means to be Cape Verdean, the people of each island embrace the others knowing there would not be a Cape Verde without one or the other. The country is also racially mixed. Ask a Cape Verdean if he is African or Portuguese and the answer will vary, but it will always come down to “I am Cape Verdean” (Costa, 2012). Almost any Cape Verdean family has African descendants as well as Portuguese descendants in their family tree. According to the CIA World Factbook, the population of Cape Verde is 71% Creole—or native-born Cape Verdean—and 28% African immigrants from continental Africa; about 1% of the population is made up of European immigrants. Cape Verde has a strong commitment to education, spending about 6% of its annual gross domestic product on education, which places Cape Verde at number 32 worldwide in the education expenditure category (CIA World Factbook).

Cape Verdean cultural identity is complex in its nature because of the African and Portuguese roots of Cape Verde. Its current diglossic system has enabled Cape Verde to further develop as a country. It has not only embraced all the different dialects of Kriolu but has also reaped benefits in having Portuguese as the official language. As individuals and a nation, Cape Verdeans are succeeding. They are globally integrated at the same time that they pride themselves in being Cape Verdean. Most people of Cape Verdean descent are also multilingual, speaking more than just Kriolu and Portuguese. They are often fluent in English, French, or even Chinese. The benefits of such a rich cultural identity are apparent in the layers of language, music, history, education, and development of Cape Verde.

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