[HAITIAN CREOLE SPEECH]: *Anpil nan kesyon ke nou te poze nan kou a te baze sou biyografi lengwistik etidyan yo. Li te vreman enteresan ni pou etidyan yo ni pou mwen menm kòm anseyan.*

SARAH HANSEN: Today on the podcast, what language teaches us about identity.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Can you be Mauritian but not speak the Mauritian Creole language? Can you be Latino but not be fluent in Spanish? Can you be African American but yet not be fully fluent in so-called Black English?

SARAH HANSEN: Welcome to Chalk Radio, a podcast about inspired teaching at MIT. I'm your host, Sarah Hansen, from MIT OpenCourseWare. My guest for this episode created a course that teaches students about how language helps us see and better understand our world. Michel DeGraff teaches the course Creole Languages and Caribbean Identities. The course highlights how linguistics can teach us about broader issues of identity, history, education, and more.

Throughout this episode, we'll be intercutting professor DeGraff's answers with his Creole translations. For now, we'll let him explain more about how he developed this unique course.

[HAITIAN CREOLE SPEECH]: *Rechèch mwen se sou devlòpman avèk*

MICHEL DEGRAFF: My research is about trying to understand how languages evolve over time and what happens when new languages are created. Say, for example, in the Caribbean in my native Haiti, where the Haitian Creole emerged in the 17th-18th century. So we try to understand the patterns of development of the things that we call Creole languages.

In terms of the structure, but also an applied side to my work where I try to understand how best to use, say, Haitian Creole and other local languages in education. And how that's crucial for development of countries like Haiti. So the course started out of a desire to try to have linguistics be accessible to a broader range of students, within which we could connect languages to larger issues of culture and identity.

And as I'm from Haiti and as my research is Creole languages, I try to think of ways in which we can use the history of Creole languages to introduce larger issues connected to linguistics, identity, history, sociology, education.

SARAH HANSEN: Even though the course focuses on Caribbean identities and Creole languages, the course requires its students who come from all over the world to observe what language means for their own identities.

[HAITIAN CREOLE SPEECH]: *Se te [?] moun Anpilyo fèt oz Etazini*

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Can you be Mauritian but yet not speak the Mauritian Creole language? Can you be Latino but not be fluent in Spanish? Can you be African American but yet not be fully fluent in so-called Black English? So those were questions that they themselves brought in. Then what I ask them to do as the very first exercise was to write what I called a linguistic biography.

And actually, I got this hint from a dear friend and colleague, Professor Anne Charity Hudley, and Charity actually shared with me her own linguistic biography. When I read that, I realized how powerful it was to read about her own growing up in terms of language, ethnicity, race. So I thought that I would ask students something similar.

SARAH HANSEN: The connection between language and power is highlighted in this course. A lot of what comes through in students' language biographies and other assignments touches on power structures and the hierarchies that exist because of cultural misconceptions tied to language and also race. I asked Professor DeGraff if students brought misconceptions about Creole languages to the course, and how he unpacked them.

[HAITIAN CREOLE SPEECH]: *Etidyan yo, yo kòmanse kou a avèk yon se...*

MICHEL DEGRAFF: So one way that we start by unpacking these misconceptions is by comparing attitudes towards languages with attitudes towards race and ethnicity. And what we get to see very quickly is that, in fact, there is perhaps as much misconceptions about language as there is about race. So they get to see very early in the course that language can be used as a proxy for race, though now it's impolite to say certain things about, say, black people or Asian people.

Yet it's still polite to say negative things about language. And then at that point what we do, we introduce some basic linguistic analysis tools for them to be able to see that in terms of basic structure, there is nothing at all that is inferior about Creole languages. In fact, what we do from the very beginning is to show that structurally there are patterns both in the syntax or morphology of Creole languages that are quite similar to patterns in the syntax and history of English, of French, of Mandarin Chinese.

So they quickly get a sense that empirically and theoretically, one cannot argue that Creole languages are any way lesser than non-Creole languages, the same way that there are no biological measures that would deem black people to be inferior to white people. So they get very quick to understand the power of this myth that often they themselves have brought along in terms of how they view different languages.

In some cases Creole language, in other cases just even dialects of English. There is Southern English or Black English. Their attitudes are very demeaning towards those varieties that have no basis in science that are rooted in hierarchies of power, and they get to see that very quickly. This course, the core of it is discussions. And in order for the course to be successful, we have to be able to discuss very delicate personal issues in a very safe way and to be honest.

It cannot be that students are afraid to reveal their positions on various topics including race, language, identity. And one way to do it is to, given that I had at the very beginning of the course-- I had the questionnaires about where they came from, what languages they spoke, where they grew up-- I was able to use that to trigger discussions.

So if we read a text about authenticity, for example. If an African-- can you be an authentic writer if you write in English, for example? I knew that some of the students had dealt with this issue. For example, we had a student who, although she was black and Hispanic, she wasn't very fluent in Spanish. And she wasn't clear whether her not being fluent in Spanish made her any less Hispanic.

You see? So I was able to use that, in order to trigger a discussion around this notion that we had read in this famous debate between Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o about African writers. Can a writer be authentically African if they write in English, or French for that matter? So that was one way to trigger rich discussion.

So the motive there was which discussions are best arrived at if we start from a personal basis where students are invested in trying to find an answer that can work for them in their personal lives or in the life of their families, their communities, their countries, et cetera.

SARAH HANSEN: Another special feature of Professor DeGraff's course on OCW is that his Instructor Insights are available in both English and Haitian Creole. I asked him why it was important that he share in both languages how the course was taught.

[HAITIAN CREOLE SPEECH]: *Pou mwen, se te vreman enpòtan*

MICHEL DEGRAFF: So it was very, I would say, crucial, for me to do this interview in both English and Creole, because I see Creole languages, even in the case of Haiti, or especially because of Haiti, as a particular revealing and clear test tube or case study to really show how language can be such a powerful tool, either for domination or for resistance. Either for oppression or for development.

So I would love teachers who look at the course to see how they can adapt the content in order to address similar issues in their own community, because I think that what you see happening in the case of Creole languages also happens in the US, happens in Europe, in Latin America, in Africa-- where language is often used as this technology for domination or resistance.

And I think this course gives some basic analytical tools to be able to analyze these patterns. And for me, it's also very important that teachers in Haiti and students in Haiti including, say, future leaders or policy makers, get to understand the discourse and the readings and to understand that Haiti could do so much better if teachers, students, leaders, had this awareness of how their own attitudes towards Creole versus French have played over centuries in keeping the country underdeveloped.

And if they could get a better sense of the importance of language in education and development, then I think the country would do so much better. And for me, it's a key bottleneck that we have to go past in order to really be able to develop a nation-- is to be able to understand the history and the nature of your national-- your ancestral language-- and to be able to use it in a more systematic and productive way.

If you cannot do that, there's no way that you can develop a whole nation that speaks that language. What the students get to understand at the end of the course is that we all hold dear certain attitudes about language. And some of these attitudes are positive for ourselves and for others, but oftentimes-- and this is actually one of the major issues that we discuss throughout the course, is that sometimes we have attitudes that have a negative impact, severe negative impact, on the lives of other people.

The lives of, sometimes, entire communities and nations. So I hope throughout that students can actually take the theory that is in the course and see ways in which they can apply it to themselves, to their communities, to their countries. So some in the course of this class have applied what they've learned, and taking it outside, including volunteering in, say, there is a dual language program that's just started in Boston.

It's a joint language program promoting the use of both Creole and English, and where students are immersed from kindergarten in both Creole and English. And now there's a student within the class, my class, who's volunteering in that classroom for kindergartners who are learning in Creole and in English. And to me, that's a-- it's a dream, because it's one case where what you learn in the course can be directly applied in the real world context, which can make actual positive change in the life of these children.

SARAH HANSEN: Professor DeGraff shares additional thoughts on teaching Creole languages and Caribbean identities within the instructor insight section of his OCW course. You can find these dual language videos, along with his openly licensed teaching materials, at ocw.mit.edu. And if you use these materials in your own teaching, we'd love to hear about it. Use the contact link in the show notes to share your story. Until next time, I'm Sarah Hansen from MIT OpenCourseWare.