MICHEL DEGRAFF: There's benefit in honoring your native language and also your native culture and then you become a more joyful learner and then you have a better chance to succeed.

SARAH HANSEN I'm Sarah Hansen. In this episode, our guest is Michel DeGraff. He's the co-founder and co-director of the MIT Haiti Initiative, which promotes the use of Haitian Creole in Haitian schools. He's also the instructor of the newly revised course on OCW, 24.908, Creole Languages and Caribbean Identities.

We actually spoke with Michel back in season one and he talked about connecting language to issues of culture, identity, and power. In this episode, we're taking a deeper look at some of these themes and how he navigates them with his students. But for those unfamiliar with Michel's work and presence, let's start at the beginning: the origins of a linguistics professor.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: I really became a linguist by accident. My first career was as a computer scientist. And I got a wonderful job, which I'll never forget, at AT&T Bell Labs as an intern, as an undergraduate. And this is where for the first time I got to understand that language is really a system of computation where you connect sounds, or in the case of sign languages, where you connect gestures with information, with meanings. And before I had no clue that that's what defined language.

And before that, for the first 20 years of my life, I had never considered my native language Haitian Creole, which we call Kreyòl in Haiti, I never thought of it as a real language. I always thought that Kreyòl was broken French, was corrupted French, was bad French. That's what I was told as a child.

So that moment at AT&T Bell Labs, it dawned on me that for the first 18 years of my education, I had been lied to. I had been lied to at home by my parents, who actually loved me very much. So it was a lie rooted in love. Then I was lied to by my teachers from age 3, 4 to age 18. In fact, back in school, I wasn't allowed to speak my native language.

I was punished for speaking it.

So then at Bell Labs, it was a moment of epiphany. I actually remember when I realized that physically it was a disturbance to think, oh gosh, why is it that for all these years I never thought of my native language as a full language? And that's when I decided to learn more about linguistics, learn more about what makes a language a language.

So back then at Bell Labs, I was actually writing programs for computer scientists and for linguists trying to create the first versions of things like Siri or Alexa, doing text to speech synthesis, and trying to understand natural language with computers. So it turned out it's the computers that taught me about language eventually.

SARAH HANSEN: Many of these themes of re-examining childhood experiences and the ways we learn about identity are woven into the course material of 24.908, Creole Languages and Caribbean Identities. In the course, Michel asks the students to examine themselves in the world around them in profound and meaningful ways.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: The key part that they learn to learn or they learn to uncover is the basic, fundamental role that language plays in how they form their own identity and how language structures social relations, the way they view others, and the way others view them.

And what they learn really that I find to be fundamental is the hidden role that language often plays in the creation and transmission of power. Power in terms of opportunities to become successful students, opportunities to get good jobs, opportunities to even find a mate. In all these relations, language plays such a key fundamental role that's often hidden.

So what they learn to do is to make the hidden visible, you see?

And for them to do that, they have to dig deep in their own biographies, in their own attitudes about people. Because whatever attitudes we have about language, it's not just about language. It's really about other human beings, other social groupings, other ethnicities, other even religions, other countries.

SARAH HANSEN: Michel asks his students to use language as a historical artifact, one that can challenge histories that have been told through colonial lenses and that can also reveal so much about the human beings held in that history.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: In the case of colonized nations like Haiti, and the same is true for most of the Caribbean, it's true for Native Americans in the US, it's true for Palestinians, it's true for Africans in many parts of Africa, the way history is written, it's often written from the perspective of the colonizers.

Even in a country like Haiti, we've been independent since 1804, but my history book was so colonial.

So our independence was bragged about, was honored, but if you read between the lines even from the very preface, a Haitian child is taught to despise their own ancestors.

Our history book teaches us to revere, to adore the colonizers, including someone like Bartolomé de las Casas, who was one of the very early architects of the slave trade.

Our history book right in the preface teaches that las Casas is to be revered as a hero.

I think this is perhaps the most striking example of how even an independent country like Haiti, our history books are so thoroughly colonial.

But one way to get out of it is to look at language, in the case of Haiti, Haitian Creole, to understand how from the very beginning of Haiti's history, the Africans resisted this dehumanization.

SARAH HANSEN: As you might expect, sometimes these conversations can be intense for students.

I asked Michel about how we approach the subjects that directly deal with the cascading effects and trauma of colonialism.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Each class, each session is really... is both reaffirming but it can make us feel so fragile. Because I went through this experience when I was in my early 20's realizing that how history, colonialism, actually even slavery have played such a major role in the way I look at myself. It's a very challenging position to be in. And I can tell you that in our class, there's been tears shed.

SARAH HANSEN: Michel explained that one commonly difficult subject for students is examining the processes of assimilation. So many of the stories students confront in this class involve exploring the trauma of assimilation, especially when it leads to devaluing or even abandoning their cultural heritage.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Children of immigrants in the US because of social pressure, because of this push to assimilate, the parents really give up on the ancestral languages and cultures.

And then when the students when they go to college, like in this case, when they take my course and then they understand the roots of this pressure to assimilate, then really see themselves as victims and they realize the loss, because there is so much loss in not having kept your ancestral language.

And I myself as a parent, I know it because I know how difficult it is in the case of my own children to keep Haitian Creole alive in the household. Because again, even as a linguist, there is so much pressure that you have to struggle to make sure that your children can keep speaking Kreyòl in a world where it's not viewed as being useful. So it takes lots of effort, and I'm a linguist. I know that speaking, honoring your native language in no way would prevent you from learning a second language or a third language or a fourth language.

It's not either or. What's key is to recognize that your native language, because of Haiti, Haitian Creole, is a basic tool to build strong foundations to learn science and math and other types of knowledge, including second languages. So you can have it all once you realize that there is no need to exclude, on the contrary, there is benefit in honoring your native language to use it as a tool to learn other things like French, for example, you see?

And we have data that confirm it, not just in Haiti, but also in Hawaii, in Africa. In fact, there are very robust data that show, for example, in Hawaii children who are immersed in Hawaiian actually succeed in becoming better speakers of English. You see? So it's not either or. On the contrary, there is benefit in honoring your native language and also your native culture, and then you become a more joyful learner and then you have a better chance to succeed.

SARAH HANSEN: One of the unique aspects of this class is how it draws on students' personal experiences to teach about cultural phenomena like the origins of linguistic power structures.

So to get some deeper insight about the class, we spoke with two of Michel's students.

IANÁ FERGUSON: My name is Ianá Ferguson. I am currently a rising junior at MIT with an intended major in the physical sciences. And I was a student of 24.908 in the spring 2022 semester.

Presently in my homeland, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, it is a 33 island nation in the Southern Caribbean. I enrolled in 24.908 as being a Caribbean national and having lived in the Caribbean all my life. I was very interested in an outside perspective of the Caribbean in terms of its identities and its Creole languages.

The class really made me think very differently about the world. Every week someone in the class is in charge of leading a discussion based on the assigned reading for that week.

And you had to connect your reading to your experience and expand on something that resonated with you in the reading. So I like to say that we were presenting our world to each other.

So my difficulty was that I had to share my world with persons who have not experienced it. And rightly so, because each person has a different outlook on the world. So my running theme was always to make my classmates understand my world so that when we discuss things, they would be able to see why and how I said things or understood things the way that I did.

SARAH HANSEN: So you wrote this really great article, "Linguistics and Economics in the Caribbean. Who Speaks Creole?" I'm wondering could you tell us what your article was about?

IANÁ FERGUSON: The article entitled "Linguistics and Economics in the Caribbean. Who Speaks Creole?" examines the reasons why Creole languages have been devalued. And it investigates this from a socioeconomic perspective where persons who view themselves as upper class or wealthy tend to speak an acrolect, which is a variety of Creole closer to the colonizing nation's language, while those of lower socioeconomic status speak basilect, which is a variety of Creole furthest from the colonizing nation's language.

Caribbean nationals perpetuate the disuse of Creole as we have been conditioned really since the period of slavery and taught that being able to speak a standard language affords or guarantees success and proves intelligence.

SARAH HANSEN: Not everyone goes from a course assignment to publishing for the public. So I'm curious how you made that transition.

IANÁ FERGUSON: I think we would have to thank Professor DeGraff for that, because I wrote this piece with no intention of publishing it. For me it was just a subset of a project that I had been working on. And I was just exploring the ideas and researching about linguistics and the Caribbean. But Professor DeGraff spoke to me about publishing it and he gave me some time to think about it.

The deciding factor was that I saw it as a way that Caribbean persons or even the world in general could be made more aware of themselves and this could have an impact for further generations. Overall, I want the article to encourage Caribbean persons to be proud of their Creole languages and I want to encourage them to be able to speak Creole and the standard language, as I opined that doing this gives one different ways of interpreting the world.

SARAH HANSEN: The other student we spoke with got just as much out of Michel's class even though she grew up in a very different part of the world.

VIVIEN SANSOUR: My name is Vivien Sansour and I was born in Jerusalem. I grew up in Palestine and spoke Arabic. That's my native language. I grew up in a small little village called Beit Jala. It's in the Bethlehem district. And for me, language could mean life or death at times. I grew up under Israeli military occupation. So if I was identified at a checkpoint and I didn't understand what the soldier said in Hebrew, if he said "come" and I left or if he said "go" and I came, it could mean literally the death of me. Many Palestinians have died at checkpoints.

SARAH HANSEN: Vivien shared how Michel was able to create a space that was safe for students to honestly share their personal experiences of their world and what that did for her as the only student in the class not of Caribbean heritage.

VIVIEN SANSOUR: The first thing he did was actually bring himself to the table. And that in itself opened our hearts to see that, you know, whatever we bring to the table is going to be safe. When someone shares their vulnerability, it allows you to feel safe to do the same.

And he offered that generosity not knowing who's in the class.

And I think he engaged in a very gentle yet gradual process of us developing slowly trust with each other to the point where by the end of the class, like our presentations I feel were deeply personal and quite profound. I think we were able to understand our personal experiences within the context of a political structure in the world.

I mean, one of Michel's powerful approaches is that while the class is about the Caribbean, he does a great job of weaving in how the Caribbean relates to other things and other places and what was happening in the world. And that big vision is I think urgent in our times. And that's part of why I connected so much to the class.

He didn't think it was super strange that a Palestinian woman wants to learn about the Haitian Revolution. He found ways to weave it into my own experience. And it allowed him, I think, to learn about me. So I felt that his curiosity about who we are, not just me, I mean every single person in the class, allowed us to feel seen and to feel that who we are and how we see the world matters. And that is significant, because then you're motivated to actually discover and become more curious about the other rather than just dismiss other people's experience as something that you can't relate to.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Each time you teach the course, you have a different group of students, it's almost impossible to predict how to make sure that each student is going to feel safe enough in the course. So I start with having the students fill out a linguistic autobiography for them to learn to reflect on how they were socialized into certain beliefs about what they speak, what their parents speak, what others in the community speak, for them to start becoming aware of the role that language plays in their socialization. And that's a very delicate exercise, because they have to start asking themselves questions about what they believe about themselves through language.

I tell them about my own biography. I'm very honest about the fact that for a good chunk of my life, I was really in a state of mental slavery without being aware of it, you see.

But then once I bring that up, some students feel freer to also describe their own experience having these attitudes that are very much prejudicial against certain varieties of languages, including sometimes their own or their parents'. But others I can see that they brace themselves, you know. Some of them do not feel safe enough to open up and to share these kind of experiences.

And I tell them, look, when you present in this class, I don't want you to just summarize the readings. You have to take the readings and see how they apply to you, to your community, to sometimes your parents. If their parents grew up in the Caribbean or grew up, say, elsewhere where there was strict language hierarchies, you want to apply those readings to those familiar cases. And some of them are comfortable doing it after a bit. But you can see that others resist it throughout.

And I think it's because it involves certain skills that I might not have having to do with, say, psychotherapy. Because some of it is really getting deep into the ways you are made to think of yourself as human being. So that can be very challenging. But what I find is that in many cases, actually maybe in most cases, there's a sense of liberation.

It's very cathartic to become aware of these patterns in your own life.

SARAH HANSEN: Michel shared with me how cultural conceptions about Haiti are deeply fraught due in part to the way its history has been told.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: So the New York Times. I don't know if you've seen it. They had a recent series that came out, and the articles were published in English and for the very first time for the New York Times in Haitian Creole and also in French. And the article is about the ransom that the French forced on Haiti for France to recognize Haiti's independence. That was back in 1825.

The French engineered this really a double debt. They imposed a ransom of 150 million francs. So they brought these boats on the coast of Haiti. They said, we're going to bomb you out if you don't agree to paying back this amount. Haiti had to pay to former slave holders for the loss of their property because of Haiti becoming independent.

This is the only time in the history of the world that a nation that became independent after winning the war for their independence, after freeing themselves had to pay quote unquote "reparations" to the slave holders who were defeated by the war. And that amount in today's dollars is worth $21 billion plus. And economists have done various simulations to show that with that so called "debt" that Haiti had to pay, Haiti would have never been able to develop as a normal nation.

I always teach about that ransom in my course. I've been teaching it for decades now. So I knew about this. But what the New York Times did was to document it very closely in terms of how much exactly Haiti paid to the French and where that money goes. And then of course, the US in 1915 also came to Haiti and further ravaged Haitian finances by basically stealing money from Haitian banks. So it's a really ugly story.

But one major gap in the New York Times story is the failure to analyze the cultural and intellectual aspect of the ransom. So in fact, there's another ransom that Haiti had to pay.

That's the cultural linguistic ransom. Because as the French imposed this quote unquote "debt" on Haiti, they also forced Haitians to adopt a system of education based on the French language. So in 1860, there was a famous contract signed that forced Haiti to accept teachers from French Catholic orders. And those teachers, the mission was to impose French and French values on the Haitian school system.

My history book is a result of this agreement with the French, you see? So Haiti has also been held ransom through language. And this is another factor that explains why Haiti has been so impoverished from the very beginning of its history. This role can be so hidden and so invisible that even a very detailed account of the French in Haiti still fails to analyze that aspect of neocolonialism.

So let's stop saying that, quote unquote "Haiti is the poorest country of the Western hemisphere." Instead let's understand why it's so poor. Let's understand the roots of Haiti's misery.

And the roots of Haiti's misery is in the ways that France and the US have ravaged Haiti's finances in abominable ways.

SARAH HANSEN: Since recording this, Michel has published an essay in the New York Times addressing this gap. We'll put a link to his essay in the show notes. Before we end the episode, Michel had something he wanted to share in Haitian Creole.

MICHEL DEGRAFF: Just to give the English speakers a sense of what I mean to say, I mean to actually really riff on the theme of Black Lives Matter. If Black Lives Matter, then our languages as Black people also matter.

Donk, zanmi konpatriyòt mwen yo, Yon bagay ki vreman vreman enpòtan pou n konprann: fò n konprann orijin prejije kont lang kreyòl la. Men, fòk nou sonje Dessalines te di a klè tout moun se moun. E li te konnen tou, si tout moun se moun, tout lang se lang.

E lang kreyòl la se lang tou. Se pou sa li te di, depi anvan 1804, fòk nou pale lang a nou, nou pa bezwen tout tan ap pale lang lèzòt.

Donk, fòk nou sonje, si pa te gen kreyòl la kòm lang, nou pa te janm ka reyisi fè revolisyon sa a ki te ban nou yon Ayiti endepandan. Se kreyòl la ki te lang revolisyon an.

Ki fè, jounen jodi a, fòk nou sèvi ak lang kreyòl la tou kòm lang ansèyman.

Se lang sa a k ap pèmèt tout ti moun nan peyi a rive jwenn bon jan konesans kòm sa dwa.

SARAH HANSEN: If you're interested in teaching or learning with materials from the updated version of 24.908 Creole Languages and Caribbean Identities, please visit our website at ocw.mit.edu.

You'll find all the materials there. And as always, they're free and open. You can help others find the materials too by subscribing to the podcast and leaving us a rating & review.

If you enjoyed this episode, you might also want to check out our season one episode with Michel, Unpacking Misconceptions About Language and Identities.

Thank you so much for listening. Until next time, signing off from Cambridge, Massachusetts, I'm your host Sarah Hansen from MIT OpenCourseWare. MIT Chalk Radio's producers include myself, Brett Paci, and Dave Lishansky. The show notes for this episode were written by Peter Chipman.

Peter also built the updated course on our site.