and human biologists. The aim should be not only to explain its occurrence but to adopt measures to prevent it. In this connection we should mention that we are conducting an extensive program to protect children from this and other types of violence in association with several other governmental and nongovernmental agencies.

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Propositions for a Structuralist Analysis of Creolism

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There is good reason to believe that there are creoles in Louisiana. People use the label creole as an identifier in Louisiana’s ethnic mosaic; the word appears in commercial name brands, restaurant menus, business logos, band names, and travel brochures. Recently a fledgling

1. © 1998 The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. All rights reserved 0011-3204/98/1904-0008$1.00. We thank Stephen J. Caldas, F. Daniel Cring, Albert Valdman, and anonymous referees for their suggestions and assistance.
social movement has been promoting creole identity in publications and cultural events; traits of creolism such as the Creole language and folkways, especially music and food, are experiencing a popular revival. In addition, historians and social scientists have documented the existence of creoles since colonial Louisiana and described various aspects of their cultures and social organization. Yet, paradoxically, according to the 1990 U.S. census, virtually no Louisianians claim to be creole, and few claim to speak Creole.²

In Louisiana and elsewhere, the term creole is polysemous [Neuman 1985:11]. Historically, it has been used to characterize various social groups and experiences on the basis of ancestry, race, culture, and language in the Americas, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean [Morgan 1994, Chaudenson 1992, Valdman 1978]. In addition, the meaning of creole has varied with time and the evolution of social structure, with the possible exception of Creole languages, what and who is creole differs between 18th-century Paris, 19th-century Caracas, and today’s Mauritius.

The semantic layering of creole has two direct consequences for the Louisiana situation. First, the term is, at best, ambiguous. In practice, it is situationally defined; the context, users, and proximity of the referent generally help in narrowing the field of meanings. Currently, in New Orleans, the term refers to either a person of racially mixed heritage or a scion of the former white elite, in the southwestern region of Louisiana it is mostly applied to French-speaking blacks. Secondly, the description and analysis of creolism have been limited to particular aspects of the phenomenon. The white elite and creoles of color in the New Orleans area have long been the topic of literary [Cable 1884, Hearne 1885, King 1921] and scholarly [Hamel 1984, Hirsch and Lounds 1992] attention; this has left white and black creolism outside of New Orleans less examined [for recent works see Brasseaux, Fontenot, and Oubre 1994, Hero 1995, Dormon 1996, Valdman 1997]. Also, research has dealt predominantly with historical [Rousséve 1937, Sterks 1972, Hall 1992, Hero 1995] and linguistic [Neuman 1985, Klinger 1992, Valdman 1996] aspects; limited ethnographic work has been done on socioeconomic dimensions [Woods 1972, Maguire 1979], cultural institutions [Spitzer 1986, Ancellet 1996], and social change [Esmian 1985, Dormon 1992, Hirsch 1992].

Overall, the fundamental sociological dimensions of creolism in Louisiana remain ill-defined, and often-asked basic questions such as what a creole is, how many there are, and where they are still receive incomplete answers. A synthesis of the current knowledge of the variables of creolism in Louisiana has yet to be done. This essay aims, first, at shedding some light on the size and cultural boundaries of the creole phenomenon in Louisiana as it appears through census data; the methodological issues raised by this endeavor highlight the need for an integrated conceptualization of creole. Some theoretical propositions are then advanced to consolidate the varying senses of the term. Borrowing from structuralist theory and supported by quantitative and qualitative data, it is proposed that creolism can be defined by the interrelation of three elements—the meanings of ancestry, race, and language—ranked on a social-status scale. The model allows for the integration of the various coexisting realizations of creolism at different times and from changing perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

This essay utilizes two types of data. Statistical data come from the Public Use Microdata Sample (5%) [PUMS] files of the 1990 census of population [Bureau of the Census 1992a,b], frequencies on race, ancestry, and language are presented by Public Use Microdata Areas [PUMAs]. Archival data from primary and secondary sources are used to chart the historical evolution of the term since its appearance in Louisiana at the end of the 18th century.

In 1990, the Census Bureau listed creole as a race, an ancestry, and a language. As a race, Creole appears among other mixed races such as Mulatto, Biracial/Interracial, Half-Breed, and Octoroon; as an ancestry it is listed as criollo(a) with other Hispanic ancestries and as creole in a subcategory of Afro-American; among languages, it is listed with Jamaican Creole, Krio, French Creole, and Haitian Creole [Bureau of the Census 1992b]. An analysis of the 1990 sample data by PUMA reveals that, despite the term’s connotations, virtually no native-born Louisianians reported creole as a race or an ancestry. Creole is claimed only as a language [table 1] and by very few people [300 claims out of 201,273, or 0.15%]. Given the total population of Louisiana [4.5 million], this figure would suggest that 6,750 Louisianians lay claim to creolism [Bureau of the Census 1992a].

Creole-speakers live in the southwestern region of Louisiana commonly known as Acadiana: 78% of claims are made by residents of 11 parishes in 4 PUMAs. Except for Lafayette, the parishes in which Creole-speakers live are mostly rural areas. There are few claims from areas traditionally associated with the emergence of creolism in Louisiana, either in the city of New Orleans or in the river parishes where the plantation economy once flourished and where the existence of Creole-speaking communities has been documented [Valdman 1996]. Figure 1 shows that black French-speakers are overwhelmingly located in the regions that contain most of the self-reported Creole-speakers. However, it is notable that even in this putative creole territory, most black Francophones identify themselves as French-speakers not Creole-speakers; moreover, they all identify their ancestry as black not creole.

The data also reveal a clear racial divide: claims of Creole use are overwhelmingly [91%] made by blacks; also, although few blacks [4%] reported Creole as a lan-

² We use the following notation system: creole refers to the generic label; creole refers to the people or things so called as a noun and an adjective; Creole refers to the language.
TABLE I
Percentages of Speakers of Creole, Cajun, and French among Black and White Louisianans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PUMA</th>
<th>Creole</th>
<th>Cajun</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1301–02</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1400</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901–04</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–3100</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2200</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2300</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*North Louisiana, 100 (Bossier, Caddo), 200 (Bienville, Claiborne, DeSoto, Lincoln, Natchitoches, Red River, Sabine, Webster), 300 (Ouachita), 400 (Caldwell, East Carroll, Franklin, Jackson, Madison, Morehouse, Richland, Tensas, Union, West Carroll); Central Louisiana, 500 (Avoyelles, Catahoula, Concordia, Grant, LaSalle, Vernon, Winn), 600 (Red River); Southwestern Louisiana, 700 (Allen, Beauregard, Calcasieu, Cameron, Jefferson Davis), 800 (Acadia, Vermilion), 900 (Lafayette), 1000 (Evangeline, St. Landry), 1100 (Iberia, St. Martin, St. Mary); Eastern Louisiana, 1200 (West Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena), 1301–02 (Baton Rouge), 1400 (East Baton Rouge), 1500 (Ascension, Livingston), 1600 (Tangipahoa, Washington), Southwestern Louisiana, 1700 (Assumption, St. Charles, St. James, St. John), 1800 ( Lafourche, Terrebonne), 1901–4 (Orleans), 2000–2200 (Jefferson), 2300 (Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Tammany).

The data, Dormon (1992:624) offered a range from 22,000 to 28,000 creoles of color.

Where, then, are the creoles? Have they virtually disappeared from census tabulations because of a problematic ethnic and racial identification? According to Lieberman and Waters (1993:446–48), this is a possibility; they propose that methodological issues are more likely to stem from inadequate conceptualization of race and ethnicity than from the methods used for measuring the size and characteristics of groups. Therefore it is possible that Louisiana creoles do not materialize in census counts because of an inadequate conceptualization of creole and the stronger pull exercised by other ethnic and racial labels.

Domínguez (1986) has attributed the underrepresentation of creoles both white and black to their identification with other groups; she notes that white creoles have increasingly identified with Cajun, Irish, or Italian-American ethnicity whereas creoles of color have chosen among racial options ranging from passing for white to claiming to be black or Indian.

The repeal in 1983 of Louisiana’s legal definition of race opened the possibility of racial self-identification by Americans of African descent after decades of forced racial classification. Recent publications suggest that this change in the law has not resulted in important changes in the self-identification of creoles of color, while there are some indications that young mixed-race creoles have begun to identify themselves as white (Brasseaux, Fontenot, and Oubre 1994:124), their involvement in a recent revitalization movement points to a stronger identification with their black peers and Afrocentric themes (Dormon 1996).

The embodiment of creole extrapolated from census data is that of black French-speakers residing in rural southwestern Louisiana. Census figures for 1990 indicate that 3.1% of blacks reported using French, Creole, and Cajun; the population of blacks over 5 years of age was 1,171,399, giving the figure of 36,693 creoles. The areas with the highest concentration are Lafayette (17.6% of the black population), Evangeline, and Saint Landry (16.5%).

The elusiveness of creoles suggests another stage in the evolution of the term, which has been historically redefined to describe new social arrangements in Louisiana.

THE DIMENSIONS OF CREOLISM

The traditional dimensions of creolism are birthplace, ancestry, race, and culture.

Birthplace. The accepted etymology establishes that creole was derived from the French créole, which came from either the Spanish criollo or the Portuguese crioulo; the word appeared in the American or Caribbean colonies of European powers and originally meant "born in the colonies." Therefore, in Louisiana, creole originally meant Louisiana native, and this connotation is still claimed today by New Orleans locals (Branley 1995): "So, 'Creole' means different things to different
people. The one common theme throughout all the definitions is that Creole is referring to something that is native New Orleans. Whether it’s Creole tomatoes, Creole cuisine, or a Creole debutante, they’re all New Orleans.”

In a symbolic combination capitalizing on the image of exoticism and sophistication projected by New Orleans’s multicultural heritage, creole is used liberally as an adjective by the food industry, where it is especially associated with fine cuisine, seafood, and spicy seasoning. Nevertheless, although many things are creole, virtually no one today identifies as such and is labeled as such on the basis of birthplace. To be born in New Orleans or even in Louisiana does not appear to be a sufficient condition for being creole. Commenting on place of birth as a defining trait of creolism, Dominguez (1986:124) wrote that “equating creole with native did create a classificatory problem.” If an American birth had been a sufficient condition of creolism, several groups could have been labeled creole. However, neither Native Americans nor the Louisiana-born children of Anglo-American settlers were ever considered creoles. Clearly, creolism emerged from birth on the American continent, but an American birth could not be the only qualification.

The emphasis on birthplace obscured a fundamental condition of creolism: to be creole one had to be born in America to parents born elsewhere. In that sense, creolism is more about displacement than about place; a creole is “from here” but with roots that are “from over there.” Obviously, the American birth of creoles and the different birthplace of their European or African parents could be applied only to the first generation; creoles of later generations were born in America to parents born in the Americas with foreign-born ancestors. Thus starting with the second generation, creoles were those who could claim a degree of foreign (i.e., non-Louisianian) ancestry.

Parentage/ancestry. Ancestry emerged as a pivotal criterion of creolism; in addition to being a native, a creole had become a descendant of creoles. This shift of meaning was prompted by more than the inevitable succession of generations; it accompanied the profound social changes brought about by the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and statehood (1812). The massive and steady in-

3. An Internet search of “creole” in May 1997 yielded over 17,000 hits, most of them associated with culinary themes and located in the New Orleans area.

4. The transgenerational transmission of the label is also an issue in linguistics; a creole is a language that has become the first language of a community, that is, a mixed language, a pidgin, that has been transmitted over two generations.
flux of Anglo-American and foreign settlers throughout the 19th century and the growing hegemony of Americans in economic, political, and cultural matters threatened the colonial order of creoles and with it the meaning of their label.

The hesitation to apply the label to the descendants of the Acadian exiles exemplifies the tension regarding ethnic identification. These people had European ancestry, had settled permanently in the New World, and had Louisiana-born children. In the 19th century, travel writers and administrators referred to them as creoles; Frederick L. Olmsted [1856:342] wrote: “We were passing a hamlet of cottages, occupied by the Acadians, or what the planters call habitants, poor white French Creoles.” The Acadian bourgeoisie was also for a while considered creole [Tregle 1992:138]. This labeling, mostly used by English-language writers, coexisted with other terms [Acadian, French] and disappeared in the 1880s when the term Cajun gained widespread usage (see Henry n.d.).

The ancestry criteria had to be refined to remain meaningful. Early in the 19th century, “reference to ‘the creoles’ implied equation with the ancienne population, the indigenous Latin stock,” writes Tregle [1992: 141]. Ancienne population was coined by white Louisiana natives of French or Spanish heritage to underscore their differences from Americans or foreign French settlers. Both in its French form and in its reference to seniority, the term symbolized for creoles their distinction and superiority in Louisiana society. Later in the century, creole scholars such as Charles Gayarré eloquently emphasized the Latin origin and stressed its cultural superiority over Anglo-American plain but efficient materialism [Tregle 1992]. The distinctiveness of the Latin origin was even asserted across the racial barrier by creoles of color; in 1907 Rodolphe Desdunes reflected the duality of the New Orleans black community in ethnic terms by identifying the “Latin Negro” and “Anglo-Saxon or American Negro” categories [Logsdon and Bell 1992:202–3].

According to Tregle [1992:134], the clash between creoles and Americans “produced the historic stimulus to a vigorous Louisiana ‘creolism.’” This vigor had been lacking in the colonial era, when creole was not a contested label arguably because the dominance of the white creole elite was not challenged. In fact, the argument continues, the creole-American confrontation produced a “creole myth” in which the urbane Gallic creole is opposed to the crude Anglo-Saxon interloper, both characterizations being equally erroneous. In this perspective, creolism emerged from the seed of its demise.

Ethnographic research findings and census data are in line with this strand of historical analysis, by most accounts [Dominguez 1986, Hero 1995] self-described white creoles have all but disappeared. There remain only a few families in New Orleans [approximately 30 surnames], Saint Martinville [about 10 surnames], and central Louisiana. Their socioeconomic status is marked by a preponderance of professionals, the virtual absence of manual and blue-collar occupations, and the disappearance of the economic wealth that was the basis for their 18th- and 19th-century elite status. “The epitome of an impoverished aristocracy,” New Orleans white creoles have, however, been able to maintain a “middle-class respectability” [Dominguez 1986:236]. Creoles as whites do not appear in Louisiana census figures simply because they have disappeared.

However, this construct of creolism remains in circulation despite the disappearance of its objective basis; not only is it used in the popular imagery and touristic endeavors in the New Orleans area, with suggestions of colonial architecture, belles in crinoline, and fine dining, but also it is employed by critics of the term because of the indomitable strength of the tradition [Tregle 1992:166n]. In contrast with its universal popularity and continued dominance, this connotation of creole originally epitomized a contraction of the meaning because of the exclusion of creoles of African descent. The emphasis increasingly placed by white creoles on the Latin heritage was aimed at excluding both Anglo-Saxons and nonwhites. To the ethnic and cultural distinction was affixed a racial one.

Race. The organization of creole’s racial meaning parallels that of the birthplace argument. Regarding the original referent in Louisiana, one position is that creole was used to describe the first generation of European settlers. Another is that, originally, “creole referred to locally-born people of at least partial African descent, slave or free” [Hall 1992:157]. A third is that in the antebellum period there was a “color-blind identification of creole with native-born” [Tregle 1992:138].

Whatever the original denotation of the term, by the end of the 19th century the racial connotation of creole had become predominant. It was also split into two different meanings: for whites it meant white purity, for blacks miscegation [Dominguez 1986]. The impasioned defense of racial purity by whites in the postbellum era helped to make an issue of the term’s racial connotation. Tregle [1992] has documented the furor which followed the publication of George Washington Cable’s Old Creole Days and The Grandissimes in 1879–80; his allusions to the obvious but taboo white-black intercourse prompted efforts by whites to clarify any confusion over the biracial meaning of the term that they shared with colored people, “white creoles troubled over the common impression abroad that creole always implied mixed or Negro blood . . . were diligent to warn against” the error [Tregle 1992:139].

However, the same protagonists concurrently developed a keen interest in the Louisiana Creole language “spontaneously created by negroes coming from Africa,” a “patois” mostly spoken by blacks, according to its original recorder, Alfred Mercier [cited in Hamel 1984:401–2]. If the sexual intercourse between white creoles and blacks was vehemently and groundlessly denied, the cultural intercourse was acknowledged. Mercier marveled “that masters accustomed themselves at addressing the slaves in the patois invented by them and that, in many families, white children would use it
exclusively until they were ten- to twelve-year old” [cited in Hamel 1984:402]. Creole had a racial meaning, but it was ambiguous.

The ambiguity arose in part from the particular racial landscape of Louisiana, which reflects the succession of ways in which miscegenation was dealt with by its various political administrations and social conventions. Creoles of color are the descendants of the gens de couleur libres, “free people of color,” the term used after the Louisiana Purchase to designate “any racial mixture of less than one half Negro” (Oubre and Leonard 1983:72); this was a category in the racial taxonomy of colonial Louisiana centered around the degree of racial purity. Under French and Spanish rules, gens de couleur libres occupied an intermediary status, being neither white nor black, while blacks were held in bondage, people of color benefited from legal avenues to earn their freedom through manumission or purchase [Hanger 1996]. Free, educated, well-off, culturally Latin and of African-European heritage, they emerged as a social group in a “three-caste social system” [Foner 1970].

The Americanization of Louisiana impacted the multilayered racial order. The racial bipolarization which followed the Civil War led to the structural weakening of any intermediate racial class and its disappearance as a legal category. From the dominant perspective, creoles of color became black, whereas a white parent had made a child a person of color, in the postbellum period “one drop” of African blood made a person black. The racial reappoitionment was accompanied by downward mobility brought on by economic and political losses. Prior to the Civil War, creoles of color were of mixed race, light-skinned freedmen, well-off landowners or craftsmen, literate and schooled in their own institutions, and emulating the European-centered culture of their white counterparts in the ancienne population. The postbellum era brought drastic changes; blacks gaining freedom saw their social status and economic opportunities improve. The fortunes of creoles of color followed a different path; wartime destruction and postwar economic crisis resulted in their economic demise as a wealthy landholding class [Mills 1977, Brasseaux, Oubre, and Fontenot 1994, Schweninger 1996], and emancipation and the Jim Crow laws of the 1890s relegated them to the low status of recently freed blacks.

Two developments associated with the disappearance of the racial buffer zone blurred the racial meaning of the creole label. First, as we have seen, efforts by whites to construct creolism as white purity contributed to the exclusion of mixed-blood creoles, at least from their perspective. Conversely, creoles of color integrated the black community, a move facilitated by intermarriage and involvement in the civil rights struggle alongside noncreole blacks [Hirsch 1992, Logsdon and Bell 1992].

The racial meaning of creole has evolved, but the defining pattern has endured; it still revolves around the Western concept of race and especially blackness: creoles are not black at all or not only black. White creoles continue to be defined by the criterion of racial purity and creoles of color by the criterion of miscegenation [Dominguez 1986]. For whites, racial purity is delineated as much by a documented monosomy as by the purported absence of a “touch of the tarbrush.” Acceptance among older white creoles in New Orleans revolves around the elimination of any doubt about an applicant’s genealogy.


PROPOSITIONS FOR A STRUCTURAL DEFINITION

We have documented how the term creole has incorporated various meanings of birthplace, ancestry, culture, and race. The major defining variables of creolism have evolved significantly since the emergence of the phenomenon; birthplace, ancestry, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural heritage are still dimensions of creole, but they no longer individually allow for a sharp delimitation of boundaries separating creoles from the rest of Louisiana’s population. The label creole no longer defines a native, a member of the white elite, a Francophone, or a mulatto. Rather, the accumulation of referents and shifts in meanings have made creole a multilayered term and dulled its effectiveness as an identifier.

Ultimately, attempts to define creole in terms of race, cultural history, norms, or attitudes fail to capture the phenomenon as a whole and in its continuity. Barth [1969] suggested studying ethnicity from the perspective of the boundaries constructed between groups in contact rather than by focusing on the “cultural stuff” they enclose. He stressed that ethnicity emerged from interaction between groups and was manifested by the construction of boundaries with a limited number of markers, cultural traits deemed significant by group members. Adopting this theoretical approach, Dominguez [1986] isolated five indexical markers of Louisiana creole identity: physical appearance, speech and the image of speech, respect and propriety, religion, and an elite connotation. She argued that physical characteristics such as skin color, eye color, and hair texture were important markers for both white and black creoles even though they referred to different objective referents (racial purity for white creole, a degree of whiteness for creoles of color, the brown-eyed creole belle and the blue-eyed creole of color). She also showed how language was constructed as a marker of creolism: Conti-
nental French was the valued form and Creole French considered inappropriate even though both black and white creoles knew a fair amount of it and concealed it. In this analysis, the physical and linguistic markers are independent of their content because they refer to different realities (skin, eye color) and can be manipulated (skin tone, speech). Unfortunately, for our purpose, this is not the case for the other variables considered by Domínguez: neither the sense of propriety, religion, nor elite connotation can be disengaged from their manifestations and used to distinguish between kinds of creolism.

The exclusion of culture in defining ethnic groups has long been a critique addressed to Barth [see Dormon 1980]. In fact, what Barth rejected was the assumption that ethnic traits were necessarily objective cultural traits; instead he advocated that the focus be placed on the subjective evaluations of objective cultural content that people use to define and characterize ethnic groups. Such an approach appears to be particularly appropriate for an analysis of creole, whose meaning is overloaded with cultural “content”; Domínguez’s analysis needs to be taken a step farther so that all the “indexical markers” retained are disengaged from their objective reality and become cognitive categories.

In line with this argument, three traits stand out: race, parentage/ancestry, and language. They are factors present in all conceptualizations of creole; they are appropriate for distinguishing creoles from noncreoles but also for differentiating between the various kinds of creolism; they can be treated as cognitive categories independent of their content. Before we proceed with the presentation of the model, one other theoretical issue must be addressed. To identify the basic markers of creolism is one step; to organize them in a meaningful model is another. How are race, ancestry, and language combined to result in a particular meaning of creole?

At this juncture, a structuralist framework offers a possible answer. Lévi-Strauss’s brand of structuralism focuses on the underlying binary pattern that appears to organize human cognition and social behavior in opposing pairs, for example, he proposed to consider kinship as a structure composed of “four terms [brother, sister, father, son] united by two pairs of correlated oppositions” [Lévi-Strauss 1974 [1958]:36]. Although his structuralism has been vigorously attacked as “self-contained intellectual constructs with little explanatory value” [Ember and Ember 1996:42], it seems a viable guide for the limited purpose at hand. It offers a model for analyzing groups and cultures as cognitive entities disengaged from their material existence, as Barth suggested; it also makes possible the integration of the various pairs of binary oppositions [white-black, Latin-Anglo, French/English-Creole] embedded in the concept of creole. Finally, the structuration with positive and negative poles allows for the integration of one important dimension, social status.

In our model, creolism can be conceptualized as a structure organizing the interrelations of parentage/ancestry, race, and language constructed as pairs of opposites and placed on a high-low status scale. Each meaning of creole can thus be plotted as a system, a triangular plane surface positioned at a particular level of the three-pronged structure (fig. 2).5 The dimensions of creolism can be constructed as follows:

1. Race as a pole made up of the opposition of black and white. In all the racial guises of creole, being white is constantly more valued than being black: the greater the degree of whiteness, the higher the status among white and black creoles alike. This is exemplified by the racial taxonomy in colonial Louisiana and the current perception of light and dark skin tones by blacks.

2. Ancestry as a pole made up of the opposition of a valued heritage versus a nonvalued one. Originally, this meant, in addition to American birth, French or Spanish heritage versus non-Latin roots which included African as well as American ancestry; now, the importance of Latin ancestry must be assessed within the context of “American” ancestry in a manner similar to Alba’s [1990] reappraisal of white ethnicity: a generic European origin appears to have replaced precise national origins as the anchor of ethnic self-definition by whites. We propose that this evolution along with the concomitant positive evaluation of American identity has resulted in the relative devaluation of Latin heritage. Also, the reevaluation of African roots among blacks has undoubtedly contributed to bridging the perceived cultural gap between blacks of “pure” African heritage and mixed-race creoles of color.

3. Culture as a pole made up of the opposition between a dominant language and dominated language; the dominant languages are successively French, Spanish, and English; the dominated ones are African languages, Creole, and French.6

Finally, the basis for the pattern of relations between race, ancestry, and language must be established. There is little debate about the existence of a strong correlation between these traits in social reality and about the well-documented fact that they greatly influence life chances; for instance, early 19th-century New Orleans white creoles valued and claimed the highest level of racial purity, the highest level of pristine French or Spanish ancestry, and the highest level of cultural accomplishment in the form of the French language; whether they actually possessed these traits or not, they were the elite. Free people of color occupied a lower rung on the ancestry, racial, and linguistic scales because of their less-valued African heritage and miscegenation; dark-skinned creoles occupied the lowest rung because of their greater closeness to the African heri-

5. Gordon [1964:51] defined the ethclass as a subsociety “created at the intersection of the vertical stratifications of ethnicity with the horizontal stratifications of social class.” Roosens [1989:158–59] has suggested a conceptualization of ethnic identity as a horizontal, nonhierarchical link between people intersecting with vertical stratification: “By defining oneself in ethnic terms, one escapes hierarchical classification.”

6. There are other traits associated with creolism in Louisiana, but we opted to retain language as the sole cultural operator because of its pivotal importance; also, other traits such as religion or folkways do not appear as significant points of difference with the society at large and within the creole category.
tage and phenotype, as well as use of the Creole language.

This model also accounts for the variations in relevance and intensity of race, ancestry, and culture. Figuratively, the greater importance of a factor at one time can be represented as an anchor to the meaning of creole. We have shown how place of birth, race, and ancestry alternated as the pivot of creolism. They remain important, but their impact varies with each new construct of creolism. It remains to be seen if this attempt can be supported by detailed empirical verification and if it can be generalized to other situations in the creole universe.

References Cited


