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GENDER IN FRENCH CREOLES THE STORY OF A LOSER*

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ABSTRACT: The grammatical category of gender has captured the attention of linguists interested in a wide variety of languages. Despite the fact that creoles are generally counted among the genderless languages, creolists continue to consider the role of gender in creoles. In this chapter, natural gender marking in a number of French-based creoles will be discussed. This description will also take into consideration possible paths of language change, and I will reflect upon why gender lost out in the complex process of restructuring the nominal morphology that occurred during creolization. I will end by turning my attention to a recent and speculative account of a special relationship between gender and number.

1. *Gender in creole languages*

"Gender is the most puzzling of the grammatical categories"—this is the first sentence of Corbett's (1991) stimulating book on gender, a comprehensive survey of gender and gender systems with data from over 200 languages. Creolists, however, will look in vain for a paragraph on creole languages, which is not really surprising given the fact that creoles are considered genderless languages. No introductory work on creoles or creole grammar fails to hint at the difference between creoles and their respective base language as far as gender marking is concerned. Holm (2000:216) remarks "[l]ike distinctions of number, distinctions of grammatical gender in the European lexical source languages were not maintained by inflections on creole nouns or adjectives. [...] Sometimes the creoles have preserved natural gender oppositions in specific nouns, but this is on the level of the lexical item rather than inflectional morphology." Valdman (1978:149) notes that "compared to French, one of the salient grammatical features of creole is the absence of gender in the noun system." Heil (1999:75) adds, "grammatical gender does not exist in the French-based creoles," along with Bollée (1977:27) who states, "as in the other

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French-based creoles, the category of grammatical gender does not exist in Seychellois Creole" [Editors' translations].

It is common knowledge that in creole languages there is no classification of nouns according to masculine and feminine, although all creoles irrespective of their base language actually do express natural (biological) gender, which is most often indicated on the level of the lexical item rather than by inflectional morphology. The situation appears to be quite simple, so why discuss gender in creole languages when there is no problem? The aim of this article is twofold. First, I will briefly sketch natural gender marking in French creoles and discuss possible paths of language change. From a more general perspective, I will then ask why gender was given up during creolization, and I will briefly allude to the special relationship between gender and number against the background of more recent, typologically oriented studies on gender.

Obviously the answer to the question of whether creoles have gender or not is directly linked with the definition of gender.¹ If one accepts the traditional definition of Hockett (1958:231) that "[g]enders are classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words," which is shared by Corbett,² French creoles certainly do not have gender; in basilectal creoles, there is no such phenomenon as congruence or agreement between noun and determiner, noun and adjective, or noun and participle. In French creoles, nouns and adjectives are uninflected items; the determiner is postnominal *-la* for singular nouns and either postnominal *ye* or *yo* or preposed *se* or *bann* for plural nouns. The personal pronouns *li* or *i* (singular) and *yo* (plural) for both masculine and feminine are the equivalents of French *il/elle* 'he/she' and *ils/elles* 'they-MASC/they-FEM,' respectively.³ Thus, natural gender expression is primarily a lexical issue, not a syntactic one.⁴

According to Wurzel (1986:77), however, nominal classes can also be established without taking agreement into consideration: "Classification of nouns means the division of the nouns of a language into a limited number of classes with class membership formally taking effect on the nouns itself [sic] and/or

¹ Cf. for example Claudi (1985), Corbett (1991), and Unterbeck, Rissanen, Nevalainen, and Saari (2000) for a comprehensive theoretical discussion of the status and function of this nominal category in various languages. Corbett (1991) also gives an overview of the different theories concerning the genesis of gender as a nominal category, which originally meant 'kind or sort' and had nothing to do with sex.

² Cf. Corbett (1994:1348): "To demonstrate the existence of a gender system evidence is required from agreement, that is outside the noun itself." Cf. also Claudi (1985:13ff.) and Dahl (2000a:113).

³ The plural marker *bann* and the plural pronoun *zot* are restricted to the Indian Ocean creoles; cf. Stein (1986) for a more precise overview on the distribution of the abovementioned forms in the different French creoles.

⁴ Valdman (1978:151) already emphasized "the lexical, rather than grammatical, nature of the indication of sex for nouns referring to human beings" [Editors' translation].

beyond the nouns in at least certain contexts" (Unterbeck 2000:xvi).⁵ This view seems to be shared by Dahl (2000a:106) for whom gender appears "on one hand as a property of a noun (as a lexical item), on the other, as a property of a noun phrase (as an occurrence)."⁶ Given the fact that in creoles the expression of (natural) gender is above all lexically inherent in the nouns, this more encompassing view will certainly be more compatible with the creole data than definitions based solely on agreement. Furthermore, if one accepts that gender "is reserved for such noun marking systems where sexual gender is transparent, although not necessarily all-encompassing" (Hurskainen 2000:665),⁷ creoles are certainly not completely genderless. Since they mark biological gender, creoles just about fulfil the basic requirements for "gender systems proper, i.e., systems showing sex differentiation within nominal classification" (Unterbeck 2000:xxvi). Thus, they differ considerably from the African substrate languages, the majority of which are characterized by complex noun-class systems (cf. Claudi 1985; Hurskainen 2000).

⁵ Cf. Claudi (1985:14): "By gender system I mean [...] any categorizing classification of nouns that is expressed through a marking on the noun itself, on other sentence constituents, or both; the criteria for the classification may or may not be of a semantic nature (e.g., animate or inanimate, human or nonhuman, male or female, etc.)" [Editors' translation].

⁶ This view is shared by most of the recent works on gender, cf. *inter alia* Claudi, who emphasizes that agreement plays a much more important role with the other nominal categories (e.g., number and case), whereas gender is more of a lexical category: "Gender as a 'lexical category' [...] is, in contrast, inherent in nouns, due to semantic and/or lexical restriction; it conveys no information beyond that which the noun itself conveys" [Editors' translation] (1985:31). Cf. also Unterbeck (2000).

⁷ Hurskainen continues, "It is important to make a distinction between gender systems and noun class systems since there are languages which apply both of these systems simultaneously" (2000:665). Cf. also Claudi (1985:14): "Gender' languages are, in more or less clearly recognizable ways, associated with natural differences in sex and exhibit two or three 'gender' (masculine, feminine, and in some cases, neuter). In contrast, 'class' languages may also more or less clearly be linked to classification criteria such as 'human', 'animal', 'plant', 'fruit', etc., and accordingly possess a greater number of 'classes', as a rule more than five and up to twenty" [Editors' translation]. Others use the term gender in a broader sense meaning all kinds of noun class distinctions, cf. for example Corbett (1994:1348): "Gender systems may have sex as a component, as in languages with masculine and feminine genders, but equally sex may be irrelevant, as in Algonquian languages where distinction is between animate and inanimate."

2. Natural gender marking in French Creoles⁸

In all French creoles, many personal nouns are gender neutral; that is, they do not provide any formal indication of the referent's sex. Words that may be used to refer to both female and male referents usually go back to the French masculine forms and include common terms such as Louisiana Creole (LouCr): *ameriken* "an American (FEM or MASC)," *endyen/zendyen* "an American (FEM or MASC)," *blon* "a white (FEM or MASC)," *koupèr dekon* "cane cutter (FEM or MASC)."⁹ Whereas in French it is possible to express gender by means of the determiner, the creole determiner *-la* is gender neutral. "In Creole [=Guadeloupe Creole (GuaCr)] there is no masculine or feminine gender; 'le' (masc.) et 'la' (fem.) are always expressed by 'la' (det.) after the noun: *machami-la* 'la marchande = the (female) merchant' et *van-la* 'le vent = the wind'" (Pouillet & Telchid 1990:1) [Editors' translation]. In creoles, the lack of overt morphological gender marking on the noun itself as well as on other word classes leads to ambiguities which can only be resolved from the context. However, in all French creoles, natural gender can be indicated either by certain lexicalized items with inherent gender or by the semantically transparent compounding of a gender-neutral noun with a gender-marked lexical item. Exceptionally and only in some creoles, gender can be expressed by means of certain nominal and adjectival suffixes. Note, however, that the range of natural gender expression by inflectional or lexical means varies from creole to creole. Thus, overt gender marking and agreement phenomena are much more frequent in LouCr and Reunion Creole (ReuCr) which, due to their specific history and sociolinguistic situation, are closer to French than the so-called 'deep' creoles like Haitian Creole (HaiCr). One can furthermore assume that for some creoles, the introduction of a written form will have consequences for gender marking, a problem that cannot be dealt with in this article.

2.1 Inherently gender-marked terms

In all French creoles, the labelling of natural gender is confined to a couple of basic antonymic pairs. Gender distinction is obligatory when referring to

⁸ The data are taken from various sources: Guadeloupe Creole: Bernabé (1983, 1994), Ludwig (1996), Louisiana Creole: Neumann (1985); Haitian Creole: Valdman (1978), DeGraff (2001); Seychelles Creole: Bollée (1977), Corne (1977); Reunion Creole: Chaudenson (1974). Spelling that varies from source to source presents an important problem. I decided to keep the spelling in those cases where few diacritics are involved; in the case of complicated, phonetically oriented spellings, Louisiana Creole data are written according to Valdman, Klingler, Mar-shall, and Rottet (1998), Haitian Creole according to Valdman (1996).

⁹ Cf. Valdman (1978:151): "But the differentiation of a feminine form and a masculine form for nouns and adjectives is exceptional in Creole. In cases in which two distinct forms are available, the masculine form often serves as the undifferentiated one" [Editors' translation]. I will not deal here with the question of whether these nouns are mostly interpreted as referring to male referents solely due to the higher prominence of men as opposed to women in social life (cf. Migge 2001).

members of the family, since most kinship terms or address forms are inherently specified for referential gender. The following examples are mostly taken from LouCr but they are also attested in other French creoles although there may be slight differences as to pronunciation and morphophonemic shape: *nòm-fam* "man-woman," *frè-sè* "brother-sister," *garson-fiy* "boy-girl," *neve-nyes* "nephew-niece," *kouzen-kouzin* "male cousin-female cousin," *gron-papa-gron-momon* "grandfather-grandmother," *misje-madam* "mister-madam," *nonk-tont* "uncle-aunt," *paren-marenn* "father-mother" etc.¹⁰ Professional titles exist in every creole whose predominant association is with either female or male referents (for example HaiCr *bòn* "maid" and *kizinyèz* "cook" for female referents; *jeran* "custodian" and *ougan* "voodoo priest" for male referents; Frétere 1974:92f.).¹¹ Additionally, most French creoles differentiate higher animals as to natural gender: *bef-yach* "bull-cow," *kòk-poul* "rooster-hen," *matou-chat* "tomcat-female cat." Again these examples are taken from LouCr, but they are found in other French creoles as well.¹²

2.2 Expression of gender by suffixation

Although inflectional or morphological marking was not transferred to pidgins and creoles, most French creoles have preserved a certain amount of productive and systematic morphological marking of natural gender, especially by means of the suffixes *-èz* and *-ès* (cf. Valdman 1978:150).¹³ It is essential, in this instance, to differentiate between (a) lexicalized items and (b) genuine products of word formation. While the former have equivalents in French, having been transferred as such from the base language, the latter are genuine creole neologisms.

With respect to the lexicalized items, again many of the following items from LouCr are well documented in several French creoles¹⁴: *dansèr-dansèz* "dancer," *trètèr-trètèz* "folk healer," *nèg-negrès* "black person," *mèt-mètès* "teacher," and terms of nationality like *frouse-froussèz* "French." Furthermore,

¹⁰ Cf. Frétere (1974:90ff.) for HaiCr, Chaudenson (1974:351-352) for ReuCr and Ludwig, Montbrand, Pouillet, and Telchid (1990) for GuaCr, to name just three other sources.

¹¹ Cf. Fatiter (1998b:627-628) for the HaiCr lexem *koutriyèz* "tailor (FEM)" (French *couturier*) which is probably an archaism.

¹² For Seychelles Creole Corne remarks: "While the contrast *kok* 'rooster' vs *pul* 'hen' (...) occurs in basilectal SC, such pairs as *seval* 'horse' vs. *zima* 'mare' (...) seem to be due to French influence" (1977:23).

¹³ As to the distribution of the different suffixes, Pouillet and Telchid (1990:4) note: "In Creole, though the feminine is infrequent, it nevertheless exists in some rare cases. It is then marked by *èz*: *branbrannèz* ('who likes to wear trinkets'), *dousinèz* ('cuddly, tender'), *èskandalez* ('scandalous'), *soutirèz* ('[female] pimp') or by *is*: *sèlibatris* ('single, unmarried'). There are no rules governing the use of *èz* or *is*: it is through usage that one comes to know these feminine forms" [Editors' translation] (1990:143).

¹⁴ Note that it is not my aim here to investigate the exact derivation process of the respective pairs of words.

cording to Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux (personal communication), *on profèsè-fann* "a woman professor" is much more likely than *on profèsè-nom* "a man professor." This strategy for overt gender marking is commonly employed in contexts in which the sex of the referent is under discussion or plays an important role in the context. If the referents (and their sex) are known to the interlocutors or if the referent's sex is irrelevant, overt gender marking is generally omitted.

As for nouns referring to animals, all French creoles form gender-specified nouns by combining *mal* "male, man" and *femel* "female, woman" with a non gender-specified noun. Apparently this strategy is mainly used with (higher?) animals (cf. Chaudenson 1974:797). In such nominal compounds the gender-modifying noun precedes the main noun: HaiCr: *mal bourik-femèl bourik* "male donkey-female donkey" (Frèrère 1974:90); *mal chèn-femèl chèn* "male dog-female dog" (Frèrère 1974:91); GuaCr: *mal-béf-fimèl bèf* "bull-cow" (Pouillet & Telchid 1990:162); ReuCr: *mal kabri-femel kabri* "billy goat-goat" (Chaudenson 1974:352). In order to indicate natural gender in animals, French creoles also make use of the lexemes *maman* "mother" (or, less frequent, *mer* "mother") and *papa* "father." Note, however, that *femel* and *maman/mer* are not really synonyms; while *femel* is the general term, *maman/mer* are used for animals that have already given birth (Fattier 1998b:751-752).²⁰

With respect to the origin of these constructions, substrate influence cannot be completely excluded, since this strategy to indicate the sex of the animate noun is frequent in West African languages (cf. Boretzky 1983:85-86; Holm 2000:119-120). However, in French the juxtaposition of a gender-marked noun and a gender-unmarked noun also exists; thus, convergence seems to be a plausible explanation (cf. Chaudenson 1974:797).²¹

2.4 Gender marking on adjectives

Since the majority of adjectives are morphologically invariant, there is no gender agreement with adjectives (Caid-Capron 1996:168; Holm 2000:216). As with nouns, however, gender distinctions on adjectives have been preserved for most French creoles in a couple of frequently used adjectives referring to nouns with the marker [+animate]. Thus, Bernabé (1994:38) cites *fou-fol* "crazy" and *soutirè-soutirèz* "extortorner" for GuaCr; for ReuCr, Chaudenson (1974:366) discusses *gra-grad* "big," *lur/lurd* "heavy," and *sèk-sès* "dry," which are exclusively used in fixed expressions ([lò lu-rd] "muddy water" or

most creoles have some feminine forms in *-in*: *koken-kokin* "thief" (LouCr), *kadjèn-kadjin* "Cajun" (LouCr), *kaf-kajfin* "Kaffir" (ReuCr), *fouben-foubim* "care-free" (HaiCr). As for the derived forms, Haitian words like *wan-gatè/wangatèz* "man/woman who believes in and/or makes magical fetishes" (DeGraff 2001), *koinèsèz* "business woman" (Fattier 1998b:628), *kabalèz* "chatty woman" (*ibid.*:135), *abitèz* "female occupant" (*ibid.*:524) or Martinique Creole (MarCr) *kenbousèz* "female sorcerer" (Valdman 1978:150) are neologisms and thus genuine derivations. According to Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux (personal communication), the suffix *-èz* may have a pejorative connotation with certain nouns: *ou byen doktèz*, *Mamzèl* "You act like you're smart, young lady, but you aren't!"¹⁵

Two points seem to be of special interest in this context. First, in French creoles the suffix *-èz* can only mark biological, not grammatical, gender.¹⁶ As in French, personal nouns ending in *-èz* can be derived from objects or activities: GuaCr: *branbrannèz* "someone who wears kitschy things" (< *branbrann* "knick-knacks"), *kankannèz* "gossipy woman" (< *kankan* "gossip"), *boujèz* "fickle woman" (< *boujé* "move, leave") (Ludwig 1996:192-193). Second, according to Ludwig (1996:194), Fattier (1998b:596), and DeGraff (2001), examples such as *wangatè-wangatèz* and *branbrannèz* prove that gender marking is productive in HaiCr and GuaCr. "The last pair [...] *wangatè/wangatèz*, is one of the Haitianisms that testify to the productivity of HC gender marking: the stem *wanga* is etymologically Bantu, from Kikongo [...] and the inflected suffix *-èz* is etymologically French" (DeGraff 2001:74).¹⁷

2.3 Formation of gender-marked nouns by composition

In some French Creoles, gender-neutral personal nouns may be marked for sex of the referent by compounding them with a gender-marked lexical item.¹⁸ Thus, in Seychelles Creole (SeyCr) and the Antillean creoles, there is the possibility to mark the feminine by combining a noun [+animate, +human] with the item *fam* [-male] for the sake of clarity: SeyCr: *ban aviatèr fam* "women pilots" (Corne 1977:28).¹⁹ The masculine is usually unmarked. Ac-

¹⁵ Hazaël-Massieux also commented that examples such as *chanèlè/chanèz* or *kinbwazè/kinbwazèz* are not frequent in GuaCr.

¹⁶ Cf. Ludwig (1996:192).

¹⁷ For DeGraff, these examples also prove that creoles have morphology. In HaiCr, "the obligatory/optional marking of gender is related to both the semantic class of the predicate head and the structure of the predicate projection: *Maman m se youn Ayisyèn/Ayisyen* 'my mother is a Haitian woman,' *Maman m se Ayisyèn/Ayisyen* 'my mother is Haitian'" (DeGraff 2001:74).

¹⁸ In French creoles, the ability to form gender-marked personal nouns from non-personal ones doesn't seem to exist. In Ndjuka, for example, words like *sèlman* "trader" (< to sell) or *kolo-kuman* "a lucky person" (< koloku "luck") are frequent (cf. Migge 2001).

¹⁹ The construction *ban aviatèr zom* "men pilots" (cf. Corne 1977:28) does not exist in SeyCr (Annegrët Bollée, personal communication).

²⁰ Moreover, *maman/papa* are used as augmentatives, thus *maman-béf* means "a big cow." Migge (2001) attests to the same structure for Ndjuka.

²¹ A comparable differentiation exists in English, where pronominal elements can occur with [+animate] referents: *he-bear*, *she-bear*, *boy-friend*, *girl-friend*. This is a strategy that is also frequent in various African languages (cf. Vogel 1996:147).

the toponym [la ravin sès] "dry ravine". For SeyCr, Corne (1977:23) and Bollée (1977:33) quote *fu-fol* "crazy," *ere-erez* "happy," and *vje-vje* "old."²²

In those creoles which have always been in close contact with their base language such as LouCr, the frequency of gender agreement with adjectives is much higher. Note that agreement is also made with animate as well as with inanimate referents: *em bonn metres* "a-FEM good-FEM school teacher-FEM" (Neumann 1985:108), *la fun-laba-la li vye* [lit. the woman there she old-FEM] "that woman is old" (Neumann 1985:143), *em gros vye rob nwar* [lit. a-FEM big-FEM old-FEM dress-FEM black] "a big, old, black dress" (Neumann 1985:144), *em ti mezon* "a-FEM small-FEM house-FEM" (Neumann 1985:143). Moreover, in Louisiana the frequency with which gender agreement is made varies from speaker to speaker and from region to region: "Basilectal varieties of LC [LouCr], for example, that are spoken by many blacks in Pointe Coupée do not show any gender distinction. All specifiers occur in a single grammatically undifferentiated form" (Valdman & Klingler 1997:116).

2.5 Gender marking on pronouns

In basilectal French creoles, gender is not indicated on personal pronouns: *li/i* 'he, she,' *ye* or *zot* 'they.' In the Atlantic creoles, however, natural gender can exceptionally be expressed on the pronominal level if the reference is not unambiguous. Thus, in GuaCr and MarCr, the nouns *manzel/madam-misyé* 'lady-man/gentleman' can—although only sporadically—replace *i* 'he, she' in order to emphasize natural gender if the referent is [+animate], without conveying a pejorative connotation to the sentence (Bernabé 1994:36). An example is provided in (1). In accordance with the animacy hierarchy, these items mostly refer to human beings, although (higher?) animals can be referred to. As for the plural, the forms *sé misyé* 'those men (or gentlemen)' and *sé manzèl* 'those young ladies' can replace the plural pronoun *yo* 'they' in GuaCr (Bernabé 1983:909), as in the example (2).

- (1) *Pyè vini, misyé di mwèn bonjou.*
"Pierre has come, he said good day to me." (Bernabé 1994:36)
- (2) *Sé misyé ka matébis.*
"They are playing hockey [from school]." (Bernabé 1983:908)

The use of *madam/misyé* 'lady/man' as (quasi-) pronouns is also observed in HaiCr. On this matter, Fattier (1996:229) notes:

Pronouns do not vary in gender. This is not a problem for the 1st and 2nd persons, whose sexual identities are visible. For the 3rd person, on the other hand, it is more

problematic: Creole uses special lexical morphemes (*misyé/misyé* pl. and *madam < monsieur, madame*) that replace or regularly alternate with 3rd person or other noun phrases (with [+human or humanized] referents). These markers make it possible to specify the sex when the situational or textual referent is unrecoverable or unstated, or to personalize the dialogue when the referent is included in the speech situation, probably by deference."²³ [Editors' translation]

Interestingly, Bernabé (1994:39-40) also lists two examples, shown in (3) and (4), in which *manzel* and *misyé* refer to inanimate objects in GuaCr, which, however, should not be interpreted as a sign of the introduction of grammatical gender into creole, but rather as cases of anthropomorphism (1994:39).

- (3) *Lapòt-la tonbé anlè pyé mwèn, manzèl fè mwèn mal toubanman.*
"The door fell on my foot. It really hurt me badly."
- (4) *Mato-a konyen lanmen mwèn, man té anvifouté misyé an razyé.*
"I hit my hand with the hammer, I feel like flinging it away."

Bernabé (1994:40-41) adds:

In fact, the features [+male] and [+female] involved here are nothing more than an expression on the semantic level of grammatical (syntactic) features that come from the respective traits of the French words *marteau* 'hammer' and *porte* 'door', that is [+masculine] and [+feminine]. Here we have a completely atypical example of feature transfer (from French to Creole, from syntactic category to semantic category). This phenomenon was made possible only through the contact of the two languages within the same linguistic ecosystem.... [Editors' translations]

According to Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux (personal communication) and Michel DeGraff (personal communication), this use of *misyé* and *manzel/madam* to refer to inanimates is extremely rare in everyday speech in Guadeloupe and Martinique, as well as in Haiti, and is usually restricted to humorous or fairy-tale contexts.

Although the above-mentioned constructions with *misyé/madam/manzel* (especially those that refer to [+animate] nouns) are interesting from a typological point of view, their marginality does not permit the assumption that they could eventually become some sort of dynamic starting point for a gender system as it is found in English, where grammatical gender does not exist but where natural gender is signaled by pronouns.²⁴

In mesolectal LouCr, speakers differentiate between *li* 'he' and *el* 'she' in the singular if the referent is [+animate] to make the sex difference quite clear

²³ According to Michel DeGraff (personal communication), *madam/misyé* can be used for all sorts of proper names with animate referents in HaiCr, including names with non-French origins.

²⁴ A possible grammaticalization of the items mentioned would of course imply specific phonetic and semantic processes. Note in this context that, according to Greenberg (1963), gender systems could very well have their origins in the pronominal system.

²² According to Bollée (1977:33), these forms are a marker of the "refined creole."

and sex difference, the "minimal building blocks that gender systems are made of" (Dahl 2000b:577). Although the basic and historically oldest criterion for noun classification is animacy (Dahl 2000b:590), the major criterion, however, for attributing animate nouns to different genders in creoles as well as in other languages is sex.²⁸ Trudgill (1999:138) notes that "[i]t is much less surprising that human languages have gender distinctions for human beings than that they have grammatical gender, since the distinction between male and female is the most fundamental one there is between human beings." According to Dahl (2000a:101), "in any gender system, there is a general semantically-based principle for assigning gender to animate nouns and noun phrases", but the domain of this principle "may be cut off at different points of the animacy hierarchy: between humans and animals, between higher and lower animals, or between animals and inanimates." In creoles, the cut-off point seems to be between humans and everything else. If gender is morphologically assigned at all, it will be assigned to humans and to higher animals by means of the lexical and affixal strategies mentioned above.

Without any doubt, grammatical gender was the big loser in the complex process of restructuring nominal morphology that took place during creolization (cf. Trudgill 1999). As a matter of fact, this category has never existed in creole languages and the very few signs of residues of grammatical gender in the early texts do not really permit one to suppose a gradual erosion of this category.²⁹ Why has grammatical gender been given up so radically in pidgins and creoles? And why has gender not been reintroduced in those creoles that are in close contact with their base language (e.g., ReuCr or GuaCr/MarCr, which only show marginal decreolization phenomena in this respect)? The answers to these questions are complex and cannot be dealt with in detail here. However, we will address some of the relevant factors, including certain de-

²⁸ Cf. Dahl (2000a:102): "The pervasiveness of sex as gender criterion is striking. There are many possible ways of classifying animates, in particular human beings, that might be used as a basis for gender, such as social status, ethnic origin, profession, age, hair color etc., but none of them except perhaps age seems to play any important role in gender assignment. The frequency of sex-based gender distinctions to some extent hides the importance of animacy."
²⁹ As for the *Passion selon St-Jean* "Passion according to Saint John" (probably written before 1760), Hazael-Massieux (1996:195-196) notes an "événement maintient d'une opposition de genre: sur vingt-cinq [sic] attestations de déterminant indéfini, vingt-six sont la forme 'on', deux la forme 'one' et sept 'oune'" ("a possible maintenance of a gender opposition: out of 35 attestations of the indefinite determiner, 26 have the form 'on', 2 'one', and 7 'oune'" [Editors' translation]) whereby *on* always precedes French masculine nouns. As for the definite article, he observes for several early texts "the disappearance of a significant number of verbal markings of definite or indefinite determination" [Editors' translation] (189), the consequence being the destruction of the system of determination marking of French [Editors' translation] (191). Cf. also Fattier (1998a:263) who confirms that there was no gender differentiation on the 3sg pronoun in the text of Ducreux from 1802: *li* "he/she," *yo* "they," and no gender marking in nouns (Fattier 1994:59).

(Neumann 1985:170). Given the fact that these forms did not exist in the historical texts, one can certainly attribute these examples to decreolization.

2.6 Gender agreement on determiners

The French definite article has not survived in French creoles except as an agglutinated article, the definite determiner in most French creoles being postposed *-la*. Only ReuCr and mesolectal LouCr have pronominal determiners that can be compared to the French system. In LouCr, the use of the preposed articles *l*, *le* [lə] "the-MASC" and *la* "the-FEM" as well as the distinction between masculine and feminine forms with respect to the indefinite and possessive determiner (*en* "a-MASC," *mon* "my-MASC," etc.; *em* "a-FEM," *ma* "my-FEM," etc.²⁵) is definitely due to decreolization (cf. Neumann 1985:107-112): *la fly* "the-FEM daughter," *l kouto* "the-MASC knife," *la bom vyon de kochon* [lit. the good-FEM meat-FEM of pig] "good pork" (Neumann 1985:144); *em gramm fom* "a-FEM great-FEM hunger," *em gros char* "a-FEM big-FEM car-FEM house" (Neumann 1985:138), *en gro bal* "a-MASC big-MASC ball," *ma mezon* "my-FEM house" (Neumann 1985:128). Note that the use of gender-marked forms is unsystematic and that basilectal gender-unmarked forms coexist with the gender-marked equivalents.

To a large degree, ReuCr has preserved the French determiners *le* [lə] and *la*: *le bug* "the guy, the man," *la lin* "the moon" (Chaudenson 1974:355ff). With respect to the indefinite article, the use of the forms [e] and [ən] does not seem to follow strict rules.²⁶ A brief look at maps 57 (*Une petite pluie fine* [lit. "a small rain fine"], 121 (*Une bosse* "a hump, a bump"), and 122 (*Une ampoule* "a blister") of the linguistic atlas of Reunion (Carayol, Chaudenson, & Barat 1984) testifies to the high amount of linguistic variation: We find the same speaker using the masculine and the feminine determiner randomly with the same noun, or different speakers using different articles with the same lexical item.²⁷

3. Gender—a loser category

This overview of gender-marking in the French creoles has revealed that all these languages have only elementary gender distinctions based on animacy

²⁵ In LouCr *èn* [ən] is rare among basilectal speakers, *em* [ən] being the unmarked form for both genders.

²⁶ According to Chaudenson (1974:357), the distribution of these forms "does not correspond to that of [le] and [la], which is generally determined by those of the former definite articles of French" [Editors' translation]. According to the same author the possessive is not gender-marked in ReuCr (1974:360). The form *ma* "my-FEM" only appears in fixed expressions as in, for example, the exclamation *ma fly* "my daughter" (cf. also Bollée 1977:42).

²⁷ Pterozak (in press) emphasizes the sociolinguistically determined variation with respect to the use of gender-marked forms in ReuCr. A detailed analysis of the linguistic atlas of Reunion will certainly help to better understand the functioning of gender-marking in this creole.

- (7) *le* *gros* *maison* *à* *Cecil*
 the-MASC big-MASC house-FEM POSS Cecil
 "Cecil's big house" (Stäbler 1995:181)³²

In Cajun as well as in Acadian French, the indefinite article is frequently not gender-marked. This is particularly true before nouns beginning with a vowel.³³ Additionally, a certain uncertainty as to the choice of the correct article is seen in these two varieties: *le chose-là* "the-MASC thing-FEM there" (Stäbler 1995:41), *la office* "the-FEM office-MASC" (Stäbler 1995:180); *le machine* "the-MASC machine-FEM" (Wiesmath 2000:163), *le poêle* "the-MASC frying pan-FEM" (Wiesmath 2000:65); moreover, gender confusion is seen in *un/une arbre* "the tree" (Wiesmath 2000:13) and *une/un serpent* "a snake" (Wiesmath 2000:34, 35).

As far as the personal pronouns are concerned, gender distinction in Cajun is highly endangered. In the singular, *il* "he" and *al* "she" are often replaced by indefinite *ça* "that"; in the plural, the gender distinction has already been lost. Specifically, the equivalents of French *ils/elles* "they-MASC/they-FEM" are replaced *ils* "they," *eux-autres* "those," *eusse* "those," or *ça* "that," with the latter two becoming more and more frequent. Some examples are given in (8)-(10).

- (8) *C'est sa-vieille soeur qui cuit.* *Ça, ça parle bien français*
 it's her older sister that cooks. that, that speaks well French
comme nous-aut.
 like us
 "It's her older sister who cooks. She, she speaks French well, like us." (Smith 1994:201)
- (9) *Mon neveu ça veut s'acheter un lit Toyota*
 my nephew that wants to buy himself a little truck, a Toyota
 "My nephew, he wants to buy himself a little truck, a Toyota." (Smith 1994:49).

³² Cf. Bollée and Neumann-Holzschuh (1998:183). For St. Barths French/St. Thomas French cf. Corne (1999:138).
³³ Cf. for Acadian French Péronnet (1989:40) and for Cajun French Conwell and Juillard (1963:130).

velopments in the base languages themselves, peculiarities of the language acquisition process in plantation societies, and, above all, functional considerations.

In his discussion of gender in ReuCr, Chaudenson (1974:350) underlines that spoken French exhibits several signs of gender weakening and he justifiably asks, "If we take spoken French as our reference point, is the distance between French and Creole so large?" (Editors' translation.) (cf. also Bollée 1977:35). It is a well known fact that, due to a series of sound changes, the gender system is less transparent in spoken than in written French.³⁰ As for popular French, although the gender opposition is still rather strong, there are signs of neutralization. Feminine plural nouns can be replaced by the masculine plural pronoun *ils*, as in *ils sont où les fleurs?* [lit. they-MASC are where the flowers-FEM] "where are the flowers?"; in the plural *ils* "they-MASC" and *elles* "they-FEM" can be replaced by gender neutral *ça* "that" or *eux-autres* "those"; the 3sg pronouns *il* "he" and *elle* "she" are often pronounced [I] before a vowel; and predicative adjectives tend to be invariable (Gadet 1992:58-59;63-64). In the so-called marginal varieties of French (*français marginaux*) like Cajun or Acadian French (Chaudenson, Mougeon, & Bentiak 1993), this evolution is even further advanced, although grammatical gender is still strong. If one accepts the hypothesis that the *français marginaux* allow one to draw certain conclusions about the language of the settlers,³¹ one can possibly assume a reasonable amount of linguistic uncertainty as to gender assignment as well as first signs of category reduction. In Cajun, for example, agreement of adjectives is frequently lacking, as shown in the examples (5)-(7).

- (5) *sa* *mère* *était* *mort*
 3SG-POSS-FEM mother was dead-MASC
 "His/her mother was dead." (Stäbler 1995:42)
- (6) *elle* *est* *froïd*
 she is cold-MASC
 "She's cold." (Stäbler 1995:153)

³⁰ French orthography preserves clues about gender which are lost in the spoken language." (Corbett 1991:58). Cf. also Tucker, Lambert, and Rigault (1977), Härmä (2000), and Dubois (1965:65).

³¹ Cf. Remarks in Chaudenson et al. (1993:44) on the French of the overseas diasporas (D1: Acadia, Quebec, Lesser Antilles, Bourbon etc.; D2: Missouri, New England, Ontario, The West of Canada, Louisiana): "These D1 varieties, cut off from the French of France and subject to little 'normative pressure,' thus provide evidence of features that have survived from earlier stages of the language. The D2 varieties, insofar as they are linked to migratory movements having taken place during the initial stages of French colonization, and insofar as they established themselves in contexts where normative pressure was virtually absent [...], are doubtless even more 'archaic' than the D1 varieties and make it possible to add even greater time depth to research on French spoken during the colonial period" [Editors' translation].

- (10) *Quand eux-autres sont comme dans le village de Houma,*
 when they are like in the town of Houma
 ... *eux-autres assaye de parler français et si la personne*
 they attempt to speak French and if the person
qu' eusse après parler [à] les comprends pas, là ça
 who they talk to them understand NEG, there that
va parler en anglais
 is going to speak in English

"When they are like in the town of Houma, they attempt to speak French, and if the person who they talk to doesn't understand them, then they start to speak in English." (Rottet 1995:237)

Of course, these examples should not be overinterpreted. That slaves obviously came into contact with grammatical gender in the acquisition process can be shown by the numerous nouns having a fossilized article as part of the word (e.g., *lo* "water" < Fr. *l'eau* "the water"). Apparently, slaves were unable to understand the function of the proposed articles because they didn't have anything comparable in their native languages, which have a complex noun class system instead of a gender system (see note 8 and Hurskainen 2000). French articles were thus reinterpreted as part of the nouns (cf. Detges 2000).³⁴

More important, however, seems to be the fact that grammatical gender-marking is largely unnecessary for human communication. Grammatical gender affixes do not mark any real-world entity, they are devoid of semantic substance, and do not serve any communicative need.³⁵ Compared to other categories such as case, number, tense, aspect, or person, grammatical gender is a relatively marginal category, whose function is "to a considerable extent obscure" (Trudgill 1999:138). Since languages can very well do without special syntactic means that help with reference tracking,³⁶ Trudgill (1999) and McWhorter (2001) classify grammatical gender marking as one of those linguistic phenomena that have an explanation but no function and that form part

³⁴ It is questionable whether noun classes can be established phonologically, basing them on the reanalyzed forms containing articles. As in many other French creoles, different groups of nouns can be distinguished in LouCr, depending on whether one of the articles has been reanalyzed as part of the word and, if so which one: *di-* in *disik* "sugar" (< French *du sucre* "some sugar"), *l-* in *lide* "idea" (< French *l'idée* "the idea"), *n-* in *nom* "man" (< French *un homme* "the man"), *z* in *zozo* "bird" (< French *les oiseaux* "the birds") (cf. Neumann 1985:150ff). Apart from Mauc'r and SeyCr, the number of nouns containing a reanalyzed article is rather small in most French creoles.

³⁵ Frei (1929/1971:73) already considered gender to be "a largely useless category from a semantic perspective" [Editors' translation].

³⁶ Gender is by no means a universal category, cf. Corbett (1991) and McWhorter (2002:4): "This kind of marking is obviously not specified by Universal Grammar, something made clear by the fact that so many of the world's languages lack it: it is merely the fossilized remainder of diachronic drift. As such, it is ornamental to a natural language."

of the unnecessary historical baggage most 'older' languages still have.³⁷ From a different perspective, the superfluosity of gender for communication is also stated by Leiss (2000:242). This author even doubts that gender can be characterized as a grammatical category at all, because contrary to number or case, it does not permit selection of a paradigm: "In German and other Indo-European languages today, gender is an opaque leftover category which may well indeed exhibit only a leftover function, namely, that of producing grammatical agreement."

Given the low functional load of grammatical gender it is not surprising that in language-learning processes there is a clear acquisition order: number > case > gender. Wegener shows for German that number markers are acquired first, then the markers for case, and finally gender markers: "The difficult and slow acquisition of gender thus proves ex negativo that children search for functions for the forms and, failing to discover them, they have difficulty in learning meaningless elements" (Wegener 2000:538). Similar observations have been made as to the acquisition of French as a first and second language (Clark 1985:705-707; Véronique 1994). It is also not surprising that in the reverse process—language death—gender is among the first to be given up. Since dying languages undergo a certain number of evolutionary processes which are also characteristic of pidginization and creolization, they tend to simplify complex morphophonemic paradigms and aim at a maximum amount of semantic transparency (cf. Dorian 1989; Neumann-Holzschuh 2000a; Sasse 1992).

Against this background, gender loss in creoles can be convincingly explained as a phenomenon caused by the interplay of cognitive and functional as well as acquisitional factors. In comparison with 'older' languages that continue to drag along with them a certain amount of historical baggage, creoles indeed display less complexity having given up a lot of their morphological and syntactical encumbrances (cf. McWhorter 2001).³⁸ Since grammatical gender is one of the least important categories for coding and communicating knowledge, its abandonment was complete. This is in opposition to natural

³⁷ Borrowing a term coined by Lass (1997:13), they consider grammatical gender-marking (analytical or affixal) as an example of 'linguistic male nipples': "They are phenomena which, as biologists would say, have an explanation but no function. Whether or not it is clear why such grammaticalization processes take place, it is clear that their motivation is not originally to divide nouns into agreement classes, or to aid with reference-tracking or disambiguation" (Trudgill 1999:149).

³⁸ I do not believe, however, that (at least French) creoles arose from ground zero. McWhorter (2001:155) states "Creole languages are unique in having emerged under conditions which occasioned the especial circumstance of stripping away virtually all of a language's complexity [...], such that the complexity emerging in a creole is arising essentially from ground zero, rather than alongside the results of tens of thousands of years of other accretions. As such, creoles tend strongly to encompass a lesser degree of complexity than any older grammar." This hypothesis is also strongly refuted by DeGraff (2001).

gender, whose preservation certainly has to do with semantic transparency and the anthropologically determined wish to distinguish between male and female.³⁹

4. *Gender and number in French Creoles*

Finally, I would like to refer briefly to an aspect of the recent gender debate which, as regards creole languages, is admittedly rather speculative. Recent diachronic research on gender emphasizes the relationship between the categories of number and gender in its hypothesis that the original function of gender was the perspectivation of plurality.⁴⁰ Whereas number has always marked the distinction between singular and plural, feminine gender was frequently used to express the collective plural and thus supplied a different perspective on a multitude of entities (Unterbeck 2000:xxxii).⁴¹ Be that as it may, it is taken for granted that number is the primary, underlying category and gender is the category built 'on the shoulders' of number (Corbett 2001; Leiss 1994, 2000; Unterbeck 2000: xxxiv). As Leiss (1994:288) notes:

If a language has the category of gender, it always has the category of number (Universal No. 36 in Greenberg 1963:95). But the reverse does not necessarily hold. The rule therefore says that the existence of the category of number implies the category of gender. Thus gender presupposes the category of number. Gender needs the category of number, so to speak, in order to develop. This indeed hints at an affinity in contents between the grammatical meanings of the categories of gender and number. But it is still unclear what these grammatical meanings are (translation by Unterbeck 2000:xxxii).

Where, however, is the link to creoles? First of all, the creole data seem to confirm this hierarchy: All creole languages have number but not all of them have gender. Although plural marking, which is marked by free morphemes in

³⁹ Within the renewed discussion on whether creolization necessarily presupposes pidginization and thus a fundamental process of reduction of the overt grammatical apparatus (cf. McWhorter 2001, 2002), gender might illustrate that the 'syntax-internal conception' which stresses the gradual evolution of creole grammar complements the pidginization-based framework. Gender was indeed one of the most prominent victims of the restructuring process which led to the creation of creole languages, although it was certainly already a weakened category in the spoken French of the settlers. Moreover, what is important in this connection is that the restructuring process in the individual creole languages took place at completely different speeds and even affected the individual grammatical categories with different degrees of thoroughness (cf. Neumann-Holzschuh 2000b).

⁴⁰ Cf. Leiss (1994:293): "The function of the gender category consisted in making available different possibilities of perspective in relation to a variety of elements" [Editors' translation].

⁴¹ Although "we are still some way from understanding how gender systems arise" (Corbett 1991:310), the fact that gender originally had something to do with the view on plurality could be a clue (Leiss 1994, 2000).

French creoles,⁴² does not follow the same rules as in French, the singular/plural distinction (which is not made if plurality is clear from the context) must be made under certain conditions: "In general, the plural marker is used only when the noun of a noun phrase has a specific reference; when it was previously mentioned in speech, when it has a deictic reference, etc." [Editors' translation] (Vaidman 1978:199). Indefinite and non-specified nouns are not generally marked for plurality in French creoles.⁴³ However, in some creoles, at least, there are signs that the category number is gaining ground in the sense that plural markers are also used when the referent is non-specific (Bollée 2000; Neumann 1985). The second link seems to be animacy, one of the major criteria for noun-classification (Dahl 2000a:100): In earlier stages, the pluralizer was most frequently used with animate nouns, although there have always been exceptions (Bollée 2000; Holm 2000:215). The third point is more problematic. Apparently at one stage in the evolution of creoles, number markers had something to do with the perspectivation of plurality. Whereas abstract and mass nouns express a collective plural and usually appear without a pluralizer in all creoles, count nouns ('individuaiva') form a distributive plural with the aid of a plural marker (providing they have the marker [+specific]).⁴⁴ Apart from some fairly recent developments,⁴⁵ number in creole languages seems to function in a similar way to gender in early Indo-European. Mass nouns and count nouns are distinguished by means of the respective number markers, the same basic bipartite distinction which was decisive for gender assignment in early Indo-European languages (Weber 2000:505).

To postulate that creoles will eventually establish a gender system once number has become a more solidly established grammatical category would certainly be daring and would have to be classified as linguistic speculation. As Trudgill and Corbett show, there are quite a number of languages which can do perfectly well without grammatical gender because it is more or less affunctional. What could eventually happen, however, is a gradual expansion of natural gender marking, which is widespread in French creoles and is even expressed by inflectional means. So far, however, items like *misyé* "sir" and *manzel* "madam" in Antillean creoles are far from being grammaticalized and gender agreement on adjectives and determiners are predominantly signs of decreolization. However, if sex is indeed so pervasive as a gender criterion, it

⁴² Creole nouns are not inflected to indicate number, although some creole words contain fossilized remnants of plural inflections from their base languages.

⁴³ Cf. also Holm (2000:216) and Alleyne (1996:148ff) for a diachronically oriented analysis of the different realizations of plural marking in French creoles.

⁴⁴ Sometimes the plural marker appears with mass nouns, in which cases the noun is no longer interpreted as collective or generic but as [+countable] (cf. Bollée 2000).

⁴⁵ There are signs that the category number is gaining ground in the sense that the respective markers *bann*, *-ye*, or *se* are also used if the referent is non-specific (cf. Bollée 2000; Neumann 1985).

may not be completely out of the question that one day natural gender marking in French creoles will also be made on pronouns.

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