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Creole onomastics

Names and naming in and for creole languages

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This article examines naming practices in creole languages and in scholarly discourse, addressing names in and for creole languages. It asks what constitutes a ‘creole name’, how the input languages affect and shape creole onomastics, and when *creole* serves as a glossonym and when as a class noun for a group of languages. Drawing on examples from diverse creoles, the overview shows that while many names originate from superstrate sources, they often undergo phonological and semantic changes. The discussion of glossonyms highlights how language names operate beyond identification, serving as instruments for categorization and identity construction reflecting both sociohistorical and present conditions. Naming emerges as a constitutive act that shapes linguistic conceptualization. Recognizing this performative dimension is essential for understanding processes of language making and for interrogating assumptions embedded in creole studies.

Keywords: creole onomastics, language making, ideology, classification

1. Introduction

This special issue brings together researchers confronted with the practical and ideological consequences of naming practices. We examine naming practices both in the field of creole studies as well as naming practices in use by the creole speakers themselves. While there is a rich research tradition in onomastics, including in contact linguistics (Sandnes 2016), and a certain body of research for glossonyms in general (e.g. Cysouw & Good 2013; Ainiala & Östman 2017), not much work has addressed the names and labels in use within creole studies, and clearly not enough has been done to address the practices of naming within creole-speaking societies (for exceptions, see e.g. Léglise & Migge 2006; Migge & Léglise 2013, 2015; Krämer et al. 2022b). Although the debate concerning the

nature and definitions of the terms *pidgin* and *creole* constitutes a foundational undertaking within creole studies (e.g. Jourdan 1991), an overview of central concepts in creole onomastics is still lacking. Even less discussion has revolved around how the labels we as linguists choose fare with and compare with those in use and/or preferred by the speakers, or which effects naming practices have beyond mere labelling. While this article and the four contributions in this special issue mainly discuss naming practices *for* pidgins and creoles, it is necessary to broaden the scope to include onomastics *in* pidgins and creoles in general.

Creolistics has only occasionally touched upon this branch of linguistics. A number of significant works are available on the toponymy of territories where creoles or pidgins are spoken, mostly providing case studies of individual territories (see Section 2.1 for an overview of the literature). Other dimensions of onomastics such as person names or product and brand names have barely been explored. This article will therefore offer a brief overview of the main questions surrounding the use and significance of creoles and pidgins in onomastics.¹ Two umbrella questions will guide the reflections: What is a creole name, and what is the role of the input languages in creole onomastics? Contrasts and overlaps in creole names with their superstrate counterparts will play an important part, but we will also discuss the role of substrate languages. We will subsequently address questions of glossonyms and metalinguistic terminology following another question which also guides the remaining articles in this volume: Is *creole* a glossonym or a class noun for a group of languages, when is it capitalized, and may practices be changing? This article discusses the two main dimensions: names and naming *in* creole languages on the one hand, and names and naming *for* creole languages on the other. As far as autoglossonyms are concerned, these two dimensions will of course overlap.

The introduction is structured as follows. Section 2 addresses established onomastic categories and their relevance to creolistics. It begins with creole toponyms, where research is more developed, and then examines other name types, such as person names, brand names, and group names, with a dedicated subchapter on substrate influence. Section 3 examines glossonyms and labels for creole languages in both linguistic scholarship and speech communities, grounding the discussion in the concept of naming as an act of language making. The concluding section synthesizes the findings.

1. This article primarily focuses on creoles, with most references directed toward them, but pidgins remain subject to similar considerations.

2. Onomastics and creole languages

Proper nouns differ from other nouns in that they fulfil another denotative and communicative function: their purpose is to individualize (Nyström 2016: 41). The selection of entities that bear sufficient importance to be individualized through naming strategies is highly dependent on social and cultural context (Völkel 2023). Ideally, the referent of a name is exactly one entity in the extralinguistic world, while other nouns can and often do refer to multiple (concrete or abstract) entities with common properties. In practice, however, these categorizations often are not as clear-cut as they first appear. This already becomes apparent in the slightly differing references of *creole/créole* in English and French. Societies in which creoles and pidgins are used obviously present the starkest examples that illustrate such overlaps and conflicts in reference.

In the first part of this introductory article, we will concentrate on geographical names or *toponyms*, names for groups of people known as *ethnonyms* and *demonyms*, and personal names or *anthroponyms* to discuss selected questions that are relevant for creole studies. In doing so, we will inevitably touch upon the realities of colonialism and upon post- or decolonial thought. Since creole languages emerged out of colonization, creole onomastics is necessarily interwoven with (de/post)colonial linguistics: ‘The right of naming is the linguistic dimension of the right of appropriation’ (Calvet 1974: 57). We will therefore not only need to look into the structural properties of creole names but also connect them with the functions and effects of naming practices in colonial and postcolonial societies, in line with socio-onomastic research.

2.1 Toponyms

Toponyms in creole-speaking societies have been the subject of several individual studies, such as the ones on Jamaica (Higman & Hudson 2009), Mauritius (Carpooran 2005; Bosquet 2021), Pitcairn Island (Nash 2016), Norfolk Island (Nash 2021), Pitcairn and Norfolk (Mühlhäusler & Nash 2016; Nash 2018), São Tomé and Príncipe (Balduino et al. 2021), the ABC Islands or Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao (Ahrens & Embleton 1987) and Cavite in the Philippines (Lesho & Sippola 2018). Herling (2018, 2025) provides an analysis of French colonial toponyms, including creole-speaking societies such as Haiti, Martinique, and Seychelles. Notter (2018) attempts a quantitative and comparative study of toponyms in the Western Indian Ocean. These works address structural properties of toponyms, the semantics behind naming motives, but also their social and historical dimensions.

Most pidgins and creoles emerged and are used in territories with a colonial past. Colonial claims and control over a place or space was commonly exerted through naming practices: colonial powers made ample use of toponyms to mark political and cultural dominance (Calvet 1974; Stolz & Warnke 2018). This includes the use of colonial languages for the transformation of existing indigenous toponyms or, more frequently, new creations of toponyms in colonized spaces. Naming strategies in creole-speaking areas frequently follow patterns identified in other colonized spaces (cf. Stolz et al. 2016). They draw on the general lexicon of colonial languages both for geo-classifiers and other elements combined with them (e.g. *Grande Anse* ‘big bay’, *Blue Mountains* in several former French or British colonies), or on a transfer of existing toponyms and person names, either from the colonial center or the colonized area (e.g. *Alkmaar*, *Groningen* or *Wageningen*, three Dutch cities of the Netherlands, in Suriname; and *Victoria* and *Mahé* in Seychelles named after Queen Victoria and the colonial administrator Bertrand-François Mahé de La Bourdonnais; or *Seychelles* itself, derived from the name of French politician and government official Jean Moreau de Séchelles). In areas where the colonial powers had strong links with Catholicism, names of saints offered a particularly prolific reservoir for place names (see e.g. the vast majority of toponyms around the coast of Réunion; San Basilio de Palenque;² or names of the Caribbean islands such as Sint Maarten, Saint Lucia, etc.). In these contexts, specific questions arise from the proximity between creoles or pidgins and their European input languages: Is a French or English toponym the same as a toponym in the local French-based or English-based creole? Are they translations of each other?

Creoles exhibit broad variation regarding the embedding of proper nouns such as toponyms in syntactic structures as compared to common nouns, as Nintemann & Hober (2023) and Nash (2018) have shown. There is no clear-cut syntactic pattern for toponym use exclusive to or generalized across creole languages, but significant differences can be observed between creoles and their lexifiers with regard to the internal formation of toponyms. Toponyms bear rich potential into informing us about language specific mechanisms that may otherwise go unnoticed (more generally, see Schlücker & Ackermann 2017 on the morphosyntax of proper names).

Superficially, it may be true that the largest part of the lexicon in creoles derives from the superstrate, but this puts us on a slippery slope. Supposing a direct continuity from the superstrate lexicon to the creole may lead us to presume that a place has exactly *one* toponym in which the lexical, etymological, and semantic values remain the same between the creole and the lexifier. This is

2. Previously Palenque de la Matuna, named after San Basilio in the early 18th century.

not necessarily the case. Research on colonial toponymy has frequently operated with cases where borrowing seems to be a transparent process because there is a clear-cut difference between linguistic systems. Underscoring the relevance of toponomastics for contact linguistics, Stolz & Warnke (2016: 35) raise the question of borrowing in multilingual place-naming as follows:

If speakers of language A use an item of language B to refer to a geographic entity in the sphere of the speech-community of A, the B-toponym clearly is a loanword in the lexicon of A-speakers. If the B-toponym coexists with an older or younger A-toponym, we are dealing with toponymic synonymy which might be exploited by the A-speakers for stylistic or other purposes.

Yet, many creole-speaking societies can be classified as geographic entities in the sphere of both speech communities, that is, a creole and its superstrate are used alongside each other. With the productive systemic openness between the lexicon of many creoles and their lexifiers, both diachronic and synchronic, it is far more difficult to determine whether a toponym can be classified as ‘borrowed’ than examples with a clear distinction between a lexicon A and a lexicon B suggests. Even if the lexical material of a name is identical in a creole language and its base language, differences can be salient on a phonological or morphosyntactic level. To name but one example, the Haitian capital *Pòtoprens* is a monomorphemic form derived from the French N+PREP.DET+N syntagma *Port-au-Prince* (literal translation in Eng. ‘port-of-the-prince’). Syntactic and etymological transparency of the name can be more reduced in the creole form compared to the French etymon. In such cases, it is plausible to argue that these places, while initially having been named in French, have gained an additional creole toponym that can be clearly distinguished from the etymological form, showing a case of toponymic synonymy. For Mauritius, Bosquet (2021: 6) therefore observes an attribution depending on mediality:

Toutefois, si le créole, sous sa forme écrite, est absent de la toponymie officielle et de la signalétique, cette langue se manifeste ailleurs dans l’activité toponymique. D’abord, dans l’usage oral des toponymes, qui sont créolisés du fait de la pratique majoritaire de cette langue au quotidien. Ceci résulte, en synchronie, de l’existence de deux systèmes toponymiques: l’un en français, à l’écrit, et un autre en créole, à l’oral.

‘However, although the Creole in its written form is absent from official place naming and signage, the language appears elsewhere in toponymic activity. First, in the oral use of place names, which are creolized due to the widespread daily use of the language. This results, synchronically, in the existence of two toponymic systems: one in French, in writing, and another in Creole, in speech.’

Where toponyms are represented in the written creole language, spelling can also mark a contrast. For instance, the municipality of *Sainte-Rose* in Guadeloupe is shown as *Sentwòz* on town signs, clearly indicating R-rounding in Guadeloupean Creole as distinct from French.

It is rare, however, that officially recognized placenames would have been coined in the creole language first and subsequently transferred into the superstrate language, or that at present, exclusively a creole name is in use. Examples include *Brokopondo* in Suriname or *Cas Grandi* in Curaçao; Migge (2023:349–350) describes several cases from French Guiana such as the *Baka lycée* neighborhood in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni with a name coined in the community and subsequently used in official naming, including maps. The gradual endonymization of superstrate-based official names seems to be the general rule, while direct creole endonyms that receive official recognition remain the exception. As Nash (2021) observes in Norfolk Island, naming practices and the attribution of a name to the colonial standard language or the local vernacular operate mainly based on a distinction between official and unofficial place names. The dichotomy between the spoken and the written language is another theme that onomastic study may highlight.

Wherever structural contrasts with the lexifier are available on a phonological, grammatical, lexical or orthographic level, creole toponyms can signal an additional local connection directly related to the names themselves. Across former colonies and creole-speaking territories, especially those which were colonized by the same European powers, identical toponyms frequently occur. The widespread practice of naming places after saints is a common source of multiple toponyms. Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, and Réunion all feature places named *Saint Joseph*. While the original French name allows no distinction unless the country or territory is openly specified, the creole form can indeed produce contrasts. For instance, the common fronting of post-alveolar fricatives in Réunionnais can render *Joseph* as *Zozef* in contrast to Caribbean French-based creoles which retain [ʒ]. Conversely, R-rounding in *Sentwòz* helps distinguish the Guadeloupean municipality from *Sainte Rose* in Réunion with its uvular R. Creole phonology or spelling, then, can restore the individualizing function of names in cases where it was at first reduced due to redundant colonial naming practices.

While contrasting features, spelling systems or the juxtaposition of two road signs may suggest a direct binary separation between a creole name and its superstrate equivalent, the attribution of a toponym to either linguistic system can often be difficult. As is frequent in continuum situations, a given form may simultaneously exhibit acrolectal and basilectal characteristics, or display differences between creole and lexifier only in specific contexts. For example, the agglutination of the determiner with the noun in French-based creoles shows some dis-

inctions in country names but still exhibits other creole features different from French. In Martinican Creole, France is mostly called *Lafrans*, except in locative constructions where *an Frans* is preferred. On the other hand, the name for ‘Morocco’ follows Martinican Creole phonology and is called *Mawok* but does not agglutinate the article and constructs locatives as *o Mawok* parallel to French ‘au Maroc’ (Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis 2018: 24). Similarly, Belearnt-Schiller (1991: 98–99) discusses the ambiguities of determiner use in Barbuda: NPs without determiner such as *Seashore*, *Canal* or *Woods* may either indicate the individualizing name-ness of English proper nouns that refer to specific places, or they may be interpreted as a creole-like structure with its frequent use of a zero determiner before common nouns and proper nouns alike.

In basilectal Réunion Creole, the name of *Sainte Suzanne* would be realized [sizan] with unrounding of the [y] in the French etymon. Yet, the front rounded vowel is frequently used in slightly mesolectalized speech that will otherwise still be considered as Réunion Creole. In such a case, it is difficult to interpret the pronunciation [syzan] as a mere ‘borrowing’ from French into Creole. The morphosyntactic properties of French toponyms may often closely resemble those of a creole language syntagma, for example in direct compounding where prepositional constructions would be possible or even preferred in French, e.g. *Anse Capucins* and *Anse Intendance* in Seychelles. As Carpooran (2005: 44) points out, such names seem French based on their spelling, but their classification is less straightforward once we consider their grammatical structure. Bosquet (2021: 22) therefore concludes:

Il s’agit, pour nous, d’un processus d’« interlectalisation » des toponymes. Il nous paraît possible de voir en ces toponymes des formes métissées qui se situent dans une zone interlectale entre le français et le créole avec un caractère hybride alliant une syntaxe se rapprochant de celle du créole et une forme graphique se rapprochant de celle du français. Ces noms de lieux ne sont, en ce sens, ni créoles ni français mais à la fois créoles et français.

‘This, for us, is a process of “interlectalization” of place names. It seems possible to view these toponyms as mixed forms that exist in an interlectal zone between French and Creole, with a hybrid character combining a syntax that resembles Creole and a graphic form that resembles French. In this sense, these place names are neither Creole nor French, but both Creole and French at once.’

Speakers in the same community or society may not necessarily agree on their representations of a place with either two separate names, one creole and one superstrate-derived, or with one single toponym that can appear through varying surface structures. In 2010, public debates were sparked by the addition of the Creole version *Sin Dni* to the town signs of Saint Denis, the regional capital of

Réunion: some saw it as a long-awaited visible recognition of the bilingual reality in the city, some criticized the choice of spelling as unfamiliar or alienating, others judged the addition unnecessary altogether. From a historical perspective, new place names were introduced in the Philippines with the emancipation in the beginning of the 20th century, especially in the Cavite region (Lesho & Sippola 2018). For example, the Chabacano-speaking town of Barra (de Maragondon) changed its official name to Ternate, referring to the island of Ternate in the current Maluku islands, where the original Creole-speaking population of the town was said to originate from (Sippola 2011).

As these last examples illustrate, toponyms in postcolonial societies are sensitive to public debate and carry strong political and historical meaning. Renaming places can therefore be an important and sometimes contested gesture of decolonization, especially when an alternative with a different etymology from a non-colonial language is available. The choice for *Haiti* instead of *Saint-Domingue* after independence is a case in point, as is the occasional use of *Karukera* for Guadeloupe in local commercial names or advertisements (see Stolz & Warnke 2016 for a broader discussion of renaming initiatives in postcolonial settings). For many places in creole-speaking societies, no indigenous or pre-colonial toponyms are available. Some territories were uninhabited prior to colonization and settlements founded only during colonization (e.g. the Mascarene Islands). In other territories, indigenous toponyms were not well recorded after the rapid decimation of the local population (e.g. in some islands of the Caribbean).³ In such cases, the structural contrast between creoles and their superstrates often constitutes the only possibility to mark a toponym as local, rather than accepting continued dependence on the colonial language in place-making. Written forms such as those appearing on road signs are important visible manifestations of decolonial place-naming. Currently, creole toponyms rarely appear in maps since the superstrate version of place names is usually the official one. In grassroots and community-based mapping initiatives, however, awareness for the relevance of creole toponyms is growing, especially when the creole language is officially recognized. For example, based on the official status of the respective languages, OpenStreetMap labels Haiti as *Ayiti*, Seychelles as *Sesel*, or Papua New Guinea as *Papua Niugini*.

So far, research about creole toponyms almost exclusively investigates place names in the territories where the creole language itself is mainly spoken. As the example of *Morocco* mentioned above illustrates, additional questions may arise

3. Examples from the Caribbean islands are discussed by Gužauskytė (2014); however, contrasting evidence of indigenous toponyms is provided by Prescod (2022) and van Buurt (2014: 41–46).

as to the form and use of creole exonyms for places situated outside the original creole-speaking place: to what extent are these exonyms conventionalized or coined spontaneously, and according to which patterns? For instance, the Mauritian Creole Dictionary by Baker & Hookoomsing (1987) lists a significant number of larger countries such as *Larabi Sawdit* (Saudi-Arabia), *Lasin* (China) or *Litali* (Italy), establishing these names as part of the fixed creole lexicon, but it rarely incorporates other toponyms such as names of cities or bodies of water outside of Mauritius. Again, categories can be fuzzy as to the status of a name as an exonym: overseas territories such as Martinique or Réunion are politically part of France, but the European part of the country is frequently labelled as *France* and perceived as a distant 'outside' space as opposed to the local 'inside' space of the island. Whether or not *Lafrans* in Martinican Creole is an exonym depends largely on an individual speaker's spatial and political perspective or the communicative context. Similarly, Haitian Creole names of places in the US or Canada used by local diaspora speakers may be considered endonyms since they are labelled by speakers of a language that is permanently present in the place itself.

2.2 Person names, commercial names, and group names

Although numerous studies have examined place names in creole-speaking societies, research on other categories of names remains comparatively scarce. Most of the observations related to toponyms also apply to person names in a creole-speaking setting, with one difference: persons have a certain level of agency about the use of their names. It must be noted, though, that increasing agency with procedures such as legal name changes is a very recent phenomenon. Especially in colonial settings where officially registered names were often chosen by the colonizer, agency in naming was sharply reduced for the person concerned or the parents of a child (Burnard 2001). Of course, this did and does not exclude the possibility to use entirely different naming systems and names, not chosen by the colonizer and not officially registered, for in-group interaction. Price & Price (1972) describe the highly productive processes of person naming in Saramaccan with multi-layered social functions, varying levels of intimacy or politeness, and multiple changes across an individual's lifespan.

A functional and communicative division persists today in many creole-speaking societies. For instance, the officially registered name of a person may be in English or French with the common spelling in the superstrate and used mainly in written documents or formal communication. A creolized version of the same name, or one or several alternative names in creole are more common for oral, informal, and in-group communication (Price & Price 1972:354–359;

Bosquet 2021: 6). Again, a continuum can yield intermediate forms that combine more and less creole-like features, resulting in nicknames such as *Ti Marie* ‘little Marie’ with a French Creole adjective added to phonologically underspecified name; such patterns can be observed in various societies where French-lexified or other creoles are used. As with place names, an adapted spelling can be a strategy to resist normative hegemony and to creolize a written name where no lexical, phonological or grammatical features allow for differentiation. For instance, the singer Daniel Hoareau from Réunion goes by the stage name Danyèl Waro. More generally speaking, artist names are a prolific field of self-naming for which it is common to choose creole features in line with the significant link between music or literature and local or national identity.

The use of creole forms for brand names and other commercial names fulfils a similar function (see Sjöblom 2016 for a typology of commercial names). Products or businesses that want to signal a particular attachment to the local or national context may choose the language that is specific to the society, rather than a supranational or global resource such as English or French. For instance, microbreweries with a strong community attachment chose names such as *Zil Kreol* ‘creole islands’, in Seychelles, or *Ewo* ‘hero’, in Haiti, which are recognizably creole due to features such as the agglutinated article or rounded rhotics. The Réunionnais clothes and accessoire line *L'effet péi* directly refers to its local embedding with a name that alludes to the phrase *lé fé péi* ‘it’s locally made’. Brand names such as these not only contribute to the reaffirmation of local or national identities, but they also reinforce the commodification of creole languages, increase their economic value and their visibility:

La langue créole est donc devenue un signal hautement différenciateur pour la marque locale, et peut également favoriser des réactions « ethnocentriques » de consommation chez les Réunionnais. En effet, elle tend à induire une forme de complicité naturelle plus ou moins forte entre l’individu et le produit à vendre.

‘The Creole language has therefore become a highly distinctive feature for local brands, and can also encourage “ethnocentric” consumer behavior among Réunion residents. Indeed, it tends to create a natural bond of varying strength between the individual and the product being sold.’ (Cally 2009:70)

The individualizing and identity-forming function of names also applies to the labelling, and thereby the delimitation, of groups of people based on social, cultural, ethnohistorical, geographic or political alignments. Yet, given the fact that group names refer to a potentially large number of individuals and therefore share a collective of referents, their semantic properties or communicative functions overlap with those of class nouns (Koopman 2016: 251–252). Their ‘nameness’ mainly rests upon their function of individualizing a collective that is perceived

to display internal cohesion. A name can then manifest an identity specific for an in-group that sets it apart from an out-group. Most frequently, group names are derivations of other names, including toponyms as a basis for names for the inhabitants of a place or a country (*demonyms*) or for ethnocultural groups with ancestry outside the given territory (*ethnonyms*, e.g. *Malbar* in Réunion for descendants of indentured labourers from the Malabar coast in Southern India, or *Mardicas* in the Philippines for descendants of a group of free men from the Moluccas). The relevance of creoles and their links or differences with the superstrate then correspond to that of the toponymic basis. For instance, the matter of whether *Seselwa* and *Seychellois* are two different names based on differing phonology or spelling, depends on the same mechanisms as the difference between *Seychelles* and *Sesel*.

However, the issue whether Seychelles Creole *-wa* fully corresponds to the French derivational suffix *-ois* with the same morphological productivity and transparency adds another layer to the discussion. Just like toponyms, group names and person names not only undergo phonological and semantic transformations in situations of language contact, but they also acquire different grammatical properties. As the grammar of noun phrases differs between creoles and their lexifiers in many respects, so does the grammar of proper names, for instance in terms of rules for determination and pluralization. In Réunion Creole, the plural marker *bann* can be placed before a person name to refer to the person's entire family, but also before a place name to refer to the inhabitants of a place or country, e.g. *bann Zoze* 'Joseph and his family/people', *bann Sin Dni* 'the people from Saint Denis', *bann Langleter* 'the English' (Staudacher-Valliamée 2011: 58).

Toponyms, glossonyms, and group names such as ethnonyms show significant overlap with each other. Depending on the society in question, the term *creole* and its cognates can refer to various social groups, based on ancestry, physical appearance, and/or linguistic repertoire. Conversely, toponym-derived names themselves refer not only to inhabitants of a place or country, but also to their language. *Sranan* as a name for Suriname and its demographically dominant creole language is a case in point. With advancing processes of nation-building in postcolonial states, the ideological link between national and linguistic identity leads to situations where names for a country, its inhabitants and the local creole language increasingly conflate (e.g. *Kabuverdianu* for the people and language of Cape Verde).

2.3 Creole onomastics and substrate languages

It may seem unsurprising that the superstrate dominates the lexical material used for naming practices. Since naming is a concomitant process of categorizing,

ordering and also of hierarchizing, names in creole-speaking societies reflect colonial power relations. Hence, colonial naming strategies often impede or overwrite grassroots and bottom-up naming in creole or indigenous languages (even literally so, as far as written records or maps are concerned, cf. Nash 2021: 230).

This is not to say, however, that substrate or adstrate influence is entirely absent in creole naming, nor that naming practices inherited from non-European original cultures disappeared entirely. In particular, Maroon communities ensured a certain level of substrate continuity in various types of names. In the interior of Réunion, Malagasy-based place names such as *Cilaos* and *Salazie* underwent phonological restructuring and can therefore be seen as substrate-derived, yet clearly creolized toponyms. Akan and other West African day names (i.e. person names given according to the weekday of a child's birth) remained in use throughout the colonial period in the greater Caribbean, e.g. in Jamaica or Suriname, especially among Maroons (Farquharson 2012; Hollington 2015: 188–194). In traditions of creole oral literatures, many widespread figures such as *Anansi* or *Bouki* have substrate-based names. Again, these names are not necessarily unchanged borrowings from their respective source languages, but they exhibit structural and semantic shifts in language contact. One such phenomenon is the imagined figure of *Bouki* in creole folk tales as a buck, especially in French-Creole cultures, due to the phonological similarity with Fr. *bouc*. The name of *Soungoula* in Seychelles folklore is derived from Swahili *sungura* 'rabbit, hare' and has known semantic bleaching to refer to a generic trickster figure, often also represented as a monkey, or a part-human figure (Choppy 2022: 216–220; von Sicard 2022: 65–66). For day names, Farquharson (2012: 160–161) stresses that 'none of the systems found in West Africa fits the Jamaican system (or any American system for that matter) perfectly'. Hollington (2015: 192) points out that 'in Jamaica, the day names underwent semantic changes and acquired negative connotations due to racial stereotyping during slavery and colonialism'. It is therefore hard to claim that these person names or names for fictional figures are exactly the same in the creole and in the original substrate languages if their semantics and connotations, their phonology and grammatical properties differ.

Whether creole names derive from the superstrate or the substrate, they can exhibit transformations on all levels of the linguistic system, in their social significance and their usage while still maintaining important links to their sources. The initial question, 'What is a creole name?', is therefore relevant independently from the source language.

2.4 From toponyms and person names to linguistic entities

Ultimately, the systemic openness between creoles and their lexifiers, especially when both are commonly used in the same society, raises the question as to what constitutes a ‘different’ or ‘identical’ name based on etymology, phonological form, semantic content, connotational value etc., the same way it remains impossible to draw clear-cut boundaries between individual languages as distinct units. Similarly, the question of toponyms mirrors the question of linguistic imposition and appropriation in (post)colonial settings. Just as colonial languages were imposed upon a colonized population that did not initially use them, colonial toponyms in the European superstrate can first be seen as exonyms since they are introduced by a community outside the territory and not (yet) commonly used locally. However, just as the colonized or their descendants may make a colonial language their own, they may adopt the colonial place name and gradually turn it into an endonym. This can happen parallel to the appropriation of the colonial language, but also via creolization: the creole language is often a strong marker of local or national identity and of decolonial contrast with the former colonizer while still carrying the history of colonization in its existence, and the same can be said for the creole endonyms for places.

Rather than as dialects of their lexifiers, creoles are to be considered linguistic systems or communicative resources that can be distinguished from the dominant colonial languages, and the recognition of this distinction is of great importance to the speech communities. It is plausible, then, to transfer this distinction upon the question of names and to assume that creole names are onomastic items separate from their superstrate counterparts, rather than mere variants of the same item (cf. Lefebvre 1998; Levisen et al. 2017). The separation between linguistic entities rests primarily upon their social value, political dynamics and thus ultimately upon extralinguistic significance and not only on structural contrast. The same is true for creole names: their classification as distinct is a decision based on social context that does not emerge inevitably from intralinguistic structure. It is contingent on the construction of categories and delimitations between linguistic entities, or processes of language making, further explored in the following subchapter.

3. Naming as language making

Naming constitutes a significant element of language making, that is, ‘conscious or unconscious human processes in which imagined linguistic units are constructed and perceived as a language, a dialect or a variety’ (Krämer et al. 2022b: 3). This

also creates the impression of clear-cut bounded entities, which again may clash with the perceived borders seen by others. Naming practices thus may interact with or contradict the realities of continuum situations. For instance, where creolists or speakers assign labels such as ‘Creole’ and ‘French’, and conceptualize these as two entities, the actual speaking practices are much more fluid between the two. While outsiders may use naming strategies to impose new orders, for example, in colonial contexts (Calvet 1974; Makoni & Pennycook 2005: 141–144), by naming the languages they speak, speakers also make sense of the multilingual realities they live in, creating order themselves. As pidgins and creoles emerge out of highly multilingual settings and are usually used in such settings, they demand processes of *ordering and bordering* by naming. These are particularly relevant in connection with emancipation and decolonization: names can certainly serve as an instrument to mark difference and independence of creole languages (and societies) from the colonial languages (and societies).

3.1 Construction of categories, groups and social meanings

The attribution of labels in linguistic contexts can be broadly divided into two categories, when creating a principled way for looking at the naming practices. The first deals with the categories, types or kinds of languages, such as *creoles* and *pidgins*. These are used to classify varieties into larger typological or sociohistorical groups. The second consists of the names for individual language varieties. These labels serve a descriptive, identifying function. Both categories reflect ideological, social, and metalinguistic dimensions.

Labels such as *creole* and *pidgin* are used to categorize languages that have emerged under specific sociohistorical conditions, as Klimenkowa shows in her article in this issue when discussing the origins of the Portuguese (and Portuguese contact varieties’) term *crioulo* ‘creole’ and its equivalents in other languages. However, the definitions and representations of these terms vary significantly between linguists and laypersons. By the 1960’s, *pidgin* and *creole* were fixed categories in the field of language contact (Selbach 2020). Linguists frequently define *creoles* as fully developed languages that arise from the nativization of a pidgin or from contact-induced language change (Bartens 2013), while *pidgins* are seen as simplified contact languages with limited functions and no native speakers (Parkvall & Bakker 2013; Velupillai 2015: 14–15). Further complexity arises with subcategories such as *pidgincreoles*, *creoloids*, *semi-creoles* or *restructured varieties*, which attempt to capture intermediate or atypical cases (cf. Bakker 2008 and the contributions in Neumann-Holzschuh & Schneider 2001). In contrast, speakers within communities may use these terms quite differently, often influenced by local ideologies, historical narratives, and sociopolitical contexts. These dis-

tinctions, while meaningful in academic discourse, may not resonate with non-specialists or community members, who might instead use alternative labels like *dialect* or *patois* (see Bakker's paper in this volume). Such terms carry distinct connotations, often shaped by colonial histories and power dynamics, and may reflect either stigmatization or cultural pride depending on context.

The naming of specific language varieties (i.e. *glossonyms*) also reveals tensions between linguistic and community perspectives. Speakers may use names to assert unity or distinction among varieties. For instance, *Papiamentu/o* is generally regarded as a single language across the ABC islands, reinforcing a sense of linguistic and cultural cohesion, or the Chabacano varieties are referred to as sister varieties, stressing their common Hispanic ancestry in specific ideological contexts. Conversely, the Lesser Antillean French Creoles are often labeled according to island-specific identities and territorial discontinuity (*créole guadeloupéen, créole martiniquais, créole dominiquais*), despite their high mutual intelligibility. These naming practices reflect sociolinguistic boundaries and identity constructions more than linguistic divergence.

The question of capitalization for terms such as *creole/Creole* and *pidgin/Pidgin* in English highlights their potential 'nameness' (cf. also Levisen *this volume*). For example, this journal traditionally instructs its authors in the old set of guidelines to use lowercase for 'creole' when referring to creoles in general and to capitalize it when referring to a specific creole, i.e. a glossonym. These glossonyms are typically accompanied by a topographical or other descriptive element, and in many cases, the glossonyms for languages we classify as creoles do not incorporate the word 'Creole' (cf. Bakker *this volume*). Similarly on a superficial level, in French, *le créole* with a definite article typically refers to an individual language the same way *le français* or *l'anglais* does. However, oftentimes the referent does not single out the creole or even creoles referred to: its referent may encompass one particular creole language in contrast to *français*, or even a larger group of languages with comparable properties, such as, perhaps, French Caribbean creoles, without making this referent explicit. The relative 'nameness' of the word, however, is visible from the potential and often the necessity to specify *le créole* with an adjective such as *réunionnais* or *haïtien*. We noted the necessity of this in particular when translating the French quotations into English. What is simply *le créole* in the French original cannot be translated into English 'the Creole' without raising a question as to the specificity of the referent. The status of *créole* seems to occupy an intermediate zone that may in its referent go beyond a specific creole language, 'Creole [X]', but stop short of a reference to 'creole', with the generic meaning of 'the set of languages defined as creoles'. Here, we have both an interplay between emic and etic functions of *créole*, as well as in the translation of academic discourse from one enlanguaged tradition to the next: The subtle dif-

ference that is induced by the language specific rules of punctuation indicate a different level of generic-ness of *creole/Creole* and *créole/le créole* in English and French, revealing different sets of classification in the scientific traditions. Is *le créole*, seemingly defined in a dialectic relationship with *français*, then, by nature something lying on a continuum with French? The usage seems to suggest this. On the other hand, English usage suggests rather the opposite trend. Here, there are only two extremes: a specific language, such as Haitian Creole, or a generic term for a group of contact languages, *creoles*, classified by linguists as a well-defined (though much debated) abstract entity or concept.

The overlap between typological labels and glossonyms points to a broader metalinguistic phenomenon: the use of language names not merely to identify individual entities but to construct categories, groups, and social meanings. In this framework, a term like *creole* can function both as a proper name and as a class noun, or even something in between, depending on context.

This multiple role underscores the importance of examining how linguistic labels operate within and beyond academic discourse, shaping perceptions of language, identity, and legitimacy. When attempting to gain a better understanding of the multiple roles of labels and names, creole onomastics shares the methodological challenges of other postcolonial and multilingual settings: Research in these contexts needs to go beyond the mere collection or quantitative pattern analysis of names and pay closer attention to the varying dynamics of meaning-making with names and labels. This may include the need to abandon the search for the one seemingly ‘neutral’ or ‘correct’ name. It is necessary to acknowledge the fact that various labels can be in use simultaneously, with changing connotations and degrees of acceptance or contestation among members of a community. Empirical research with a historical approach often needs to rely on data from authoritative and colonial sources that suggest static labels and overrepresent top-down naming practices, e.g. maps, church records or population registers. More ethnographic engagement is needed to contrast and complement these data with emic perspectives so that more of the heterogeneity in naming practices can be acknowledged, including in scientific publications which may represent the dynamics through the use of varying terms within the same text instead of eclipsing variation with an artificially homogenous terminology.

3.2 Naming as an ideological tool

It is significant that *naming* can refer to two different yet related processes, namely the act of giving a name to an entity and the act of using a name to refer to a (constructed) entity (Völkel 2023: 159–160). Naming and labeling linguistic varieties are not neutral acts; they entail the emergence and confirmation of concepts,

categories, and seemingly bounded entities. In this sense, naming functions as a dimension of language making, shaping how languages are perceived, classified, and socially situated. In multilingual settings, and particularly in those in which creole languages have developed, naming serves as a mechanism for speakers to make sense of their linguistic environment. The act of naming imposes a form of *order* on complex and fluid linguistic realities. This need for order is not to be seen exclusively as a later development of local entrenchment going hand in hand with creolization; pidgin speakers needed to orient themselves, too. As Nash points out, ‘Being able to talk about space is paramount in a fledgling language where livelihood is sought and is dependent and contingent on the ability to manage, know, and work with the environment’ (Nash 2016: 5).

As pidgins and creoles typically arise and function within highly multilingual contexts, the process of naming them often triggers dynamics of *ordering and bordering*, delineating linguistic boundaries that may not be so clear-cut in practice (cf. Melchor’s paper *this volume*). This process acquires particular significance in contexts of emancipation and decolonization, including in postcolonial nation-building when the glossonym directly and exclusively refers to the country where it is used and additional classifiers like *Creole* are dropped, e.g. *Kabuverdianu*, *Morisien* or *Jamaican* (Krämer et al. 2022a). Here, naming becomes a political and ideological tool: it marks difference from, and independence of, creole languages vis-à-vis the colonial languages. The assignment of distinct names to creoles (glossonyms) and the spaces they inhabit (toponyms) can thus serve as a declaration of linguistic and cultural autonomy.

However, this raises critical questions about the extent to which naming allows for variation and fluidity. In continuum situations, where linguistic practices span a range of forms and registers, the imposition of discrete labels such as *Creole [X]* and *French* may contradict the lived realities of speakers. These labels suggest distinct entities, yet actual usage often reflects a spectrum of variation that resists such binary classification.

One key area of inquiry concerns the interaction between *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) labels. How do the names and classifications used by community members align with or diverge from those employed by linguists and other external observers? This tension is particularly evident in multilingual contexts, where different groups of speakers and scholars may assign different meanings and values to the same linguistic entity. Relatedly, the coexistence of alternative labels within a single community raises questions about synonymy and connotation (cf. Bartens 2002 on Palenquero). For example, in Jamaica, the terms *Jamaican Creole* and *Patois* may both refer to the same linguistic practices, yet they carry distinct social and ideological weight. Are these labels interchangeable, or do they reflect different conceptualizations of language, identity, and legitimacy? If Haitians call

their language *Kreyòl* and neighboring Bahamians call Haitian Creole ‘Creole’ (but refer to their own language as *Bahamian dialect*), is this the same name for the same language or not? These examples show that studies of meaning-making and functions of glossonyms are needed, both today and in historical contexts, if we want to understand the dynamics of language contact from a sociolinguistic perspective.

The origins of labels, whether they emerge organically or are deliberately constructed, also influence their reception and impact. Politically motivated naming, such as the official recognition of a language variety or of the location where it is spoken, can serve strategic purposes but may not always resonate with speakers. Furthermore, the language in which labels are formulated matters. Names derived from colonial languages or global academic English may carry historical baggage or reflect external authority. For example, the case of the Philippine Spanish creoles shows how different names and functions co-exist according to the users: the linguists use Philippine Creole Spanish or Philippine Spanish Creole(s) or Chabacano, to highlight the connection between the varieties. Individual varieties are referred to both with their English names (e.g. Cavite, Zamboanga and Ternate Chabacano) and Spanish names (e.g. *caviteño*, *zamboangueno*, *ternateño*). Some of the latter are in use by the communities as autoglossonyms (*Caviteño*, *Zamboangueno*), while also local names are used as autoglossonyms ([*platiká di*] *Bahra* ‘[speech of] Ternate’). The success of such labels depends on their perceived authenticity, relevance, and alignment with community values. This raises the question of whether speakers are aware of the etymology of these labels, and whether there are efforts to decolonize naming practices. In some contexts, there is a growing recognition of the need to reclaim linguistic terminology and assert local agency in the naming of languages.

In more applied contexts, naming practices may relate to social realities, for example, when creoles are connected with tourism promotion and the construction of an island identity (Mühlhäusler & Nash 2016; Krämer & von Sicard 2020) or to material production in the education sector (e.g. Sippola 2010; DeGraff & Stump 2018).

In sum, naming practices both reflect and shape sociolinguistic realities, and intersect with issues of identity, authority, and ideology. While they offer tools for identity construction and political assertion, they also risk oversimplifying the complex, dynamic nature of multilingual and multilectal communication. The act of naming invites reflection on how linguistic categories are constructed, negotiated, and contested within communities and in broader sociopolitical frameworks.

3.3 Names in the lexicon and theoretical bias

Names are a subcomponent of the lexicon; however, the exact source and nature of the lexicon in pidgins and creoles is a matter that is not settled. Despite the broad consensus typically taken for granted, ie. that the superstrate becomes the lexifier of contact languages, *how* this comes to be in creoles (and also *if*, in the case of pidgins) is still very much up for debate (e.g. Selbach 2008). The scholarly tradition of French creolistics emphasizing the historical descentance of creoles from superstrate dialects (e.g. Chaudenson 2003) largely continues to suppose a continuity in the transmission of the superstrate lexicon, among other components, whereas in the framework of relexification as advocated by Lefebvre (1998), in starkest contrast, the labeling of concepts is a process that is entirely divorced from the superstrate lexemes' original meanings and connotations. Under the latter framework, once an overlap between semantic and pragmatic features between substrate slots and superstrate lexemes has been established, it is merely the phonetic strings of the lexifier that are used to relabel concepts that were present in the substrate and are then incorporated into the creole. However, due to internal language change and the continued contact with the lexifier, meanings in the creole – just as in any other language, but further accelerated by the ongoing presence of the lexifier and widespread bilingualism – will continue to shift.

Making explicit a model of the lexicon is important. It might further aid in laying the groundwork for systematic research into onomastics, always bearing in mind the actual variability, flexibility and diversity of possible lexical derivations. How do creole languages initially acquire and then continue to (re-)establish their lexicons, by inheritance of lexemes from the superstrate, or by copying only their phonetic strings? Individual speakers and co-creators may diverge in their paths to coding meanings, not only in an historical view. What relevance does (superstrate) etymology have for the creole language, when is the term applicable, and to which speakers? How much semantic, pragmatic and metalinguistic overlap of a term is required for the successful negotiation of meaning? All of these questions must be addressed keeping in mind the historicity of creoles as languages evolving within continuously changing social circumstances, with the speakers' varying degrees of bilingualism, cultural knowledge and agency, often on a case-by-case basis. Onomastics allows us to take important further steps in observing more succinctly the different avenues to accessing and making converging yet differentiated meanings out of words.

Questions concerning the status of creole names in written versus spoken form raise further important theoretical and sociolinguistic issues (e.g. Bosquet 2021; Nash 2021; Melchor *this volume*). The question of whether orthographic

representation confers greater legitimacy than oral usage is not merely technical; it intersects with broader debates on authority, authenticity, and linguistic standardization. Writing is not a neutral medium but a powerful instrument of codification that can elevate certain forms while marginalizing others (e.g. Bartens 2022). The precedence of written norms over oral practices often reflects institutionalized hierarchies and ideologies of correctness, thereby shaping perceptions of what constitutes a ‘proper’ language (cf. Sebba 2007).

The authority exerted by the ‘infallibility of the printed word’ (Geraghty 2007: 387) is heightened to the extreme in Dictionary writing, which invests writers with added levels of responsibility (Geraghty 2007; Jourdan 2020). As discussed above, an entry in the dictionary can confer language names to some but not other languages. Generating word lists and dictionaries is not without consequence, and listing and defining words of a language, naming with proper nouns and common nouns, is not a purely objective exercise devoid of our interests (cf. Deumert & Storch 2020). What we study or not and what we name or not has social effects (Jourdan 2020).

From making broader choices about what to include in a dictionary to subtler choices in representation, such as whether capitalization is applied, can also reveal underlying theoretical assumptions. These signals add an additional dimension to the grammar of naming, which is as intriguing within creole grammar as it is in the discourse surrounding it (Mühleisen 2002). Terminological choices are far from neutral: they serve as indicators of underlying theoretical orientations and biases.

Naming (in and of) languages is deeply tied to identity construction and postcolonial power dynamics. Here in this volume, we bring together researchers approaching the topic of naming from different methodological vantage points. For Melchor (*this volume*), who stresses that imposing external names can significantly affect the self-perception and social positioning of speakers, naming constitutes an epistemological practice, whereas for Bakker (*this volume*), it is also a matter of labeling scientific categories assumed to exist a priori, harking back to the Saussurean arbitrariness of the sign. Klimentkova (*this volume*) inspects the historical evolution of the terms used both by academia and by speakers, while Levisen (*this volume*) seeks to abandon Anglocentric terminologies altogether.

Choices in terminology, whether in naming processes, categorization, or orthographic conventions, reveal implicit assumptions about language genesis, structure, and legitimacy, thereby exposing the ideological underpinnings of competing models. Interpretation and use of names and labels will always vary from person to person, speaker to speaker, and theorist to theorist. Such variability underscores the inherently situated nature of linguistic analysis: meanings must always be negotiated (Appel & Muysken 1987: 28).

This negotiation of meaning underlies the communication of all speakers, and researchers are not exempt. Terminological practices, far from being purely objective descriptors, function as epistemological markers that index the theoretical frameworks from which they emerge. In this sense, the lexicon of creole studies does not merely reflect linguistic phenomena but actively participates in shaping disciplinary discourse.

4. Conclusions

This article has examined some of the complexities of naming practices in creole languages and in scholarly discourse about them. With several examples, it has shown that defining what constitutes a 'creole name' engages fundamental questions about the mechanisms at play in language contact and creolization: 'Contact onomastics thus has to address the socio-cultural setting and the language users as well as the relevant languages' (Sandnes 2016: 541). While the lexical matter in toponyms, person names or group names may derive mainly from superstrate sources, it often undergoes structural and semantic changes, including processes that can bring the names closer to substrate patterns and semantics. We have shown how these changes are deeply connected to issues of sociohistorical and ideological nature.

Regarding the status of *creole* as a linguistic label, the intersection of typological labels and glossonyms revealed a broader metalinguistic dynamic. Language names serve not only as markers of individual entities but also as tools for constructing categories, group identities, and social meanings. Within this perspective, a term such as *creole* may function simultaneously as a proper name and as a class noun or occupy an intermediate position, depending on the context.

Naming is not a neutral or merely descriptive act: it shapes how languages are conceptualized, categorized, and positioned within social and ideological hierarchies. Recognizing this performative dimension of naming is essential for understanding the processes of language making and for interrogating the assumptions embedded in linguistic scholarship. We hope that this special issue will encourage further research on naming practices in creole languages, approached from both lexico-onomastic and sociolinguistic perspectives. Such work is crucial for deepening our understanding of the lived realities of creole-speaking communities and for illuminating the broader processes involved in language making.













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