

REVIEW

Local languages in education: the MIT-Haiti Initiative

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of the strengthening of the Black Lives Matter movement, Professor Michel DeGraff relates the struggle for human rights and social justice in Linguistics. Presenting the MIT-Haiti Initiative, he shows a creative and exportable political-linguistic project. This project uses digital tools created in Haitian Creole to promote Haitian students' access to quality education. In Haiti, where the majority of the population speaks only Haitian Creole, this local language becomes an essential tool for education. Thus, the objective of the MIT-Haiti Initiative is to promote active learning in Haitian Creole. In this initiative, language and education become key vectors in the fight against social exclusion. Therefore, the lecturer shows that Linguistics is capable of making a practical contribution to equality of opportunities and sustainable development.

RESUMO

Em meio ao fortalecimento do movimento *Black Lives Matter* (Vidas Negras Importam), o Professor Doutor Michel DeGraff relaciona a luta por direitos humanos e justiça social à Linguística. Ao apresentar a Iniciativa MIT-Haiti, o pesquisador nos mostra um projeto político-linguístico criativo e exportável para além do Haiti. Esse projeto se utiliza de ferramentas digitais em crioulo haitiano para promover o acesso dos estudantes haitianos a uma educação de qualidade. No Haiti, onde a maioria da população fala apenas crioulo haitiano, o idioma local se torna uma ferramenta essencial para a educação. Assim, o objetivo da Iniciativa MIT-Haiti é

impulsionar o aprendizado ativo em crioulo haitiano por meio da valorização da língua local. Nessa iniciativa, língua e educação se transformam em vetores-chave na luta contra a exclusão social. Logo, o conferencista evidencia que a Linguística é capaz de contribuir de forma prática para a igualdade de oportunidades e o desenvolvimento sustentável.

KEYWORDS

Linguistic diversity. Haitian Creole. MIT-Haiti Initiative.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Diversidade linguística. Crioulo Haitiano. Iniciativa MIT-Haiti.

The conference *Black Lives Will Not Matter Until our Languages also Matter: The Politics of Linguistics and Education In Post-Colonies*, delivered by Michel DeGraff, professor in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), takes place at a time in history when the Black Lives Matter movement is occupying the streets and promoting anti-racism. A spectator at DeGraff's conference may think that it was very opportune to deal with this topic at such an important moment (and indeed it is opportune!), but it is necessary to bring to attention the fact that this fight has been going on for a long time.

From DeGraff's speech there is a lot to analyze, there is a lot to benefit from, and there are many aspects to which we can pay attention in this review. Due to space limitation, we will not be able to discuss everything we would like to from this very important conference promoted at the event Abralin ao vivo - Linguists Online. Our main focus will be the inspiring project MIT-Haiti (MIT-Ayiti, in Haitian Creole), coordinated by Michel DeGraff. First, however, one cannot help but talk about DeGraff's important contribution to the decolonialization of Linguistics itself, especially in relation to the view on Creole languages.

Sooner or later, it is likely that the reader will encounter the text *Linguists' most dangerous myth: the fallacy of creole exceptionalism* by DeGraff (2005). Those who encounter this text are also expected to give due attention to it. DeGraff (2005) shows that the beliefs that Creoles are somehow an exception to other natural languages, and are opposed to non-Creoles, starts very early in the history of studies of these languages. The roots of these beliefs are found in a Eurocentric, colonial and anti-scientific view. Not only that, DeGraff (2005) shows that

despite its historical basis in colonialism and slavery and its scientific and sociological flaws, Creole Exceptionalism is still enshrined in the modern linguistics establishment and its classic literature (DEGRAFF, 2005, p. 1)

This tradition of separating Creoles from non-Creoles has its effects on Linguistics, as shown by Aboh and DeGraff (2017), but also implications for education. In turn, this practice has several

consequences on the social plane, such as the stigma created by Creole speakers themselves about their languages that makes them think that only the languages of their colonizers can be used in education. It is not uncommon for Creole speakers to make comments that demote their own languages, and DeGraff showed this at his conference. Such a scenario is the result of a tradition that has always downgraded these languages and overestimated that of the colonizers.

Thus, it is necessary to look more closely at the situation in Haiti in relation to the Creole spoken there. Adopting DeGraff's model in many of his texts, we will refer to Haitian Creole as Kreyòl and use *Creoles* for a general reference to the languages so labeled. It must also be said that, being Kreyòl Michel DeGraff's mother tongue, his efforts are concentrated in Haiti. However, the case of that country is representative of many other communities where Creoles are spoken and the initiative coordinated by Michel DeGraff, to promote education in the mother tongue, is an example to be followed.

Analyzing the political-linguistic and social context of Haiti, DeGraff points out that education has never been accessible to everyone due to socioeconomic and linguistic barriers. These barriers are linked to the fact that French, the main language used by institutions, governmental offices, and the written press, is not understood by the vast majority of the population.

Thus, while French is spoken only by a small elite of the country, Kreyòl is often excluded from the formal spheres of life in society. According to DeGraff, this social domination also extends to the school system and also makes Haitian society a case in which the classic concept of diglossia does not apply.

Classical studies on diglossia have Ferguson's (1959) research as one of its main exponents. For this theoretician, diglossia designates the existence of two linguistic varieties that coexist in a given territory and that, for historical and political reasons, have distinct, specific and non-overlapping social status and functions.

For DeGraff, the inapplicability of the concept of diglossia to his country of origin, Haiti, is justified by the number of monolingual speakers. According to DeGraff (2017), 95% of Haitians are able to understand and express themselves only in Kreyòl. These individuals, because they do not have a diglossic choice, distinguish themselves from a minority of the country capable of resorting to both French and Kreyòl.

Together with French, in the words of DeGraff, this local language became official in the country with the advent of the 1987 Constitution. This Constitution declared that Creole is "the language by which all Haitians are united". Kreyòl today has its own Academy, spelling and literature.

DeGraff argues that, in Haiti, improving the educational system requires the use of Kreyòl from primary to university level, which will expand access to quality education. Thus, through a brief analysis of the country's sociolinguistic context, he points to an initiative that aims to improve education in Haiti. Through an interactive pedagogy, as well as technologies that consider Haitian Creole, he introduces us to the MIT-Haiti Initiative.

The objective of the MIT-Haiti Initiative is to expand access to quality education and to modify the country's reality with regard to social exclusion and poor education. In order to do so, advanced

technology is used so as to develop, evaluate, and disseminate resources and learning activities in Kreyòl, and improve significantly the educational system.

The innovative character of this initiative is that it is the first time that specialists in the technological field, together with linguists, have concentrated all their efforts on the creation of this type of educational material. In this sense, DeGraff (2017) is incisive in saying that if the producers of teaching materials disregard the linguistic diversity, which includes 'local languages', such as Kreyòl, quality education will remain inaccessible to the great mass of population.

The proposal of the MIT-Haiti Initiative consists of three pillars, explained in DeGraff (2017). The first is linked to the use of the local language, in this case, Kreyòl; the second is active learning, optimized by the use of the mother tongue, capable of promoting reflection, collaboration and communication; and the third, a technology that improves learning, facilitating the understanding of complex and abstract concepts.

The MIT-Haiti Initiative is undoubtedly a model to be disseminated and implemented not only in Haiti. For when linguistic diversity and local languages receive the attention they deserve, it is possible to picture a world in which access to quality education is genuinely democratic.

Michel DeGraff's speech inspires us to reflect on the political-linguistic and social reality of Brazil, as well as on the linguistic diversity found here, when he points out to the importance of considering local languages in the education system.

According to data from the Institute for Research and Development in Linguistic Policy (IPOL), there are currently more than three hundred languages spoken in Brazil (MORELLO, 2015). Among them, indigenous languages, immigration languages, languages of Afro-Brazilian communities, the Brazilian Sign Language and Creoles.

However, despite the large number of Brazilian languages, Souza (2018) points out that, by the year 2018, out of five thousand five hundred and seventy municipalities, only sixteen, belonging to seven Brazilian states, had co-officialized local languages, those being only immigration and indigenous languages. In addition to this fact, the analysis carried out by Souza points out that many of these co-officialization laws do not make explicit the inclusion of local languages in the school curriculum.

Thus, this conference emphasizes the importance of paying attention to minority languages and putting into practice projects that promote their implementation in the educational system of the territories where they are spoken.

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