

## French Creoles of Color in English - Origins of a Louisiana Dialect (Examples from the Badin/Metoyer family in the 1800s)

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The Creoles of Color of eighteenth and nineteenth century Louisiana have attracted significant academic attention within the last few decades. Progress has been made in identifying elements of their social and linguistic history, as well contributions to American English. Historically French speaking, the Creoles were ethnically and culturally mixed, making it difficult to know when they began learning English and from whom. The present study examines the non-standard linguistic features in the written correspondence of one Creole family for clues to the origins of Creole African American Vernacular English, as distinct from (although sharing much in common with) other modern vernaculars, including that of other African Americans, Southern Whites, and Cajuns.

The corpus consists of personal letters written by the free Creoles of Color in the Badin/Metoyer family in the late 1800s (Norbert Badin Papers, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA). Norbert Badin was a free man of color who owned a plantation in the Cane River area of southern Louisiana. He wrote few of the letters in the collection himself, but many were addressed to him by Gabriel and Pauline Metoyer, relations from farther up the Mississippi River in Camptelouisiana. The Metoyer family is one of the best known and most frequently referenced families in literature about Creoles and Free People of Color of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mills 1977; Gehman 1994). A few other letters are included from New Orleans, Natchez, New Roads, Boyce, and St John's Parish from other free people of color, including family members. The current corpus contains 48 documents from this collection.

These letters have been transcribed, remaining faithful to the original grammar, orthography, capitalization, and line breaks. They are being analyzed for linguistic features which may help trace the origins of non-standard features currently found in Creole English to other ethnic groups with whom the Creoles would have been in contact and therefore learned English.

Special attention is given to specific morpho-syntactic features identified in the language of other groups from the same time period and region, and a general comparison is presented (Bailey 2001; Dubois & Horvath 2003; Van Herk & Poplack 2003; Schneider & Montgomery 2001). We code uses of non-standard auxiliaries (*have/has/had, was/were, is/are* and deletion of any of these), as well as use of inflexible copula *be*, omission of plural or possessive *-s*, *a/be + verb + ing*, multiple modals, double negatives and a variety of lexical or formulaic items such as *ain't, for to, y'all, fixin' to, be done*, demonstrative *Them*, and irregular preterits (i.e. *knowed*). The presence or absence of these features, as well as frequency of their use will allow us to compare the Creoles of Color with other ethnic groups of the time and paint a clearer picture of the social and cultural contact between communities.

### References

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