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On Promoting Literacy in Regional and Minority Languages: Some Potential Pointers from Central and Eastern Europe for Trinidad English Creole

Antony Hoyte-West
Independent scholar, Petersfield – United Kingdom
antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com

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Corresponding author : Antony Hoyte-West

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Abstract

Based on current initiatives to promote literacy in several Central and Eastern European minority languages, the present article provides a reflective overview of a range of pointers that these case studies could potentially offer for Trinidad English Creole, a creole language spoken widely in the Caribbean twin-island nation of Trinidad & Tobago but which does not have official status in that jurisdiction. Though the case study may at first seem unusual, the article justifies the selection by briefly comparing and contrasting the relevant historical factors which have influenced the modern-day usage of several minority languages in Central and East Europe with the situation regarding Trinidad English Creole, drawing attention to shared factors such as the prevalence of language contact, diglossia, and sociocultural domination by external influences. After sketching the current state of the art regarding the usage and the wider (lack of) recognition of Trinidad English Creole, the study then outlines the chosen methodological approach, which is qualitative and desk-based in purview, and linking it to the author's existing research studies which have centred on these themes and geographical areas. Subsequently, taking the Central and East European context as a point of departure, the study then outlines the different potential pointers which could lead to the promotion of greater literacy in Trinidad English Creole, noting that up until now the focus of governmental and educational efforts has coalesced around encouraging the uptake of Spanish as an additional language in Trinidad & Tobago. In observing changing attitudes to Creole languages in the wider English-speaking Caribbean, the first point centres around awareness-raising, advocating for the existence of a specialist university-based institution to promote the research and academic study of Trinidad English Creole, thus emulating examples taken from other minority languages in Central and Eastern Europe such as Rusyn, South Estonian, and Kashubian. The second point relates to the potential development of intensive training courses (of several months' duration) for Trinidad English Creole which could incorporate a literacy-based component. In presenting the Central and East European context, it gives a cursory overview of the possibilities for such courses, profiling the recent addition of specialised long-term courses designed to promote the uptake and spread of Lower Sorbian, whilst acknowledging the success of such programmes for Breton. In addition, similarly to the case of other Central and East European minority languages, such schemes could also encourage the production of necessary and relevant pedagogical materials to study, learn, and teach Trinidad English Creole in an effective and sustainable manner. Linked to the previous one, the third point relates to the potential development of language certification schemes for Trinidad English Creole, noting the existence of similar schemes for Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian. It also draws attention to the myriad other factors which are involved in creating and developing training programmes, including the potential viability and prospects of such initiatives.

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Mots clés

Alphabétisation ; Créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise ; Langues minoritaires ; L'Europe centrale et orientale ; Politique et planification linguistiques

Résumé

S'appuyant sur des initiatives visant à promouvoir l'alphabétisation dans les langues minoritaires parlées en Europe centrale et orientale, cet article donne un aperçu de certains points de repère que ces études de cas pourraient offrir au créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise, une langue parlée à Trinité-et-Tobago mais qui n'a pas de statut officiel dans ce pays antillais. L'article compare et met en contraste les facteurs historiques qui ont influencé l'utilisation actuelle des langues minoritaires en Europe centrale et orientale avec la situation du créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise. Il attire l'attention sur des facteurs communs tels que la prévalence du contact linguistique, la diglossie et la domination socioculturelle par des acteurs extérieurs. Après avoir présenté l'état actuel des connaissances concernant l'utilisation et la reconnaissance (ou le manque de reconnaissance) du créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise, l'article décrit l'approche méthodologique choisie, qui est qualitative et basée sur des documents. Ensuite, en prenant comme point de départ le contexte de l'Europe centrale et orientale, l'article décrit les différentes possibilités qui pourraient conduire à la promotion d'une plus grande alphabétisation en créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise. En observant l'évolution des attitudes à l'égard des langues créoles dans les Caraïbes anglophones, le premier point est axé sur la sensibilisation, préconisant l'existence d'une institution universitaire spécialisée pour promouvoir la recherche en créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise. Le deuxième point concerne le développement potentiel de formations intensives pour le créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise, qui pourraient intégrer l'alphabétisation. Le troisième point concerne le développement potentiel de systèmes de certification linguistique pour le créole trinidadien à base lexicale anglaise, en notant l'existence de systèmes similaires pour les langues slaves minoritaires comme le haut sorabe et le bas sorabe.

1. Introduction

The last few decades have been marked by significant geopolitical, socioeconomic, and technological transformations worldwide, accompanied by a growing recognition of the importance of language diversity in its broader context. Various initiatives have highlighted This awareness by promoting regional, minority, and indigenous languages at local, national, and international levels (e.g., see UN, 2008; UNESCO, 2024). Turning to Central and Eastern Europe, the profound political and societal changes since 1989 have significantly impacted several languages in the region. As Kamusella (2021, pp. 147-150) details, the emergence and re-emergence of new nations have had important implications for the use and status of various languages. For example, the former pan-Yugoslav language of Serbo-Croatian is now divided into four separate tongues (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin), and Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian, which were formerly domestic languages limited to their respective Soviet republics, have been recognised as official languages of the EU since 2004.

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At the same time, there have been growing moves to recognise and promote the usage of some of the many minority languages spoken across the region, and the vast majority of nations in the area have signed and ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (see Council of Europe, 2024); although, as Vervaet and Mandić (2022) outline, the issue of multilingualism as far as the usage of minority and minoritised languages remains an important point of discussion. Accordingly, there have been several initiatives put in place to promote reading and writing in these languages in relevant contexts and as will be presented, these have included practical efforts such as the promotion of relevant educational and other projects to promote greater literacy in these languages, thus aiming to ensure their intergenerational transmission and future survival in years to come.

At first glance, the comparison suggested by the title of this article may seem slightly bizarre – indeed, the warm shores of the Caribbean Sea may ostensibly appear to have little in common with the colder ones of the Baltic. Yet, a closer look at historical and sociocultural factors reveals that the Caribbean and Central & Eastern Europe do in fact display certain similarities, particularly with regard to their backgrounds of language contact shaped by annexation, colonialism, and imperialism. The specific case study that this article is centred on, the Caribbean country of Trinidad & Tobago, has English as its only official language. In day-to-day terms, however, English forms part of a linguistic continuum with a creole variety (see, e.g., Winford, 1997; Wilson, 2024, pp. 3-4, etc.). This state of affairs is not unusual in the Caribbean – indeed, as will be outlined later, many of the other Anglophone Caribbean nations also have demotic creoles which are spoken alongside English. However, as will be discussed, creole languages can often be viewed unfavourably by society at large, as can also be the case with some of the regional and minority languages spoken in Central & Eastern Europe.

Through presenting and comparing some relevant literacy-related measures, this article reflects briefly on general cases of several Central and Eastern European regional and minority languages, using them as points of departure to explore relevant possibilities for the specific case of Trinidad & Tobago and the English creole spoken on the main island of Trinidad. In aiming to offer a broad general overview than a comprehensive analysis, it intends to proffer some potential initiatives for the development of wider literacy skills in creole languages not only there but also across the broader Anglophone Caribbean.

2. On the linguistic and historical situation in Central & Eastern Europe and Trinidad & Tobago

Noting the existence of various definitions of Central & Eastern Europe (e.g., see Kamusella, 2024), the countries in the region are distinguished by considerable ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. Among national, regional, and minority languages, members of many language families are represented, including Slavic, Baltic, Romance, and Germanic languages, as well as Finno-Ugric and Turkic languages

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(Kamusella, 2009, pp. 149-341). With language often perceived as a key discriminator of identity in broader terms (e.g., see Lanehart, 1996), the unique historical and sociocultural context of Central and Eastern Europe mean that, particularly with regard to minorities, multiple identities can also be embodied (e.g., see Waechter, 2016).

The past two centuries have seen much of Central & Eastern Europe dominated by imperial entities such as the Habsburg Empire, the German Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Russian Empire. With the map of that part of Europe changing significantly initially after World War One (Kamusella, 2021, pp. 89-91), and again after World War Two (Kamusella, 2021, pp. 121-124), the dominating power of the Soviet Union also reinforced the role and status of Russian as the principal language of communication in the newly-Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Kreindler, 1988, pp. 8-12), as well as being a privileged foreign language in Warsaw Pact nations (Protassova & Yelenevskaya, 2020, pp. 112-113).

Yet, as mentioned in the preceding section, the changes of the last three-and-and a half decades have had ramifications with regard to regional and minority languages. In Poland, for example, moves to recognise selected regional languages (such as Silesian) are currently afoot, though this is also the subject of political debate (see Polskie Radio, 2024). Similarly to many of the creoles spoken in the Caribbean (see Winford, 1985), many of these Central & Eastern European minority languages exist in a state of diglossia with more dominant national languages (see e.g., Kamusella, 2016). In some cases, attempts to increase their vitality, prestige, and recognition have been ongoing for decades – for example, in the case of Carpatho-Rusyn, dating back to the growing ethnolinguistic consciousness of the mid-19th century (Plishkova, 2017).

In many instances (for example, as Mladenova (2021, pp. 46-108) details in her study of Banat Bulgarian), this has meant efforts to create orthographies and literary standards for these languages, as well as moves towards developing not only literature but also primers and grammars for minority languages. Jumping forward to the present era, there have been initiatives for many of these languages to promote reading and writing in their relevant education systems. Aside from more formal aspects, the internet and social media (such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), etc.) also represent a very important way of promoting the spread and usage of these tongues (e.g., see Mladenova (2021, pp. 225-235) in the case of Banat Bulgarian; Kamusella (2023) in the case of Silesian etc.).

Turning to the Caribbean, the dual-island nation of Trinidad & Tobago – formerly a Spanish and subsequently British colony which has been independent since 1962 – has historically had multiple creole languages. In later Spanish and early British colonial times, a local form of French Creole was once widespread in the multilingual Trinidad of the 19th century but has now faded from use. In the present era, the creole varieties which enjoy much greater contemporary vitality are the English-based creoles spoken on both islands.

Similarly to Mühleisen (2013), this study will centre on Trinidad English Creole. This is widely spoken in modern Trinidad yet also has a lengthy pedigree, as studies

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attesting to historical and modern-day development of the language outline (e.g., see Winford, 1975; Winer, 1984; Winer & Rimmer, 1994, etc.). Though an orthographic system has been mooted (see Winer, 1990) and a comprehensive dictionary has been compiled (Winer, 2009), there appears to be no officially-recognised literary standard in force. Nonetheless, as detailed elsewhere (Hoyte-West, 2022a), the language is commonly used in arts and culture, such as in local musical genres (Winer, 1986) and despite the lack of a standardised writing system, literature by Trinidadian authors also often features it, ranging from a few words used to give a sense of local flavour to much more extensive usage (e.g., see Mair, 1990). In addition, similarly to the minority languages of Central & Eastern Europe, Trinidadian English Creole is also very much present on social media (see Wilson, 2024).

As mentioned earlier, by having this English-based creole alongside its official English, Trinidad & Tobago is by no means unique in the Anglophone Caribbean. As outlined in the introduction, the history of language contact through colonisations means that several of the many other former British-ruled islands in the region which are now independent nations (e.g., Antigua & Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, St Kitts & Nevis, St Lucia, and St Vincent & the Grenadines) also have their own creoles (see Ferreira, 2012, p. 133).

In the case of some of these island nations (for example, in St Lucia and Dominica), both English- and French-based creoles can be found, thus echoing the nineteenth-century Trinidadian case (e.g., see Irvine, 2022). Yet interestingly, despite the fact these are all new countries which became independent in the 1960s and 1970s, and in spite of their strongly-defined and well-differentiated social and cultural identities, none of these nations has opted to recognise a Creole language as an official language. However, awareness of these Creole languages has been noted at the national and international level, as illustrated by the 2011 Charter on Language Policy and Language Rights in the Creole-speaking Caribbean (see González García, 2023, p. 143). In addition, the unique potential of these islands in developing language policies which could incorporate Creole languages has been recognised in some recent research on the region (e.g., González García, 2024; Forrester, 2024), as well as in studies highlighting the introduction of Spanish as a main foreign language in Trinidad & Tobago (Hoyte-West, 2021a; Mideros et al., 2023, pp. 5-11) and elsewhere in the Caribbean (e.g., Céspedes Suárez, 2023). Given that the focus of this study is on possible pointers for increasing literacy in Trinidad English Creole, it should also be noted that the general adult literacy rate (in English) in Trinidad & Tobago is also extremely high by global standards, standing at 99% (UNESCO-UIS, 2013, p. 48).

3. Research approach

In terms of the research approach, this brief essay is an offshoot of two of the author's current projects. The first examines the role, evolution, and status of several Slavic languages within the broader Central & East European context (Hoyte-West,

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2021b; 2022b, 2023a), and the second revolves around historical and modern-day aspects relating to language and culture in the Anglophone Caribbean, with a strong focus on Trinidad & Tobago (Hoyte-West, 2021a; 2022a; 2022c; 2023b). In representing an attempt to coalesce these two different facets of his academic, professional, and personal background, this exploration aims to provide several pointers for the development of initiatives to advance the promotion of literacy in Trinidad English Creole with reference to work being done in Central & Eastern Europe.

The article therefore shares a similar qualitative and desk-based methodological approach (Bassot, 2022) with several of the other studies mentioned, and this perspective has previously been utilised in discussions of minority languages in the European context, such as a synthesis of recent Galician language policy (Monteagudo, 2024). As stated in the introductory section, in offering a commentary on the current situation and suggestions for possible future directions, the present study does not pretend to be comprehensive, but rather to outline some potential suggestions perhaps deserving of attention at a later date.

4. Some possible pointers for promoting literacy in Trinidad English Creole

To provide a brief overview of the current situation in Trinidad & Tobago, the general focus has been placed on the development of oral skills and text competencies in Spanish rather than on Trinidad English Creole. For the past two decades, this priority has been formalised through the Spanish as the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) scheme, a wide-ranging governmental initiative to foster, inter alia, the use of Spanish in the country's education system (Hoyte-West, 2021a). As such, Spanish has become more and more available in the country's educational institutions, as increased teacher training has led to its presence at a variety of educational levels, ranging from primary and secondary schools to tertiary institutions such as universities (Hoyte-West, 2021a, pp. 238-240).

The ramifications of the policy have not led to widespread Spanish proficiency among the populace, though, as discussed elsewhere (Mideros et al., 2023, p. 5; Hoyte-West, 2021a, p. 241), practical reasons such as increased migration from Venezuela have now superseded the original commercial and economic underpinnings of the SAFFL language policy. Thus, save for a report issued over a decade ago (Robertson, 2010), Trinidad English Creole has largely not featured prominently on the agenda of educational policies to date. This situation can perhaps be contrasted with that of various regional languages in the Central and East European context. Depending on relevant national policies, education systems have incorporated the relevant minority language in different ways: for example, in the case of Latgalian, as an optional subject in certain regional schools (Martena, Marten & Šuplinska, 2022, p. 33); in the case of Võro, with the involvement of an external institution (2019, p. 20), or in the cases of both Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian, through formalised bilingual schooling (Brězan & Nowak, 2015, pp. 16-17).

To turn to the issue of awareness-raising, as mentioned previously, across the Caribbean many English-based creoles were perceived unfavourably as non-standard

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varieties of the dominant tongue, i.e., as "bad" or "broken English" rather than as independent languages (Winford, 1975, p. 53), although Mühleisen (2013; 2022) has found that attitudes do seem to be changing.

Unlike Jamaican Creole, which is probably viewed as the most developed of the Caribbean creoles in terms of its standardisation and promotion, as well as in the creation of terminology, Trinidad English Creole still requires further assistance. In the case of Jamaica, a specialist Jamaican Language Unit at the relevant campus of the University of West Indies has been created to support and advise on relevant language provision (UWI Mona, 2024; Hoyte-West, 2022a, pp. 8-9), thus demonstrating that input from relevant academic institutions can be important in the promotion and spread of associated initiatives. In addition, to giving a sense of prestige, it also provides a focal point for language policy and planning schemes. This is similar to the case for several of the minority languages spoken in Central and Eastern Europe – for example, the Centre for South Estonian Language and Culture Studies has been created in Tartu to promote scientific activities relating to the Võro minority language (University of Tartu, 2024), the Research Institute of Kashubian Linguistic and Culture Heritage in Gdansk (Kamusella & Nomachi, 2014, p. 49), and the Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture in Prešov (University of Prešov, 2024). As such, the potential creation of a specific centre for Trinidad English Creole – either within one of the universities in Trinidad & Tobago or as a discrete institution, would therefore be an important stage to promote wider usage and give additional status to the language as a whole.

Such an initiative could also go hand in hand with the development of intensive training courses in Trinidad English Creole. In addition to enhancing speaking skills, this could also be an effective practical way of acquiring the necessary literacy skills, remaining mindful of the possible issues that acquiring multiple literacies can pose (e.g., see El Hajj & Niewese, 2020). Indeed, intensive language courses designed to promote the rapid acquisition of a given tongue have been around for many years. Well-known examples include the pre-sessional courses in the English-speaking world aimed at non-L1 university students from abroad (e.g., see Pearson, 2020). In the Central and Eastern European context, the development of intensive language programmes for relevant national languages (such as Bulgarian, Polish, and Slovak) has been in place for decades, starting during Communist times when large number of students from aligned nations came to obtain higher education there (see e.g., Bednarek, 1991; Boneva, 2021; Borovská 2022; also Hoyte-West, 2023a).

Outside of the world of higher education and focusing specifically on minority languages, funded intensive language acquisition courses lasting for six months are offered for the Breton language, and are taught by specialist training institutions (Le Pipec, 2014, pp. 146-147; Hoyte-West, 2023c, p. 188) with the aim that participants achieve an intermediate level (around B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)) following completion of the course (e.g., see Skol an Emsav, 2024). In Central and Eastern Europe, a newly launched initiative has recently been inaugurated

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for the Lower Sorbian language, a Slavic minority language spoken in the federal state of Brandenburg in eastern Germany (Norberg, 2017). Here too, funded intensive 10-month language courses are organised (Zorja, 2024) with the aim of revitalising this endangered language and ensure its survival in subsequent decades. An initial cohort of 12 participants began in September 2023 (Šejcowa/Schuster, 2023), and the scheme has additionally featured in local media (e.g., see RBB Fernsehen, 2023). Thus, such projects could potentially provide a possible template for similar initiatives in Trinidad & Tobago involving literacy for Trinidad English Creole.

Unlike Lower Sorbian, which alongside Upper Sorbian is classified as definitely endangered by UNESCO (see Salminen, 2010, p. 37), as mentioned before Trinidad English Creole is widely spoken yet does not have any official recognition. Therefore, it could be argued that the development of official intensive language training programmes to promote literacy could add prestige in the language, allowing it to assume a more prominent position in wider culture and society. In addition, such initiatives could also provide opportunities for members of the broader diaspora (such as the author of this article) who for various reasons may wish to acquire spoken proficiency and literacy skills in Trinidad English Creole. It would allow for the creation of appropriate pedagogical approaches and materials to teach and learn the language effectively, a need also shared by several minority languages in Central & Eastern Europe such as Kashubian (Makurat-Snuzik, 2022).

A further stage could also include the development of relevant certification schemes for the language; in the Central and East European context, for example, a suite of language qualifications aligned with the CEFR has been created for Upper Sorbian (Sprachzertifikat Sorbisch, 2024a; Hoyte-West, 2021c) and Lower Sorbian (Sprachzertifikat Sorbisch, 2024b), and certification opportunities also exist for many minority languages across Europe (see Hoyte-West, 2023c). Thus, the possibility of official certification for Trinidad English Creole (and by extension, other creole languages spoken across the Anglophone Caribbean) could also be an avenue for further development. Yet, in addition to cultural enrichment, socioeconomic factors also need to be considered; for example, the financial outlay required in creating such programmes, the interplay with other political and social priorities, as well as the expected prospects of such moves to increase literacy among the number of speakers of Trinidad English Creole through the provision of such training programmes.

5. Some conclusions

In offering some preliminary thoughts on possible methods to make literacy skills in Trinidad English Creole more widespread, a number of historical similarities with several minority languages in Central and Eastern Europe were found, namely in terms of language contact and the aftermath of colonialism and imperialism. In terms of literacy, attempts are now being made to revitalise and promote writing skills in local and regional languages, including greater incorporation and recognition in public life and the creation

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of specialist schemes to rapidly increase the number of literate speakers in a short space of time.

In the Trinidad & Tobago context, efforts to increase awareness of the local creole could include increased incorporation of the language in schools, awareness-raising initiatives, and the creation of intensive language tuition schemes. Depending on the sourcing of adequate funding and relevant impetus, through promoting increased literacy, these measures could assist the uptake, status, and prestige of Trinidad English Creole. In addition, the wider economic benefits of using the language needs to become apparent (possibly analogous to the case of Latgalian – see e.g., Lazdina, 2013). In this regard, similarities could perhaps be drawn with Le Pipec's assertion regarding Breton, observing that a once overlooked language has now been transformed into a professional asset ["un atout sur un CV"] (Le Pipec, 2014, pp. 146-147). As such, with considerable research being conducted on the Trinidad & Tobago context, and with the strong presence of the language on social media (see Wilson, 2024), it is clear that subject to the necessary impetus, there will certainly be rich possibilities to develop prospects for wider literacy in Trinidad English Creole over the coming years.

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Author Biodata
Antony Hoyte-West is an interdisciplinary researcher focusing on linguistics, literature, and translation studies. A qualified translator and conference interpreter from several languages into his native English, he holds a doctorate in linguistics from the University of Silesia in Katowice, master's degrees in modern languages, management, area studies, and conference interpreting from the universities of St Andrews, Oxford, and Galway, as well as two diplomas in piano performance. He is the author of over 80 publications on various topics, a number of which are indexed in Scopus or Web of Science. He has presented his research at over 50 international conferences in 20 countries and is on the editorial or advisory boards of 6 peer-reviewed journals. He has been a visiting fellow at the Leibniz Centre for Educational Media (Braunschweig, Germany) and South West University "Neofit Rilski" (Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria).

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