

## Sociolinguistic Implications of Identity Shift

The term *Creole* in Louisiana has been used to designate everything from architecture to agriculture as local. It may also be used, in nominal form, to refer to local people. In this nominal use, its meaning has undergone shift and change in tandem with changes to Louisiana's political and cultural climate over the past three hundred years, producing a complicated polysemy in which *Creole* may indicate people who identify racially as White, Black, or both (Dominguez 1977, 1986). Modern changes to the term (as well as to its counterpart, *Cajun*) continue a trend toward increased binarity and concomitant synonymy in racial and ethnic categories documented decades ago (Dominguez 1986, Trépanier 1991). We focus in this paper on the term's current semantic range and the sociolinguistic implications of this ongoing flux within the city of New Orleans.

Previous research on New Orleans English has shown that post-vocalic /r/ correlates with social categories and is a strong marker of identity (Reinecke 1951; Brennan 1983; Schoux-Casey 2013, 2016; Carmichael 2014). In earlier work (AUTHORS 2019), we showed that it also tracked with the ongoing realignment of local ethnic categories. Older White, working-class speakers used similar (low) rates of rhoticity to older Black speakers, while older White middle-class and Creole residents patterned together at a higher rate. In the youngest generation, however, all White speakers' use of rhoticity had increased and the two groups of White speakers were now similar; Black speaker's rates of rhoticity held fairly steady across generations, but Creole speakers had decreased their rate of rhoticity so that young people more closely resembled Black speakers. This rearrangement reflected comments made by interviewees that suggested that the category *Creole* in New Orleans was merging with or even becoming subsumed by *Black*. Notably, many younger speakers simply do not use the term *Creole* in reference to themselves, even as they describe their neighborhood, church, and family using this term. This presents a methodological conundrum: how do we track group-level changes when the identity of the group itself is in flux?

In this paper, we propose an ethnic orientation measure for Creoles, mirroring prior work on ethnic identity (Hoffman & Walker 2010; Nagy, Chociey, & Walker 2014). Our measure is based on discursive descriptions of Creole identity, since identity precedes and is mediated by discourse, emerging from interactions between internal (personal) and external definitions, and is thus best understood when multiple analytic strands come together (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 606). We therefore build on prior work, using the locally meaningful variable of nonrhoticity to test the predictive significance of the various factors included in our "Creole Orientation Measure," such as religion, positionality towards the label *Creole*, and stance towards participants' own identification as Black, Creole, both, or neither. In doing so, we provide new perspectives on language variation and change in a context in which ethnic identification itself is also varying and changing.

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