



## Interview with the American lexicographer John Rigdon about languages, translation and the literary production in Haiti

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### Introduction

John C. (Clinton) Rigdon received his Post High School Education at Bob Jones University - Greenville, SC. He majored in Electronics Engineering and Accounting, with a minor in English. He has authored approximately 1200 titles on the American Civil War, American History, and Genealogy, and approximately 400 of which are now available on Amazon. His first published book was “The Boys of the Fifth”, a regimental history of the Georgia 5th Infantry Regiment published in 1996. For we know how tremendous e-tools are today in both the translation process and in debates related to Translation Aid; as a lexicographer, he is also author of an additional 35 language titles including Dictionaries, phrasebooks, and literacy books in various languages with a special interest in the Haitian Creole. He started working on a Haitian Creole dictionary along with several other experts in the field of Haitian Creole and linguistics and published his first Creole title “*Aprann Pale Kreyòl*” (Learn to Speak Creole) in 2005. This was followed with a collection of short stories in Creole and English which were the result of a creative writing contest. He solicited Haitian speakers to submit their stories and poems which he, along with others, translated into English and published as “*Kreyòl Woyloyloy*” (Creole Wow! O Wow!).

**Yéo N’Gana: Would you please briefly introduce yourself (research fields, specialties)?**

John Rigdon: My career has been in computers, mirroring the introduction of the personal computer. I purchased one of the first Radio Shack TRS-80 computers in 1978. I later went to work for Radio Shack selling their computers, then with Computer Land as sales manager and store manager. I later managed my own computer store for a number of years and developed manufacturing inventory control and accounting software for a number of smaller firms and several Fortune 50 companies. I was involved in the early days of the Internet in 1994 and 1995, and then left the computer industry in 1996 to pursue writing.

My early writing centered on the American Civil War. I published my first title in 1995 and have since written a number of other titles. Two of my books have been used as the basis of movies based on the Civil War in South Carolina.

In 2003, I visited Haiti with a group from my Church and saw the need for literacy materials in the Creole language. At that time, I did a world-wide search of Creole materials and found just 65 titles in the Creole language. At least half of them were “learn to speak Creole” related and only a handful were literary works, all English short stories translated into Creole.

I started working on a Haitian Creole dictionary along with several other experts in the field of Haitian Creole and linguistics and published my first Creole titles “*Aprann Pale Kreyòl*” (Learn to Speak Creole) and “Learn to Speak English” in 2005. As far as I know, this was the first bilingual book to teach English to Haitians. I had the idea to sponsor a creative writing contest in Creole. I thought that the book would be sold in the U.S. and abroad to members of the Haitian diaspora and that would support further development of books and literacy in Haiti. I solicited Haitian speakers to submit their stories and poems. Over several months we received an amazing collection of poems and short stories. I along with others translated the materials into English and published the anthology as *Kreyòl Woyloyloy* (Creole Wow! O Wow!). Unfortunately, the sales of the book have been a disappointment. Most of the people who speak Creole in the diaspora do not read it. Their education was in French, not in Creole. Lower school education in Creole did not occur in Haiti until about 2000. Thus we were just beginning to see a generation who could read Creole when the quake struck in 2010. French is still the language of choice for most schools and all higher education in Haiti and there is a strong cultural bias that to demonstrate education one must write in French.

**Y.N.: How did you come to work with Haitian Creole? Does Haiti have a literary history in Creole?**

J. R.: I made several trips to Haiti between 2001 and 2010 working on my language skills and publishing my first dictionary (Creole’s 4<sup>th</sup>) in 2006. I was in Haiti when the quake struck in 2010 working on a translation of some medical texts. Following my return, I contacted Google and Microsoft and several other smaller firms about the possibility of using my dictionary as the basis of machine translation for the relief effort. In order to begin development of machine translation we need a 20,000-word list aligned to another language and a corpus of a million plus parallel texts. At the time I had about 17,000 words in my dictionary and the only parallel text was the Bible and maybe 10,000 lines of other texts. Both Google and Microsoft responded and we had the Haitian Creole language on line within a week. Microsoft particularly pushed the envelope to develop their machine translation, and today the Creole / English translation is better than their French / English.

I also participated in the translation of a book on building houses in earthquake prone zones which was originally published in Spanish in Peru. We were able to get this

book published in Creole and French within about 60 days and it is now used as the basis for much of the new construction work in Haiti thanks to the efforts on the ground in Haiti by “Architects Beyond Borders” and others.

Following the earthquake crisis in Haiti, I began studying the languages of Central Africa with an eye to focusing on the minority languages beyond the top 100 featured on Google and Bing. I discovered a most amazing project from Princeton University called Wordnet<sup>1</sup> (<https://wordnet.princeton.edu/>) which was an outgrowth of an idea of Peter Mark Roget (Roget’s Thesaurus) and James Strong (Strong’s Concordance to the Bible). The genius of their idea was to assign a numbering system to every *definition*, not just the words, which then allows us to align languages along the meanings of the terms, thus eliminating ambiguous meanings of words.

There are eight languages which are considered “gateway languages”, meaning that 95% of the world population either speak one of these languages, or have someone in their close community who can translate. Those languages are English, Russian, Spanish, French, Mandarin, Tagalog, Hindi, and Punjabi. If these languages are mapped with a Wordnet type implementation, the other languages will become much easier to translate.

For the past two years I have been working to build a database of languages aligned with Wordnet – focusing on these minor languages. The wonder of this is that once a word is aligned in any language – it is aligned in *every* language. My site which illustrates the potential power of this is [www.wordsrus.info](http://www.wordsrus.info). I have worked closely with a Polish firm, [www.glosbe.com](http://www.glosbe.com) to develop and deploy these dictionaries.

**Y.N.: How do you see Caribbean writings and native languages with regard to Europeans’ today?**

J. R.: In 2013, I was introduced to Burkina Faso and saw much parallel in the language situation there with what I had seen in Haiti. As in Haiti, French is also the language of government and business there, but in Burkina we have 77 languages, not just one, and limited literature and literacy in most or all of the languages. Most of the people of Burkina, however, have limited access to learn French and are hampered in their education because the schools are taught in French. For those who are educated in French (and other languages), they do not have the skills to read their native language, though they speak it well. Thus we have a situation where people must first attain literacy in their own language to encourage writing in their language. The impetus for this is different for children than for adults. Adults will learn to read because of a “need to know” whereas children will learn to read for the “joy of

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<sup>1</sup> Wordnet is a lexical database for English in which words are grouped by meaning instead of alphabetically. This allows this lexical database to show how similar words’ meanings differ, how they overlap and how the meaning of a word changes in different contexts. This concept has become the basis of modern machine translation.

learning.” We are therefore focusing on developing health care and other “how to” materials for adults and short stories and poems for children.

I am now involved in publishing dictionaries, phrasebooks, and beginning literacy materials in these languages – many of which have virtually nothing available beyond the Bible translation. These are all aligned with Wordnet 3.1. My vision is that these materials will form the basis for encouraging literacy, and ultimately literary production in these languages.

**Y.N.: What Caribbean writer have you translated? How are Caribbean writings received in the US?**

J. R.: My only specific translation work for Caribbean authors has been “Construction and Maintenance of Masonry Houses for Masons and Craftsmen developed in Chile, now translated into English, Creole and French” (<http://www.ngohaiti.com/construction/rebuild.htm>) and the short stories I published in 2005. To my knowledge none of those authors have published other works, although one lady has produced an off-Broadway screen play in New York based on the story she submitted.

**Y.N.: Are Haitians ready to venture in producing in Creole? For publishers aim at, above all, doing business, how do you see in twenty years the Haitian literary production in Creole?**

J. R.: At the time of the earthquake Haitian Creole literature was beginning to blossom. I saw dozens of titles in the market and Haitian author, Edwidge Danticat, has had great success with her book *Krik? Krak!*, primarily through the support and promotion of Oprah Winfrey.

Six years after the quake we are just beginning to see new works emerge. I believe that we will see a great surge of Creole titles in the next few years. At the time of the quake we had a group of young adults who had been educated in Creole emerging. Sadly, we have now lost a generation, and now must strive to bring these young people under 30 along. I believe it is much the same situation we have in areas which have been plagued with war and disease. The struggle for education and literacy must progress alongside the provision of basic human necessities. Our focus is on basic health care materials and water purification. Currently a new translation of “Where There Is No Doctor” is nearing completion in African French and Bambara. ([www.dokotoro.org](http://www.dokotoro.org)).

**Y.N.: How crucial is culture in your dictionaries building process?**

J. R.: I see my dictionaries as crucial for those who are wanting to communicate in their own language – and thus with the world. There is a strong argument that societies which have developed and supported a written language have been able to thrive by passing on ideas from generation to generation and building on earlier thought. Those which have not had a written language and literacy have struggled.

There is a strong cultural bias in Haiti that one must write and speak in French to show the level of their education. I see this also expressed in other countries where a non-native language dominates. This really limits the creativity and in many cases the quality of the works produced. I believe it is crucial that one be able to write first in their own native language, then translate to a target language. In many cases ideas do not translate completely, but the jewels remain to be discovered by those who know the native language.

**Y.N.: Finally, do you know books translated from Haitian Creole to any European language and vice versa? What role does translation play or played in spreading the Haitian literature?**

J. R.: Ms. Danticat has published another 16 titles in English and garnered quite a bit of success in the United States in English and in Canada and France in French. I have published *A Propos Du Vaudou Haitien* by Emmanuel Felix in French, Creole and English and it is now in its second printing of 5,000 copies. Emmanuel Vedrine maintains a bibliography of books in and about Creole. <http://www.potomitan.info/vedrine/vedrine1.php>

Educavision (<https://www.educavision.com/>) is the largest publisher of Haitian Creole books. A review of their site will show that we are beginning to see some literature in the language, although most of what they publish is educational material.

**Y.N.: It's been a real pleasure having you. Thank you.**

J. R.: Thank you. I invite you to contact me at [jrigdon@researchonline.net](mailto:jrigdon@researchonline.net) with comments or questions. I am particularly interested in how my site, [www.wordsrus.info](http://www.wordsrus.info) might be improved.