

Mr. David Remnick
Editor in Chief
The New Yorker

Monday, February 1st, 2016

Dear Mr. Remnick,

Jon Lee Anderson’s “Letter from Haiti” (*The New Yorker*, February 1, 2016) paints a dishearteningly bleak picture of Haiti that extends to its national language, Kreyòl, disparagingly described as a “French patois”. This description is as inaccurate as calling French a “Latin patois” or English a “Germanic patois”. Like most languages, Kreyòl’s history connects it to other languages, in this case, French and African languages. Today, Kreyòl is one of Haiti’s two *official* languages, alongside French, and it is the *national* language, spoken by everyone in Haiti, with a literature, a standardized orthography and an official Academy, of which I am a founding member. How we describe Kreyòl matters. Haiti suffers from the widely shared prejudice that Kreyòl is a lesser language, unsuitable for public discourse and education (in contrast to French, which few Haitians speak). This prejudice excludes the majority of Haitians from full participation in society —most damagingly, from access to schooling in their mother tongue. Fortunately, a new movement now advocates for Kreyòl as the most effective language for modernizing and democratizing education in Haiti, based on scientific evidence. The MIT-Haiti Initiative, which I lead, uses Kreyòl and technology to develop state-of-the-art resources and workshops for participative pedagogy in science, math and leadership. Teachers and leaders from over 150 academic institutions and the highest echelons of government have participated in this initiative. In July 2015, Haiti’s Creole Academy and Ministry of Education signed an agreement to extend the use of Kreyòl to all levels of the school system. But it’s an uphill battle against the status quo. Mischaracterizing Kreyòl as a “French patois” undermines a key component of Haiti’s struggle to escape from the school failures, chronic impoverishment and anti-democratic rule that Mr. Anderson decries in his article.

Sincerely,

Michel DeGraff

Professor, MIT Linguistics, <http://mit.edu/degraff> , <http://facebook.com/michel.degraff>

Director, MIT-Haiti Initiative, <http://haiti.mit.edu> , <http://facebook.com/mithaiti>

Member, Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen