

A survey of Creole language studies

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I. Introduction

Over the last 30 years Creole language study has become a focal point in linguistics. As in any field of academic endeavour, the amount of literature is quite staggering. Thus, we can only provide a simplified introduction to the field, which is more a very modest appetizer than a decent meal! What is immediately obvious is the great diversity in approaches and the vehement discussions on almost every point that concerns these languages: varying from matters of origin to the prognostics for the future. It is impossible to cover all the different types of Creoles and pidgins that we encounter around the world under one umbrella theory, which account for all of the linguistic, historical and social dynamics in this field. We will set out to give a short description of what constitutes a pidgin or a Creole, the different theories of the genesis of Creoles, the present stage of acceptance and development of Atlantic Creoles, thereby including the emerging role of Scripture translation in the promotion and standardisation of these languages. At the end a selected Bibliography will be attached for further study.

II. What is a Creole language; what is a pidgin?

The very definition of a Creole language and/or a pidgin, is subjected to debate, because the definition is intimately linked to one's perspective of the genesis. Probably the best way is to speak about the prototypical Creole and pidgin and then see how some would differ from this theoretical standard. The most appropriate way to start is to define what a pidgin is. A pidgin is a contact language that develops through regular but limited contact between two groups or more that need to communicate for a short term or for restricted purposes like trade, and where none of the groups has competency in the other's language. A pidgin is nobody's mother tongue; it arises through a process of linguistic negotiation where ease of learning and restricted communicative use is in focus. A pidgin is thus by definition limited in its lexical reach and exhibits a significant gap as regards to different linguistic features. The pidgin will be constituted by a combination of lexical items and grammatical features from both languages. Some pidgins were only further developed in terms of lexicon and syntax with the next generation of speakers, for whom it became their mother tongue.

There are cases where a pidgin might develop an extended vocabulary even before it becomes the mother tongue of the next generation. The classic example being *Tok Pisin*, the English based pidgin of Papua New Guinea that became an "extended pidgin" long before it acquired native speakers (Thomason, p. 161). Pidgins usually take their limited vocabulary predominantly from one of the languages in the contact situation; that is why one can speak of, for example, "English pidgin" or "Vietnamese French pidgin". When a pidgin or a Creole takes its vocabulary predominantly from one language source, that language is called the "lexifier": the (main) source that provides the lexicon for the Creole or the pidgin. Normally, when a pidgin acquires native speakers it becomes a Creole, a full-fledged language in its own right.

Thus, a good working definition of a Creole is: a contact language, which has its lexicon predominantly, derived from a lexifier language, but its syntax at least partially derived from another (substrate) language. From the perspective of historical linguistics, one can say that a Creole is a language that cannot be traced back as resulting from evolutionary modifications within one source (mother language) like in the case of English, German, French and Spanish who can all be traced to one common Indo-European language. A Creole does not have a single parent language but may have different languages that derive from it. In that sense a Creole is a contact language and its history can be traced back to the time of contact between the two or more groups that constituted the language. Thus, a Creole has no language tree going back through history; in that sense, one can speak of an “abrupt beginning”.

However, further research has shown that an important group of Creoles probably did not have a pidgin in their past. There are cases when Creoles have arisen even “more abruptly”, apparently without having a clear defined pidgin, like in the case of many Caribbean Atlantic Creoles where the mixed population of slaves needed a common language to communicate quite urgently. So there would have been no time for a pidgin to develop between two or more language groups: a lot of slaves would not have had the possibility of maintaining their own language while using a pidgin as a second language.

Another issue is that because of the past dominance of European languages in general in linguistic studies in the past, and the focus on Atlantic based Creoles, many have erroneously been led to believe that only European lexified Creoles or pidgins exist. But there are Creoles in a wide range of language groups: there exist or existed Arabic lexifier Creoles or pidgins, Austronesian lexifier Creoles or pidgins and Amerindian lexifier Creoles or pidgins, to mention just a few. These took their basic lexicon from Arabic, from Japanese, or from one Amerindian language and were or are used in speech communities where European languages do not play a role at all. However, for ease of reference we will be referring mostly to Atlantic based Creoles in the remainder of this summary, since they have become the most studied examples in the linguistic communities given their apparent similarities and dissimilarities.

III. How does a Creole language come into existence

The dominant language that provided the vocabulary input for most Creoles is, of course, not difficult to trace. For example, it is obvious that English lexified Jamaican Patois, and French, Haitian Creole. There are also different cases where one can argue that the lexifier was not the standard version of the European language, but a combination of dialectal variations, which were in vogue among the seafaring people and the colonial settlers. But as tricky as dialectal lexical considerations can be, they are nothing compared to tracing how the Creole syntax was formed. The case for the substrate influence of the West coast African languages in Atlantic Creoles is pretty strong, but here also there is no consensus on the exact languages, although some progress has been made. Some have seen the syntax as the result of an imperfect foreign language learning with the European superstrate language as the target, while others attribute regional dialectal influence. Defining how the syntax of the Creoles

became constituted in combination with the lexical development is in fact determining how the languages came into existence: their genesis. And indeed there are different radically opposing theories when it comes to the genesis of Creoles. It is impossible to go into any great detail in this complex and fecund area of Creolistics, but a brief outline of the major scenarios presented over the past decades might help not only to answer the question of origin but to elucidate the different ways in which Creoles have been studied.

III.1 The Monogenetic theory: a relic from the past?

A very well known theory, which may very well be the first in chronological order, is that ultimately, all Creoles, at least the European based ones, derive from a common language. This common language in some theories would be the old medieval language called *Lingua Franca*, which is a Mediterranean Italian, based universal language that was in vogue under the seamen and travellers from Europe. Of course, this *Lingua Franca* would later have been relexified by other colonial languages like Portuguese. Another variation on the theme postulates a West African Portuguese *lingua franca* spoken by the slave traders and people who populated the fortresses and settlements in West Africa. This language became the means of communication between the different groups (European and non-European) in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. Of course, the immediate criticism would be that this would only account for European based Creoles and their similarities, while on the other hand it would not account for the dissimilarities among them. Serious comparative linguistic analysis of the Creoles and pidgins around the world has shown the theory cannot be upheld in the face of the structural diversity within this language group. Partially for that reason one has seen the emergence of a softer version of the same: different categories of Creoles would have different common ancestors, as, for example, in the case of English based Creoles versus French based Creoles and/or Portuguese based Creoles. These kinds of variations on the monogenetic theory are still very much in vogue.

III.2 Bickerton's Language Bio-programme Hypothesis

The monogenetic theory, i.e. Creoles deriving from some type of *Lingua Franca*, belongs to the time when studies of Creoles were very much based on European lexified samples and the study of especially Atlantic based Creoles. The *status questiones* in Creole genesis theories is very much determined now a day by the *abrupt genesis* versus the *gradual development* theories. Derek Bickerton, who developed the so called Language Bio programme Hypothesis is an example of an abrupt genesis adherent, since he thinks that within one generation the pidgin was transformed by the descendants of the pidgin speaking community into a full-fledged Creole language. This transformation is guided by a genetically inherited intellectual capacity all humans share. This would account for certain similar features among Creoles, and their seeming preference for unmarked linguistic structures. The fact that so many other languages have a historical evolutionary development which differs from this innate default setting would be due to the strong corrective influence of the environment, i.e., adult language speakers. For example, a Spanish-speaking child would also develop the linguistic input he gets into a Creole type language without

much morphology, if he was left to his own devices, without intensive adult correction and training.

In other words, Bickerton postulated that the process of nativization of the pidgin, leads to the formation of Creoles. Thus, the study of Creoles would lead to the discovery of the “default” innate language settings. Most Creoles, for example, do not have extensive verbal morphology but make use of the preverbal Tense Mood Aspect particle sequence to communicate time/aspect features and this is what is most natural to the human brain. Of course, Bickerton was looking at Atlantic based Creoles in general and did not include non-European lexifier Creoles.

Among the many problems his theory faced has been that historical investigation into the demographics of the slave trade shows that in many plantation situations there was rather an increased influx of adult slaves after the first group and not a great increase in the children population, born from the first group, which is a prerequisite for his theory to uphold. Furthermore, empirical studies of multilingual settings show that parents would be at least as much inclined, if not more so, to speak their own (African) mother tongue to their children instead of solely the “community pidgin”. And last but not least, Bickerton is unable to explain why so many Creoles do still have a certain level of morphological tagging. To mention just a few: *Papiamentu* has a prefix for the participial form, the African Creole *Kituba* has two tense prefixes and the West African Portuguese-lexifier Creole *Fa d'Ambu* has a wide range of diminutive or augmentative prefixes.

So with time Bickerton had to restrict his theory to a very small sample of Creole languages, if not solely to his first and primary field of studies, Hawaiian Creole English, thus, taking away its universalistic claims. On the other hand, the striking analysis of common Creole syntactic features, which he has been able to produce, based on a formal generativist grammatical analysis has been very rewarding and still makes a more modest universalistic approach based on innate linguistic features interesting and attractive to those who adhere to the generativist agenda. One thing is for sure; Bickerton has to be credited with propelling Creole languages to the centre of linguistic debate and demonstrating their importance as languages in their own right.

III.3 Other abrupt genesis theories: Relexification and negotiation

As mentioned already, one aspect of Bickerton's hypothesis was that the language development had to take place within one generation. As compared to the development in the case of internal language change, for example, from Latin to Spanish or French this is quite “abrupt”, in one or two generations. Another “abrupt” theory is Claire Lefebvre's theory of relexification. The hypothesis is that adults relexified their own African mother tongues by means of the European language. This theory requires, of course, the socio-linguistic condition of having this African language(s) disappear completely by the time the Creole was formed. She has done intensive studies on Haitian Creole, attempting to prove that it is a relexification of Fon, a Western African language. Thus, in this hypothesis and other variants of the same, the focus is not on the European language, but on the substrate language that partially gave the Creole its semantics and syntax. Further analysis has been done to

detect the substrate African influence in different Surinamese Creoles. One interesting development is the research being done by linguists who are mother tongue speakers of one or more of the historically relevant West African languages. They should be able to discover more profound influences in some Atlantic Creoles. For example, the linguistic department of the University of Amsterdam is involved in that endeavour.

Of course, this relexification theory does not answer all of the questions. Even if one could show that in a particular situation there is a large monolingual community – *Fon* speaking in the case of Haitian plantations –, the theory assumes that the European lexifier would not have had any syntactical influence on the substrate language. Furthermore, relexification normally takes place in a somewhat bilingual situation where the speakers relexify language *A* with words from language *B*, however, in the case of the slaves they were not bilingual French/Creole speakers. As a matter of fact the socio-linguistic situation imposed upon them the need for a new intra-lingual means of communication. Relexification would rather take place later on when a future generation of Creole speakers would relexify the language with words from another language in which they have some competence.

Another abrupt theory of Creole genesis is the different variations on the gradual theory that sees Creole formation as a result of some type of second language acquisition strategy. The European language is being acquired by part of the speech communities, while the lexifier language speakers (e.g. slave owners) can also be involved in the creation stage of the Creole. When people try to acquire another language this will automatically lead to interference from both input languages. A more promising theory is the theory of negotiation developed by Thomason and Kaufman (1988) in which a pidgin or a Creole is the result of cross language negotiation between different groups. Moreover, they have proved that it is not just a matter of simple addition of features from the input languages (European lexifier and African substrate), but features that are not original to any of the input languages can develop because of the need for linguistic compromise.

III.4 Gradualist theories of Genesis

In opposition to the “abrupt” Creole language development reconstructions, gradual development theories have gained prominence in many quarters. Here Creole formation is seen as extending over a number of generations. Especially in the case Jamaican Patois, Haitian Creole, and Sranan Tongo, the English lexifier Creole of Suriname this has been investigated with some success. These theories arose from the interest in historical investigation of written documents of these languages in the 1980’s. The demographic development of the historical speech community also played an important role in the totality. In many cases it has become clear that the proportion of locally born slaves/blacks did not surpass the import of African born blacks in the first generations. So there was no immediate next generation that was populous enough to carry the nativization of the pidgin – that is transforming the inherited pidgin into the mother tongue of the children. Changes detected over the course of time in documents from different periods show that the Creole’s formation was not abrupt, but continued after what was supposed to be the cut-off period.

IV. Bible translation and the socio-linguistic reality

Creole languages have come into their own in the linguistic world and are also catching up in the Bible Translation world. Although, in many Creoles the extant oldest written texts include Scripture material as in the case of Papiamentu, Negerhollands (Danish Virgin Islands), and Sranan Tongo (Suriname), in modern times the advance of Scripture translation has not been always as smooth. In many Creole-speaking societies there has been an engrained sub-estimation of the mother tongue. Especially in situations where the lexifier language co-exists with the Creole language, which it has influenced, people tend to see the latter as a “broken form of the European language”. For example, in Jamaica, there has been a lot of opposition from educational and church circles against translation of Scripture into Patois, because people see the Creole as a substandard form of English. The tendency to decreolize has also been noted, that is when speakers try to use the “higher form” (acrolect) of the Creole that resembles the lexifier language more. The “basilectal” (“basic”, more Creole like form) is often considered to be too primitive or substandard. Even so there are Scripture translations underway in different Creoles in the Caribbean and on the other side of the Atlantic. Haitian Creole and Papiamentu have seen the publication of a complete Bible, while in St Lucian Creole and Sranan Tongo, for example, a New Testament has been issued. There are projects underway in for instance Gullah (Sea Island Creole English), Jamaican Patois, Guadeloupean French Creole and French Guyanese French Creole, and Cape Verdean Creole.

Bible translation offers an opportunity to systematically study these languages better, since the very work of translation results in databases fit for further analysis. Moreover, Bible translation by definition implies standardisation, which is an antidote to a typical problem of oral languages like Creoles, which is extreme (lexical and at times even grammatical) variation. This is what happened in the case of languages like German and English with respectively the Luther Translation and different translations like the King James Versions. The field of Bible translation in Creole languages is indeed an exiting field where different aspects of socio-linguistic analysis come into play and where Creole translations whether in print or in audio format prove to be a very effective means of communication, being languages of the heart.

There remain different challenges for the future, like the need for more analysis of actual translations to provide better information on actual language strategies used by the native speakers. In many cases, there is a great lack of linguistic information where even mother tongue speakers continue to see their own native tongue as inferior or substandard. It is time for a harmony model instead of a conflict model. The Creole language provides identity while the European colonial language, whether it be the lexifier language in the case of French in Guadeloupe and English in Jamaica, or Dutch on Aruba Bonaire and Curaçao, which by a quirk of history is not the main lexifier language of the local Creole, provides upward mobility by means of access to more reflexive scientific discourse. In most situations both will be probably needed, even as Creole in many instances is also entering the field of education and higher learning as a vehicle language. In the traditional conflict model, the speech community would prove its political and ethnic allegiance by exclusively adopting

one of the languages; in a harmony model one would think of complementary functions for the different languages, resulting, for example, in some type of bilingual education.

V. Conclusion

Different aspects of Creole language studies have passed the revue; this has in no way been an exhaustive study. The main problem in Creolistics is the fact that the main players often refuse to admit that despite the similarities between Creoles both in terms of language typology as well as the socio-historical underpinning, no one theory of origin and thus no one analytic tool can encompass the different types of Creoles, in all their actual historical evolution. It would seem that the different contradicting theories would have something to add to our knowledge and our arsenal of analytic tools.

In any case, in order to facilitate Scripture engagement, one cannot bypass these languages as effective means of communication. Often the very translation of Scripture gives them a validity and legitimacy in the eyes of those who are linguistically challenged, while at same time offering a natural means of standardisation and stabilization. The field of descriptive translation studies holds great promise for Creole translations and linguistics; the more we study the process of translation and the actual use of the translation, the more we will falsify our linguistic theories on Creoles and our translation theories in general, and in the Biblical field specifically.