

Contact, Change and Acquisition: A view from hybrid grammars

Enoch O. Aboh, University of Amsterdam

In the literature of language acquisition, creoles are seen as an exceptional case of language change: they result from a break in transmission where a generation of L1 learners (i.e., the creole children) find themselves in a linguistic and cultural vacuum. The received wisdom assumes that, as the number of the African slaves grew and outnumbered that of European colonists on the plantations, the new comers (i.e., the bosals) had less access to the target language and had to learn from each other approximations of the target. Bickerton (1981, 1988, 1999) argues that the acquisition of such restructured varieties resulted in an extremely impoverished linguistic system (i.e., the pidgin) characterized by the loss of a great number of lexical and grammatical items. Bickerton (1988: 273) further concluded that “Children with no prior language experience but with their native language capacity to guide them will take that same input and make good any deficit between it and a natural language.” The newly created language, however, is “in some elusive sense simpler than [...] older languages (Bickerton’s 1988: 274).” Put differently, the supposedly creole simplicity is rooted in the creole ancestor: the pidgin. This view is embraced by McWhorter (2001) in his article “The world’s simplest grammars are creole grammars” and in related studies, where the label creole stands for a cluster of linguistic traits defining a typological class (of simple languages), presumably a cluster that is closer to UG (but see Muysken 1988, DeGraff 1999, 2001a, b, 2003, Mufwene 2001, 2008 for a critique). Under Bickerton’s view, the creole children did not acquire a language but created a new language that has no historical relation other than lexical with any existing language. This in turn would mean that while the study of creoles is important for understanding the computational system underlying Language, such a study does not necessarily directly bear on issues of language acquisition whether L1 or L2.

In this talk, I will take the non-orthodox view that the study of creoles directly bears on issues of first language acquisition. Building on work by Mufwene (2001, 2008) on the evolution of language, I assume that every situation of acquisition involves contact and change: either between varying idiolects of the same language (L1 acquisition), or between idiolects of different languages (L2 acquisition). I conclude from this that language acquisition is a driver of language change.

Given this view, creoles are indeed exceptional, not so much because they represent the barest expression of UG or emerged from a break in transmission (as argued by some), but because they provide us with a wonderful empirical domain whereby we can hope to isolate the ingredients of contact, change and acquisition. The study of creole languages, though it requires some amount of reverse engineering, may inform us on how new idiolects emerge and may spread through a speech community. This is so because:

1. Creoles developed recently (within about four centuries) and have not lived long enough for their original ‘ingredients’ to fade out due to a long history of linguistic change.
2. Creoles are contrastive and result from the extensive contact between typologically different languages (e.g., Romance/Germanic vs. Niger-Congo), and thus differ from languages which developed from the contact between genetically and typologically related languages (English).

Because of these two properties, creoles represent a gold mine where, focusing on specific aspects of the clause structure, we can identify distinctive features contributed by the source languages and reconstruct how these evolve into new variants (i.e., idiolects). To this purpose, I adopt a biological

approach to the evolution of language, and suggest that a new language (e.g., a creole, a contact language) may emerge from the recombination of *distinctive syntactic features* (by analogy to gene recombination in biology) from different varieties or languages into a coherent system representing the speaker's Internal-language. This hypothesis adheres to Aboh's (2006, 2007, 2009) view that the agents of change are individual speakers acting on linguistic features anchored in functional categories, the locus of parameters and language variation. Adopting Mufwene's (2001, 2008) evolutionary approach to language change, and work on competing grammars (Pintzuk 1996, Kroch 1989, 2000), I assume that new languages emerge from a process of competition and selection allowing a recombination of features expressed by functional items. A functional item is regarded as a triplet involving semantics, morphosyntax and phonology. I argue that language contact or language acquisition may lead to fission of this triplet such that any component may be affected differently under the pressure of the competing grammars. Therefore, the ecology of language contact/acquisition allows the competing components of functional categories to recombine into new variants. Under this theory, the so-called creoles are linguistically hybrid (in the biological sense). They emerged from the recombination of linguistic features from typologically different languages. As a result, creoles develop diverse and often syntactically and semantically opaque features which could not have arisen in the context of their source languages taken individually. What is needed therefore is not a theory of *creolization*, but a formal account for how distinct syntactic features may recombine into a more complex and viable linguistic system. As such, understanding the genesis of new languages, such as creoles, represents the first step to understand the emergence of (complex) linguistic systems that underlie language acquisition and language evolution.

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