

The Demographics of Creole Formation in Hawaii

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Demographic evidence has long been used in creole studies as a means of inferring the necessary conditions of creolization and the relative roles of adults and children in the process. Baker (1982) and Baker & Corne (1986) argued that population changes producing demographic disproportion were critical to the development of creoles, Bickerton (1984) claimed that the radicalness of creoles (i.e. morphosyntactic distance from their superstrates) depended on similar disparities between segments of the population, and Singler (1992) critiqued Bickerton's characterization of creole genesis on the basis of population data from Suriname. McWhorter (2000), on the other hand, has disputed the relevance of demographic disproportion to creolization.

In the paper which follows, I will show that demographics are indeed relevant but must be balanced with other sociolinguistic data of linguistic practice. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information on the sociolinguistics of language contact in the case of most creoles formed in the 17th and 18th centuries, so demographics plays a fairly prominent role in theories concerning their development. But the recent formation of Hawaii Creole English (HCE) in a setting replete with detailed sociolinguistic and demographic records makes an assessment of the value of demographic data possible. These data include immigration statistics, censuses of various kinds, sociological surveys, and a corpus of life histories (reported at NWAV 34) that contain material of both sociolinguistic and demographic significance.

The population changes resulting from the massive immigration of contract labor to Hawaii after 1876 accord well with attested changes in linguistic practice, consistent with the assumptions of the effects of demographic disproportion. This includes the stabilization of Pidgin Hawaiian as the predominant pidgin on plantations, the timing of the shift to Hawaii Pidgin English (HPE) on plantations, and the order of language shift between the different language groups to the creole. Demographic evidence also highlights differences between the plantation and metropolitan contexts and partially explains why HCE resembles the HPE spoken in the city far more than the variety on plantations. Moreover generational differences between different language groups parallels patterns of language shift. But demographic evidence can be misleading as well. The overwhelming numbers of Japanese immigrants around 1900 and 1910 would lead one to expect substantial Japanese influence on HCE, when in fact Japanese substratal influence is slight. Social motivation and identity also provide more far-reaching explanations of certain patterns of linguistic practice that demographics cannot explain, such as why the basilect formed in the face of extensive contact with superstrate speakers.

References

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