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*Defining creole*. By John McWhorter. Oxford University Press. 2005. Pp. 351. Hardback, \$49.00.

Reviewed by Umberto Ansaldo (Universiteit van Amsterdam)<sup>1</sup>

There are several, understandable reasons why the thesis of the "Creole Prototype", originally proposed by John McWhorter in 1998, would cause controversy: issues of simplicity and complexity, when applied to cognitive and cultural aspects of human groups, cannot but attract disagreement based on differential subjective views, underpinned by philosophical stances, theoretical predilections and political agendas. In this sense, perhaps, McWhorter can be blamed for being naïve in not expecting the Prototype idea (PI) to cause any controversy (2005: 6); but in this monograph under review, the author seems to be seeking redemption from, or at least clarification of, a debate that has kept the world of creole studies rather alive for nearly a decade. In acknowledging the "unsuitable brief and underargued presentation" (p.6) of his original statement of the PI, McWhorter also suggests that it was inappropriate for the claims underlying the PI to appear scattered across different publications (and in different years), because, he believes, it is the sum of his thesis that should be held up for evaluation. In this review, then, I have decided to engage with the sum of his theories, and not with the parts. There has after all already been much, often critical, engagement with parts of the PI, my own included (see Ansaldo and Matthews, 2001, Gil, 2001); moreover, the collective thesis presented in *Defining Creole* goes beyond the most frequently discussed aspects of the PI, and reveals some interesting aspects of the "definition" that might otherwise go unnoticed. This is what I largely engage with here. As such, this review is not a chapter by chapter tabulation of contents of McWhorter 2005 (cp. Winkler 2005): those familiar with his work will recognize the basic issues without needing a detailed description since the monograph, though updated and revised, builds

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1. I want to thank Lisa Lim and Stephen Matthews for comments on a draft of this review.

heavily on the author's collected articles and chapters over the past decade; those unfamiliar with the PI will simply have to pick up the book and read it.

The definition of "creole" as a synchronic term is aptly presented in the first chapter, the most important one for evaluating the totality of McWhorter's claims. The idea of a set of features defining creole languages rests on two observations (p. 10): (A) "creoles are indisputably new languages", and (B) "grammars are dynamic rather than static systems". It is important to note that (A) clearly relies on a historical definition of "creole", and (B) assumes a diachronic view of grammar. For these reasons, the author argues, it must be possible to find signs of youth in a new grammar, or alternatively to identify features that only arise over time. These three notorious features are: (1) inflectional affixation intended as a morphological, as opposed to an abstract, UG feature, which arises over time if a free morpheme is reanalyzed as grammatical and becomes bound; (2) tone systems, which emerge through tonogenesis from phonetic erosion, specifically grammatical tone systems involving contrastive monosyllables and grammatical functions; and (3) derivational noncompositionality, arising through semantic drift.

The crucial thing about features (1)–(3) is that, according to McWhorter, they are by-products of language change, *not inherent to UG*, i.e. not necessary for effective communication. Any one or two of these features can be found in creole languages; but any natural language of the world lacking all of these three traits will be a creole language (p. 11). Older languages display these traits because an older language would have evolved away from pure UG features. *Prototypical* creoles, therefore, are creoles that have not yet aged away nor been affected by (a) contact with other languages not related to their genesis and (b) substrate/superstrate interference.

The fundamental reasons for *prototypical* creoles to be the way they are, according to the author, are the following:

- i. Creoles develop out of a strategy for basic communication encoding only essential communicative concepts, namely *pidginization*. A pidgin, which for McWhorter is not a natural language but a utilitarian vehicle of restricted communication, can be seen as an instance of early Second Language Acquisition (SLA) which, in the right typological environment, will show the relative "simplicity" attributed to creoles (pp. 33–34).
- ii. Creoles are based, in particular, on West African pidgins, developed in the "castles" of the West Africa Coast. These are seen as preexisting contact environments in which creoles developed. Such varieties constituted *the target*, as "creole speakers perceive their languages not as steps on the way to a standard but as vehicles of group identity in their own right"; many creoles, according

to McWhorter, happen in a context with “rich access to the dominant language” (p. 244–246).

- iii. Creoles shared common processes of language change, as seen in the grammatical and lexical idiosyncrasies that Atlantic English-based creoles (AECs) share, and which are not found (exactly) in the substrate languages (p. 200). This argues for a “robust” common ancestor spoken across the Caribbean and on the West African Coast.

What has been sketched so far is, to my mind, the essence of the Creole Prototype Hypothesis. Such a hypothesis leads to two predictions (p. 36). The weak version suggests that, as younger languages with the three traits (1)–(3) are rare, creoles (or at least *prototypical* creoles) show a confluence of (absence of) features not present in older languages. It should perhaps be noted that while acknowledging that the absence of this confluence in older languages is a statistical rarity, McWhorter still finds this worthy of investigation. The strong version predicts that no younger language combines these three features.

I have stressed the use of “prototypical” premodifying “creole” because McWhorter makes a crucial concession to the relevance of what has been referred to as feature pool (Mufwene, 2001) or typological matrix (Ansaldo, 2004): “creoles [that] descend from lingua francas with ample affixation and/or lexical and morphosyntactic tone would not conform to the Creole Prototype, and this is indeed the case” (p. 20). This means that, among the factors presented above as (i)–(iii), the implicit notion of a common typological feature pool appears as a salient condition for the emergence of prototypical creoles. A logical and necessary consequence of this is that, had the preexisting contact languages developed in a completely different typological environment, the creoles could have shown a different set of “typical” traits from the ones defined for the creole prototype. Taking the role of typology seriously is essential for a full understanding of the outcome of high-contact environments (Ansaldo in prep.). With this in mind, I believe that a more cautious claim based on (i)–(iii) may be put forward; though undoubtedly still controversial, this would have the strength of resting on sound argumentation and abundant data analysis. This claim would hold that AECs (and perhaps some other creoles based on languages other than English but influenced by AECs) show a set of common features that arise from (1) common ancestry and (2) contact-induced restructuring typical of early SLA in an environment where isolating typology meets a mildly agglutinative one. These cannot, at this point, be regarded as universal tendencies of pidginization, since, as the author himself admits, early SLA strategies could lead to different results in different environments. The weak version may thus stand in a relativistic sense, i.e. considering that the prototype really applies to an environment where West African types meet Standard Average

European. The strong version is, however, difficult to understand, as McWhorter has already admitted that finding a conflation of the three traits of underspecification is a statistical possibility, however typologically unlikely. When dealing with the possibility that Riau Indonesian (Gil, 2001) might fit the bill of, at least, an older language as underspecified as a prototypical creole, following McWhorter's (2001) diagnostics based on phonology, syntax, grammaticalization and morphology, the author (p. 68–71) notes that, crucially, Riau Indonesian — which he questionably treats as a relative of Bazaar Malay — is acquired by adults “in untutored, nonprescriptive fashion” (p. 69); in other words, it undergoes erosion and simplification typical of early SLA or pidginization. “If I were presented with a language whose history did not involve acquisition being more often by adults outside of a school setting than by children, and this language were nevertheless as underspecified as Riau Indonesian”, he claims, he would admit the strong hypothesis refuted. The balance so far then is that a constructive interpretation of the weak hypothesis needs refining, to include the typological dimension, which renders it relative. The strong hypothesis, I am sure the author realizes, requires a scenario so improbable that it may never be testable; the already small set of potential candidates for falsifying the PI is decreasing.

One of the aspects of a “total” view of McWhorter's thesis I find puzzling is the following: for a work grounded in a diachronic view of language (assumption B above, i.e. grammars as dynamic systems), what good does it do to try to establish a synchronic class of languages? Such an attempt would be rather curious if carried out within historically established language families such as, say, the Romance languages. It is widely accepted that the languages traditionally grouped within this class share a number of features due to their common ancestry. It is also accepted that a number of high-contact varieties fall at the edge of this family, e.g. the Rhaeto-Romanic languages, i.e. they are not “prototypically” Romance. But would it make any sense to claim that Romance languages are alike because of a shared process of Romanization akin to (McWhorter's) pidginization? And would it help to say that this process is defined by a number of traits these languages “lack”, found in other diachronic processes when compared to a set of features typical of a different group of languages? If we picked three basic typological features that distinguish Romance languages from Slavic ones, would we think of constructing a thesis based on UG to account for this difference, or would we invoke differential paths along the possible grammaticalization clines? As it happens, McWhorter does not need to invoke UG for the focal points of his thesis to stand; nor is it necessary to construct a synchronic type for what can only be understood in diachronic sense, namely the emergence of new structure (Givón, 1979). McWhorter does not need UG nor an abstract synchronic stage because he already has the theory of common ancestry in West African pidgins (though we would need more

detailed information about the possible nature of these varieties), which applies at least to AECs and their close relatives; the similarities come from here and, as long as the typological pool does not vary too much or as long as there are no drastic substrate/ superstrate deviations from it, McWhorter argues, the prototype stands, at least for this subclass of “creoles”. But, interestingly, what McWhorter clearly still needs (p. 11 and claim A above) is a historical definition of the larger class of creoles. Such a definition encompasses languages born in the middle of the second millennium, amid displaced multiethnic communities, with limited possibility or necessity to acquire a dominant language. A language is, ultimately, a social and historical entity (see, for instance, Croft 2000, or Mufwene 2001).

McWhorter’s main worry seems to be that, if there were no “linguistic” difference(s) between creoles and other languages, “creole studies ought to be the exclusive province of anthropologists, historians and sociologists with a grammatical study of Papiamentu tense and aspect no more pertinent to the field than an equivalent one on Hungarian” (p. 37). I struggle to understand this: does the fact that Germanic and Romance languages are not “linguistically” — in McWhorter’s sense — meaning, I presume, “ontologically” — different from one another — make the study of their tense and aspect, or any other feature of their grammar, redundant? What this statement reveals is that McWhorter too, like many others, suffers from “creole exceptionalism”, a problematic aspect of current linguistic theorizing (see DeGraff, 2005). The study of “creoles” or “creolization theory” is a case of a historical construct that results from colonial practices and nation-state ideology, centered on the notion of “creole speech community”, and leads to the establishment of a whole array of exceptionalist and typically highly speculative accounts of “creole” evolution. Patterns of this type are well captured in Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice* (1977) as “slips” resulting from underestimating the limits of one’s own point of view:

To consider regularity, that is, what recurs with a certain statistically measurable frequency, as the product of a consciously laid-down and consciously respected ruling (which implies explaining its genesis and efficacy), or as the product of an unconscious regulating by a mysterious cerebral and/or social mechanism, is to slip from the model of reality to the reality of the model. (Bourdieu, 1977: 29)

To end, there are two things which are important to note: Even in a revised weak version, McWhorter’s *Defining creole* can still offer several important insights towards “creole theory”; I briefly present these below, to provide a perspective on the parts that constitute this book as a whole. His latest book supports the dismissal of the ill-defined and poorly researched idea of “imperfect” or “special” acquisition, in my mind undoubtedly a product of Eurocentric, colonial ideology (see also DeGraff, 2005, Ansaldo and Matthews forthcoming); it also offers a more gradualist,

and long-term, scenario for language creation (see Arends, 2001), thus putting another dubious notion, that of “abrupt” creolization, in the proper light (see also Chapter 10 on language intertwining and creolization). It reminds us that we still know extremely little of what does and does not constitute UG (particularly interesting is the discussion of predicate negation in Chapter 7) — and that, I may add, UG is too often invoked or assumed but hardly testable (Tomasello, 2005). In dismissing the limited access scenario (see, for instance, Chapter 9), McWhorter also challenges aspects of the superstratist views of creole formation: it is an illusion, according to the author, that English and French would have been targeted; the slaves would not have had the need nor the inclination to acquire “targets”, as they could rely on the preexisting interethnic varieties (Chapters 5, 8, 9). Another strength of this book is that it tries to engage with general linguistic theory, e.g. typology, historical linguistics (Chapters 7, 8) and SLA (of particular interest is the discussion of zero copula in Chapter 6), and it always pays due attention to the role of contact and restructuring in the history of a language (perhaps most clearly so in Chapter 11, where the history of English is revisited).

I believe that, though critical, I have not been speculatively selecting isolated aspects of the PI in order to evaluate them, and I have focused on the larger picture without questioning sub-claims, data analysis and interpretations of theory. This brings me to the second important point, and one with which I end this review: that, as it often happens, strength and weakness are but two sides of the same phenomenon. In tackling all the major truisms of creole studies, McWhorter makes a remarkable attempt at reviving a field that otherwise, at times, tends towards intellectual inbreeding. In linking his arguments to so many different fields of linguistics (and with so much data), McWhorter reminds the field that, ultimately, it is only within the larger framework of general linguistics that the study of creole languages becomes rewarding. For example, the debate surrounding the issue of “simplicity” has revealed how badly prepared the field of linguistics still is when it comes to having to define unbiased, objective grounds on which to measure simplicity, be they syntactic, semantic or other (but see Dahl, 2004 on complexity). In this sense, surprisingly little has happened over the past two decades (Muysken, 1990). Perhaps more importantly, the simplicity debate also reveals how simplistic the field of linguistics can be about the ideological underpinnings of its own theorizing; understanding this, is a prerequisite for any sound theory of language to emerge.

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Reviewed by Zuzana Tomková (University of Chicago)

## 1. Introduction

The subtitle of Peter Mühlhäusler's (2003) *Language of Environment, Environment of Language: A Course in Ecolinguistics* suggests that this book may answer the question of what *ecolinguistics* means. As I argue below, the book neither sheds much light on the question, nor does it provide a persuasively structured overall argument.