

Review of *Deconstructing Creole*

Edited by Umberto Ansaldo, Stephen Matthews and Lisa Lim

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Midway through my undergraduate studies, a friendly lecturer warned me that the cosy truths I had learned in my first year would all have to be unlearned before I graduated. Perhaps that is also the message of this timely book, which seeks to challenge much of what we ‘know’ about creole languages: in fact, to test and critique many of the cosiest ‘truths’ which have become established over the years as the field of creole studies has matured. The particular ‘truth’ that the contributors to this volume seek to deconstruct is the notion of ‘creole uniqueness’, the idea that creoles are a distinct group of languages with special features that make them different from all others. As Ansaldo and Matthews say in their introductory chapter, ‘the ultimate goal is to overcome the artificial dichotomy between creole and non-creole languages, in order to integrate the study of creolization phenomena into mainstream linguistics, i.e. the study of language variation and language creation’ (p. 3).

The notion of creole ‘uniqueness’ or ‘exceptionalism,’ has become sufficiently established in the collective consciousness of creolists and linguists to be taken as ‘fact’ by many. It is supported, according to Ansaldo and Matthews (p. 4), by three parallel lines of enquiry which seek to demonstrate that creoles are ‘special’ with regard to (1) their structure, (2) their acquisitional environment, (3) their differentness from ‘old’ languages. The notion is vulnerable on all three counts, as individual chapters in this volume show. Refutation of these points, say Ansaldo and Matthews, will lead to acceptance of the fact that creoles are not a particular *type* of language but rather the ‘products of high-contact environments in specific sociohistorical settings’ (ibid.), and allow the field of ‘creole studies’ to return to the mainstream of linguistics. Furthermore, they argue, ‘exceptionalist scenarios’ must be seen as ‘ideological constructs that viewed speakers of creole languages as having failed in one way

or another, in respect to language evolution, language acquisition and language creation’.

The first of the volume’s two parts, *Typology and grammar* mainly addresses the question of the ‘exceptionality’ of creoles in terms of their structural characteristics. Three papers question the pervasive claim of ‘simplicity’. The assertion that creoles have simple morphology is attacked by Joseph T. Farquharson in ‘Typology and grammar: Creole morphology revisited’. Farquharson says that creolists have made the claim without paying due attention to the facts. He adduces data from several creoles, including Haitian, Jamaican, Saramaccan and Berbice Dutch, to show that in fact morphology – especially derivational morphology – can be substantially complex.

Two further chapters continue this theme. In ‘The role of typology in language creation: A descriptive take’ Enoch O. Aboh and Umberto Ansaldo examine noun phrase inflectional morphology in Caribbean creoles and Sri Lanka Malay in relation to the input languages. They conclude that the outcomes are the result of a process of feature competition and selection from a ‘feature pool’ at the time of formation of the language. Relevant to this process are the syntax/discourse prominence of the features concerned, their relative markedness or otherwise, and their frequency (p. 63). Given these principles, they argue, it is possible to show that many of the properties of Surinam Creoles (so-called ‘radical creoles’) result from shared typological properties in the African and European input languages – and moreover, that the creoles are more mixed than previously suggested (ibid.) On the other hand, Sri Lanka Malay shows noun phrase inflections which are arguably not ‘simple’, but can be traced to prominent features of the adstrate languages Tamil and Sinhala. In ‘Creoles, complexity and associational semantics’ David Gil tests the notion of ‘simplicity’ with respect to compositional semantics, ‘the ways in which the meanings of complex expressions are derived from the meanings of their constituent parts’ (p. 71). He uses experimental data to measure the availability of associational interpretations in a range of languages. If creole grammars are ‘the world’s simplest grammars’ (a quote from McWhorter 1997 which Gil repeatedly challenges) then we should expect them readily to accept complex interpretations of expressions in which relations are grammatically un- or under-specified. But in fact, according to Gil’s results, a significant number of non-creole languages are more associational than any of the creoles tested.

Two more papers further challenge widely accepted views of creole ‘evolution’. Anthony P.

Grant's contribution, 'Admixture and after: the Chamic languages and the Creole Prototype' shows with respect to the Chamic languages of South East Asia that they superficially resemble what McWhorter 1998 calls 'prototypical creoles' (lexical tone and bound inflectional morphology are absent, and there is only semantically compositional derivation). However, there is sufficient documentation of earlier stages of these languages to show that they have not developed from pidgins, nor undergone any kind of rapid restructuring or 'creolisation' process. Instead, their current form is the result of 'massive structural and lexical influence' through language contact over a long period. In 'Relexification and pidgin development: the case of Cape Dutch Pidgin', Hans den Besten shows that the creole Khoekhoe Afrikaans cannot have resulted from the earlier, historically attested Cape Dutch Pidgin through a straightforward process of relexification (even with partial stripping of functional elements). Rather, 'linguistic creativity' and 'adaptation to Dutch syntax' must be seen to be involved (p. 160).

Part 2 of the volume, *Sociohistorical contexts* deals mainly with the relationship between sociolinguistic context and the linguistic outcome. In 'Sociohistorical contexts: transmission and transfer', Jeff Siegel examines the issues concerning the transmission of 'substrate' features into creoles and the ideological implications of different theories. Although there is a debate between those who believe that creoles are the result of some kind of 'abnormal' transmission (Thomason and Kaufman 1988) and those who believe that creoles developed gradually from their lexifiers, Siegel points out that both sides share a belief in the role of second language learning in creole development. But the 'relatively minor differences' in this respect have 'major ideological implications' (p. 195): the notion that creoles are restructured varieties of their lexifiers, rather than new creations, does not fit with the postcolonial view of creoles which has been embraced by many eminent creolists as a way of promoting creoles as independent languages worthy of study and of use in prestigious domains. In turn, 'gradualists' like DeGraff (2005) have argued that abnormal transmission, and the exceptional status for creoles which it implies, are extensions of the old racist and colonialist ideologies which link creolisation, directly or indirectly, to slavery and subordination.

This link is challenged by Umberto Ansaldo, Lisa Lim and Salikoko S. Mufwene's chapter, 'the sociolinguistic history of the Peranakans: what it tells us about "creolization"'. They discuss the social origins and linguistic history of the Peranakans or 'Baba Malays', the descendents of Chinese migrants to Malaya, whose language has been identified by a number

of scholars as a creole or pidgin. They demonstrate that irrespective of whether Baba Malay is a 'creole' it is certainly a hybrid or mixed language variety, but it is not the result of any cataclysmic social upheaval. Nor has it ever been associated with an underclass; its speakers have, and have always had, high social and economic status. They conclude that 'new hybrid cultures and vernaculars' can emerge from specific situations of population contact but that these need not be considered to be exceptional, 'because contact has played some catalyst role in the speciation of almost any modern language today' (p. 223).

The interplay between economics and language is also the theme of 'The complexity that really matters: The role of political economy in creole genesis' by Nicholas Faraclas, Don E. Walicek, Mervyn Alleyne, Wilfredo Geigel and Luis Ortiz. They develop an argument that the specific sociohistorical, political and economic circumstances and ideologies of the former slave colonies can account for different linguistic outcomes to a large extent. The nuanced detail of these situations is the 'complexity that really matters' in determining linguistic outcomes. In the Spanish colonies slavery involved 'civilising' and to an extent assimilating the slave population, subsistence farming rather than plantations, and politics based on struggles between a local 'creole' elite and the metropole. The English and Dutch colonies presented a strong contrast in all respects, with plantation-based sugar monoculture dominating economically and driving a capitalist system in which slaves were mere labour units and the planters saw themselves as expatriates. The linguistic outcomes can be seen to bear a direct relationship to these historical and social facts: the English colonies developed creoles with considerable structural differences from English and substantial African influence while in the Spanish colonies the population spoke local dialects of Spanish with relatively little African influence.

In 'Creole metaphors in cultural analysis' Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton discuss how the metaphor of 'creolisation' has been taken up by other disciplines, particularly anthropology, as a way of modelling global cultural processes. Ironically, this use of 'creolisation' to free anthropological description from 'totalising assumptions about integrated cultural systems and homogenous communities' (p. 265) is at odds with much of what has actually happened within creole studies: for example the ideologically charged debates between 'superstratists' and 'substratists'. While in some respects creolistics has been quite radical within linguistics, Harris and Rampton conclude that it has largely missed out on new perspectives within sociology and cultural theory, so that there are 'good grounds for doubting [its] value [...] as a

ground-breaking model or template for the analysis of cultural contact' (p. 273). To see how people process 'cultural mixing, translation and difference', they argue, it is better to study dialogic interaction directly. This they do with an example of an interaction which involves adolescent participants of different ethnic backgrounds in a complex display of switching between different language varieties including – as it happens – Creole. Methodologically, they claim, their preferred approach of 'sociolinguistic micro-ethnography' is constrained in a way which contrasts with the necessarily speculative nature of much traditional creole linguistics, based as it is on incomplete historical data. They suggest that 'non-creolist' sociolinguistics has much to offer to this field.

It is of course possible to point out flaws and weaknesses in the contributions here and there. The papers represent different levels of theoretical development and the argumentation of some is more robust than that of others. The papers are patchy in their acknowledgement of earlier work along the same lines (although several mention the significance of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller); in fact many of the ideas have appeared before, though not always so clearly articulated and not, as here, in concert. Nor have creolists been quite so complacent about their field as the volume might suggest: some of the stagnant concepts are more readily found just outside the field (among non-creolists) rather than inside it.

This book will arouse controversy. Each side will be preparing for battle. Is 'exceptionality' a patronising product of colonial ideologies or a robust theoretical finding? The truth of course, is more complex. The Caribbean English-lexifier creoles, which are often treated as prototypes and where the ideological debate seems to centre, have grounds for being called 'exceptional' (or 'unusual') in terms of the social circumstances of their origin. But there is no need to pin the label 'failure' on the earliest speakers. Creoles are 'real' languages whether or not they are 'dialects' of a lexifier. Like any language they are creative responses to their contexts. The 'non-creolist' sociolinguistics recommended by Harris and Rampton suggests a way forward, where 'creoles' are still interesting, but do not have to bear the burden of being 'exceptional' and 'theory-busting'. Certainly, the time has come to re-examine, perhaps rethink, some of the key notions of 'creole studies' – including the issue of whether there really should be a 'creole studies' – and this book is a landmark on the way to that.

References

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