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CLASS 20: THE GRAMMAR OF CREOLES

PIDGINS VS CREOLES

The term *pidgin* has somewhat **unclear etymology** — perhaps it's a caricature of "business" pronounced as a Chinese pidgin. More importantly (for the linguist) it is

"a **contact vernacular**, normally **not the native language** of any of its speakers [...] it is characterized by a limited vocabulary, an **elimination of many grammatical devices** such as number and gender, and a drastic **reduction of redundant forms**. [...] **The only way in which a pidgin may escape extinction is by evolving into a creole.**"

[DeCamp 1971: 15-16; my emphasis — KKG]

- a pidgin is **no one's native language** (contact language; adult language)
- few or no **inflections**
- fixed, simple **word order**
- **lexicon** of 1,000-2,000 words
- simplified **phonetic** system

A *creole* is taken to be a first language spoken by an entire speech community.

- **pidgin** in its ancestry
- grammatically distinct from its **lexifier** language
- **simplified** and regular grammar
- expanded, stabilized **lexicon**
- theorized to develop as the **native language** of the children of pidgin-speakers
- Bickerton's **bioprogramming** theory

"Humans have a **biological program (hardwiring) for language** that is distinct from whatever general learning resources they may have. In other words, a human being comes into the world with a **capacity for acquiring a language**, and this capacity is **of no use for learning anything but language.**" [Bickerton 1983: 202; my emphasis — KKG]

An **expanded pidgin** is somewhere between a pidgin and a creole — to the extent that the distinction is real **Tok Pisin** (Papua New Guinea) has been argued to be one.

Pidginization is a "complex process of sociolinguistic change comprising reduction in inner form, with convergence, in the context of restricted use" (Hymes 1971: 84).

Creolization is a "complex process of sociolinguistic change comprising expansion of inner form, with convergence, in the context of extension of use" (Hymes 1971: 84).

ASPECTS OF CREOLE GRAMMAR

I want to present some issues in the **grammar of creoles** (morphology, syntax), concentrating on English-lexifier creoles (**superstratum**) and their various **substrata**.

Bickerton (1983: 51-72) identified twelve features of Creole grammars:

1. **Movement rules (placing focused constituents in sentence-initial position):** Creoles only use this method of focusing. Other strategies, such as stress or tone patterns which are used in other languages (substrata) are not adopted.
2. **Articles:** Creoles handle articles without any variation. All creoles have a system identical to Hawai'i Creole English — definite article for presupposed-specific NP, indefinite for asserted-specific NP, and zero for non-specific NP.
3. **Tense-modality-aspect (TMA) systems:** The majority of creoles express TMA by means of three preverbal free morphemes which occur in the same order.
4. **Realized and unrealized complements:** In creole 'languages' complementizers are selected according to the semantics of the verb.
5. **Relativization and subject-copying:** Most creoles have relative nouns, unlike pidgins, at least when the head noun is also subject of the relative clause.
6. **Negation:** Generally, non-definite subjects and VP constituents in creoles must be negated in addition to the verb (some form of 'negative concord').
7. **Existential and possessive:** Many creoles use the same lexical item to express existential ('there is') and possessive ('have') meaning (see class presentation).
8. **Copula:** Characteristically, creole 'languages' do not have a copula *be*. There are separate forms for each of the semantically distinct functions fulfilled by copula *be*. This goes together with the next feature (see also class presentation).
9. **Adjectives:** In creoles, adjectives often function as verbs (predicates!).
10. **Questions:** No creole 'language' shows any difference in syntactic structure between questions and statements. Intonation is used to mark this difference.
11. **Question words are bimorphemic:** The first morpheme (e.g. what makes English *wh*-words "*wh*") is derived mostly from a superstrate word.
12. **Passive equivalents:** Passive constructions are rare in creole 'languages'.

Issues in Verbal Morphosyntax

The **unmarked verb** (simple form) refers to whatever time is in focus (from context).

(1) *Miskito Coast CE (Nicaragua)*

Him a di uona. Him **tek** dem an **put** dem an dis wie [...] die **kom** an him **liiv** dem all hiia an path.

'He is their owner. He **takes** them and **puts** them on the right path [...] They **come** and he **leaves** them all in that place and **goes** off.' (from Holm 1978)

- (2) *Miskito Coast CE (Nicaragua)*
 Wi **liiv** from der an **kom** down hiir fo stodi. Ai **staat** to pas mai gried-dem...
 'We **left** that place and **came** down here so I could study. I **started** to pass from
 one grade to the next...' (from Holm 1978)

This grammatical property is typical of many **West African languages**, for example:

- (3) *Yoruba*
 mo **jɛun**
 'I eat' / 'I ate'

Creoles make use of the so-called **anterior tense** — similar to the past tense in Indo-European languages, but slightly different: in **basilectal creoles**, the action of the following verb took place **before time in focus** when anterior time is used (through a **morpheme**). And again this is found in **non-creole languages** (possible substrata):

- (4) *Yoruba*
 mo **ti** jɛun
 'I have (already) eaten' / 'I had (already) eaten'

While arguably a **substratum-property**, the **influence of the superstratum** language cannot be disputed, since it often determines the **form** of the anterior marker:

- (5) Jamaican CE: *ben* (English: *been*)
 Haitian CF: *te* (French: *était / étê*)
 São Tomé CP: *tava* (Portuguese: *estava*)

Progressive aspect is also expressed by formal markers:

- (6) *Miskito Coast CE (Nicaragua)*
 Mi baan wen hi **waz ruulin**.
 'I was born when he was ruling.' (from Holm 1978)
- (7) *da* (CE), *ka* (CF), *ka* (São Tomé CP), *na* (Guinea-Bissau CP), *ta* (Cape Verde CP)

A lot more can be said on the workings of **creole TMA** (tense – modality – aspect) — which makes for another nice paper topic by the way (cf. point 3 from above). A very nice illustration is the **TMA-chart from Sranan** (transparency, see references).

Sranan (Surinam)

Sranan (or Sranan Tongo) is the native language of one-third inhabitants of Surinam.

- mostly descendants of **African slaves**, **English** planters (17c), **Dutch** (late 17c)
- basic **vocabulary** is **English** — Sranan must have been developed very **quickly**
- **creolization** was developed **slowly** instead — this would explain the strong **influence** of the **substrate** language on Sranan, in particular on grammar

Let's look at Sranan morphosyntax. Sranan has **seven pronoun forms**:

(8)	singular	plural
1	<i>mi</i>	<i>wi</i>
2	<i>yu</i>	<i>unu</i>
3	<i>a</i> (subject) <i>en</i> (object/possessive)	<i>den</i>

Sranan distinguishes in the **third person singular** between the **subject** and the **object** case. It is further noticeable that Sranan also has **distinct singular and plural second person** forms ('you-singular' *yu* and 'you-plural' *unu*, of African origin).

In Sranan the **plural** is either **not marked** at all or it is marked through the **definite article**. **Tense and aspect** are indicated by the markers *e* (**progressive**) and *o* (**future**). They can be combined with *ben* (**past tense marker**), for example (cf. transparency):

(9)	a.	<i>mi e waka</i> 'I am walking'	c.	<i>mi ben e waka</i> 'I was walking'
	b.	<i>mi ben waka</i> 'I walked'	d.	<i>mi ben o waka</i> 'I was about to walk'

The **copula *be*** is expressed in different ways in Sranan (see class presentation):

(10)	a.	<i>locative de</i> Rude de na oso 'Rudy is at home'
	b.	<i>equivative a</i> Rudy a stukaman 'Rudy is a student'
	c.	<i>adjectival Ø</i> a siki 'he is sick'

There are two possibilities to form a **possessive relation** in Sranan.

(11)	a.	<i>a pikin fu Mary</i> (marker <i>fu</i>) 'the child of Mary'
	b.	<i>Mary pikin</i> (word order) 'Mary's child'

Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea)

In Tok Pisin, **plural markers are not used**, so 'one pig' and 'three pig', for example, are grammatically correct. However, the Tok Pisin **pronominal system** has got **singular, dual, trial and plural** meaning — speakers **add to the singular** form the **number** of persons and the morpheme *pela* (which means 'more than one'):

- (12) a. *yu* 'you' (sg)
 b. *yutupela* 'you (two)' (dual)
 c. *yutripela* 'you (three)' (trial)
 d. *yupela* 'you (all)' (plural)

In addition to these markings of plurality, **two sets of non-singular pronouns** exist in Tok Pisin which mark **inclusive** or **exclusive** meaning. For example:

- (13) a. *yumi* 'we/us including you'
 b. *mipela* 'we/us not including you'

Furthermore, there are **no English tense and aspect markers** like *-ed* or *-ing*, which can be seen in the example *Mi wok nau*. *Nau* signifies that the action is taking place at that moment, but **nothing is added to the verb** to show this clearly. This does not mean that there is no tense marking in Tok Pisin. The **tenses are lexically marked**:

- (14) a. *bin* past
 b. *bai* will-future
 c. *i stap* progressive
 d. *pinis* present perfect
 e. *save* habitual or 'to be able to'
 f. *ken* 'is allowed to'
 g. *inap* 'have the ability'

Nigerian Pidgin

There are **no plural markers**: 'three pig', 'two plate' or 'five fish' are grammatical. However, the **pronominal system** is only partly simplified (data from Bediako 2001):

(15) subject		object / possessive	
1.SG <i>a</i>	1.PL <i>wi</i>	1.SG <i>mi</i>	1.PL <i>wi/ os</i>
2.SG <i>yu</i>	2.PL <i>una</i>	2.SG <i>yu</i>	2.PL <i>una</i>
3.SG <i>i/in</i>	3.PL <i>dem</i>	3.SG <i>am/in</i>	3.PL <i>dem</i>

Third person singular is simplified by using just one form for all genders. On the other hand, **second person singular and plural** are distinguished (unlike in English).

Regarding the **tense system**, the particle *dey* can be used to form several tenses:

- (16) a. I **dey** go church.
 b. I **dey** church.

In the first example *dey* is a **progressive marker**; however, it has got this function only if a verb follows. The usage of *dey* in front of a noun means that **the time is past**. It is also possible to form **past tense by using the particle *bin*** (Bediako 2001):

- (17) I **bin** chop.
'I ate.'

The **present perfect** exists as well. The sequence *don de* marks the perfect tense:

- (18) A **don de** tek bat.
'I have started taking my bath.'

In Nigerian Pidgin there is just one possibility of expressing the **future** (marker *go*):

- (19) I **go** meet am tomorrow.

Furthermore, phrases of achievement like *after all, finally, in the end* or *on balance* are often omitted. Nigerians use the word **don to express achievement**:

- (20) a. I **don** catch am.
'After all, I caught him/her/it.'
b. The food **don** done.
'Finally, the food is ready.'

Prepositions and articles, on the other hand, are a very uncomplicated topic. It is possible to leave out articles as in *I go church*. Articles are seen as redundant, because most of the times the **meaning of a sentence is clear without adding the article**.

A striking simplification of prepositions can be seen in **Cameroonian pidgin**, in which the **preposition fo has got six meanings** (Fromkin & Rodman 1998: 424):

- | | |
|--|---|
| (21) a. Gif di buk fo mi.
'Give the book to me.' | d. Du dis wan fo mi, a beg.
'Do this for me, please.' |
| b. I die fo fam.
'She's at the farm.' | e. You fit muf ten frangk fo ma kwa.
'You can take ten francs from my bag.' |
| c. Dem die fo chos.
'They are in the church.' | f. Di moni dei fo tebul.
'The money is on the table.' |

The **idioms** in Nigerian pidgin also show that it is not the most elaborate language, because **idioms from the tribal languages (substrata) are often translated word for word**: *aya uku* is an idiom for a greedy person in Ibo. It means *big eye* and this is exactly how it is translated into Nigerian pidgin: *big-eye*.

References

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