

Maroon Societies and Creole Languages

Ian Hancock

The isolation of Maroon settlements and their efforts to keep outsiders at a distance have ensured that details of Maroon history remain incompletely documented. There were Maroons in Jamaica during the period of Spanish rule, for instance, before the English took over that island; but we don't know what language they spoke, or under what conditions it shifted to become the English-related creole spoken today. And so far, we can only speculate as to how some speakers among the Jamaican Maroons acquired and have preserved another creole language, one which bears striking similarities to the creoles spoken in Suriname, in South America. We are interested both in the historical origins and in the social conditions that perpetuated such a diversity of speech. Despite these gaps in our knowledge, what we can learn about Maroon societies, and especially about Maroon linguistic history, can nevertheless shed light on the development of creole languages and on the processes of creolization in general.

Creolization of Language

Linguists have documented many creole languages throughout the world. Creoles are not dialects of the various languages from which they took most of their vocabularies — English, Spanish, Portuguese, etc. — and the long-standing supposition that they are has caused serious problems in the classroom. This unfortunate situation is the result of several factors, in particular the perpetuation of negative attitudes instilled into creole-speaking populations during the years of colonialism, and the lack (until recently) of formal training for educators in creole language history and structure. Teachers in

creole-speaking countries can still treat their students' natural speech as deficient or defective, because this is what they themselves have been taught.

Nor are creoles "mixed" languages like, say, the Spanish/Portuguese dialect of the Brazilian-Argentinian border; they are new, restructured linguistic systems with grammars of their own. The way these languages come into being depends entirely on the social circumstances of their speakers' history. In most language-learning situations, a child is born into an already-existing speech community in which parents and other adults speak an already-existing language and provide models for that child to learn from. If such a stable speech community does not exist, but instead the community consists of speakers of many languages, then no target language exists for the child to imitate, and no community of model speakers of a single language is available to help the child learn. Instead, according to one theory, the infant will draw upon certain innate structures — perhaps part of a genetically-determined "language ability" — and upon the eclectic pool of lexical and other linguistic material present in the multilingual community.

Such multilingual communities may result from persons of differing linguistic backgrounds coming together and having to communicate, such as in army or police barracks in some parts of the world; but these will not always become communities into which children are born. Languages used among adults in such circumstances may never be spoken as a child's first language. Languages emerging in this way are usually called pidgins in the analytic literature; they may cease to exist once their usefulness ends.

Ian Hancock is Professor of Linguistics and English at the University of Texas at Austin. His major work has been with the English-related creoles and Romani. His pioneering work in Brackettville, Texas, brought to light the fact that the Seminole Maroons of this community have maintained a distinct language, Afro-Seminole Creole, closely related to Gullah. He earned his Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

Comparison of a Sentence in Several Maroon Languages and other Creoles

This chart shows: 1) similarities of vocabulary; 2) similarities in syntax (word order); 3) the "deeper" (less European) quality of Maroon versus non-Maroon Creole languages

English Sentence:

"SHE GROUND THE CORN WITH A PESTLE"

(In the following creole languages, this sentence is expressed with a different construction than in English; in the creoles, it is rendered as "she took pestle [mortar-stick] mash corn")

	<i>she</i>	<i>[past marker]</i>	<i>take</i>	<i>mortar-stick</i>	<i>mash</i>	<i>corn</i>
Saramaccan *	a	bi	téi	tatí	masiká	kálu
Ndjuka*	a	be	teke	mata tiki	masi	kalu
Aluku (Boni)*	a	be	teki	mata tiki	masi	kalu
Jamaican Maroon Creole*	o	min	teka	maata tiki	maas	kaan
Jamaican Gullah	im	ben	tek	maata tik	mash	kaan
	i	bin	tek	pesl fo	grain	kaan
Krio (Sierra Leone)	i	bin	tek	mata tik	mash	kon
Palenquero* †	eli	a	kohé	piló pa	molé	maí

*Languages marked by asterisk are Maroon Languages

†Vocabulary derived from Spanish rather than English

(adapted from Hancock, 1987)

Upper Guinea Coast English: A Source of Western Hemisphere Creoles

During the early years of European contact on the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa, local and highly distinctive (though not creolized) varieties of Portuguese, English, French and Dutch seem to have developed. They were spoken between European settlers and their African wives and fellow residents. There is evidence that Upper Guinea Coast English came to be used as a lingua franca among the African porters, or *grumettos*, who worked for Europeans and Afro-Europeans. We have records of slaves who say that they learned "English" in the slaving depots on the West African coast while awaiting transportation, and on the ships coming west. But the "English" they learned was in fact an already blended Guinea Coast dialect. It was spoken as a second language and learned by the grumettos as adults from their employers, many of whom spoke it as a first language. The eclectic linguistic mix of Africans in the *barracoons* awaiting ship-

ment provided the linguistic environment suitable for the emergence of a pidgin. The vocabulary of the Coast English, at least as it was utilized by the grumettos, was available to the slaves, though conditions for learning the whole language were not.

When Africans arrived in American slave markets, they were sold as individuals, not in family or colingual (same-language-speaking) lots. The new communities they subsequently joined throughout the British territories — in North, South or Central America or on the different Caribbean islands — were made up of individuals like themselves who had no choice but to continue to use what they had learned if they wanted to be able to communicate. When their children were born into these polyglot communities, this still-emerging lingua franca based on Upper Guinea Coast English provided their language model. During the early period, however, the infant mortality rate was very high, and only the steady influx of new adult slaves

ensured that the communities did not die out. Nevertheless, within the first two or three decades in each community, the linguistic situation had more or less stabilized, and with the cessation of the slave trade, the original African languages began to disappear.

Not entirely, however. In Maroon communities especially, remnants of African languages dating from the earlier period continue to be used in ritual contexts.

Maroon Languages - "Deep" Creoles

Because of their social and geographical isolation, most Maroon languages are distinctly conservative when compared with other creoles. While they are creoles, they are less like the languages from which they took most of their vocabularies — English, French, Dutch, etc. — than non-Maroon creoles. Some speakers refer to the relative difference or distance between creole and its metropolitan counterpart as being more or less "deep," and Maroon creole languages tend to be deeper than those spoken by non-Maroon populations. This is true not only because of the larger African component of their lexicon, but also because of their phonology and grammar.

In creole-speaking communities where the lexically-related metropolitan language is also spoken — which is the case in most places — each is exposed to the other, and there is constant influence upon the creole from the colonial language. More so than the reverse, since most speakers aim for competence in the official language, and may intentionally modify their creole in that direction. In such places, we cannot really speak of a single, distinct creole at all, but of a continuum, or spectrum, of varieties that ranges from deep to those with increased interference from the colonial European language. In some places, this contact seems to have resulted in the gradual extinction of the creole, for example in parts of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, where we have records, but no contemporary evidence of, a creole called "Habla Bozal."

But a Creole Spanish *does* survive in the Maroon community of San Basilio de Palenque in the region of Cartagena, Colombia. Likewise, some of the "deepest" Black English in the United States is spoken in those parts of Louisiana which in earlier centuries were home to North American Maroon communities.

The Jamaican Maroons also remember their own creole, which is now used only to communi-

cate with ancestral spirits, but which was probably their everyday speech until the early part of this century. Jamaican Maroon Creole is extremely conservative in its English component, which comes so close to that of the creoles of Suriname as to suggest strongly an actual historical connection with them. The same Maroon populations have also retained some African speech as well, particularly Ashanti, spoken in the region of modern-day Ghana. Examples of Jamaican Maroon forms that have parallels in Suriname but not in general Jamaican Creole include the "be" verb *na* (which is *a* or *da* in Jamaican Creole), the particle *sa* used with verbs to indicate future tense (and which is *wi* or *gwain* in Jamaican Creole) and *onti* meaning "what" (Jamaican Creole has *wa* or *wat* or *wara*).

The speech of the Afro-Seminole is similarly conservative when compared with its immediate historical relative, the Gullah or Sea Islands Creole spoken along the Carolina and Georgia coast. Negation in Sea Island creole with *no* is now extremely rare, having been replaced with *ain'* or *don'*, but it is general in Seminole, e.g., *mi no yeddi um*, "I didn't hear her." Similarly, the common creole grammatical marker for pluralizing nouns, i.e., by placing the word *dem* after them, has practically disappeared from Sea Islands Creole, but again, is normal for Seminole: *enti hunnuh bin bruck di stick dem?* "Didn't you break the sticks?"

Although the formalized study of creolized language is well over a century old, it is only in the present day that linguists have come to realize its importance in our attempts to understand the processes of language genesis and acquisition. We have also widened the scope of Creole Studies to acknowledge that other features of society besides language are subject to creolization, and we look now to this aspect in the emergence of new cultures, cuisines, musics and identities, especially within the various Maroon societies, in the post-colonial world.

Further Readings

- Hancock, Ian. 1987. A Preliminary Classification of the Anglophone Atlantic Creoles. In *Pidgins and Creoles*, Glenn Gilbert. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Holm, John. 1989. *Pidgins and Creoles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Romaine, Suzanne. 1988. *Pidgin and Creole Languages*. London and New York: Longman.
- Todd, Loreto. 1984. *Modern Englishes: Pidgins and Creoles*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.