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Generative Studies on Creole Languages



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Introduction

This volume brings together a number of studies which try to cope with data from Creole (and in a few cases, Pidgin) languages from a generative point of view. As such its aim is two-fold: to interest scholars and students working on Pidgin and Creole languages in recent work in generative linguistics; and to interest people who have been part of the mainstream of generative linguistics in new types of insights which can emerge from the study of Pidgin and Creole languages as evolving and dynamic systems.

Many serious scholars specialized in Pidgin and Creole linguistics have considered the generative paradigm to be hopelessly inadequate, for two reasons. Not only did they consider that artificial rigidity and uniformity were imposed on complex and variable data (as several critics have charged with regard to Beryl Bailey's 1966 generative grammar of Jamaican basilect), but also that structures directly imported from English were imposed on languages which diverge markedly from the European mold (see Roberts, 1975).

Most generativeists, on the other hand, have shied away from Pidgin and Creole languages because of the variability hinted at or described in the literature. This situation may be changing somewhat as generative theory is becoming more focussed on intra- and interlinguistic variation.

The resulting relative independence of the study of Pidgins and Creoles from the generative paradigm has led to a number of refreshing insights into the complexity of Creole grammatical phenomena. On the other hand, we find that their analysis has remained relatively shallow, in spite of a feverish interest in the field over the last ten years or so. In contrast, the contribution of Pidgin and Creole linguistics to various branches of sociolinguistics, particularly variation theory, has been considerable and profound.

This volume originated under the conviction that the study of Pidgin and Creole languages constitutes an important part of the research program of generative grammar for three reasons, which merit some discussion here.

First, an analysis of the stages through which a Pidgin develops into a native language, a Creole, can give us insights into the minimal require-

ments for natural languages. Within the generative paradigm the process of creolization is seen in mentalistic terms. Systems of communication which have had a parasitic and grammatically peripheral status as Pidgins or other secondary uses, acquire native speakers. This means that they will have to adapt so as to be definable by the language acquisition device (cf. Naro, 1973). No matter what the Pidgin ancestor was like, the Creole will have to be learnable by the child. Since within the generative paradigm language acquisition is seen as an interaction between imperfect data input and a complex set of hypotheses on the part of the child, the process of creolization can give us direct insight into what kinds of hypotheses the child will formulate.

An alternative view of minimal adequacy conditions on natural languages appears in Labov (1971) and Sankoff & Laberge (1973). These articles are the beginning of a series of papers within a functionalist paradigm, and have in common that they focus on the position of natural languages within the speech community, and their adequacy as systems of daily communication. This paradigm, which has centered on data from Tok Pisin, has stressed two points:

- (a) There is no sudden break or qualitative jump between the Pidgin (non-native) and Creole (native) varieties of Tok Pisin, but rather an increase in complexity as the Pidgin develops.
- (b) The differences which do occur are mostly stylistic, having to do with the amount of variability the system allows (Labov) or the amount of redundancy of the system (Sankoff & Laberge).

It is not clear to what extent the generative and the functionalist research paradigms are in conflict. The type of conditions on learnability formulated in generative grammar are of necessity quite abstract. Furthermore, it is not obvious that structural conditions on natural languages are necessarily distinct from functional ones. To give but one example, the emergence of *ia* bracketed relative clauses in Tok Pisin:

[NP *ia* [S *ia*]]

Sankoff & Brown argue that this construction is due to the specific discourse function of foregrounding in relative clauses (1976). On the other hand, one could claim that this development shows the generality of a simple X' expansion rule as:

X''' → X'' *ia*

where X ranges over N and V. The fact that Tok Pisin relative clauses are

optionally bracketed by two *ia*'s would then be relevant from the point of view of discourse, but from the point of view of the syntax, relativization results from the interaction of several independent processes, among them the generation of X'' determiners.

A second contribution the study of Pidgin and Creole languages can make to the generative research program is in the domain of a theory of markedness. While most earlier theorizing on this point had assumed that Pidgins, given their reduced nature, represented unmarked systems, this idea is not tenable, and Bickerton (1975) launched the idea that Creole systems represent the unmarked case. If we believe that grammatical markedness develops in languages through lexical accretion, borrowing, the influence of factors of ease of speech perception and production, etc., then it is plausible that 'young languages', such as recently emerged Creoles, represent the unmarked case. This idea is also problematic, however, in that Creoles can also be said to be 'mixed' languages, that is, they emerged in a multilingual contact situation. A case in point is verb serialization (cf. Schachter, 1974). While typologically one might distinguish between prepositional (or postpositional) languages and serializing languages, several Creole languages, e.g. Sranan Tongo, show both systems. For this reason, the idea that Creole languages constitute the unmarked case should be treated with caution; nonetheless, it can be a fruitful research strategy.

The third contribution is in the field of variation. Many Creole languages have as oppressed languages undergone the influence of dominant languages spoken in the same area, but what makes the case of Creoles special is that these languages are often lexically closely related to the Creole in question. The result is that we find very complex speech communities, where a continuum of varieties is spoken ranging from the original Creole to a colonial standard. An example is Jamaica, but there are many more such cases (cf. DeCamp, 1971). The extreme variability which goes far beyond the lexical and the phonological, even in the range of speech styles of individual speakers, poses particular problems for generative grammar. Even if it were possible to abstract away from the variability with individual speakers, and focus on one single system, as Bailey tried to do in the case of Jamaican, how then can we relate the various individual systems to each other? Rather than claiming that the generative paradigm is inadequate, models can be developed which are plausible from the point of view of grammar as well as accounting for the variability in the data.

In this volume the articles of Glenn Akers, Peter Mühlhäusler, Bill Washabaugh, Ellen Woolford, Hilda Koopman & Claire Lefebvre attempt to show how grammars vary and change, by providing and analyzing data from different historical and developmental stages of a number of languages.

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The papers of Jan Voorhoeve and Chris Corne stress the independence of Creole grammars from their European lexical ancestors. In the contributions of Hans den Besten, Hilda Koopman & Claire Lefebvre, Ellen Woolford, and Pieter Muysken we find attempts to substantiate the universal claims made in Bickerton (1975) and to redefine them in a generative framework: what universal characteristics do Creole languages have due to their being Creoles?

In no way can this volume claim to summarize important work of the last ten years. Let us hope it marks a beginning. It is certainly the case that only on the base of a large amount of reliable data the generative study of Pidgins and Creoles will progress, as several authors remark in this volume, and most articles here do present a considerable amount of data. On the other hand, the data needed are defined by the theoretical questions asked, and we can hope that this volume contributes to those questions.

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