

QUESTION WORDS IN THE CREOLE LANGUAGES

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The majority of creole languages have adopted their vocabulary to a large extent from colonial languages. For this reason we speak of French, English, Portuguese, etc. creoles. In (1) and (2) we show that the content words of French and Dutch respectively have remained in Haitian and Negerhollands:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|------------------|--------|---------|---------|----------|
| (1) | a. Haitian | vini | dōmi | tab | māde |
| | b. French | venir | dormir | table | demander |
| (2) | a. Negerhollands | kom | slap | tavl | vraeg |
| | b. Dutch | komen | slapen | tafel | vragen |
| | | 'come' | 'sleep' | 'table' | 'ask' |

For function words there is a much more indirect correspondence, and this can be illustrated very well with question words. It is to this category that we wish to turn in this exploratory study. The most striking characteristic of question words in a number of creole languages is their analytical character. In (3) we give some examples:

- | | | | |
|-----|----|----------------------------|---------------|
| (3) | a. | wa tit (Q-time) | NEGERHOLLANDS |
| | | when | |
| | | (compare Dutch 'wanneer') | |
| | b. | o pe (Q-place) | SRANAN |
| | | where | |
| | | (compare English 'where') | |
| | c. | ki žã (Q-genre) | HAITIAN |
| | | how | |
| | | (compare French 'comment') | |

In all these examples we find a form that can be represented abstractly as QUESTION PARTICLE + SEMANTIC UNIT. This question particle we will indicate as Q in the glosses.

Next to forms such as (3) we also find other types of form, such as those in (4):

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|----------|--------|------------|
| (4) | a. | wen taym | 'when' | JAMAICAN |
| | b. | ken | 'who' | PAPIAMENTU |
| | c. | andí | 'what' | SARAMACCAN |

These forms deviate in various ways from the analytical model in (3). They may be a direct reflex of a form from the colonial language, as in (4b), or consist of a mixture of the colonial language form and a questioned element as in (4a). Finally there is the possibility that they neither reflect the colonial language nor the

analytical model in (3), as in (4c). This configuration of facts leads then to two complementary questions:

- (a) how can we explain the divergence of the question words in the creoles from those in the colonial languages?
- (b) how can we explain the variations among the creole languages in terms of their question word systems?

Without pretending to be able to provide an exhaustive explanation with respect to these two issues, we will discuss them from a number of perspectives that reflect current issues in creole studies. After having presented a more complete typology of creole question word systems in section 1, we look at these systems in the following sections from three different perspectives. In 2 we consider the question of to what extent substratum languages could have made a contribution to the analytical systems in (3) and to possible other non-European forms (Alleyne 1981, Lefebvre 1986). In section 3 we take up a more universalistic semantic perspective: do the question words perhaps reflect universal tendencies towards semantic transparency in the creole languages (Seuren & Wekker 1986)? Section 4 is devoted to the role of the lexicon of the colonial languages. We conclude in 5 with a list of questions for further research. At some points we will be referring to pidgins, alongside of creoles, treating them as if they were equivalent. Although this is theoretically a questionable thing to do, the data from the pidgins cited parallel those of creoles in most respects.

1. The analysis of question word systems

To begin with, some terminology. We will refer to an *opaque* Q-system when the various Q-words are not analysable into smaller units, when we encounter forms that we must represent morphologically as X?, Y?, Z?. On the other hand, we will refer to a *transparent* Q-system when the various Q-words are analysable into a Q-element, and an element indicating what is questioned (*Q-E* = questioned element): i.e. Q-X?, Q-Y?, Q-Z?.

For example Marig *wa* 'who' and *mi* 'what' are opaque, while Igbo *ónyè òlèé* 'who' (person-Q) and *ìhè òlèé* 'what' (thing-Q) are transparent. In Table 1 we present the transparent system of Chinese Pidgin English, and in Table 2 the opaque system of KiNubi:

	forms	analysis
WHO	who (-man)	who (-man)
WHAT	what ting	Q-thing
WHICH		
WHEN	wat-time	Q-time
WHERE	wat-side	Q-side
WHY	wat-for	Q-for
HOW	how (-fashion)	how (-fashion)
	wat-fashion	Q-fashion

TABLE 1: THE TRANSPARENT QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF CHINESE PIDGIN ENGLISH

	forms	analysis
WHO	munú	who
WHAT	s(h)unú	what
WHICH	yatúú	which
WHEN	mitéén	when
WHERE	wén	where
WHY	léé/malú	why
HOW	kééf/kefiin	how

TABLE 2: THE OPAQUE QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF KI-NUBI, A CREOLIZED LANGUAGE SPOKEN IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

A transparent system can also become opaque through time. Latin **quis**, **quid**, **quando**, **cur**, and other Q-words represent the historical reflex of a transparent system, but only a few forms are still transparent in classical Latin. Thus the forms in (5a) would probably qualify as transparent:

- (5) a. quis who Q-that (person) (is 'that (masculine)')
 quid what Q-that (thing) (id 'that (neuter)')

but not those in (5b):

- b. quando when * Q-ando
 quam how * Q-am

We will call this a *fused* system.

A different type of system, which we will call *mixed transparent*, is to be found in an number of English-based creoles, where the Q element varies according to the Q-E element. Here we typically find the forms in (6a) as opposed to the purely transparent forms of (6b):

- (6) a. mixed transparent b. (pure) transparent

who-man	Q-man
what-thing	Q-thing
which-one	Q
when-time	Q-time
where-part	Q-part
why-reason	Q-reason
how-fashion	Q-fashion

A system which is to a large extent mixed transparent is Jamaican Creole, some of whose question words are presented in Table 3:

In several tables with question word we will have to distinguish between **which=A**, the adjectival use of 'which' in forms such as 'which boy?', and **which=N**, the nominal use in forms such as 'which did you buy?'. The available data are not always sufficiently detailed for a given language to allow us to distinguish between these usages, so that we have only included them when relevant. In other cases we just refer to 'which', when it is unclear which of the two is meant. Often, the form used in both will be identical. Similarly, we sometimes

need to distinguish between the adjectival use of 'how' as in 'how long', and the independent, nominal use as in 'how did you do it?'.

	forms	analysis
WHO	huu (-dat)	who (-that)
WHAT	wa(t)/we/wara	what
WHICH	wich	which
WHEN	wen-taym/wen	when-time/when
WHERE	we-paat/we	where-part/where
WHY	wa-mek	what-make
HOW	ou	how

TABLE 3: THE MIXED TRANSPARENT QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF JAMAICAN

A final type of question word is derived from the transparent type, but results from the dropping of the Q-particle, so that only the Q-E element remains. This type we will call *atrophied*. Sranan is an example of a language which contains such forms, as can be seen from Table 4:

	forms	analysis
WHO	(o)suma	(Q-) person
WHAT	(o)san/o-sani	(Q-)san > what/Q-thing
WHICH	o-disi/(o)sortu	Q-this / (Q-) sort
WHEN	o-ten	Q-time
WHERE	(o)pe	(Q-) pe > where
WHY	(fu)san-ede	for-san -head
HOW	o-fasi/fa	Q-fashion/ fa > how

TABLE 4: THE PARTIALLY ATROPHIED QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF SRANAN

In nearly all the cases where the Q-particle is dropped the reason why this is possible is obvious. In a number of these cases the Q-elements have undergone a change such that it is no longer homophonous with the corresponding free morpheme. We will illustrate this in Table 5.

The two forms that have lost the Q particle altogether, *fa* and *san*, are distinct from their etymological antecedents *fasi* and *sani*. When the full forms are used the Q-particle is compulsory. All the compulsory cases of the Q-particle, moreover, involve such full forms.

There are three forms not covered by these statements. (o) *suma* does not contain the usual free form, for which *sma* is now more normal. (o) *pe* contains an element which also occurs marginally in compounds such as *beri-pe* 'graveyard' (i.e. 'bury-place') and as such might be felt to be more meaningful. (o) *sortu* lacks an obvious explanation.

The existence of partially atrophied systems brings to mind the fact that we must be careful in taking contemporary descriptions as representative of the early forms of creoles. Whenever we have good documentation for earlier stages of a creole, we

free form	gloss	Q-word retaining Q-particle	Q-word with optional or no particle
sma/suma	person		(o) suma
sani	thing	o-sani	san
disi	this	o-disi	
sortu	sort		(o) sortu
ten	time	o-ten	
presi	place		(o) pe
fasi	manner	o-fasi	fa

TABLE 5: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SRANAN QUESTION WORDS

can see that question words have undergone a number of changes. Consider as perhaps an extreme example the recorded forms for 'why' in four stages of Sranan:

(7)	WHY	1718	verwate
		1783	hu heddi/va hu heddi
		1856	san hedde/vo san hedde
		1980	san ede/saide/fu san ede.

Given the typology we have established in this section we can now classify a number of the creole languages as in Table 6, keeping in mind that many systems have characteristics of different 'types':

	trans-parent	mixed transparent	opaque	fused	atrophied
ENGLISH-BASED:					
Sranan	x				x
Saramaccan	x		x	x?	
Ndjuka	x				x
Jamaican	x	x	x		
Guyanese	x	x	x		
Gullah	x	x	x		
Tok Pisin	x	x	x		
Cameroonian	x	x	x		
Chinese PE	x	x	x		
Krio	x	x	x		
FRENCH-BASED:					
Haitian	x		x		x
St. Lucian	x		x		x
Louisiana	x		x		
PORTUGUESE-BASED:					
Papiamentu	x		x		x
Principe			(x)		?

	trans- parent	mixed transparent	opaque	fused	atrophied
DUTCH-BASED:					
Berbice	x		x		x
Negerhollands	x		x	x	
OTHER-BASED:					
KiNubi			x		
Sango	x				

TABLE 6: A PRELIMINARY TYPOLOGY OF CREOLE QUESTION WORD SYSTEMS

2. Substratum-influence

Since there are African languages with analytic forms too, it is tempting to think of the wide-spread occurrence of analytic question words among the creoles as being due to substratum influence. Here we want to go into this possibility in slightly more detail than is customary. All the available evidence points to three languages as having played a major role among slave populations in the Caribbean, particularly Surinam, Jamaica, and Haiti: Fon, Twi, and KiKongo. In this section we present the question words of these three languages:

	forms	analysis
WHO	* me -té> mě	* person-Q > mě (fusion)
WHAT	e-té/ani/*nu-te >ně	that-Q/what/*thing-Q> ně (fusion)
WHICH=A	-té	Q
WHEN	hwe-té (-nu)	tima-Q
WHERE	fí-té /fi	place-Q/fi (fusion)
WHY	é-té-ú(tú)/aní ú(tú) aní gbe/ně -gbo	that-Q-body/what body/ what-aim/what-towards
HOW	ně ... gbo	what ... by

TABLE 7: THE TRANSPARENT QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF FON

This system is highly transparent and this has lead Lefebvre (1986), in her systematic analysis of Haitian and Fon, to conclude that the creole is essentially a relexified form of the West-African language. Note that Lefebvre does not mention the existence of the opaque form *ani* 'what', which would slightly decrease the parallelism between the Fon and Haitian systems. In Table 8 we present the Haitian system. Note that one major difference between the Fon system and the Haitian system is that in the former the Q particle occurs on the right, and in the latter on the left. Lefebvre explains this difference in terms of different headedness in the two languages.

	forms	analysis
WHO	ki-mūn	Q-person
WHAT	(ki-)sa	(Q-)that
WHICH=A	ki	Q
WHEN	ki-le	Q-hour
WHERE	(ki-)kote/ki-bo	(Q-)place/Q-place
WHY	pu-ki(-sa)	for-Q(-that)
HOW	ki-žã, kumã	Q-manner/how

TABLE 8: THE TRANSPARENT QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF HAITIAN

Consider now the Twi system, which is only partially transparent, and in fact has one mixed transparent form, *hen-fa* 'where side/part':

	forms	analysis
WHO	woana	who
WHAT	ben (A)/den (N)	what (A)/what (N)
WHICH	muana	which
WHEN	da ben	day/time what
WHERE	hen-fa	where side/part
HOW	den	what (N)

TABLE 9: THE QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF TWI (FANTE)

In the previous section we saw that Jamaican Creole has a mixed transparent question word system. One way to explain the Jamaican system is in terms of de-creolization: the (incomplete) adaptation of the Jamaican system to the colonial standard, English. Thus an original transparent form such as 'what time' may be reinterpreted as 'when time' under English influence. The facts from Twi suggest a second possibility, however, namely that the Jamaican mixed transparent system is a generalization of mixed transparent forms in Twi. This is not implausible given that Twi was the single most important African language spoken in Jamaica during slavery (Alleyne 1986, forthcoming).

Even if the correspondences between Fon and Haitian, on the one hand, and between Twi and Jamaican, on the other, tentatively suggest that a substratum origin of the creole question word systems is not impossible, we should keep in mind that it is by no means the case that the African systems are generally transparent. In fact, many are not. KiKongo, which played an important role in Caribbean slavery, is an example :

	forms	analysis
WHO	nani	who
WHAT	nki	what
WHICH	nki (A)/e-CM-e (N)	what/what (N)
WHEN		
WHERE	hue/e-CM-e (N)	where/what (N)
WHY	bue	why
HOW	nki	wh

TABLE 10: THE QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF KIKONGO (here CM = class marker, a morpheme indicating the noun class to which the questioned element belongs)

In fact we will shortly see that there are other explanations for the transparency of many creole question word systems. The only cases where substratum influence is undeniable are those where actual forms inherited from potential substrate languages surface in the creole.

Consider the system of Berbice Dutch:

	forms	analysis
WHO	wi	who
WHAT	wati/wa(so)	what/what (so)
WHICH	welcke	which
WHEN	wan ere	when
WHERE	wa-anga > wanga	Q-place
WHY	wa(t)-skol	Q-cause
HOW	hoso	how so

TABLE 11: THE QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF BERBICE DUTCH, SPOKEN IN GUYANA

In the case of Berbice Dutch it is known (cf. Smith, Robertson and Williamson 1987) that a major component of this creole was supplied by Eastern Ijò resulting in Ijò features of lexicon, morphology, and syntax. Of the Eastern Ijò dialects Kalabari appears to have provided the major influence. One of the Berbice forms seems directly derived from Kalabari:

- (8) Berbice Dutch: wa-anga
 Kalabari: to-angáa
 Q-place

The Kalabari Q-E has been reinterpreted as a postposition in Berbice Dutch. The rest of the Berbice Dutch forms derive directly from Dutch.

Following the same kind of reasoning, we can establish that the Saramaccan question word system is a second likely case of substratum influence. Consider Table 12:

	forms	analysis
WHO	ambé	who
WHAT	andí	what
WHICH=A	ún-	Q
WHICH=N	ún-di	Q-this/that
WHEN	(na)-ún-té	(LOC)-Q-time
	(na)-ún-júu	(LOC)-Q-hour
	un-júu-té	Q-hour-time
	naótén	(atrophied) < <u>na-ún-tén</u>
WHERE	ún-kamfa	Q-place
	(na)-ún-sé	(LOC)-Q-side
	naasé	(atrophied) < <u>na-ún-sé</u>
WHY	andí	what
	fu andí édi	for what head
	fu andí mbéi	for what make
	fu andí báka	for what back
	andí mbéi	what make
HOW=N	(ún)-fá	Q-fashion
HOW=A	ún-	Q-

TABLE 12: THE QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF SARACCAN (LOC = locative particle)

The forms that we can relate to an African substratum are **ambé** 'who' and **andí** 'what'. Smith (1987) argues that these derive from Fon **mě/mě** 'who' and **aní** 'what'. The fact that the Fon word for 'who' has no initial **a** is presumably a recent development, given the cognates in other Gbe dialects:

(9)	'person'	'who'
Fon	mě/mě	mě/mě < mē-té/mè-té
Vhe	ame	ame-ka
Gen	àmè	àmè-ké

The occurrence of pre-nasalized **mb** and **nd** in the two Saramaccan forms requires mention. The very fact, of course, that the same development is seen in both items strengthens the hypothesis that the Fon forms represent the sources of these items. As the development of pre-nasalized stops from nasals only takes place preceding oral vowels we can identify the Fon variant **mě** or rather ***amě** as the source of the Saramaccan form. The fact, however, that the two items 'who' and 'what' may well be derived from (seventeenth century) Fon does not necessarily imply that the whole system of Q-words in Saramaccan is based on that of Fon. In particular the forms for 'why' in the two languages would seem to have different models:

(10)	Fon	Saramaccan
	what aim	what
	what (<thing-Q) towards	for what head
	that-Q body	for what back
	what body	(for) what make

If for Saramaccan it is at the same time the case that some opaque forms are directly derived from Fon, and that some transparent forms are unrelated to Fon, then the hypothesis that transparent creole question word systems are based on African models such as Fon is deprived of much of its support.

3. Semantic transparency

As is clear from Table 6 and from a number of the specific examples of creole question word systems that we have given so far, many of these systems show a greater or lesser degree of semantic transparency. Seuren and Wekker (1986) study the occurrence of semantic transparency in creole languages, and hypothesize that this represents a basic strategy of creolization. It could be considered the syntagmatic counterpart of Bickerton's bioprogram (1981). The application of their idea to question word systems would appeal to three basic principles: uniformity, i.e. the maximum uniformity in the treatment of semantic categories; universality, i.e. the minimum of reliance on language particular rules; simplicity, i.e. the minimum possible of processing necessary in proceeding from semantic analyses to surface structures, and vice versa. It would result in a question word system of a uniform type, involving separate adjacent Q-elements and Q-E elements in a consistent order.

Before going on we should mention that the Q-E elements that can appear in the various Q-words are quite varied. We find, among others, those in (11):

- | | | |
|------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| (11) | who | Q-man/person |
| | what | Q-thing |
| | which=A | Q-0/Q-kind/appearance/sort |
| | which=N | Q-one/this |
| | when | Q-time/day/hour |
| | where | Q-part/place/side |
| | why | Q-head/make/body/bottom/reason |
| | how=N | Q-fashion/way/manner/method |
| | how=A | Q-0 |

It is not obvious how the variation found in the different Q-E elements is to be reconciled with the universality requirement imposed by the semantic transparency hypothesis.

With the exception of the Saramaccan items for 'who' and 'what', the question word systems for this language, and also late 18th century Sranan would seem to be totally transparent. Outside the traditional Q-word system the Q-particle is productively used with nouns and adjectives. We give some examples from Saramaccan (De Groot 1977):

- | | | | |
|------|----|-----------------------------------|--|
| (12) | a. | un-né fi-i | |
| | | Q-name for you | |
| | | What is your name? | |
| | b. | un-dégi mi músu sán di paánga | |
| | | Q-thick I must saw the plank | |
| | | 'How thick must I saw the plank?' | |

44. The influence of the colonial languages

Whenever a creole language has been under the influence of its own colonial lexifier language, the (presumably) originally transparent question word system appears to have been affected to some degree by that of the colonial language. This applies at least to the French and English creoles of the Atlantic region. It is less clear to what extent the Portuguese-based creoles had completely transparent systems, and the Dutch-based creoles differ in this respect.

The influence of Standard English is clearly present in the Krio system, which frequently has monolithic modern English derived forms alternating with older, normally transparent forms:

	Modern additions	Older system
WHO		û/uda/udat
WHAT	wât	we(tin)
WHICH=N		úswân/úskâyn
WHICH=A		us/úskâyn
WHEN	wen	ustem
WHERE	we	úsây/úspât
WHY	wây (fɔ)	we(tin) fɔ/wetin mek/ wetin du
HOW	âw	a

TABLE 13: THE QUESTION WORD SYSTEM OF KRIO

A comparison with the question word systems of Cameroonian Pidgin English and Fernando Poo English, which are obviously closely related, supports the idea that the influence of Standard English has spread in Krio.

	Cameroon	Fernando Poo
WHO	hú/hús/hús man	u
WHAT	wétin/húskayn tin	uetin/uat
WHICH=N		us uan
WHICH=A	} húskayn	us
WHEN	hústaym	us tem
WHERE	húsay	ussaid
WHY	fɔ sekà wetin	fɔ uetin
	wáy	uetin ... fɔ
HOW	há	au

TABLE 14: THE QUESTION WORD SYSTEMS OF CAMEROON AND FERNANDO POO

The systems of the latter two creoles are quite similar to that of Krio, the exception being that the forms directly derived from English question words are generally lacking.

The question word system of the colonial languages did not only make itself felt in a process of later adjustment. In the earliest formative stage, speakers of the early

creole or its antecedent pidgin must have had access to a minimal question word system, to form the Q-element. Thus the Atlantic English-based creoles with a clear Q-element generally derive this from 'which':

(13)	Cameroonian	hu(s) (other dialects: wi(s))
	Krio	u(s)
	Guanese	wi
	Saramaccan	un (1778: hu)
	Sranan	o (1783: hu)
	Ndjuka	on

The phonological change *wi* --> *u* has frequently operated.

The Pacific English-based creoles have a Q-element derived from 'what':

(14)	Chinese Pidgin English	wat
	Tok Pisin	wa

The Dutch-based systems, in as much as they are transparent, have forms derived from *wat* 'what', as well. The French systems have a Q-element *ki*, which could be from French *qui* 'who'. The Portuguese systems tend to be opaque.

5. Questions for further research

The above survey of creole question word systems has of necessity been incomplete. It has yielded some preliminary answers, but it has led to further questions as well. We may tentatively conclude that a large group of creoles have developed semantically transparent systems. Apart from Saramaccan and Berbice Dutch, which show lexical traces from Fon and Ijò, respectively, in their question word systems, the evidence for African substratum influence is slight at this moment. Before we can state a more definite set of conclusions, however, a number of issues need to be looked into. These include:

(a) A study of the relation between question word formation and the formation of other systems of grammatical morphemes, e.g. reflexives. Compare Papiamentu *bo mes* (you-self) 'yourself' and *bo kurpa* (you-body) 'yourself', examples that we find in many creoles. These resemble the compound-like transparent question words of many creoles.

(b) A comparison between creoles and sign languages with respect to question word systems, a comparison which would greatly increase the chance that we can determine which are universal tendencies of sign formation, and which are particular to the group of languages and the social situations involved.

(c) A more detailed study of larger differences between individual question words. Do 'core' elements such as 'who' tend to be formed differently from elements such as 'why', in general?

(d) A much more detailed study of the question word systems of the Portuguese and Spanish-based creoles. If they are not transparent, and do not particularly resemble the related colonial languages, by what principles are they formed?

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