Creole languages and migration : the exception that doesn't prove the rule

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1. Introduction

The point I wish to make in this talk is that the emergence of creole languages or creolization, even though it often – but by no means always – occurred following population displacements, is a special phenomenon, entirely different from the usual linguistic consequences of migration. (Pidginization, in contrast, is a common phenomenon. I won't have anything to say about it.)

In order to make my point, I will first briefly review what these consequences are, relying heavily on Thomason & Kaufman's (1988) work. Then I will describe the historical circumstances in which creole languages appeared and I will delineate what I think are the necessary conditions for their appearance. The comparison of these circumstances and conditions with known cases of migrations and their linguistic upshots will show how few similarities there are between both phenomena. In fact, Creoles will be seen to result either from no migration at all (at least not on the part of the Creole creators), or from what I'm tempted to call 'negative' migrations, that is forced transportations. (I paraphrase Erving Goffman's notion of a 'negative line', namely a line in which people stand in order to get what they do **not** want, such as – the example is Goffman's – a place in a gas chamber.)

2. The linguistic consequences of migration

Mankind's history is to a large extent a history of migrations. It begins with the Out of Africa migrations that ultimately resulted in *Homo Sapiens* colonizing the whole planet. Other outstanding, if less global, examples are the *Völkerwanderungen* (a so much more evocative term than 'Great Invasions') that put an end to the Roman Empire as a political construction and shaped modern Europe; the Arab expansion of the 7th century; the European colonization of America; the South-North migrations that are taking place under our eyes, from Africa and the Indian subcontinent to Europe, from South to North America, despite all the walls and electronic barriers that are being put up to try and check it.

Although people migrate for a variety of particular reasons, it seems they do it impelled by the general notion that 'it might be better elsewhere'. (Migration must be distinguished from nomadism insofar as the latter consists rather in a kind of 'mobile sedentarism'.) Migrating people start off speaking the languages they inherited from their forbear. What happens to these languages depends on the situations they encounter where they finally stop, at least for a significant while.

The Out of Africa migrations were special since the migrants, at least the early ones, went into territories that were linguistic blanks. The main effect of the migrations may thus have been to further diversify whatever languages these people had taken with them. Migrating to lands where no humans and therefore no languages were to be encountered never repeated itself after the occupation of Australia and America, however.

In the entirely humanized world that followed, two great types may be distinguished, illustrated by the Germanic migrations to Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula on the one hand, the first European migrations to North America on the other hand. These are ideal types to some extent, with all kinds of mixed types in between. I will review them very briefly, as the facts are well known and they serve me only as a background.

The situation of the Franks and Visigoths having entered Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula and settled there in the 5th century showed the following features: (i) they were in positions of power, especially in Northern Gaul and Spain; (ii) they were a minority among the populations they ruled; (iii) these populations were part of the then crumbling but still prestigious Roman Empire. As a consequence, the Franks and Visigoths entirely relinquished their ancestral Germanic languages after a few generations, and they adopted the Proto-Romance of the surrounding people they very soon mixed with. These Germanic languages only survived through the Proto-Romance as sources of lexical borrowings and possibly structural influences. The latter seems to be especially strong in Northern Gallo-Romance, as evidenced by the deep phonological changes that affected it in comparison with other Romance languages and also by a few morphosyntactic features.

The situation of the early immigrants to North America was almost exactly the reverse, except for the power position. Although they actually formed a minority with respect to the native Amerindian population, they thought of themselves as being the majority in a territory which they considered empty to all intents and purposes. Far from enjoying the least prestige, the Amerindians were mostly seen as a nuisance to get rid of by any means. There was thus never any question of the early immigrants giving up their ancestral language, English, to adopt, say, Mohawk. This is not to say that migration had no linguistic consequences, but they consisted mainly in a reshuffling of the home dialects leading to the new dialect cluster called American English. Nothing very dramatic in this.

Later immigrants who were not native English speakers found themselves more or less in the situation of the Franks and Visigoths, except again for the power position. (For obvious reasons, African Americans cannot be counted among these later immigrants.) They correspondingly relinquished their ancestral languages after one or two generations and shifted to American English.

Interestingly the most numerous groups at least, for instance the Italians, didn't give up their religion or their cuisine to adopt the local varieties. This seems to be a generally valid observation: language is the inheritance migrants will most easily give up if they have to give up something. And the reason for this may be that language, although endowed with cultural dimensions, is definitely not a cultural object. Language loyalty does exist, but it seems to me to be a recent phenomenon related to the rise of nationalisms in 19th century Europe, when intellectuals (themselves a new social group) began to view language as a cultural property. Common people (the migrating ones) have a more objective view of language: it is a natural faculty to be used, not thought about. Changing language if it gives you an advantage is thus no big deal.

North America is also interesting because it presents us with a mixed case, namely that of recent Hispanic immigrants to the United States. These people, even in the second and third generations, acquire a native competence in English, but they don't give up their ancestal language, so they become bilingual. True, bilingualism (or diglossia) is a necessary stage in the linguistic events related to migration. It is usually transitory. Yet, in the situation at hand, it seems to have stabilized in such a

way that Spanish is now the other main language of the United States, which might turn into a bilingual country like, say, Belgium.

To sum up, migrating people either switch to the main language of their destination, or they impose their own language, or (more rarely) enduring bilingualism results. The languages involved are usually affected in the process, sometimes to a significant extent. The reason is that migration causes language contact, and language contact is a powerful trigger and/or accelerator of language change (see Weinreich 1953). No entirely new language emerges in the process, however. Even though historical accidents played a role in shaping it, Old French still proceeds essentially from the continuous evolution of Gallo-Romance, which itself proceeded from the continuous evolution of Latin, and so forth.

This is precisely where creole languages radically differ. I now turn to them.

3. A quick view of creole languages

I made as if we all knew what a creole language is. In fact we don't. Defining what makes a creole language creole, that is specifically distinct from noncreole languages while remaining a natural language, is something no two creolists agree on. Being thus vague about the intensional meaning of the term, it may be useful for a start to delineate its extension through a quick review of what it refers to.

What we do know for sure about creole languages is that they constitute a **historical** class that may be defined thus:

> Creoles (a historical definition): Languages that appeared between the 16th and 19th centuries as an aftermath of the world's conquest by five European nations: France, Great-Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain.

This definition may seem simplistic, but it has at least the merit of undeniability. The verb 'appeared' is essential, as it implies that these languages didn't exist **at all** before the mentioned period. More precisely, it is a defining property of creole languages that they have a beginning, and that it can in principle be dated within a span that doesn't exceed 50 years. (I say 'in principle' because historical data are not always sufficient for us to actually achieve this dating, but we know we could given more data.) Languages resulting from 'ordinary' change do not share this property. Given the **continuous** character of change, there is no way we can pinpoint when English or French came into being. Actually, they never began. (They were christened at some point, but that's another story.) As already pointed to, this is completely at variance with what is observed following migrations, which cause no language appearance.

The expression 'world's conquest' is deliberately vague and polemical: it refers to the 'Great Discoveries' (a brazenly ethnocentric term); the first colonization from the 16th to the 18th century, marked by slavery; the second colonization in the 19th century with partial suppression of slavery and two new actors, the United States and Germany. The list of the conquering nations implies that their languages were involved in creole formation, which is true, without claiming that only they were implied, which would be a mistake.

Of course, conquest should be sharply distinguished from migration, even though it may involve or entail it at some stage. What is especially striking with the conquest I'm talking about is the small amount of people that actually performed it.

With this definition I also wish to discard the claim that creolization is not a specific process, but is an usual component of language change in general. English

and the Romance languages would thus be Creoles ; French is said to be 'creolizing' in the suburbs. I don't think much is to be gained with such an extension. Known creole languages arose in very special conditions, not identical but sharing many commonalities, quite different in any event from the conditions of, say, 5th century England or early 21st century Parisian suburbs.

Finally, the term 'aftermath' is deliberately imprecise as well. It is a fact that the quintet of nations just mentioned played the leading role during the relevant historical sequence, with the upshot that Creoles are first identified and classified according to which of the five languages provided them with a vocabulary (which is why they are called 'lexifiers'). One thus speaks of Dutch-based, English-based, French-based, Portuguese-based, and Spanish-based Creoles. However, the European world conquest acted like an earthquake, with after-shocks beyond colonization as such. 'Second generation' Creoles thus arose, whose lexifiers are not our five European languages. Actually, they aren't even (Indo-)European at all, since their lexifiers are Amerindian, Bantu, and Oceanic languages, and Arabic. The definition includes them as well.

4. Necessary conditions for creole formation

Let me begin with a truism: since creole languages appeared during recent history, we can be certain that the forbear of the people who now use them spoke different native languages before this appearance.

Actually, the truism is only apparent. The native language of my ancestors in the 17th century was also different from mine. But they called it French. (In fact, this is not true : they probably spoke an Alemanic dialect on my father's side and an Occitan dialect on my mother's side, but let's ignore that.) What I mean is there is no breach of transmission between 17th and 21st century French, but just language change. Creole languages necessarily involve such a breach. They therefore always involve discarding some ancestral language and adopting a new one ('language shift' in Thomason & Kaufman's 1988 terminology).

This in itself would not tell creole formation apart from one of the possible results of migration. The adoption was peculiar, however. The people concerned didn't learn an existing language, like immigrants or their children may do. What they learned was a foreign vocabulary around which a new language grew, distinct from the lexifier in all grammatical components : phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, especially the latter three, as phonology first 'came' with the vocabulary and may not be all that different from that of the lexifier. This is Thomason & Kaufman's (1988:205) Outcome II: "Vocabulary matches closely and shows regular sound correspondences, but there are few or no grammatical correspondences".

The question we must answer is therefore this: Why did the creole-speakers-to-be **not** learn the language that offered them its vocabulary, but only this vocabulary as a first step? What special conditions caused this halt and the veering off that followed? Let me try to sum them up. For a creole language to arise, we need:

(a) A multilingual population that gathered following a catastrophic event (in the technical sense of 'catastrophe') and would probably never have gathered without these events.
(b) A foreign group, much smaller in number, responsible for these events, which puts them in a position of absolute or relative dominance with respect to the population whose gathering they brought about.

(c) A communication deficit within the population because none of the languages spoken in it is known by (nearly) everybody.
(d) A vital urgency to overcome the deficit, because the new conditions created by the foreigners' intervention leave no room for the usual recipes such as bilingualism.
(e) In parallel with (c) and (d) and enhancing them, a sociocultural breach, possibly accompanied by a geographical split, which upsets the individuals and tears them away from old customs, at least for a time.
(f) Following (c)-(e), and as a remedial attempt, a forced recourse to the foreigners' language which, because of its speakers' total or relative dominance, their small number, and their foreignness itself, is only partially accessible during the crucial period, namely through its 'outermost' component, the vocabulary.
(g) The maintenance of conditions (a)-(f) long enough that a new language arises from partial learning, replacing the ancestral languages of the now Creole-speaking population.
(h) The lasting survival and reproduction of this population, insofar as they manage to preserve their creole language and identity.

The crucial point is (a), the initial catastrophe. It separates creolization from the linguistic results of migrations. As indicated above, I give 'catastrophe' its technical sense, meaning a thoroughly new event that could not be foreseen from the previous course of events. Migrations are not catastrophes in that sense, even though they are sometimes set off by events that would commonly be described as catastrophic – think of the potato blight that precipitated Irish migration to the United States in the 1850s. Rather they are part of the normal turns of history. Insofar as they influence language change, they deflect its course and/or make its rate faster, but they don't produce novelties.

Creole languages are novelties. The vocabulary they share with their lexifiers was not inherited as in normal language acquisition from parents to children, but it was massively borrowed in a process of spontaneous ('untutored'), incomplete second language learning by adults. It was then grafted onto a grammar or morphosyntax that shares little with that of the lexifier beyond what all natural languages have in common. (This claim is too crude and ought to be qualified. It is by and large true, though, and will suffice for my purposes.) In other words, Creoles and their lexifiers are not genealogically related in the way that French and Latin are, they do not belong to the same language family, where a language family is defined as a diachronic sequence or a synchronic array of languages that are all the results of **continuous** change from some proto-language.

My claim is that Creoles, in contrast, are the results of **catastrophic** change, producing a breach in continuity, a severance of genealogical links. With all due caution, creolization may thus be seen as the linguistic analogon of catastrophic evolution in a punctuated equilibrium model of the evolution of living organisms (see Gould 1985). With an important difference, though, namely that catastrophic evolution may well be the biological norm, whereas it seems to be the exception in the language kingdom.

True creolization thus appears to be a rare phenomenon, once it is clearly distinguished from continuous language change. The criterion for the distinction has already been alluded to, it is **time**. Continuous language change may produce quite deep restructuring – just compare Modern French to Classical Latin. But it needs time to do this, about 12 centuries in the case just mentioned. The complete

restructuring that cut off Creoles from their lexifiers took one century at its longest (on restructuring in creole formation, see Holm 2004). This also is the mark of a catastrophe: it is fast!

5. Two case studies

The above scenario is an abstract one. I will now try to flesh it out. To do this, I will sketchily describe two creole matrices, which I purposefully selected because they are both significantly different and equally good stagings of the scenario. One is the Caribbean, the other West Africa, that is an area covering South Senegal, Casamance, and present-day Guinea-Bissau.

In the Caribbean, the catastrophe mentioned in (a) is the deportation into slavery of about 11 million people from the West African coasts between the end of the 16th century and the first half of the 19th century (see Curtin 1969; Eltis 2001; Pétré-Grenouillot 2004). That deportation cannot be assimilated to migration hardly needs elaboration. Although slavery was institutionalized in most African societies of the time (and existed in Europe as well), to be delivered into the hands of men never seen before, to be transported across the sea to unknown and unimaginable lands, was indeed a catastrophic experience for the people who lived through it.

The foreign group of (b), the strange men just mentioned, consisted in representatives of the five conquering nations which were active in slave trade and annexed island and mainland territories in the Caribbean area.

Points (c)-(e) go without saying given the way the slave trade went on : people from different origins got mixed in the coastal depots, aboard ships, and in the plantations where the slaves worked. The transportation itself, which turned the Africans into ‘naked immigrants’ to use the words of a Caribbean writer (Edouard Glissant), constitutes the worst uprooting imaginable, only matched by the Nazi camps and the Stalinian Gulag of the past century. (‘Naked immigrant’ is an oxymoron: real immigrants never come naked.)

According to documents, the mixture was sometimes deliberate in order to forestall plotting among the slaves by lack of mutual understanding. Not only would such a policy have been ineffectual, as you don’t really need a common language to plot a revolt, it is unlikely it was ever systematic or even feasible : in the heydays of the slave trade, slaves were coming mainly from two areas, the Bight of Benin and Angola, where respectively Kwa and Bantu languages are rather close to each other, so it’s hard to conceive how any sort of understanding among the slaves could have been prevented. This shows the importance of point (e).

As a consequence (point (f)) Dutch-based, English-based, French-based, Portuguese-based, and Spanish-based Creoles appeared. Mainly English-based and French-based actually. The only Spanish-based Creole is Palenquero spoken near the Caribbean coast of Colombia. Negerhollands and Skepi Dutch are now extinct, and Berbice Dutch is dying. One gets a glimpse of Portuguese-based Creoles through Papiamentu and Saramaccan.

Let’s pause a while at this juncture. When we refer to the foreigners’ language, what variety is implied ? Which French, for instance, was the French of French-based Creoles ? Obviously not the one you can now hear in Paris. Can we be more accurate ? We know the plantation system didn’t come about overnight. Preceding the massive import of African slaves, the Caribbean had been populated – having been first depopulated from their native inhabitants – by European settlers. The latter, when they were not convicts, had more or less willingly signed indenture contracts which actually sent them overseas for life. In a sense, **they** were

immigrants, but of a rather special sort nevertheless. This gave rise to the so-called 'habitation society', which anteceded the 'plantation society' by at least half a century. While it lasted, 'free' Europeans outnumbered the first incoming African slaves, as the trade had not yet acquired its full industrial dimensions (see Chaudenson 2003).

Except for a few noblemen, the settlers belonged to the low classes. In the French islands, they hailed primarily from Northern and Western provinces, meaning they spoke dialects sufficiently distinct that it could raise serious intercomprehension problems. Those were probably solved though dialect levelling – koineization. Scholarly education provided by missionnaries, who then taught Europeans and Africans alike, may also have played some unifying role (cf. Hazaël-Massieux 1996).

A number of the features to be found in the Creoles may thus have their origin in the language changes that took place within the habitation society, in the intercourse between settlers and slaves. Perhaps a first creole-like dialect arose, that was subsequently overwhelmed and reshaped by the massive arrivals of new slaves from Africa. True creolization only began then.

Finally, the existence of creole languages to this day confirms the actuality of points (g) and (h). Notice that the continuation of matrix conditions may result from their very cruelty. For instance, the English-based Surinam Creole Sranan is one of the few creole languages for which we have ancient documents, namely a dictionary from 1780. The language of this time, probably stabilized about 1750, doesn't seem to differ much from what it is now. Yet, slave-worked sugar plantations were present in Surinam as soon as 1660. Creole formation thus took almost a century, a long time in comparison with most other Creoles. Apparently, the delay was due to the ghastly living conditions of the slaves, who died before they had time to have children. The slave population had therefore to be constantly replenished by new arrivals, who constantly upset the matrix conditions. Not before the conditions improved and the population began to reproduce internally could point (h) become a reality (see Arends 1995).

Let's now turn to the Casamance-Guinea-Bissau area. Here the catastrophe of point (a) was much less tragic than in the foregoing case, although it fully answers the definition of a catastrophe. It consisted in the impromptu landing of a few Portuguese sailors about 1450, followed from 1460 onwards by a few hundreds settlers, first on the then deserted Cape Verde Islands. Many among these settlers were Jews. Emigration ensured a cautious distance between them and the Inquisition.

In order to trade freely, out of reach of the royal monopoly, many of them crossed the sea to the mainland, where they settled among the coastal peoples of Casamance and present-day Guinea-Bissau (see Rougé 2003). They were called *lançados*, meaning 'castaways'. They established factories, took wives and begot children. Their mixed offspring were called *filhos da terra*, 'children of the country'. The dominance required at point (b) was thus not very domineering with them. It consisted above all in the fragile prestige enjoyed by novelty-bearing strangers.

The spontaneous settling of the *lançados* nevertheless unsettled the local societies. Their example drew more entrepreneurs from Portugal. The villages grew into towns where more people convened. This gave rise to a new population of detribalized Africans in the service of africanized Europeans. They were called *grumetes*, meaning 'shipboys'. This new social group comprising the *grumetes* and the *filhos da terra* fulfilled the conditions in points (a)-(f), and creolized Portuguese (*Crioulo*, *Kriyol*) became their distinctive language (see Kihm 1994).

Christianization still reinforced this new group's identity, ensuring its continuation as required by points (g) and (h) of the scenario. The belated and superficial character of Portuguese colonization was also influential. More recently, the Liberation War (1961-1974) generalized the use of Kriyol, which became the *de facto* common language of the Liberation Army, then of the whole country.

6. Conclusion

Migrations do not lead to creolization, and creolization is not a foreseeable linguistic result of migration. This, I think, is a settled point. Deportation from Africa to the Caribbean was not migration, unless we take the term ironically (the 'naked immigrants'). In Guinea-Bissau and Casamance, not only did no migration take place, since events occured *in situ*, but there was no large-scale population displacement. (Of course, the Portuguese did migrate, but they did nothing to launch creolization beyond bringing their native vocabulary.)

To some extent, *grumetes* flocking to factories may be compared to those numberless peasants who moved to cities, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries. They too were 'detribalized' and had to adjust to new conditions. Linguistically, however, they did so as in all true migrations, that is by switching from their native dialects to the dialect (generally called 'language') of the city they migrated to.

What is special in Guinea-Bissau and Casamance is that spatially quite limited movements resulted not in the adoption of some already existing language, but in the creation of a new language that is like neither Portuguese nor any of the local languages of the area. This underscores the crucial role of the catastrophe represented by the coming and settling of these near extra-terrestrials Europeans must have first appeared to the local Africans' eyes.

More case studies would present us with similar pictures, variations on the same basic scenario. Wherever they are found, creole languages appeared as a consequence of what must be a rare happening in the world's history: a population's sudden contact with total strangers out of nowhere, whose presence deeply disrupts prevailing social conditions and creates new ones, which no previous experience prepared the population to cope with.

In the Atlantic area these new conditions frequently took the form of oversea enslavement in near industrial plantations not so different from modern concentration camps, although by no means always, as we saw. In the Pacific, the equivalent was the massive transportation, beginning in the 1850s, of indentured workers to plantations on various islands, especially the Samoa and Fiji, giving rise to Melanesian Pidgin English (see Keesing 1988). Legally, indenture is not slavery, but it made little practical difference to the people who were thus shipped away on long-term contracts that had generally been signed for them.

A fascinating story is that of Nubi, an Arabic-based Creole spoken in Uganda and Kenya (see Heine 1982; Wellens 2005). It is rather comparable to the story of Guinea-Bissau Kriyol. It began in Northern Sudan in 1820 when the Khedive of Egypt, Mehemet Ali, decided to conquer the whole of Sudan. As he needed a powerful army to do this, he forcefully recruited Black African slaves from the Nuba mountains. These people, who spoke several different languages, were regrouped in a training camp in Aswan, then launched against Sudan. They learned some Arabic, since it was the language of command and their only common medium, and they were converted to Islam. For them, the Turko-Egyptian army was thus the equivalent of the Portuguese factories for the people of Guinea-Bissau and Casamance. Within

it, with respect to the Turko-Egyptian soldiers and their former fellow-countrymen, they formed a new social group, called the Nubi because of the origin of its first members, using a new language, creolized Arabic. This group reproduced since there were women with them. At the end of the 19th century, the Nubi army had to retreat southwards following the Mahdist revolt. They were then recruited by the British. Some stayed in Uganda, others continued to Kenya. In both countries they have remained a separate ethnic group to this day.

Nubi builds an especially interesting case, as it shows quite clearly that all points of the creole scenario have to be realized somehow for a creolized language to emerge. Such a necessary conjunction of contingent events is what makes creole formation such a rare occurrence. It also explains, I believe, why creole formation is so inherently linked with the so-called 'Great Discoveries' and what ensued. I can think of no other period in history where points (a)-(b) could have been so fully the case, that is when people belonging to entirely unconnected worlds entered into contact in such a brutal way. (Such encounters perhaps took place in prehistory, but we can't do anything with that supposition, except novels.)

Sudden contact is therefore a necessary condition, but it is naturally not sufficient, given the scenario. It must be socially shattering to some extent, which means that the structure of the 'contacted' society is a crucial factor as well. It is worthwhile, for instance, to compare Guinea-Bissau-Casamance with the area a few hundred kilometers to the North, namely Senegal (the Jolof). There the Portuguese met with a hierarchized, nearly urbanized society which they saw as quite similar to their own, judging by the chronicles. Their landing was probably a surprise – although not a strong one, since the Wolofs were in contact with the Berbers and the Arabs and knew how white men look – but it was not disruptive. No creole language emerged from this contact (except indirectly, as people from Senegal were sold as slaves and shipped overseas). In Guinea-Bissau-Casamance, in contrast, societies were less hierarchized (although they were agricultural, not hunters-gatherers) and white men were quite unknown.

To conclude and to repeat, the (rare) linguistic phenomenon called creolization appears to be quite separate from the expected linguistic consequences of migration. It occured with people not moving in real space but only, so to speak, in mental space, from one socio-cultural world to another. When people did move in real space, it was not migration, but deportation, violently imposed to slaves, under duress when indentured labour was the institution.

The unavoidable question, now, is what exactly is creolization? It was not the topic of this talk, however, nor is it the subject matter of this conference.

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