

Macmillan Center Pre-Dissertation Grant

APPLICATION

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EXPLORING AUSTRALIAN KRIOL

Creole languages have been subject to significant interest by linguists on account of their unique status as lenses into rapid, observable linguistic and social innovation in new communities that are borne of intergroup contact: particularly in the form of a colonizing force and multiple, subjugated communities.

The purpose of this application is to seek support for continuing my work researching linguistic properties and speaker variation in Australian Kriol, a radically under-documented creole language spoken multiple communities across northern Australia. This language, spoken by approximately 30,000 people, emerged in the context of the violent dispossession of Aboriginal tribes during early-twentieth century frontier expansion in Northern Australia. On-ground research and collection of primary data is essential for advancing and nuancing linguistic work for Kriol. My proposed fieldwork for June and July of this year is as a pilot study; one that will be used to assess the feasibility of continuing research in this domain, notably in compiling a dissertation consisting of theoretically-informed descriptive work on Kriol. This work also represents the initial research which will be treated as preparation for future grants and funding (e.g. NSF, DDRIG) in support of dissertation work on indigenous language description and analysis.

The research that I have conducted on this language so far, at both an undergraduate and graduate level, makes use of a text corpus drawn primarily from a Kriol translation of the Bible and picture books. My first qualifying paper for the Yale PhD program undertakes a probabilistic and statistical survey of the biblical text to provide evidence of a semantic and grammatical change that is currently in progress. While this data is a useful base for drawing structural generalizations about the language, it is insufficient in the context of contemporary linguistic research for the purposes of explaining language use and change. The work will be undertaken over a period of 6 weeks at Ngukurr (the Roper Bar settlement, southern Arnhem Land: 14°33'S 134°44'E) in order to assess the range of speaker variation and to elicit judgments from native speakers on the syntax and semantics of these variants of conversational Kriol. Ngukurr, a settlement of approximately 1,000 indigenous Australians, is described as the location of Kriol language birth and has a federal-government funded language center, primarily tasked with documentary and preservation work for the community's ten endangered heritage languages. It also has the advantage of being located in reasonably close proximity to the smaller Kriol-speaking community of Minyerri, which has been previously described as being associated a similar but distinct dialect.

This data collection will comprise six weeks of speaking to native speakers about the structural properties of their language. To facilitate this, various well-tested approaches to linguistic fieldwork will be deployed: conversational recordings (necessary for the collation of naturalistic speech data) and elicitation tasks (e.g. Bower 2015). This latter category involves testing the grammaticality and felicity of constructed sentences in Kriol in order to test hypotheses against speakers' knowledge of their own language. It will take the form of individual and group-interviews in order to facilitate expression in as broad a range of sociolects and registers/stylistic varieties as possible (cf. Wolfram 2013; Bailey & Maynor 1987). These interviews will include activities such as pre-prepared judgment tasks (questionnaires) in addition to translation work and semi-structured stimulus work (storytelling aided by picture books/videos etc., cf. Meakins 2011). Access to these judgments and intuitions is crucial for developing a more reliable understanding of Kriol grammar and of speakers' relationship with their language. Furthermore, a significant advantage of undertaking work at the Ngukurr Language Centre is the fact that speakers associated or otherwise familiar with the Centre are familiar with the interests of field linguists and their methods.

Given the inadequacy of the existing literature, documentation of Kriol — the most widely spoken contemporary Aboriginal language — has important social implications. Awareness of this language, a direct effect of the marginalization and violence committed during colonization against aboriginal peoples, is a desideratum in the context of indigenous rights: an additional foreseen outcome of this work is a contribution to the further development of resources and literature for this under-recognized language. Even basic documentation of the language represents a valuable contribution to the field. Additionally, Kriol's status as a "new" and radical contact language and marker of Australian indigenous identity mean that it holds promise as an excellent case study of the paths along which language tends to change (thereby providing insights into the nature of human language, the primary objective of linguistics as a discipline) as well as a study of the effects of disruption to traditional 'language ecologies' and the innovative behavior of these communities upon fragmentation and reconstitution. This funding would permit for initial data collection and exploratory work to enable research in this area.

Selected References

- Bailey, G., & Maynor, N. (1987). Decreolization? *Language in Society*, 16(4), 449-473.
- Bower, C. (2015). *Linguistic Fieldwork: A Practical Guide* (2nd ed.): Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meakins, F. (2011). *Case-Marking in Contact: The development and function of case morphology in Gurindji Kriol* (Vol. 39). Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Wolfram, W. (2013). Fieldwork Methods in Language Variation. In R. Wodak, B. Johnstone, & P. Kerswill (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Los Angeles: SAGE.