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Africa in Motion: Changing Identities in the Diaspora I

African (Linguistic) Identity/Continuity in the Diaspora: Focus on the Caribbean

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1. Introduction

- Like clothing, hairstyles, and other culturally variable phenomena, language offers a wealth of resources on which people may draw to meet their sociosymbolic needs.
- As a result, linguistic features of all sorts may come to serve as markers of whatever social distinctions are seen as important to people within a given social group.
- Among the distinctions marked in this way are those drawn in terms of broad categories such as gender, social class/socioeconomic status and age.
- I will focus on linguistic issues in the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora in contextualizing this talk.
- The relationship between language and identity is a fundamental one in sociolinguistics. A growing body of work explores the utility of thinking about sociolinguistic variation as the result of “acts of identity” (see Gumperz, 1982; LePage & Tabouret-Keller, 1985 for early views).
- Researchers have argued that issues of agency, culture, ethnicity, performance, style, ideology, and vernacular language usage are all key elements to consider as well.
- Main point – African languages/African linguistic identities were not lost in the New World. They were reformed/recreated in new linguistics forms. Displaced Africans were neither able to maintain their ancestral languages nor shift to colonial languages, so they created new ones.
- I’ll show that these new languages, called creoles, were only partly based on the languages in the contact situation.

2. Definitions/Background

2.1 Creole – a language that emerged out of contact between the languages of West Africans and European colonizers. In each setting where these languages develop, we find that there was a large number of socially subordinate population (slave population in the case of the Caribbean) under the control of a small socially dominant European population. Speakers of Caribbean Creole languages today are

speakers of languages whose ancestors were geographically displaced so that ties to their original languages and social identities are partially broken. *Note broken but not cut off!*

2.2 Research has shown that the West African languages which are relevant for describing Creole language are of the Niger-Congo family of languages (Lefebvre, 1996; Lumsden 1999 among others). Specifically, the Kwa group which includes the Akan (varieties - Twi and Fante) and Gbe (Ewe, Aja, Fon, Gen, Phla-pha) subgroups (Capo, 1991).

- When we examine the structure of these languages, we consistently find that the lexicon (words) is derived from the European languages and the structure (syntax, morphology, sometimes even semantics) is derived from West African languages.

2.3 Creoles in Sociocultural and Historical Context

- One issue which is important here is whether and how enslaved Africans were able to preserve their native cultures or how they created a new creole culture.
- To understand the linguistic developments that took place, we have to examine the sociolinguistic structure of the setting in which enslaved Africans found themselves.
- I consider linguistic developments among enslaved Africans in the New World as language change arising from language and culture contact.
- Alleyne (1997) for instance claims that there are specific factors in each Afro-American contact situation which account for differences in each post-emancipation Afro-American Society.
- Factors:
 - Maximum inequality in the distribution of power between groups in contact.
 - Nature and degree of interaction between the two groups (different subgroups have different levels of language contact; field slaves, drivers etc)
 - Psychological factors: motivation, resistance, ethnicity, perception of opportunities for social mobility
 - Demographic differences between the groups in contact (cf. Baker, 1999)
 - ratio of new (bozals): old slaves (creoles and acculturated slaves)
 - ratio of men: women
 - children:adults
 - Location of the contact
 - Number of cultures in contact (bilingual vs. multilingual contact)

3 Creoles in the Caribbean

- The linguistic impact of the contact between European languages and African languages as well as the legacy of the post-emancipation era is evidenced across the Caribbean.
- Most Creolists today agree that Creoles are the result of different degrees of restructuring of both the European and the West African languages.
- The main groupings are: English-based Creoles, French-based Creoles, Ibero-Romance Creoles.

- We can directly link these grouping to Europeans who had slave colonies in the region. (See map)
- Still, there is evidence of significant percentages of West African words in Caribbean Creole languages e.g. Twi (Jamaican Creole); Gbe (Haitian Creole; Saramaccan)
- In fact, there is evidence of West African linguistic influence at all levels of the linguistic system. This has been the driving force behind theorists who subscribe to AfroGenesis models of Creole formation.
- phonology – (the sound systems of the language)
 - West African lgs. have a *tonal* system and European languages have *stress* systems. Some Creoles have *tonal* systems e.g. Saramaccan, some have *stress* e.g. Jamaican, Sranan; others appear as a compromise between the two *pitch accent* e.g. Papiamentu, Guyanese.
 - The 2 major substrate languages for Ndyuka (and all Surinamese creoles) are Gbe and Kikongo. The Ndyuka vowel system is more similar to Kikongo system. However, other aspects of the grammar shows more influence from Gbe.
 - Many creoles (English-based, Dutch-based, French-based) have 5 to 7 vowel systems. The corresponding lexifier languages and the substrate languages all have more than 7 vowels.
 - Co-articulated stops - stops with 2 different places of articulation but which function as a single sound.
Saramaccan has /kp/ and /gb/ e.g. *kpasi* ‘vulture’; *ghonogbono* ‘moss’ (These sounds alternate with kw and gw as they do in some dialects of Ewe - a substrate language.)

Also corresponds to kw and gw in Sranan and Ndyuka e.g. gwe ~ gbe ‘leave’

- Prenasalized stops - preceded by a nasal with the same place of articulation and function as a single sound.
Saramaccan mbei ‘make’
- palatalized stops - involves the raising of the tongue towards the hard palate while producing the stop e.g.
garden (**gya**adn), car (**ky**ar) Jamaica; food (**ny**anan) Saramaccan
- Syllables in these varieties were restructured to pattern with syllable structures in the base languages. Avoidance of C-clusters *stick* → *tik*; change in pronunciation of sounds *thing* → *ting* (many of the West African lgs. did not have [th] so its not surprising that the sounds was modified in the speech of Creole speakers.

Other modifications/restructuring

- omission of a sound word initially
e.g. SR stand -- tan ‘stand’ HC american -- merikan
- omission of a sound word finally

HC risque (F) --- ris 'risk'

Insertion

- c. insertion of a sound word initially
Guiana French Creole sport (F) - espor 'sport'
- d. insertion of a sound word medially
e.g. Papiamentu delgado (S, P) -- delaga 'thin'
- e. insertion of a sound word finally
Saramaccan laugh --lafu
Negerhollands groot (D) -- grotto 'great'

Metathesis - a change in the linear order of sounds in a word

CV-metathesis within the syllable

- f. Sranan work -- wroko
JC film --- flim

o

- morphology – (word structure and word formation). Compound words *cut-eye*; *suck-teeth* are found in many Caribbean Creoles (and in African American English). Also languages like Twi, Yoruba, Mende, Igbo use morphemes that have the same literal meanings. Rickford and Rickford (1999), showed that that use of these terms and the accompanying gestures is specific to Blacks in the New World and is in fact not known or used by whites.
- syntax – (sentence structure) Serial Verbs Constructions survived in Caribbean Creoles (are only found in West African lgs not European lgs.)
e.g. *run-come-give (JC)*
- Past time reference in Caribbean creoles tend to match that of the (substrate) West African lgs. Creoles have a *relative tense system* in which an event is marked as past relative to a given point in time established by the discourse context. In contrast, European languages have an absolute tense system in which an event is marked as past relative to speech time.
- Dialect divergence- In a recent volume on Contact Englishes in the Eastern Caribbean, researchers examined language use among white and black enclave communities in the Bahamas and Anguilla. In both cases, it was shown that these communities main linguistic distinctiveness perhaps in tadem with their ethnic differences. These papers highlight the important issues of race/ethnicity and their juxtaposition with language which is often overlooked.
- Similarly, Gordon 2000 showed that New World Blacks in the US do not have the same kinds of vowel shift observed in the speech of whites.

4 Attitudes towards Creoles

Language mixture of any kind has always evoked strong emotional reactions.

Ambrose Gonzales (1922:17-18):

Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullahs seized upon the peasant English.....
Wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as well as they could and enriched with certain expressive African words, it issued through their flat noses and thick lips as so workable a form of speech that it was gradually adopted by the other slaves and became in time accepted Negro speech

While linguists might cringe at distasteful statements such as this, the fact is many members of the public probably accept the view that Creoles are the result of ineffective learning of standard languages. Even speakers of the Creole languages themselves are often ambivalent or have negative attitudes towards the languages. Almost all of the Caribbean varieties are ascribed low status and are thus stigmatized in the countries where they are spoken (not codified but note exceptions). The European languages on the other hand are ascribed high status and are associated with elitist norms.

So, why do speakers continue to use these varieties?

The languages continue to be used perhaps because they represent group solidarity/group identity, common heritage, reflect common struggles in today's social climate. Perhaps, they also provide a metaphorical link the past.....

One ever feels his two-ness-an American, a Negro; two souls
Two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body...
The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife-
This longing...to merge his double self into a better and truer self.
In merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. (DuBois, 1903)

I who am poisoned with the blood of both
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed the drunken office of British
rule, how choose between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give? (Derek Walcott, 1969)

5 Summary

- Language expresses much more than what is signified by its words.
- It expresses the way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves (i.e. social identity)