Defining Creole

By John H. McWhorter


Reviewed by Gerry Beimers
SIL International and University of New England (Australia)

Introduction

Defining Creole is a collection of thirteen of John McWhorter’s articles on issues that impinge on creole languages. Though originally written over a ten-year period, McWhorter has revised, included new data, and in some cases abbreviated the original articles. His aim is to deal with what he considers distorting tendencies in creole studies caused by sociopolitical issues. The book is divided into three parts.

Synopsis

Part I: Is There Such a Thing as a Creole?

In the introduction to this part McWhorter recounts how he came to propose the Creole Prototype Hypothesis and how certain misunderstandings of it had arisen. The five chapters in this part explicate the hypothesis, consider its application in detail, and contrast it to other theoretical positions.

The first chapter, “Defining ‘Creole’ as a Synchronic Term,” is McWhorter’s “official” statement of his Creole Prototype hypothesis. Here he explicates the three traits of the creole prototype, namely, “few or no inflectional affixes” (p. 12), “little or no use of tone to distinguish monosyllabic lexical items or to encode morphosyntactic distinctions” (p. 13), and a lack of noncompositional derivation. He then argues that the traits exist in a gradient due to four factors. As such, any particular creole (note: creoles are generally considered to be “younger” languages) possesses each trait to a greater or lesser degree. He responds to criticisms of his hypothesis by examining the case of Haitian Creole. Finally, he argues that older languages do not conform to the prototype, or at least none have been found yet that do; thus the author is able to define creole as a synchronic as well as a sociohistorical term.

In the second chapter, “The World’s Simplest Grammars are Creole Grammars,” McWhorter proposes a metric of language complexity to serve the purpose of making it possible to falsify his claim “that creole languages in general strongly tend to be less complex than older languages”
McWhorter uses the metric to compare Saramaccan with two older languages (Tsez and Lahu). Essentially, McWhorter locates his claim for less complexity in the view that languages acquire complexity over time, thus young languages such as creoles have the least complex grammars.

McWhorter’s third chapter, “The Rest of the Story: Restoring Pidginization to Creole Genesis Theory,” provides an examination of issues surrounding the developmental relationship between pidgins and creoles. In it he argues against the notion that the path from source language to creole is merely via “syntax-internal” (p. 74) transformation. The argument takes the shape of an examination of six features (which he designates as ornamental—metaphorically speaking) not found in creoles, namely: ergativity, inalienable possessive marking, overt marking of inherent reflexivity, evidential markers, grammaticalized referential marking, and consonant mutation. McWhorter argues that a syntax-internal model alone cannot effectively explain creole genesis. In the context of his discussion McWhorter is at pains to make clear that his approach does not designate creoles as primitive or functionally inadequate. Rather they have less of the ornamental features that accrete over time due to elaboration and drift. He sees in this the possibility that creole languages more clearly manifest human language competence.

The fourth chapter, “Saramaccan and Haitian as Young Grammars: The Pitfalls of Syntactocentrism in Creole Genesis Research,” is a detailed look at one creole, Saramaccan, in comparison with its substrate language, Fongbe. Here McWhorter gives a sustained examination of several grammatical features in the two languages to show how various rebuttals (relexification, loss of inflection and epistemological problems, and a lack of data) fail to falsify his creole prototype model. In doing so he makes a great effort to avoid the suggestion that Saramaccan is a simple language.

His fifth and final chapter for part one, “The Founder Principle versus the Creole Prototype: Squaring Theory with Data,” argues that the superstratist creole genesis model (advanced mainly by Chaudenson and Mufwene) is not supported by the data. McWhorter contests its three key tenets. The first, that early plantation slaves spoke approximations of the lexifier, is contested with data from Martinique and Suriname. The second tenet, that creoles are simply varieties of their lexifier, and its requisite “approximation mechanism” (p. 154) do not stand up to a nonselective presentation of the data (e.g. Sranan and Annobonese Creole Portuguese). The third tenet, that nothing can distinguish creoles from other language varieties that have arisen in contact, and the subsequent conclusion that creole is not a valid classification, is shown by McWhorter to be contradicted by the Creole Prototype itself.

**Part II: Is Creole Change Different from Language Change in Older Languages?**

In this section McWhorter seeks to address issues related to language change in creole languages. He claims leftist sociopolitical motivations (“culture cult” as he calls it, p. 162) have restricted the study of creole language change to decreolization or substrate influence and excluded normal language change processes.
Chapter six, “Looking into the Void: Zero Copula in the Creole Mesolect,” examines the usefulness of a language-internal diachronic study of the copula in English-based creoles in the Caribbean. In the first place he challenges the validity of the notion of a zero copula in the mesolect of a creole continuum. Next he argues—using synchronic, diachronic, and comparative evidence—that the basilectal creole equative copula is an internal development and that resemblance to West African equivalents is accidental. Consequently, he concludes that basilectal registers of the creoles he examined have evolved from an original stage no longer available and that his approach provides a better explanation for the zero copula in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).

The seventh chapter, “The Diachrony of Predicate Negation in Saramaccan Creole: Synchronic and Typological Implications,” is a study in the diachronic development of predicate negation in Saramaccan Creole (SM). After outlining predicate negation in SM, McWhorter proposes seven arguments for the diachronic developmental path of the negator á and examines anomalous occurrences of another negator ná. According to the author the SM developments demonstrate that even young languages such as creole can undergo internal structural change. He also cautions against the notion that conservative creoles reflect UG. The chapter closes with some discussion of topic-comment/subject-predicate typology in relation to SM.

In chapter eight, “Sisters under the Skin: A Case for Genetic Relationship between the Atlantic English-Based Creoles,” McWhorter advances arguments for treating the Atlantic English-based creoles as direct descendants of a stabilized elaborated pidgin. He examines six common idiosyncratic features that he believes are so unlikely to have emerged in separate locations that they point to a common ancestor.

McWhorter’s ninth chapter, “Creole Transplantation: A Source of Solutions to Resistant Anomalies,” is an attempt to ascribe a greater role in creole genesis models to the notion that a creole may emerge from a pre-existing pidgin or creole (either in situ or imported from elsewhere). His investigation covers Hawaiian Creole English, the French plantation creoles (or rather the lack of a continuum of lects in these), and Spanish creoles. He also touches on the issue of why no creole developed amongst the slaves in the sugar plantations of Venezuela. Finally, he looks at the Portuguese creoles. The implication for McWhorter is that the central conception of limited access to a dominant language cannot account for certain explanatory problems observed in a variety of creole contexts. The problems are resolved if a greater role for pre-existing contact languages is allowed.

Chapter ten, “Creoles, Intertwined Languages, and ‘Bicultural Identity’,” focuses on the supposed difference between intertwined languages and creoles. The author argues that the data on a variety of intertwined languages demonstrate that fluency in the lexifier is not a necessary trait of intertwined language genesis. Further to this he shows that an intertwined language being a criterion of culturally intermediate identity also applies to creoles. McWhorter then proposes and tests a typology to distinguish between the two language types in question, namely, “in contexts generating a pointedly bicultural identity, when there is only one native language, an intertwined language results; when there is more than one, a creole results.” (p. 253) The consequence for the author is that intertwined languages are one kind of creole.
Part III: The Gray Zone: The Cline of Pidginization or the Inflectional Parameter?

In the third section of the book McWhorter examines the role of reduction in language genesis and change that occurs through language contact.

In chapter eleven, “What Happened to English?,” McWhorter shows that English is “significantly less overspecified semantically and less complexified syntactically” (p. 268) compared to its Germanic sisters. His essential thesis, that this is due to a contact-based explanation, accounts for the facts. He outlines his view of overspecification and complexification and then goes on to examine ten features, namely, reflexivity marking, external possessor constructions, grammatical gender marking on the article, derivational morphology, directional adverbs, be with past participles, passive marking with become, verb-second word order, disappearance of thou, and disappearance of the indefinite pronoun man. The discussion then considers how Old Norse would have impacted the transmission of Old English. In all of this McWhorter does not claim that English is a creole, nor that English is simple and has not undergone elaboration since that break in transmission.

The twelfth chapter, “Inflectional Morphology and Universal Grammar: Post Hoc versus Propter Hoc,” argues in some detail that a model of Universal Grammar that includes parameters characterized by the presence of inflectional affixes is out of line with the tenets of genetic inheritance associated with evolutionary theory. The metaphor of inflectional affixes as “linguistic male nipples” (p. 315) is effectively argued throughout the chapter—the point being that developments such as inflectional affixation are indeed examples of the kinds of unnecessary elaboration discussed in chapter three.

The final chapter, “Strange Bedfellows: Recovering the Origins of Black English,” reveals weaknesses in the two main theories concerning the origins of Black English. After introducing the two major positions, the Creolist Hypothesis and the Dialectologist Hypothesis, McWhorter evaluates six papers in the Dialectologist book entitled The English History of African American English. He concludes that while some aspects of nonstandard English dialects did contribute to Black English, there remain features that apparently support the Creolist Hypothesis. However, his investigation leads beyond this and argues that the evidence is poor for linkage between Black English and African or creole legacies. He proposes that the Dialectologist school expand its hypothesis to allow that some traits are attributable to adult second-language acquisition.

Final comments

This volume as a whole is well produced. It has an extensive bibliography (some 700 items) and a comprehensive index (some 20 pages). I noticed only four typographical errors (incorrect spelling or references to section numbers). McWhorter’s style is clear, organized, and readable. Each chapter is effectively and coherently argued, and well grounded with examples. Given that the chapters originally appeared as individual conference papers or articles, subsequent data and critique have generated responses by the author that have been incorporated profitably in the current volume.
Field workers engaged with pidgin and creole linguistics, language change, and language contact phenomena will find this volume offers them a stimulating comprehensive treatment of the foundational issues in these areas. Those with other views of creole genesis will be required to seriously assess McWhorter’s position and rearticulate their own in light of the case that McWhorter makes. And scholars with a merely socio-historical view of creoles are bound to review their position as a result of this volume.

References