

On the emergence and development of three Atlantic creoles:
A linguistic and historical perspective on Haitian, Sranan and Cape Verdean.

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2. Description of research project

Pidgin and creole languages are considered "mixed" languages in the sense that they cannot be traced back to a single earlier language (Thomason, 2008: 271), due to the multilingual context in which they emerge. These languages typically develop in plantation, trade and other work settings where speakers with different first languages (henceforth, L1s) are in contact with each other for an extended period of time and create a new language for the purpose of communication.

It is often assumed that in the beginning stages of interaction between adult speakers with distinct L1s, they create a rudimentary pidgin that turns into a creole after it becomes nativized, meaning after it acquires native speakers. As a result, some creolists view adults as the original creators of pidgins, and children as the creators of creole languages.

Things are not, however, that simple as the pidgin-to-creole cycle and the nativization criterion are not generalizable to all cases of creole formation. On the one hand, there is indeed evidence that some creoles like Hawaiian creole first developed as a pidgin (Hawaiian Pidgin English) spoken by the Japanese, Portuguese, Tagalog plantation workers (among others) before it became nativized and turned into Hawaiian Creole English (Bickerton, 1984). On the other hand, there is no evidence that creoles in the Caribbean for instance (i.e., Jamaican) have been through a pidgin phase, suggesting that both children (in the Hawaiian case) and adults (in the Jamaican case) can be agents of creolization. Furthermore, on an imaginary continuum, some creoles are postulated to be closer to the European language spoken by the original settlers whereas others are closer to the African languages spoken by the slaves. Numerous factors such as population demographics, settlement vs. plantation colonies, access to the dominant language, power relations between the languages in contact may determine where a creole falls on the creole continuum. In sum, this greatly depends on the linguistic ecology and the socio-historical context in which a given creole emerges. However, a vexing issue for linguists is that it is difficult to find records of the early stages of creole formation, partly because creoles are oral, non-standardized languages, with no official orthographic conventions to promote their standardization and their access to the written form.

The lack of early written records has led to a variety of questions that this project will address: What did a given creole look like in the early stages of development? Did it go through a pidgin phase prior to becoming a creole? Who were the original founding populations and what were the languages in contact? Do creoles with distinct histories, populations and languages in contact display similar features early on and do they go through similar stages in their development? Who were the early agents of creolization: adults and/or children? Were early creolophones targeting the European language as a second language (we doubt it) or can one find in early sources evidence of innovations attesting to the emergence of a new system? What was the socio-historical context in which the creole developed?

In an attempt to answer these questions, this project examines a set of early creole texts written in the 16th and 18th centuries and the historical context in which they were written. The texts that we currently have at our disposal represent the earliest written records of Haitian Creole, (a French-based creole), Sranan (an English-based creole) and Cape Verdean Creole (a Portuguese-based creole).

The 1793/1796 Haitian texts are translations in creole of French documents claiming the emancipation of Haitian slaves following the 1789 French Revolution. These texts reveal much linguistic variation in the way they were transcribed and lead us to suspect that there were multiple transcribers, even for a single text. The observed variation affects countless grammatical domains from the expression of negation to the expression of plurality, showing that Haitian Creole was far from having stabilized at that point in time.

The 18th century Sranan Creole texts are court transcripts reporting the trial of maroon slaves who had managed to escape from the plantation but who were recaptured and tried before a court of law.

The 16th century materials relating to Cape Verdean Creole are a compilation of plays that Portuguese playwrights wrote for the entertainment of the royal court. These plays caricatured the speech of Black slaves who lived in Portugal and who are believed to have first stopped in Cape Verde islands.

In order to draw a fuller picture of the linguistic and historical insights that these old texts have to offer, the historians and linguists on this project aim at answering key questions pertinent to their own field while illuminating those of the other discipline.

The historians on this project will strive to situate each set of texts in the correct socio-historical setting, frame them within the main historical events of the time and help unveil with more accuracy the identity of the founding populations in contact, both on the European and African sides.

The tasks of the linguists will be to examine language variation in the early stages of each creole, analyze whether all three creoles go through similar developmental stages, study the changes that led to the three creoles' current grammatical structures and evaluate the level of proficiency in creole of the various transcribers.

Historians and linguists also hope to illuminate each other's research questions: By helping linguists determine with a higher degree of accuracy the historical context of the texts and who the populations in contact were, historians will help unveil the source languages that contributed to each creole. A solid knowledge of their linguistic ecology will enlighten linguists on how precisely each of the source languages contributed to their genesis.

Linguists will help historians determine the level of proficiency in creole of the various transcribers. In the case of the Haitian texts for instance, whether some of the transcribers were French, literate slaves or educated bozals has major implications for the role that Black slaves may have had in the propagation of the emancipation texts. Evidence of their early activism may help historians understand better how it could have prepared them to organize and win the Haitian Revolution.

3. Description of the collaborative process

This project involves a collaboration between three faculty members, three graduate students, one undergraduate student and a librarian at the University of Michigan, in addition to two Haitian consultants. The first consultant is Michel Degraff, a Haitian linguist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the second is Wadler Fleurina, a local native speaker of Haitian Creole.

The next few paragraphs introduce the research profile of each collaborator to the project, which will make their respective role all the clearer in the latter part of the document. As we shall see, each team member brings to the project a specific expertise and set of skills that will lead to a natural division of labor among the UM team members.

Sarah ("Sally") Thomason is a contact linguist specialized in historical linguistics and who co-authored with Terrence Kaufman *Language Contact, Creolization and Genetic Linguistics* (among numerous publications). This is a pioneering volume that devised a new methodology for identifying contact-induced change, as opposed to language-internal developments. Her work has contributed in major ways to our understanding of a broad taxonomy of processes and outcomes that are observable when two or more languages come into contact, including pidgins and creoles.

Marlyse Baptista is a linguist specialized in the morpho-syntax of creole languages and in theories of creole genesis. Her recent research has focused on cognitive processes involved in the formation of creole languages. She has recently co-authored with Susan Gelman and Erica Beck psycholinguistic experiments testing the role of convergence in creole genesis.

Jean Hébrard is a historian who at UM co-directs a project on Law in Slavery and Freedom project. He is also faculty at l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France. His internationally acclaimed book *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (co-authored with Rebecca Scott and published by Harvard University Press, 2012) is based on large amounts of archival work and reports on how slaves and their descendants have used the writings of colonial administrations to recover rights and identities that their legal status denied them.

Yourdanis Sedarous, a first-year doctoral student in the Linguistics department is interested in contact linguistics and syntax. Her Master's thesis investigated code-switching between Egyptian Arabic (her native language) and English, based on field work data.

Ariana Bancu, a fourth-year doctoral student in Linguistics is writing her dissertation on contact effects between Transylvanian Saxon, German and Romanian (her native language). She is evaluating her informants' levels of proficiency in these three languages and is therefore familiar with new methods for measuring speakers' proficiency in languages they speak. She has much experience in coding and tagging speech data in large corpora.

Naomi Gottschalk, a Junior undergraduate in our department, is currently writing an Honor's thesis on bilingual Basque-Spanish speakers, based on data that she collected in two sites of Basque country in Spain last Summer. She is excellent at syntactic analysis and is among the top undergraduate students in our department.

Andrew Walker, a doctoral student in the History department, is currently writing a dissertation entitled "Strains of Unity: Property, Antislavery, and Sovereignty in Haitian Santo Domingo, 1822-1844." He has much expertise in the history of Haiti and is also currently developing an online database of Haitian documents and literature.

The Linguistics librarian, Jennifer Nason Davis, is an expert in identifying archival resources at the UM libraries and other institutions.

Among our consultants, Michel DeGraff, a Haitian linguist at MIT and Wadler Fleurina, a local Haitian speaker will provide necessary guidance in interpreting variation in the old Haitian texts and in making sure that our own transcriptions and translations into current Haitian are accurate.

Based on our respective expertise and skill sets, a natural division of labor among the UM team members will be emerging this Spring. Marlyse Baptista and Sally Thomason will work closely with Yourdanis Sedarous, Ariana Bancu, and Naomi Gottschalk in analyzing the morpho-syntactic properties of the old texts in Haitian, Sranan and Cape Verdean that we currently have at our disposal. Sally Thomason's expertise in historical linguistics may help us identify contact-induced change and tease it from language-internal development. Marlyse Baptista's expertise in creoles may help us detect the similarities and differences in the way tense, mood and aspect markers and plural markers first emerge and develop. Similar or distinct patterns of emergence among creoles with different lexifiers (European languages) and different substrates (African languages) will have broad implications for theories of creole genesis. The three Linguistics students will be involved with the grammatical analyses every step of the way, in addition to coding and tagging specific linguistic features in an attempt to evaluate the form, function, distribution and frequency rates of individual markers. Their technological expertise and their experience handling large corpora will allow us to identify distinct patterns in the development of the three creoles. Furthermore, in the context of the Haitian old texts, Ariana Bancu's expertise with new methods of measuring speaker's degree of proficiency in the language portrayed in these old texts will be useful to the historians on board. It will help them determine whether a given transcriber was a French settler or an African slave. Unveiling the identity of some of the transcribers will have important ramifications for historians' assumptions regarding who the agents of diffusion of the emancipation documents were.

Jean Hébrard's and Andrew Walker's familiarity with the Haitian texts and their vast experience in archival work may not only provide crucial information regarding the original populations/languages in contact in Haiti but also in Suriname (for Sranan) and Cape Verde (for Cape Verdean Creole). Our hope is that their archival expertise, in addition to Jennifer Nason Davis' will help uncover not only new information about the original populations and source languages in contact but also possibly, a new set of diachronic texts representative of early stages of other creoles.

In this project, faculty and students will work closely with each other and are viewed as full-fledged partners from the initial comparative analyses of the texts and of their historical settings to the publication phase (it is common for linguists to co-author their work with students, see Baptista's CV). We intend to produce together two publications, in addition to working on other initiatives (see section 4).

4. What contribution(s) will the project make to the humanities field(s) in which it intervenes, and to the humanities more broadly? How do you anticipate results will be communicated and to what audiences?

We wish to answer the questions in (4) in reverse order, as we would like to emphasize the value of this kind of collaborations for humanities more broadly before highlighting the contributions that it makes to both the fields of Linguistics and History.

Although linguists do collaborate with scholars in other disciplines (complex systems, computer science, mathematics), oddly enough, it is seldom the case that linguists collaborate with historians. And yet, as already discussed in section 2, some of the key questions driving the field of contact linguistics could be best answered with the help of historians. In the case of contact languages like creoles, we do know that population demographics, the type of colonies in which they develop (settlement vs. plantation colonies), access to the dominant language, the type of power relations that existed between the populations/languages in contact are all factors that have a definite impact on the type of creole that emerges in such environments.

We cannot answer with any degree of certainty any of the questions above, unless we have solid knowledge of the historical circumstances in which a given creole arose and of the founding populations that contributed to its genesis. For this reason, a significant contribution that this particular project makes to humanities broadly speaking is to demonstrate the power of interdisciplinary work in helping answer questions that are foundational to the two collaborating fields.

For contact linguists, the results of this project are likely to be significant in showing the common developmental patterns that emerging creole languages go through. Our analyses are also likely to reveal the specific grammatical domains that the creoles' different substrates (if historians can help us unveil the original populations) and superstrates contribute to. There are in the scholarly literature diachronic studies of individual creoles but they typically focus on just one creole language or one small set of texts. Thanks to the complementary expertise of our team members, we will be in a position to compare for the first time creoles in the very first stages of development. Given that all three creoles have distinct source languages and superstrates (French for Haitian, English (and Dutch) for Sranan and Portuguese for Cape Verdean), the comparative analyses we will conduct are likely to reveal the similarities and differences in the way they develop.

For historians, linguists' capacity to evaluate the degree of proficiency in a given language may help them finally find cues as to the identity of the transcribers for the various texts we will analyze. In the case of Haiti specifically, unveiling the identity of the original transcribers will help gauge more accurately the agency of the Haitian slaves both in disseminating the emancipation documents, and in leading the Haitian Revolution.

If funded, we plan on publishing our co-authored findings in two venues: the Linguistics journal, *Language* (the flagship journal of the Linguistic Society of America), as this particular journal seeks papers with broad implications for the field. Our project certainly will, by showing how new languages emerge and develop. The other venue will be *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. This journal based at the University of Michigan is likely to be interested in the comparative and interdisciplinary nature of our project.

In addition to these two joint publications, we are planning three events and a new course: 1) We intend to organize at the Hatcher Library a public exhibit of the Haitian, Cape

Verdean and Sranan old texts with linguistic and historical commentaries and we do hope that archival work will uncover other old texts in other creoles that we can exhibit.

2) For History and Linguistics, we envision a workshop open to students from both units to share with each other best interdisciplinary practices, including archival work and using methods to gauge speakers' proficiency.

3) For a much larger audience, we envision a Ted Talk tentatively entitled: "How humans create new languages".

We will also propose to the Linguistics department to offer a brand new course focusing on the synchronic and diachronic study of young languages.