Linguists who meet John Holm today, a newly retired Professor Catedrático with a chair in English Linguistics at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, and one of the most eminent creolists in the world, might imagine that his path to academic prominence must have been the usual sort of straight-line progression: high school to college to graduate school, followed by tenure-track academic employment and a steady climb through the ranks. This would be a mistake. John’s career path has been impressive indeed, but far from ordinary. He came to languages and to creoles early, but mostly not in classrooms.

His background doesn’t immediately suggest adventure. John was born in 1943 and grew up in Jackson, Michigan, which is not the most exotic of towns. His family was hardly the monolingual and monocultural Midwestern stereotype, however. His Danish father was a much travelled electrical engineer — he lit up Islamabad — and an ex-sailor; his mother’s family descended from the Volga Germans who were taken to Russia by Catherine the Great, and she made sure her children knew about German culture. Both parents valued the languages of their original home countries, and all the other languages they met on their travels. They also leaned left in their political views, which made life difficult during the Communist witch hunts led by Senator Joseph McCarthy during the 1950s; so at one time they considered moving to Uruguay. This plan inspired the whole family to study Spanish, and John remembers the excitement of using the language to open up new perspectives later during a family vacation trip to Mexico.

By the time John reached high school his interest in languages was firmly established, and he studied German, Spanish and Russian. A short-lived summer job in Arizona in 1961 evolved into an impromptu hitch-hiking trip to Mexico and then Nicaragua, where he ran out of money but began his life-long journey into creole linguistics. As he describes it, ‘One of the most amazing things I discovered there was that black people from Nicaragua’s Caribbean
coast spoke what they called ‘Pirate English’, a Creole English that I could hardly understand.”

Further exploration of creole languages had to wait, though. He returned to Michigan and earned a B.A. in English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan in 1965, studying other languages along the way. He spent his junior year in France, half of it at the Sorbonne, and studied Italian as well as learning French. He extended his travels during that year to Vienna, Greece, Turkey, the USSR, and Denmark.

In all these places — Nicaragua, the University of Michigan, France — he exercised his talent for making friends for life, a whole range of people he learned to know through foreign languages. After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1965 he followed the suggestion of some Colombian friends and went to Bogotá to teach English as a foreign language; it was the year, he says, when he finally became fluent in Spanish.

After that experience, he moved back to the U.S. to take an M.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Columbia University Teacher’s College (1968). He had taken linguistics courses at Michigan, but these years were important to his formal training. He also worked briefly as a social worker in the New York City system, and that was almost as important. He came in touch with people whose world he hadn’t known before, and problems he couldn’t solve. Both the science and the sympathy stayed with him.

It was Swiss friends from his University of Michigan days who suggested his next move: to teach English as a foreign language at the Volkshochschule in Zurich, Switzerland (1969-1970). Perhaps Zurich was a little too peaceful, for he rapidly returned to Michigan: this time to the Detroit Institute of Technology, across the road from Motown Records. He was there for two years (1971-1973) and he had two separate tasks: teaching English to the Institute’s large cohort of students from Gujarat, India, and teaching Standard English to newly-recruited African American students from Detroit, who came to the Institute speaking African American English. He wondered why his students’ grammar differed so strikingly from the grammar(s) of other English dialects, and that question gave him his second push toward creole linguistics. The discipline offered a way to pull together his social concerns and his scientific interests and satisfied his day to day need to understand well enough to teach properly.

This was not always a comfortable line of enquiry for administrators, or even other teachers, and John zig-zagged back to Switzerland for a while. He taught English as a foreign language at the Benedictine school in Sarnen (1973-1975), a small town on a lovely lake behind all the famous mountains,
and at the end he was solemnly invited to stay ‘für immer’ — for ever. The offer shocked him back into the academic world.

By the early 1970s sociolinguists were beginning to debate the origins of African American English (AAE, then called Black English.) The hypothesis that AAE originated as an English-lexifier creole had been proposed by, among others, William Stewart (for instance in ‘Sociolinguistic factors in the history of American Negro dialects’, 1967) and J. L. Dillard in his 1972 book Black English: its history and usage in the United States. The opposing view — that AAE arose as a dialect of American English, no more different from other dialects than they are from each other, was then espoused primarily by American dialect geographers (e.g. Krapp 1924, Kurath 1949, and later dialectologists as well; see Labov 1982 for a brief outline of the history of research on AAE). The discussion became the first great controversy in pidgin/creole studies, but certainly not the last; the field became notorious for the vivid mutual criticism of rival theorists.

Fascinated by AAE and creoles, John left Switzerland and went first to the State University of New York at Cortland to study AAE and then to University College London, where he earned his Ph.D. in 1978. His research took him back to Nicaragua in 1976 to study the Creole English of the country’s Caribbean coast, the language he had first encountered in 1961 as ‘Pirate English’. His dissertation, The Creole English of Nicaragua’s Miskito Coast: its sociolinguistics, history, and a comparative study of its lexicon and syntax, is not only a descriptive grammar and dictionary; in bringing together anything available about the social and economic history of the coast, even going through one local historian’s barrel of papers for material, it remains the best available story of a much disputed coast.

John’s interests encompassed all of language contact, but his particular foci have always been creoles (and, to a lesser extent, pidgins) and those languages that have sometimes and controversially been called semi-creoles — among them AAE, Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese, and Afrikaans. He began publishing during his student years, with ‘Miskito words in Belize Creole’ (1977). He also started on the conference round in those years, and his very first presentation (1976) turned out to be among the most influential papers of his career, though another scholar was later credited with his original insight (he explains the circumstances in the Afterword of Holm 1984, the formal publication of the 1976 conference paper). In this paper he argues that ‘the similar pattern of copula deletion in B[lack] E[nglish] V[ernacular] and the creoles [Gullah and Jamaican Creole] links the two historically... It is the African origin of many features common to these varieties that accounts for
their similarity and points most unambiguously to their common ancestry’ (1984: 300).

Indeed, he suggests that it makes little sense to talk about copula deletion under certain conditions in AAE and the two creoles when the African substrate languages lacked a copula in the same conditions. That is, ‘deletion’ suggests that AAE and (other) creoles once had the copula in those constructions and then lost it, while from a substratist perspective, the languages would never had a copula there at all. Some of John’s quantitative evidence that linked copula constructions in AAE and the creoles formed a significant part of William Labov’s testimony in the famous Ann Arbor AAE case, testimony that in turn contributed to a decision in favor of African American parents who sued to have their children’s language rights recognized in the local public school system (Labov 1982).

The 1976 conference paper also signaled an interest in what became a major interest of his research career: investigating what structural features substrate and superstrate languages contribute to emerging pidgins and creoles. At first his emphasis was on structural links between Caribbean creoles and the Niger-Congo languages spoken by enslaved Africans. He is known as a substratist, one who believes that substrate contributions are preeminent in pidgin/creole genesis processes, but his arguments have always been nuanced, recognizing the complexity of the interplay between different social and linguistic factors.

After London, he went to the College of the Bahamas in Nassau (1978-1980) as Lecturer in linguistics, English, and German. There he was in constant contact with Creole speakers, and he turned his attention to ‘the problems that speakers of Black and Creole English had in learning the standard variety’ (Holm 2010). Realizing that ‘many grammatical problems were linked to differing subcategorizational rules in specific words’, he ‘began to collect data on these words systematically on cards’ (ibid.) for in those dinosaur days, before computers, many of us were addicted to entering data on 3 inch x 5 inch cards. He realized that the cards could be ‘the beginning of a dictionary that no one had ever written’ (ibid.) and that dictionary, written with Alison Shilling, was published in 1982. The sometimes despised creole could now be a source of national pride, with copies in every Bahamian school; and since Shilling and Holm handed the copyright to the College of the Bahamas, it is also freely available on line and, as of 2010, it was getting more than a thousand hits a month. The website says it is still ‘the only complete scholarly study of the unique terminology and patterns of usage of Bahamian Creole and Standard Bahamian English’ (www.cobses.info/edbeww/, accessed 6/16/13.)

The study of creoles and pidgins had once been on the margins of linguistics, but that was changing rapidly. In 1966 the first (modern) textbook on

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pidgin and creole languages was published (Hall 1966). In 1971 Dell Hymes edited an important collection of papers from the 1968 Creole Linguistics Conference in Mona, Jamaica – the book that established pidgin and creole linguistics as an exciting field of study in itself and a vital component of any comprehensive investigation of language contact phenomena. A few years later, in 1975, another important conference focused on pidgin/creole linguistics, the International Conference on Pidgins and Creoles (Honolulu).

Specialized societies began to arise during this same period. In particular, the Society for Caribbean Linguistics, whose beginnings were in the 1968 Mona conference, was formally established in 1972; John was an early member. The *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* began publication later, in 1985, and quickly became the standard journal in the field; and the Society for Pidgin and Creole Linguistics (SPCL) was established in 1989. John entered the field at a time when it was beginning to grow and expand, and as his career developed he contributed significantly to that rise.

In 1980 John moved back to the United States to CUNY to teach English and linguistics in the Hunter College English Department. He continued his work on Caribbean and Central American Englishes, with two edited volumes (1983, 1986) and numerous articles. His research also moved beyond the Caribbean and AAE; his first publication on Popular Brazilian Portuguese (1987) and a short article on Portuguese-based creoles (1989) date from this period. He had rather tense relations with some English-Department members who found the study of creoles irrelevant to their mission, if not downright offensive, but in 1986 he was granted tenure — his steady stream of important publications made that inevitable, at least in retrospect — and in 1989 he was again promoted, to full professor. In his last decade in New York he taught in the Ph.D. Program in Linguistics at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center, where he had ‘a number of talented doctoral students from a number of different countries who wanted to write their dissertations on the many creole and semi-creole languages that immigrants had brought to New York City’ (Holm 2010). His passion for nurturing students to help them become fully trained professionals, and his effectiveness as a teacher, is evident in the success of many of his doctoral students at CUNY and at Coimbra.

John spent his first sabbatical year, 1986-1987, as a Fulbright fellow, teaching a course in creole linguistics at University College, London, and completing the work that brought him lasting fame: *Pidgins and Creoles* (1988-1989), a two-volume compendium. Volume 1 is subtitled ‘Theory and structure’; it begins with a historical overview of the literature (Schuchardt, Reinecke, Hall, Taylor, and others) and continues by outlining important topics of discussion from (mostly) modern pidgin/creole studies: the monogenesis
hypothesis, the creole continuum, lexical influences on emerging pidgins and creoles, phonological structure, and syntactic structure. Volume 2, ‘Reference survey’, lists and characterizes more than a hundred pidgins, creoles, and (other) restructured language varieties. John compiled, sifted, and analyzed information from the literature (including of course his own writings), and from unpublished research on some of the languages, to provide (as the publisher’s blurb says) an ‘overview of the sociohistorical development of each... providing texts and highlighting the salient linguistic features of each’. Volume 2 is organized according to primary lexical sources: Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, English, several African languages, Arabic, Native American languages, and others.

The book became a tribute to the memory of very good friends, John and Aiko Reinecke, scholars and activists who helped organise the pineapple workers of Hawaii and fell foul of the McCarthy campaigns as John’s parents almost did. John Reinecke’s Ph.D. dissertation (written for Yale University’s Department of Race Relations in 1937) was the most complete survey of pidgins and creoles until John’s two volumes were published. Reinecke’s dissertation was more sociologically than linguistically oriented, and of course it differed greatly from John’s survey in many other respects as well – not least because of the much greater body of knowledge about contact languages that had accumulated in the half-century between the two works. Indeed, one of John’s major accomplishments in Pidgins and Creoles was to provide a history of the field which in turn helped give creolistics an ancestry and an identity. This, in conjunction with the 100+ descriptions of the languages, helped to guide future research and thus shape the discipline of pidgin and creole linguistics.

Pidgins and Creoles immediately became the standard work in the field, the book that scholars of all theoretical persuasions consulted even when they disagreed with one or another of John’s analyses. In its comprehensiveness, its insightful and sensible analyses, and its nonpolemical tone, the book is an admirable scholarly resource. This achievement established John as one of the world’s most accomplished pidgin/creole specialists. It also brought him into contact with dozens of scholars who came to know and value his eagerness to get things right in discussing languages they had written about.

This is how I first made his acquaintance, through correspondence about Chinook Jargon and an 11th-century Arabic-based pidgin as he was writing those sections of the book. I was impressed then, and I am impressed still, by his remarkable ability to maintain an equable, polemics-free stance in a field that is all too full of easily offended prima donnas. John certainly has firm opinions, but he expresses his theoretical views without fireworks and is unfailingly polite. Stories of shouting matches in SPCL sessions never have
anything to do with John Holm, and email diatribes against theoretically uncongenial opponents also never involve John, either as aggressor or as target. (I don’t mean to suggest such things are routine in the field of pidgin and creole linguistics, but they are most certainly not unknown.)

His standard work convinced him that there was one flaw in the field which could be corrected. English-based creoles were studied mostly by English speakers, French by French speakers, and so forth, which made an overview of data on creole syntax difficult and hindered the development of theory. His first response was to join a handful of others to create the steering committee that led to the first meeting of the Society for Pidgin and Creole Linguistics in 1989, a body which made no rules about geographical site or lexical source but studied creoles from the Pacific and the Atlantic, and restructured languages ‘from Central Africa to Siberia’. A seminar of his graduate students at CUNY produced grammars of the creoles they studied in a standard form which allowed them to be compared, and that was later expanded, with Peter Patrick, into parallel grammars of eighteen creoles from the Caribbean to Creole Arabic in the Sudan and Spanish in the Philippines (Holm & Patrick 2007). The form of the survey was an important model for the even wider Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures (2013); ‘to a significant extent’, writes Susanne Michaelis, one of the editors of the Atlas, ‘APICS stands on the shoulders of its important predecessor’.

In 1998 John left the Graduate Center at CUNY, and New York, for the rather different traditions of Coimbra and Portugal. He had already begun to study Portuguese formally while still in New York and had taken a field trip to Brazil in 1983 that stimulated his interest in African-Brazilian varieties of Portuguese (Holm 2010). He attended the first international colloquium on Portuguese-based creoles held in Portugal (University of Lisbon, 1991) and, with a Fulbright fellowship, spent his second sabbatical leave in 1993-1994 as a visiting professor of linguistics at the University of Coimbra in Portugal. He was more and more interested in creoles with a lexical base in Portuguese, both for the theoretical issues raised by Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese and other ‘semi-creolized’ languages, and because the Portuguese creoles still suffered a lack of academic respectability in Portugal itself, even among the scholars most competent to study them. Yet these languages allowed the study of contacts unlike those that formed the Atlantic creoles —indigenous languages in Brazil, Dravidian in India, Cantonese in Macau, Austronesian in Timor — and perhaps a different category of result.

In Coimbra, he has built a lively and highly successful program in creole linguistics, attracting students who wish to specialize in Portuguese-based creoles, as well as students specializing in other creoles and other contact
languages. For as Holm 2004 shows, he is always concerned to build a theoretical framework for the categorization and analysis of all contact languages. Debates about Black English often sank into disputes over whether ‘it’ had ever been a creole, and whether it was creolizing or decreolizing. Afrikaans could at last be studied to ask, no longer over the protests of Afrikaners, how Dutch changed in South Africa through contact. Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese was clearly not a creole, but it had clearly changed through time as a result of contacts. There was an entire area which had not been studied, and the only problem was finding a name for it. For a while, John chose ‘semi-creolization’, an old term of art, but he came to see that the real fit was with contact linguistics in the wider sense.

John’s journey has taken him from AAE to English-based creoles to Portuguese-based creoles, always with an eye to placing the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of the languages in the general context of contact linguistics. His ten books attest to his diligence and also to his dedication to providing specialists in language contact with data and analyses that can then inform and enrich their own research. His most recent book, Holm & Michaelis 2009, is a prime example: it is a massive anthology, comprising five volumes and a total of 2,520 pages.

John is now officially in retirement but, if we are lucky, his research career is far from over. I have learned a great deal from reading his writings over the years, and from conversations with him; and I know that many, many other language-contact specialists, including of course his numerous students, would agree that his research contributions have been crucial to the well-being of our discipline.

Note

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