Mesolect as the norm: semi-creoles revisited

Mesoletos como norma: revisão do conceito semi-crioulo

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Abstract: Creolists have long classified creole languages as ranging along a continuum from basilectal to mesolectal toacrolectal, with an implication that the basilectal range is the‘purest’ or even most prototypical representation of creolization. However, in light of John Holm’s focus on the category of semi-creoles, in this paper I argue that most creole languages worldwide classify as ‘mesolectal’, much more like semi-creoles than ‘basilectal’ creoles like Sranan and Tok Pisin, and that this even includes the ‘basilectal’ ranges of English Caribbean creoles. I propose that ‘mesolectal’ creolization is in fact the usual result, and that the term ‘basilect’ be restricted to the relatively few creoles that developed under the unusual circumstance of almost complete dissociation from their lexifiers. This includes the Surinam creoles, the Gulf of Guinea creoles, Tok Pisin and its relatives, and very few others.

Keywords: Basilect, mesolect, semi-creole.

Resumo: Crioulistas há muito que defendem que as línguas crioulas se classificam ao longo de um continuum que se estende desde a faixa basiletal até à faixa acroletal, passando pela mesoletal, com a implicação de que a basiletal corresponde à representação ‘mais pura’ ou, até mesmo, mais prototípica da crioulização. Contudo, à luz da atenção dada por John Holm aos semi-crioulos, este artigo defenderá que a maioria das línguas crioulas no mundo pertencem à faixa ‘mesoletal’, muito mais como semi-crioulos do que como crioulos de tipo ‘basiletal’, tais como o Sranan e Tok Pisin. Isto inclui até os crioulos de tipo ‘basiletal’ das Caraíbas Inglesas. Considero que
a crioulização ‘mesoletal’ é de facto o processo mais comum e que o termo ‘basileto’ deve ficar circunscreto aos poucos crioulos que se desenvolveram em circunstâncias de quase total dissociação das suas línguas lexificadoras, tais como os crioulos do Suriname, do Golfo da Guiné, Tok Pisin e afins, e poucos mais.

**Palavras-chave:** Basileto, mesoleto, semi-crioulo.

1 **Introduction**

I am thankful for being allowed to contribute to this occasion, as John Holm’s work on creole languages was foundational to shaping my thinking as I entered the field in the late 1980s.

Here, I would like to focus on the category of semi-creole, a term Holm imprinted on the field (although it was created as early as Reinecke 1937) and has investigated assiduously since (cf. Holm 2004). I suggest that the basic insight behind it applies to more creoles than we traditionally suppose, and that the class itself ought to be extended to more languages, including one that few would expect to fit into the category at all.

The revision has two main advantages. First, it seeks a purely linguistic taxonomy, unconnected to habits of thought inevitably encouraged by issues of social history, ethnicity, standardization, and entrenched scholarly tradition. Second, this revision offers areas of rapprochement between creolists resistant to classifying creoles as a kind of language and those who accept doing so. While I continue in my belief that the latter position, Creole Exceptionalism, is scientifically correct, that belief is ultimately founded partly in observations from creolists in opposition which I find genuinely useful.

2 **Defending the term**

Holm (2000: 10) has described the semi-creole as ‘a new variety with a substantial amount of the source [lexifier] language’s structure intact, including the inflections not found in basilectal creoles, but also with a significant number of the structural features of a creole, such as those inherited from the substrate or the interlanguages that led to its preceding pidgin.’ In this source and others, he adduces as typical examples of the class Afrikaans, Black English, Reunionnais French, Popular Brazilian Portuguese, and in some later work, the various vernacular Spanish varieties of Latin America spoken by descendants of slaves.
Holm’s definition contains assumptions that have been contested since he wrote, such as that basilectal creoles lack inflection by definition, that creoles are necessarily born of pidgins, and that degree of substrate inheritance can be considered a diagnostic of ‘creoleness.’ Relevant are claims that these assumptions were mistaken and that creole studies will move forward in simply treating all languages, creoles included, as mixtures from ‘feature pools’ based on the principles of population genetics. Mufwene (1997: 59), for example, suggests that the very term semi-creole lacks scientific validity: ‘In the absence of a structural linguistic definition, what do we learn from this label? Or, what do we need it for? What criteria justify this new category?’

These questions are well-taken — and have elicited responses. Mufwene assumes that semi-creole (as well as creole itself) could only qualify as a valid term if characterized as a list of linguistic features. However, various arguments have proposed (cf. McWhorter 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Parkvall 2008; Bakker, Daval-Markussen, Parkvall & Plag 2011) that creolization is characterizable via linguistic features lacking rather than present.

Specifically, the Creole Exceptionalism (CE) hypothesis stipulates that creoles are defined by two fundamental traits: 1) hybridity, but also 2) birth in a pidgin, or pidginized variety, such that their grammars harbor starkly less grammatical complexity and irregularity than older languages. At this writing, the arguments for this position have yet to be addressed substantially by those opposed to treating creoles as a linguistic class.

As such, I will approach Holm’s conception as empirically valid: semi-creolization represents a process of 1) hybridization plus, as Holm terms it, 2) grammatical restructuring, both manifested to a degree moderate in comparison with the extreme one evident in creoles often termed radical, ‘deep’ or basilectal such as Saramaccan.

‘Restructuring’ is indeed different from the simplification that the CE stresses. However, within the restructuring that Holm refers to, simplification of lexifier (and substrate) constructions plays a dominant role; e.g. to mark the past with an invariant preverbal particle eliminates the allomorphy that a past-marking affix exhibited, as well as the irregular past-marking exhibited by a great many verbs. In his frequent references to the role that universals of second-language acquisition play in creolization, Holm gives indication of concurring with this conception.
Most creoles are ‘semi-creoles’, part one: are Caribbean mesolects ‘post-creole’?

Under Holm’s taxonomy, semi-creoles are hardly unique among creoles in their relative proximity to the lexifier in terms of hybridity and simplification. He considers semi-creoles linguistically analogous to the mesolectal varieties of the Atlantic English-based creoles, the latter distinguished as post-creole, creolization having purportedly diluted due to contact with the lexifier (decreolization).

The taxonomic similarity is evident in a comparison of, for example, Reunionnais and mesolectal West Indian Anglophone creole. Retention of morphology is a useful diagnostic, albeit partial, of the extent to which creolization has occurred. In both of these creoles:

1. Lexifier derivational morphology is retained to a robust degree. A perusal of word lists or dictionaries reveals this quite clearly, such that Reunionnais retains verbs prefixed by re-, de-, and an- (< French -en). On the West Indian mesolects, in English, a particularly useful demonstration of derivation is also verb-particle constructions, analyzable as derivation according to analyses such as Bolinger (1971), where, for example, examples such as git op (get up) and mes op (mess up) are normal in mesolectal Guyanese (Rickford 1987: 162-4).

2. Some lexifier inflectional affixes are retained, to the extent that none of the languages qualify as analytic in any meaningful sense. Reunionnais maintains a future-tense inflection, a suffix that marks the past in some varieties, and a definite article that varies for biological gender (lö vs. la) and number (plural le) (Corne 1999: 78-83). These are examples of inherent inflection (cf. Booij 1993), roughly, inflections with meaning. Because this class includes tense/aspect and number, all creoles retain some inherent inflection — but in unbound form (McWhorter 2011). What distinguishes semi-creoles is their doing so in affixal form. West Indian Anglophone mesolects have this trait as well, retaining inflections such as present-tense marker -s and progressive -in (They teaches there, We teachin there [Roberts 1988: 70]).

3. Some inflectionally conditioned irregularities are maintained. In Reunionnais, some heavily used verbs like be, have, and need vary suppletively when tensed. In Anglophone Caribbean mesolects, past forms of some English strong verbs are retained (e.g. mesolectal Guyanese wuz, had [Rickford 1987: 178]).
4. Nevertheless, the degree of morphological abbreviation in both languages is substantial. Like creoles in general, Reunionnais and mesolectal Anglophone creole lects all but lack:

a. *contextual* inflection, conditioned by syntax and devoid of ‘meaning’, i.e. case and concord. Reunionnais, for example, lacks French’s grammatical gender and its attendant concordial markers, while Jamaican eschews English’s possessive ‘s.

b. *paradigmatic* inflection even if inherent, under the terminology of Moravcsik & Wirth (1986); i.e. the overt marking of subdivisions of semantic space such that the subdivision becomes denotationally arbitrary. Relevant here is that Reunionnais future marking does not vary according to three conjugation classes as it does in French.

This is predictable of languages born of second-language acquisition. It is well-documented that derivational morphology is more easily borrowed — i.e. acquired non-natively — than inflectional morphology (Moravcsik 1978, Matras 2009: 212), given that derivational morphology is more lexical, and thus concretely processible, than the more grammatical function of inflectional morphology. Meanwhile, paradigmatic inflection is retained less easily than inflectional morphemes that apply more generally and without allomorphy (cf. McWhorter 2011: 43-6).

Here, however, a traditional sense might be that there is a small class of semi-creoles, and then certain mesolectal varieties of English-based Caribbean creoles that parallel them in moderation of restructuring, but only because of decreolization from an initial state more ‘prototypically’ creole. That is, under this view these Caribbean mesolects — and other creole lects deemed ‘post-creole’ — are *post hoc* developments, departures from a basilectal ‘real thing’ that once existed by itself.

Here, however, it becomes germane that the Caribbean Anglophone mesolects must be seen not as latter-day decreolizations, but as representing an initial situation in which a mesolect and basilect co-existed. While actual decreolization has been richly observed to various degrees worldwide, Bickerton’s (1996) point has been perhaps underattended: for zero-copula to be typical of Anglophone Caribbean mesolects rather than basilects, where there is an overt copula *da, na, or a*, makes no sense if the mesolects are the product of movement towards English. Why would movement towards English entail omitting an overt copula, when speakers presumably imitating theacrolect would process zero copula as abbreviation or error (cf. the universal usage of zero copula in Foreigner Talk [Ferguson & DeBose 1977])?
The only logical analysis is that both lects had zero copula at the outset, after which an overt copula happened to develop in the basilect independently of the mesolect (cf. McWhorter 2005: 167-181). That is, the mesolect existed alongside the basilect from the beginning, and Bickerton reinforces the point with an analogous observation about past marking.

In other words, the Anglophone Caribbean mesolects can be seen less as ‘post-creole’ developments than as original ones: structurally as well as sociohistorically quite parallel to Reunionnais. To wit, these mesolects are, and always have been, semi-creoles, themselves.

4 Most creoles are semi-creoles, part two: there is no ‘Frenchamaccan’

Under this characterization of semi-creoles, however, it is worth noticing that not just some, but all of the French-based creoles would seem plausibly classified as ‘semi-creole’ as well. There is, for one, no French creole nearly as deeply imprinted by substrate material and as distant from lexifier grammatical structures as, for example, Saramaccan. Instead, all of them, including the ones considered most ‘basilectal’ such as Haitian and Mauritian, qualify in broad view as mesolects.

Haitian, for example, retains a great deal of French’s derivational morphology (DeGraff 2001), as do all of the French-based creoles. A main difference between Reunionnais and Mauritian involves inflection rather than derivation: the latter does not retain nearly as much lexifier inflectional affixation. Instead, it has a reinterpretation of the infinitival marker as a morpheme contrasting short and long forms of verbs; there is a similar construction in Louisiana Creole French as well (Veenstra 2003). Meanwhile, other French creoles such as Haitian all but lack even this reflex of French verbal inflection. Perhaps predictably from this, the French-based creoles other than Reunionnais also display less irregularity and suppletion conditioned by inflectional category.

Thus the difference between most French creoles and what we term semi-creoles hinges largely on that the former retain less inflection. That difference is rather a fine one, however, and overall, a great deal of French creole material seems ‘un-French’ largely because of orthographical conventions and standardization. Superstratists such as Chaudenson (1992: 166) are correct in tracing a Mauritian sentence like *Zot tı pe ale* ‘They were going’ to regional French *Eux-autres étaient après aller*, warning against a mistaken analysis of past and progressive markers *tı* and *pe* as exotic recruitments. This is true of tense and aspect markers in all of the French creoles, as contrasted with a
more deeply ‘restructured’ tense-aspect system such as Sranan’s, where for
*De ben e go* ‘They were going’ regional Engishes offer no ‘They been there go’
as a source: here is a classic example of what Holm terms restructuring and
the CE designates as the product of pidginization followed by reconstitution.

Creoles like the French ones, then, are the source of proposals such as
DeGraff’s (1999) that creolization can be characterized in large part as the
resetting of certain syntactic parameters, especially the one determining
whether inflection is ‘strong’ or ‘weak.’ More broadly, if all of the French
creoles are but one step beyond Reunionnais in their distance from French
itself, even retaining the essence of French’s derivational morphology and
having only lost its (already rather modest) inflectional apparatus, then the
idea that creoles are ordinary developments from their lexifiers just as French
was from Latin seems plausible.

Similarly, Mufwene’s enthusiastic adoption of Chaudenson’s counsel that
creolists trace creole features to regional dialects rather than standard varieties
becomes natural, and his truly radical suggestion (Mufwene 2001) that
mainstream American English, Black English, and Gullah (a mesolectal variety)
all developed via the same process of a mixture of ‘features’, such that either
all should be classified as creoles or none should, becomes ordinary. Under
this perspective, although its adherents do not phrase it as such, creoles are,
in general, semi-creoles — so much so that the very classification of these
languages as a separate category seems, to them, of questionable justification.

To the extent that such observations are hardly untethered from reality,
it is crucial that it could indeed be applied to most of the world’s creoles.
Over the past twenty years, as we have learned more about Iberian-based
creoles — due in considerable part to John Holm’s academic, administrative
and institutional efforts — as well as about creoles like Nubi Creole Arabic,
Sango and others, it has become clear that despite any background sense that
the ‘creole creole’ is Sranan or Sao Tomense Creole Portuguese, in the vast
majority of cases, creoles are mesolectal.

The reason for this is simple: nearly always, creoles have been spoken in
a diglossic relationship with their lexifiers. Inevitably, this means that the
lexifier has a profound impact on the creole either at birth, subsequently, or
both. This is the default situation for creole languages, not a special case on
display in the Anglophone Caribbean.

Here is a representative list of cases, with the observation that in creoles,
retention of inflectional morphology implies retention of derivational as well
(the author is aware of no cases to the contrary):
- *Cape Verdean Creole Portuguese*, in its Portuguese-influenced Barlavento variety, retains ample inflected forms from Portuguese, and these are hardly unknown in the Sotavento variety; furthermore, Baptista (2013) questions whether the latter represents decreolization, as opposed to an original situation.

- *Papiamentu*’s ample inheritance of Spanish inflection, as well as other grammatical features, is well-known and considered an original feature; Holm’s (1989: 315) judgment was emblematic: ‘Many features of Papiamentu are more like those of a European language than an Atlantic creole.’

- *The Portuguese creoles of India* were explicitly called examples of semi-creolization as early as Schuchardt (1889) and Silva Neto (1950: 12), a salient reason for which is their retention of tense-marking suffixes from Portuguese (albeit paradigmatically invariant). Also of note in Portuguese creoles of South and Southeast Asia is the use of *per* (< Portuguese *para* ‘for’) as an object marker for animates, a rare example of creoles retaining a distinction marked in source languages by contextual rather than inherent morphology.

- *Palenquero* encompasses variable usage of Spanish-derived inflections such as progressive *-ndo* and even plural suffixes (argued by Schwegler [1998: 261] to be original to the creole, not interference from Spanish). Also relevant is that the classification of certain grammatical features as belonging to one language or the other varies considerably among speakers, such that we might conceive of Palenquero as comprising, variably at least, even more inflectional options.

- *Chabacano Philippine Creole Spanish* retains almost as much derivational apparatus from Spanish as the French creoles do French (Steinkrüger 2003), as well as a few verbs that retain past- and progressive-inflected forms (Steinkrüger 2009: 177).

- *Nubi Creole Arabic* is a distinctly ‘mesolectal’ creole compared to its Arabic source, retaining various Arabic-derived derivational and inflectional affixes, while marking other Arabic-modelled categories with stress or tone shifts (Owens to appear).

- *Sango* is in no sense as grammatically distinct from its Ngbandi lexifier as, for example, Saramaccan is from English; unsurprisingly some analysts have termed it a ‘vehicularized’ Ngbandi. It retains affixes marking subjecthood, plurality, the agentive, a deverbalizer, and irrealis marked by tone (Pasch 1997).
• Colloquial varieties of Indonesian, which I have argued to qualify as creoles (McWhorter 2005: 71), retain Standard Indonesian’s derivational machinery in abbreviated, variable, and yet robust fashion, predictable as they are spoken alongside the standard.

• The Anglophone Caribbean ‘basilects’ qualify, according to the metric in this paper, as mesolectal compared to creoles like Sranan and Sao Tomense. Only rather laboriously will most process the following sentence of even basilectal Guyanese as a ‘separate language’ from English:

(1) Mi git op n mi a kuk, rong haa paas faiv, mi sii is. Dem jres ii.
I get up and I PROG cook around half past five I see this they dress him
‘I got up and I was cooking, around half-past five. I saw this. They had dressed him.’ (Rickford 1987: 164)

These examples should suffice, in representing the full range of creole languages worldwide. In general, the languages classified as creoles are mesolects, not basilects. Based on creoles such as those above, a novice might well come to conclusions like those of Salikoko Mufwene and Michel DeGraff. Their position is that creolists have unwittingly essentialized what are simply languages that developed like any others, modified lightly by the effects of adult acquisition, but hardly to an extent justifying the treatment of the languages in question as a unique category.

5 Excursus: Caveat creolist — mesolects are still interesting

It must be clear that I maintain that these mesolectal creoles are very much different enough in terms of structural reduction to motivate treatment as a distinct language contact phenomenon, rather than as ordinary developments from their lexifiers or mere mixtures of languages. For example, I maintain them as a separate category from semi-creoles proper (see Section 7).

Inflectional affixation is but one grammatical feature that gets lost in creolization. Furthermore, while some affixes are replaced by free morphemes, just as many are not — such as those indicating the subjunctive, evidentiality, inalienable possession, and more — and opponents of the CE have yet to answer how these omissions can cohere under their frameworks (cf. McWhorter 2005: 72-101).
(2) a. French:

Ils n’ont pas de ressources qui puissent
3P NEG.have NEG PART resource.PL REL can.SUJ.3P
leur permettre de résister.
3P.OBJ allow to resist
‘They don’t have the resources to allow them to resist.’

b. Haitian:

Yo pa gen resous ki pou pèmèt yo reziste.
3P NEG have resource REL can allow 3P resist
‘They don’t have the resources to allow them to resist.’ (Ludwig, Telchid & Bruneau-Ludwig 2001: 164)

The difference between these sentences is much vaster than affixes in French represented by free morphemes in the same functions in Haitian. Suffixes marking person and number are lost entirely (as we expect given their status as contextual morphology), along with their status as irregular in cases like ont and puissent. The case distinction between ils and leur, as more contextual morphology, is lost — as is the irregularity of the oblique form. Other losses are beyond affixation entirely, such as of the partitive marker de and its very particular conditioning, and the occurrence of object pronominal leur in the clitic-climbing position before the verb. Note also: while we can omit discussing the plural -s on French’s ressources because it is not pronounced, generally, morphophonemic liaison processes often preserve plural -s in spoken French whereas this process is absent in Haitian.

Structural abbreviation of this degree is unknown in ordinary grammar-internal language change, including developments from Latin to Romance (cf. McWhorter 2011: 38-9). To label this degree of abbreviation cannot be dismissed as inappropriate reification1.

Nevertheless, the Haitian sentence is indeed much closer to French than Sranan is to English. Pace Claire Lefebvre’s Relexification Hypothesis, which I

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1 I am deliberately not addressing controversies as to whether creoles like Haitian emerged more basilectal than they are now. I believe that they did, but I want my argument to stand regardless of evaluators’ positions on that issue, and as such, in this paper I am proceeding according to the views of CE opponents, who suppose that, for example, Haitian emerged with French’s derivation rather than taking it on over time.
have questioned in various places (cf. McWhorter 2011: 149-81), the influence of West African grammar on Haitian is present but modest (i.e. all but unidentifiable in the above sentence). A great deal of French structure is absent in Haitian, but the grammar that remains is more a streamlined version of French’s than a significant ‘restructuring’ of it, from African languages or independently. Calling Haitian ‘a kind of French’ is a subjective choice. Many (perhaps most) will reject it, but the proposition itself is hardly nonsensical.

Haitian evidences the typical degree of difference between creole languages around the world and their lexifiers. Substrate influence is present, but in no way extreme enough to even preliminarily motivate characterization as relexification. Lexifier-derived grammar is simplified, and markedly so, but not transformed into structures utterly alien to that lexifier. In a world where only creoles like those above existed, the characterizations of creolization by Mufwene and DeGraff would be valid to a considerable extent.

The problem is that there are certain creoles that are quite different.

6 True basilects: the unusual case

It is seldom noted in sociohistorical accounts of creole genesis that a situation where a creole is adopted as a full language in the absence of its own lexifier is highly unusual. It has happened in only a few cases, and the result is creoles distinct from most others.

These are the creoles which are easily analyzable as having developed from pidgin-level renditions of the lexifier, subsequently rendered into natural languages by heavy substrate influence and grammar-internal developments. They are also the creoles that most robustly display the Prototype combination of features, for the direct reason that they emerged as pidgins: morphologically, little or no contextual inflection, and inherent inflection neither affixed nor paradigmatic; phonologically little or no lexically or morphosyntactically contrastive tone; and semantically little or no opaquely noncompositional derivation (cf. McWhorter 2011: 40-56 and McWhorter 2013).

For example, the Surinam creoles’ lexicon contains only about 650 English lexical items (Koefoed & Tarenskeen 1996). English derivational morphology was completely lost, and derivation has been reconstituted via substrate and grammar-internal resources. There is no English-derived inflectional morphology at all. Substrate influence from Fongbe is so strong that it even contributes some core grammatical items to Saramaccan such as focus marker \(wε\) and interrogative markers \(ándi\) ‘what’ and \(ambé\) ‘who’, and even core lexical items such as \(bɛ\) ‘red’ as well as grammatical features particular to Fongbe such as reduplication connoting the counterexpectational resultative (\(dédé físt\) dry.dry fish ‘fish dried out of a kind not usually dried’).

Crucially, these creoles do not submit to any conception of being direct descendants of English:
(3) Te den yonkuman fu wrokope yere na tori dis,  
when the-PL young man for workplace hear LOC story this  
dan den e lafu. Dati na wan bigiman sre fisre fi.  
then they PROG laugh that COP a big-man self-self  
‘Whenever the boys at work heard this, they would burst out in  
laughter. That’s one hell of a guy.’ (Adamson & Smith 1995: 231)

Here we have usages of English etymology unfamiliar to speakers of any  
English itself such as time (te) for when and for (fu) as a marker of association,  
the occurrence of demonstrative items after the noun rather than before (tori dis ‘story this’), and self used in a meaning unfamiliar to English (and  
also, reduplicated). The evident difference between this passage and its  
English translation is hardly a mere matter of orthographical conventions and  
regionalisms.

Similarly, it is difficult to propose that Principense Creole Portuguese is in  
any fashion ‘just Portuguese’, even with thorough acquaintance with colloquial  
Portuguese dialects:

(4) Ê pôkê ya paddasu ta modi pwe fa. Na  
is because PRES stepfather is manner father NEG LOC  
kumi sê, ê pôkê ya sunu sa zuda omi na  
place that is because PRES sleep HAB help man LOC  
tabwe fa.  
problem NEG  
‘It is because a stepfather is not like a father. In the same way, it is  
because sleep doesn’t help people in trouble.’ (Günther 1973: 126)

Nor is Negerhollands ‘Dutch’ in the sense that Haitian can be parsed as  
‘French’:

(5) Di difi sini am a kan goi mais mi ris gi  
the dove PL he PAST can throw corn and rice give  
sini.  
them  
‘He could throw rice and corn to the doves.’ (Sabino 2012: 182)

The reason for the stark distance of these creoles from their lexifiers is that  
they developed largely apart from them. Negerhollands is a useful example,  
in that it was initially spoken alongside a Hoch Kreol (‘high creole’) variety  
much closer to Dutch. One perspective could see Hoch Kreol as ‘not the real
creole’ — but I suggest that Hoch Kreol was the normal situation, and that likely this variety would have predominated if Dutch had continued to be spoken alongside Negerhollands. Instead, even at its birth Dutch shared space with Danish, and by the late eighteenth century English had replaced both of those languages as the European language spoken by Negerhollands speakers.

Tok Pisin and its sister varieties (Bislama, Solomon Islands Pijin and Torres Strait ‘Broken’), as well as the diachronically related Australian Aboriginal Kriol dialects, are similarly distant from English, for the same reason — this grammar developed apart from English itself (initially among Australian aboriginals and then under German administration). They are additional creoles of this especially basilectal sort.

These languages are often treated as somehow taxonomically distinct from New World, African and Asian creoles. However, this has become obsolete and even incoherent. (It is unfortunate that Goulden’s suggestion [1990] that the island varieties be termed varieties of ‘Bislamic Creole’ did not catch on.) Mufwene, for example, treats these languages as separate cases because they were born of documented pidgins, while there is no written record of pidgins preceding the Atlantic creoles and he believes that these creoles were therefore not born of pidgins.

However, this argument is contested. The CE stipulates that we can deduce that the Atlantic creoles, too, were born in pidgins because of the fates of various lexifier features in them that are unknown beyond pidginization (e.g. generalization of the infinitive, omission of copula, widespread omission of case distinction in pronouns) (McWhorter & Parkvall 2002, McWhorter 2011). As a result, under the CE, accounts by Mühlhäusler (1985) of the development of derivation in Tok Pisin from a pidgin stage that lacked it are directly analogous to the development of creoles like Sranan, despite that the processes did not happen to be committed to paper.

To wit, the argument is that it is not accidental that ‘I was going’ in Sranan is *Mi ben e go* while in Tok Pisin it is the equally un-English *Mi bin go i stap*. What would motivate us to propose distinct genesis scenarios for these two languages, rather than deriving both from pidginization followed by reconstitution as a natural language?

Neither Mufwene nor others have responded to this question at this writing, upon which we will assume the point conceded. Creoles like Sranan were born as pidgins just as Tok Pisin and its relatives were, and therefore Tok Pisin is very much of a class with the Surinam creoles, the Portuguese creoles of the Gulf of Guinea, and Negerhollands. It is a mere sociohistorical accident that these languages are not conventionally termed creoles, and Goulden’s
term *Bislamic Creole* should be resuscitated. In fact, as of this paper, I will be doing so.

Creoles of this kind are ultimately what the debate between CE adherents and CE opponents hinges on. Haitian and most creoles submit reasonably to classification as variations of their lexifiers (although my judgment is that such a treatment would be unadvisably broad). However, creoles like Sranan and Principense do not submit to this treatment, and it must be judged an argumentational flaw in work from CE opponents that data from these truly basilectal creoles is adduced so rarely.

However, the fact remains: creoles of this kind are, relatively speaking, rare. They are the exceptional case, not a norm. ‘Normal’ creoles, in terms of how colonization operated, are mesolectal. Creolization usually occurred rather moderately.

### 7 Some taxonomic revisions

I suggest that the full range of creole data available at this writing suggests the following classification.

(a) *Basilects* are only the creoles that developed in isolation from the lexifiers, therefore left as pidgin-level varieties that expanded into full languages with substrate and grammar-internal resources. Basilects are a smallish group, comprised largely of the Surinam, Gulf of Guinea and Bislamic creoles and Negerhollands.

(b) *Mesolects* are most creoles. This includes what have been called the ‘basilectal’ range of Anglophone Caribbean continua, which remain starkly closer to their lexifier than Sranan, Tok Pisin, etc. (compare the Guyanese example in this paper with the Sranan one, for example). What has traditionally been called the ‘mesolectal’ range of these creoles classifies, under my metric, as upper mesolectal.

(c) *Semi-creoles* retain both derivation, some non-paradigmatic and inherent inflection, and sometimes even shards of contextual inflection from the lexifier. I suggest that Reunionnais and Afrikaans are usefully classified here. If so, however, we must include another language: English.

This is because in terms of loss of Proto-Germanic material, Afrikaans retains much more than English does, not less. Both languages lost grammatical gender and much verbal inflection. However, English also lacks v2, much of the Germanic derivational machinery, the Germanic
indefinite pronoun, the *be*-perfect, the directional adverb paradigm, inherent reflexive marking (e.g. German *er erinnert sich* ‘he remembers’) and other features (McWhorter 2007: 83 *passim*). Then, while Afrikaans’ substratal features from Khoi and Malayo-Portuguese are well-known, scholars of the history of English are increasingly accepting that English was significantly influenced structurally by a Celtic substrate (cf. Miller 2012, McWhorter 2011: 261-96).

As such, if English is *more* structurally reduced from its progenitor language than Afrikaans and harbors the same modest but evident degree of substratal influence as Afrikaans, then there is no reason that English not be classified as semi-creole as well. This classification complements in spirit those arguing that the very concept of creole is an essentialization conditioned partly by racial perceptions. Their suggestion is to eliminate creole as a linguistic concept (or, at least, one that would motivate a subfield’s attention). My suggestion is that the linguistic concept is real, but that some languages fit into it that would not immediately occur to us. Earlier I have suggested that colloquial Indonesians are among these. Here, I submit English as a semi-creole.

(d) NCSL — *Nonhybrid Conventionalized Second-Language* varieties — is the term I have suggested (McWhorter 2007) for a certain kind of contact language that has muddied a great many language contact debates. Namely, a language can be born of a light degree of grammatical simplification due to widespread adult acquisition, but without any significant substratal input. Classic examples include Mandarin Chinese, the colloquial Arabics, Persian, Swahili, and Standard Indonesian (as well as English, depending on one’s taxonomic preferences) (McWhorter 2007; Trudgill 2011).

I suggest that Popular Brazilian Portuguese and Black English correspond to this category more than to the semi-creole one. Their classification as semi-creoles makes perfect sense, in itself, and an alternate taxonomy is easily conceivable under which they would remain under that classification. However, my own seeks a finer grain, in order to account for cases such as those adduced above — and my sense is that the origins of Popular Brazilian Portuguese and u.s. Black English were like those cases’ than that of Reunionnais.

Popular Brazilian Portuguese, while evidencing a certain degree of simplification of inflectional categories, nevertheless retains enough of them, including contextual variations such as grammatical gender, that it reveals itself as a more direct descendant of European Portuguese than Afrikaans is of Dutch. Also, influence from African languages on Popular Brazilian
Portuguese is present (cf. Holm 1987), but again, light — analogous to the Altaic influence on Mandarin Chinese.

I would also place the vernacular Latin American Spanishes spoken by descendants of Africans as NCSLS. When languages preserve grammatical gender — even if variably elided — then it is entailed that they maintain most of the inflectional and derivational battery of their progenitor, as well as most of their grammatical machinery. This is because, as we have seen, (1) the acquisition of inflectional morphology implies the acquisition of derivational morphology and (2) the retention of paradigmatic inflectional morphology implies the retention of other inflectional morphology. I am leery of classifying such languages as ‘creole’ at all, especially as once again, West African influence on these Latin American dialects is variable and light.

In the same way, U.S. Black English harbors a certain degree of simplification of mainstream English grammatical structures (including ones beyond those that vernacular white American Englishes do), but English’s derivation and contextual and inherent inflection are largely intact, while no concentrated linguistic analysis has identified specific substrate influence from African languages in the dialect (Winford 1998, McWhorter 2005: 359-66). Winford and myself have suggested that U.S. Black English is primarily a product of very mildly disruptive second-language acquisition — i.e. what I have later termed a NCSL.

In short, I argue that creoles are a type of language indeed — but that most of them are not as drastically unlike their lexifier languages as it can appear when the most basilectal creoles are treated as representative of how creolization worked. They are not. In most cases creoles have been spoken alongside their lexifier, and therefore creolization has been, to varying degrees, partial. The ‘classic’ creole is mesolectal.

Abbreviations

COP copula, HAB habitual, LOC locative, NEG negation, OBJ object, PAST past, PL plural, PART partitive, PRES present, PROG progressive, REL relativizer, SUJ subjunctive.
References


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