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Economy, innovation, and elaboration in Mauritian and other creoles

This paper begins with a restatement of the position of Baker (1990), that the initial (unconscious) aim of people in nascent multilingual societies based on slave labour was to construct a means of interethnic communication, i.e. a pidgin, rather than to acquire the slaveowners' language as such. Pidgins are often described as reduced forms of another language (cf Hall 1966: xi-xii), and the reduction is applied to both the grammar and lexicon of the (usually European) language of the slaveowners. It is important to realise that only native speakers of that language were in a position to make such reductions. Slaveowners may have made some attempt to simplify their language by e.g. using only the infinitive forms of verbs since, initially, they had as much need to communicate with slaves as the slaves did with them. It was, however, the slaves who gradually constructed the pidgin, by adopting recurrent nouns, adjectives, and verbs in an uninflected form, together with a very few prepositions and adverbs, and some basic word order rules. Perhaps the most thrifty "innovation" was the convention that everything is or was, obviating the need for an overt copula, at least in equative sentences. The resulting pidgin was a very economical means of communication although limited by the extent that it was largely context bound. The fact that, in almost all territories which formerly depended on slave labour, the creole language spoken today retains all these economies is compelling evidence that they are developments of an earlier pidgin.

The paper goes on to consider how pidgins became more elaborate, context free, creole languages. It approaches this question in two different ways. First, it develops the claim made in Baker (2014) that the focussing of pidgins necessarily took place wherever there was the greatest degree of interaction between diverse ethnolinguistic groups. This would normally be at the main settlement/port rather than on the plantations scattered throughout the territory. Secondly, while attempting to categorize the different kinds of elaborations found in Mauritian and other creoles, it emerges that few can be attributed to a single cause and it is suggested that innovations and calques which increased the expressive qualities of the creole without the need to acquire additional morphemes were particularly favoured. For example, while the reduplication of verbs and adjectives in Mauritian appears to have been inspired by Malagasy, this is employed in a more systematic manner in the creole and effectively doubles the stock of both parts of speech without adding any new words. While these and other examples give the impression that creole speakers readily accepted changes which extended the proficiency of their language, the paper ends by acknowledging that there are nevertheless a few innovations which have become firmly established even though they do not appear to serve any useful purpose.

References

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