

Kristoffer Friis Bøegh (Aarhus University), Aymeric Daval-Markussen (Aarhus University)
& Peter Bakker (Aarhus University)

Stable features: Atlantic creoles are more European than African

Opinions about the structural influence of African languages on the Caribbean creoles differ among creolists. The most extreme views can be exemplified by on the one hand, Derek Bickerton's denial of any influence of African (substrate) languages on creoles, and on the other, by Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain and Claire Lefebvre, who consider creoles roughly as continuations of their lexifiers, with replacement of Fon phonetic strings with French phonetic strings, adjusted through some minor processes. Neither of these extreme views have many adherents. Most creolists today would place themselves somewhere in between. Some ecological creolists would even place themselves exactly in the middle, claiming that creoles can be equally African and European in a process of recombination of features, in the feature pool hypothesis (Mufwene 2009).

We decided to test this idea. In the first phase, we selected the most stable morphological and syntactic features (excluding phonology). The features were chosen from Wichmann & Holman (2009), who identified stable features on the basis of the *World Atlas of Language Structures*. Known dependent features were excluded. We ended up with 30 stable typological features. A convenience sample of 40 African languages was chosen, mostly from countries of Western Africa, such as Ghana and Angola, so as to include many languages spoken by Africans involved in creolization, while maintaining areal and genetic diversity. Phylogenetic tests applied to these languages showed that known classifications, usually based on lexicon, are replicated in these results, even though these are based on typological features.

In the second phase, 47 creole and semi-creole languages (among them 27 Atlantic creoles) were selected from all continents and from a wide variety of lexifiers (Arabic, Dutch, English, French, German, Japanese, Malay, Motu, Ngbandi, Spanish, Portuguese, Tupinamba). Some of these came about without any involvement of Africans (e.g. Asian creoles, Amerindian creoles), and others almost exclusively with Africans. Thus, several thousands of structural features were gathered. The 23 Atlantic creoles were then compared with 47 Niger-Congo languages from 12 different branches, including Kwa and Bantu.

Phylogenetic programs enable us to make an automatic assessment of the African structural continuity. Lefebvre should predict Fon and Haitian to be close to one another. Substratists would expect Caribbean and African creoles to cluster, against creoles from other parts of the world. Adherents of the idea that creoles form a typological group would expect all creoles, regardless of their African influence, to cluster apart from the African languages.

It appears that creoles are much more European than African, and this is also true for creoles with African substrates. Otherwise creoles are distinct from non-creoles.

References

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