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Semantic Innovations in Creolization. The conceptual development of emotion words in Urban Bislama

This study explores the semantic aspects of innovation in creolization, through a detailed case study of urban Bislama, a creole spoken in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu (Meyerhoff 2013; Vandeputte-Tavo 2013; Willans 2011). The case study provides a lexicographic portrait of emotion words in Urban Bislama, with a special emphasis on the aspect of innovations. The paper discusses the concept of “innovation” and explores the different ways in which this concept can be useful for the emerging field of creole semantics (Stanwood 1997, 1999; Priestley 2008; Nicholls 2013; Author & Priestley, in press, Author & Jogie, in press). It opens up broader theoretical discussions about the intersection between creolistics, cognitive linguistics, and cultural semantics. It raises a series of new questions: How do creole words capture “emotion”? What happens to the “emotion domain” in the process of creolization? In what ways can creole languages help us advance the linguistic search for “emotional universals”? The study is based on i) linguistic fieldwork and semantic consultations with young speakers in Port Vila and ii) meaning-in-context analysis of postings on *Yumi Toktok Stret*, a Facebook group with 14.000 members, the largest Bislama-driven online forum. The analysis of Bislama provides an overview of emotion-related words, including descriptive emotion words such as *kros* (from English ‘cross’), *les* (from English ‘lazy’), *sem* (from English ‘shame’), or body-based words such as *jamjam* (from English ‘jump-jump’), and *seksek* (from English ‘shake-shake’), and expressive emotion words, such as emotive interjections. The paper provides a model study on how to approach the emotional semantics of a creole language, equipped with tools from cross-linguistic studies on emotions (Athanasidou & Tabakowska 1998, Wierzbicka 1999; Harkins & Wierzbicka 2001; Dewaele 2010; Dixon 2012). The study concludes that Bislama semantics has an emotional profile, which is neither identical to colonial English semantics or to traditional languages of Melanesia. It stands for a neo-Melanesian conceptual universe, which in itself is an innovation, created out of creolization, urbanization and postcolonial semantics.

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