John H. McWhorter (Columbia University)

Quirky case in creoles, or creolization as a quirky case

In a language that emerged from a pidgin variety, or a variety deeply impacted by second-language acquisition, a reasonable hypothesis is that irregularity will be, as the new language exists over time, largely an innovation. That is, while any full language harbors a degree of irregularity, we might expect that creoles will be relatively low on irregularity because of their recent birth as pidgins.

An example of irregularity in language in general is quirky case, such as Icelandic's semantically incoherent use of accusative marking as in *Bátinnrak áland* boat-ACC drifted to shore "The boat drifted to shore." While the theoretical syntax literature of quirky case tends to focus on Germanic languages, the feature is widespread elsewhere, such as Russian's often opaque usages of the instrumental (for verbs such as *obladat'* "to possess" and *byt'* "to be") and many other cases in several language families. Yet in creole languages, even with source languages that have quirky case marking (as English, Dutch, French and Spanish all do), quirky case marking is very rare. For instance, Saramaccan for *I want him to be able to go* is *Mi kɛ a(*ɛ̃) sá gó*, with the Exceptional Case Marking on English *him* replaced with a subject form. The reason cannot be identified as analyticity, as analytic languages harbor quirky case as well, such as in Polynesian and various Sino-Tibetan languages.

A cross-creole survey shows that in creoles, quirky case is generally an innovation, an example being Saramaccan's requirement that the third-person singular subject in nonverbal predications with the *da* copula be an oblique form: *Hɛ̃́(*a) da dí mɔ̃́ɔlánga wǎ* "He is the taller one," which can be demonstrated to have arisen via syntactic reanalysis over time after Saramaccan emerged. Ongoing contact with source languages, predictably, creates exceptions. However, from substrate languages, this is only as inherent (meaningful) rather than contextual (grammatical) inflection; e.g. the animate-marking "with" and "for" prepositions in Indo-Portuguese creoles and Phillipine Creole Spanish. This is consonant with findings that creoles retain the former rather than the latter. Meanwhile, the fact remains that among creoles that have developed largely in isolation from their source languages, quirky case is an innovation.

This supports the hypothesis that creole languages are born from radically interrupted transmission, rather than simply as language hybrids.