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**Creoles and sign languages in comparison with non-creole spoken languages:
A preliminary survey**

For several decades, scholars have proposed that there are a number of significant parallels between creoles (Cs) and sign languages (SLs). Observations have been made that SLs are so similar to Cs structurally that, since the two language types are not genetically related and not in contact, both of these groups show evidence innate nativization processes (e.g. Fisher 1978, Gee & Goodhart 1988). Typical features quoted include reduplication, an associative plural, no tense marking (but a rich aspect system), no passives, a topic-comment word order, serial verb constructions, among others. The contributing factors to these similarities are proposed to be: (i) the acquisition processes, which are argued to involve a break in transmission from the ancestral languages and an impoverished and inconsistent linguistic input (e.g. Fisher 1978, Aronoff et al. 2005, Kegl 2008, Adone 2012), closely resembling the scenario proposed for Cs in the Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (e.g. Bickerton 1984); (ii) the origin of the languages, which are argued to “arise spontaneously when people who do not share a common language communicate” (Aronoff et al. 2005: 307) mirroring situations where pidgins emerged; and (iii) the young age of the languages (e.g. Aronoff et al. 2005, Meir et al. 2010). These proposed similarities rest on a host of assumptions, all of which have been variously challenged within the study of pidgin and creole languages, namely that Cs are young languages that have their origin in pidgin languages, that the principle agents of creolization were children who received inadequate linguistic input from their caretakers, and that Cs form a structurally unique type of language. Typological surveys of SLs are still sparse and these claims are usually made on the basis of a few SLs only. This survey will investigate whether Cs and SLs do in fact share structural similarities that set them apart from non-creole spoken languages by comparing a sample of Cs and a sample of SLs for features covering all domains of the linguistic system (from phonology over morphology and morphosyntax to pragmatics) with language samples found in the World Atlas of Language Structures Online (WALS; Dryer & Haspelmath 2013). The selection of features rests firstly on what has been commonly referred to as typical for Cs (e.g. lack of tone, an invariant negation marker, polar questions through intonation only) and secondly on the compatibility of the features for comparison with WALS.

References

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