

## On the Origins of Pidgin and Creole Languages: An Outline

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**Abstract:** Pidgin and creole languages are usually the result of contacts between people who do not speak each other's language. When they meet for different purposes (trade, business, plantation work) they immediately look for a quick means of communication. Thus, a simple makeshift language is created in a relatively short time. It is naturally composed of the elements deriving from two or more of the languages that are in contact. It is commonly considered (see, e.g., Bickerton 1981, Sebba 1997, Mühlhäusler 1986) that pidgins can constitute the initial stage for further development into a stable pidgin.

**Keywords:** contact linguistics, pidgins, creoles and mixed languages, minority languages

The study of pidgin and creole phenomena has long been neglected in linguistics. The study attracted interest in the late 1960s. Previously they were referred to as "marginal languages" (Reinecke 1938: 107). The discussed languages were considered for a very long time to be slave talk [*di Patwa* or *patois*] (Patrick 1995: 227), uneducated languages, and "were to be avoided". There have been various definitions of the term "creole". The earliest of them can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

*Creole languages result from the adaptation of a language, especially some Indo-European language, to the (so to speak) phonetic and grammatical genius of a race that is linguistically inferior. The resulting language is composite, truly mixed in its vocabulary, but its grammar is essentially Indo-European, extremely simplified.* (Vinson 1889: 345-46, cited in DeGraff 2003: 393)

There is no agreement as to a single unified definition accepted by all researchers "[c]reolists agree neither about the precise definition of the terms pidgin and creole, nor about the status of a number of languages that have been claimed to be pidgins and creoles" (Muysken and Smith 1995: 3). All of the definitions attempt to capture the nature and essence of the term indicating different aspects of it (its function, the role the languages play in the group, their structural characteristics, etc.). Some of the earliest definitions, later criticized, explained pidgins away as "marginal languages" (Reinecke 1938) like the entire field of research. John Holm (2000: 1) recalls some of the "unfriendly" names given to pidgins, reminding that other generations thought of them as "broken English", "bastard Portuguese", "nigger French", "*kombuistaaltje* (cookhouse lingo)". However, the attitude towards contact languages has changed throughout the years and I would like to present selected definitions which have been used in pidgin and creole linguistics.

Terry Crowley (2008: 75) writes of the term pidgin as being "fraught" and states that:

*Languages designated as pidgins range from extremely rudimentary short-term contact languages used only in a very narrow range of contexts to structurally and lexically far more expanded varieties which have been in use over an extended period and for a much broader range of functions, even though in each case there may be a shared lack of native speakers.*

Robert Hall (1966: 9) speaks of circumstances in which many types of English-based pidgins were created in the following words: "(...) the various types of Pidgin English arose in various regions, as a result of the same basic stimulus: English seamen and traders (many of whom have voyaged to more than one region) were moved to simplify their language when they were dealing with indigenous peoples – an example of the process termed *stimulus diffusion*".

Peter Bakker presents a three-layer definition describing the structure of a pidgin, the purpose why the pidgins come into being and who uses this type of language:

*Pidgins are languages lexically derived from other languages, but which are structurally simplified, especially in their morphology. They come into being where people need to communicate but do not have a language in common. Pidgins have no (or few) first language speakers, they are the subject of language learning, they have structural norms, they are used by two or more groups, and they are usually unintelligible for speakers of the language from which the lexicon derives.* (Bakker 1995: 25)

David De Camp underlines the indigenous origins of a pidgin:

*A pidgin is a contact vernacular, normally not the native language of its speakers. It is used in trading or in any situation requiring communication between persons who do not speak each other's native languages. It is characterized by a limited vocabulary, an elimination of many grammatical devices such as number and gender, and a drastic reduction of redundant features.* (De Camp 1971: 15)

Robert Chaudenson presents a complex definition of a pidgin, taking into account the sociohistorical background of pidginization, and he considers a pidgin to be:

*(...) a language with reduced structures and lexicon, used for a limited number of functions by speakers who dispose of, and also speak, (an)other language(s) for full-fledged communication, and who belong in social groups which are largely autonomous.* (Chaudenson 2001: 22)

Chaudenson distinguishes also between two types of pidgins and creoles, namely, *endogenous* and *exogenous* contact languages. The first type is “pidgins and creoles that have developed from contact between an indigenous population and an immigrant group; in the context of colonial expansion, this is the case of a colony based on trading posts and centers” (Chaudenson 2001: 22). The latter type, according to Chaudenson, developed out of contacts “among immigrants and the transplanted populations” (*ibid.*). Jamaican Creole, for instance, belongs to the first category and would be classified as an endogenous creole.

John Reinecke, on the other hand, offers a general term for pidgins, creoles, jargons, *lingua francas*, makeshift languages, and substitute languages, referring to them as *marginal languages* and proposes the following definition:

*The marginal languages arise in areas of pronounced culture contacts, in situations where, broadly speaking, it is impossible or impracticable for the peoples concerned to learn each other's language well. Their structure (...) is greatly broken down and simplified.* (Reinecke 1938: 108)

Peter Mühlhäusler (1986: 3-5) finds establishing a satisfactory definition of a pidgin problematic, and compares a few selected definitions. He notes that there are many problems connected with defining the discussed terms. He disagrees with Reinecke's view of the makeshift character of pidgins – a statement which does not take into account “the fact that pidgins can develop to a considerable degree of stability and complexity” (Mühlhäusler 1986: 4). He also opposes the view that pidgins may be considered to be mixed languages. In the case of language mixing, two languages clearly make a significant contribution to the creation of a new language: one provides the content words and the other one provides the grammar. According to Mühlhäusler (1986: 5) in pidgin characteristics “the most mixed component of grammar is the lexicon, where syncretism of various types is common, and not syntax”. Mühlhäusler continues, adding that:

*Pidgins are examples of partially targeted or non-targeted second-language learning, developing from simpler to more complex systems as communicative requirements become more demanding. Pidgin languages by definition have no native speakers, they are social rather than individual solutions, and hence are characterized by norms of acceptability.* (*Ibid.*)

Sarah G. Thomason speaks of a prototypical pidgin creation within a framework of contact phenomena, and underlines that it is three-language-groups contact which is the starting point for new language formation:

*The prototypical pidgin (...) arises in a new contact situation in which three or more groups of speakers come together for purposes of trade or other limited communicative purposes. The contact among the groups is sufficiently limited that no group has the need, the desire, and/or opportunity to learn any of the other groups' languages; and, although there may be widespread bi- or multilingualism*

*among individual members of the various groups, the level of bi- or multilingualism is not sufficient to permit fully adequate communication in the contact situation.* (Thomason 1997: 76)

The purposes of communication concern mainly business matters and so does the vocabulary shaped at the beginning of the language contact phenomenon. Later on when more contexts of contact appear, new words are added to the newly created language in order for it to serve new discourses. Thus, we can say that the purpose of contact delineates the scope of new word formation. Holm, in his definition of a pidgin, states that in fact no one learns this contact language for social purposes. It is invented whenever a new range of expressions are to fulfil current needs of communication. Let us consider Holm's entire definition of a pidgin:

*A pidgin is a reduced language that results from extended contact between groups of people with no language in common; it evolves when they need some means of verbal communication, perhaps for trade, but no group learns the native language of any other group for social reasons that may include lack of trust or of close contact.* (Holm's 1988: 4-5).

John Holm sees cooperation between groups speaking different languages as a factor facilitating their mutual understanding: "(...) the superstrate speakers adopt many of these changes to make them more readily understood, and no longer try to speak as they do within their own group. They co-operate with the other groups to create a make-shift language to serve their needs, simplifying by dropping unnecessary complications such as inflections (*e.g. two knives becomes two knife*) and reducing the number of different words they use, but compensating by extending their meanings or using circumlocutions" (in Holm 1988: 5, cited after Hymes 1971: 43). The notion of *superstrate* and *substrate* languages refers to the stage of pidgin formation process, "[w]here a single language is identified as the source of the majority of the lexicon of a pidgin or creole, it is known as the lexifier" (Sebba 1997: 25). As Sebba states "(...) the great majority of the lexicon of a pidgin or creole derives from just one language, with a small (usually less than 20 per cent) contribution from other languages. This fits in well with the idea that *one*<sup>1</sup> language – in colonial situations, usually the European colonizers' – was the original target of language learners" (*ibid.*). Thus, the dominant language is called the superstrate language, or the "top layer", known also as the lexifying language which contributes the lexicon. For instance, in the case of the Jamaican pidgin, before the process of creolization, the lexifier language was English. The substrate languages were the indigenous languages of West Africa (although there is a monogenesis hypothesis, according to which all creoles stem from just one forefather language<sup>2</sup>). Donald Winford is of the opinion that "[t]here is a great deal of structural diversity among the English-lexicon creoles, which range from languages quite close in structure to their superstrates, *e.g.*, Bajan and Trinidadian Creole, to others that diverge quite significantly, *e.g.*, the Surinamese creoles. Those which differ are called 'radical' creoles, and those which are close to the superstratum are called 'basilectal' and they are spoken in Belize, Guyana, Jamaica" (Winford 2008: 19).

All the definitions presented above come from the previous century. I would like to present one more definition of pidgins and creoles (or as the author prefers creoles and pidgins) given by Salikoko Mufwene:

*(...) creole and pidgins are new language varieties which developed out of contacts between colonial non-standard varieties of a European language and several non-European languages around the Atlantic and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Pidgins typically emerged in trade colonies which developed around trade forts or along trade routes, such as on the coast of West Africa. They are reduced in structures and specialized in functions (typically trade), and initially served as non-native lingua francas to users who preserved their native vernaculars for their day-to-day interactions.* (Mufwene 2008: 544)

Almost all definitions of pidgin languages emphasize the instability and fragility of the entire sociolinguistic system, in which the pidgin in question functions: "[p]idgins, by their very nature, tend towards instability, both in terms of linguistic system, and in terms of their function. If they do not belong to the small group of pidgins that become standardized, or nativized, or both, they may well disappear completely when the social need that caused them to come into existence passes" (Arends et al. 1995: 7). Mark Sebba (1997: 36), when describing different classes of pidgins, notices that those

<sup>1</sup> Italics as in the original.

<sup>2</sup> For the entire discussion see Schuchardt ([1909] 1979), Whinnom (1971).

which quickly appear and disappear are pidgins of either sporadic or one-time contact, they can never have a chance to evolve into extended pidgins or creoles.

It is important at this point to make a clear distinction between pidgins and mixed languages. Pidgins are sometimes called *mixed languages*, but there is a clear-cut distinction between these two. Sebba (1997: 36) enumerates three characteristic features of mixed languages: 1) they are the result of contact between two languages; 2) have native speakers of their own; 3) are grammatically as complex as their source languages. Pidgins are the result of three or more language contacts, and their grammar is said to be of simplified structure, whereas grammatical structures of mixed languages are as complex as the two languages from which the new variety emerged. Having the above in mind, Robert Hall (1966: 25) can observe that “[w]e therefore must not think of a pidgin representing a simple bilateral fusion; it is, rather, a development of a single language (usually European language, in modern times) with strong influences from one or more others, sometimes a great many, and usually non-European”.

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