

Simple and transparent
by *Pieter A. M. Seuren*

It would be difficult for me not to appreciate McWhorter's thesis that creole languages distinguish themselves by the relative simplicity of their grammars as a function of their relative youth, since that is what is proposed in Seuren & Wekker (1986; reprinted as Chapter 19 in Seuren 2001). There we put forward the hypothesis that the structural properties of early creole languages are largely the result of the necessity, imposed by forced migration and forced labour, to be maximally simple and easy to learn, and that even the oldest creole languages have not had the time required for them to develop the more complex grammatical machineries that characterize older languages. One welcomes McWhorter's attempt at making the notion of grammatical simplicity (complexity) more explicit so as to create a better testing ground for the hypothesis.

In McWhorter's words (Section 2.4.3): "The guiding intuition is that an area of grammar is more complex than the same area in another grammar to the extent that it encompasses more overt distinctions and/or rules than another grammar." Sensibly trying to remain as theory-neutral as possible, McWhorter applies this "guiding intuition" to (i) phonology (number of marked elements), (ii) syntax (number of rules), (iii) semantics (number of distinctions), and (iv) morphology (makes for complexity generally). He might have referred to Seuren & Wekker (1986: 64–66), where the following is said:

[A] maximization of S[emantic] T[ransparency] involves three strategies for grammars: (1) maximal uniformity of treatment of semantic categories, (2) minimal reliance on rules or rule types that are highly language-particular, and (3) minimal processing. Or, to put it briefly, UNIFORMITY, UNIVERSALITY, and SIMPLICITY. [...] Given [the] strategy [of uniformity] one will expect few arbitrary grammatical distinctions, as with grammatical gender or conjugational idiosyncrasies, or with derivational processes in morphology. Moreover, one will expect a uniform strategy for arranging verbs and their arguments (subject, object, indirect object). Thus, rules that bring about variations in the order of subject (S), verb (V), object (O), and, though less crucially, indirect object (IO), will be untypical of creole languages. [...] [Universality] renders morphology essentially alien to creole languages, since whatever universals enable the growth of a morphological system in a language leave ample room for a multitude of often haphazard variations.

In fact, one might be tempted to say that McWhorter's attempt at closing in on the notion of complexity hardly contains anything that goes beyond what is already proposed in Seuren & Wekker (1986). He contributes examples and illustrations, always useful, of course, but hardly any new notions or insights.

In this context one is surprised to find (Section 5.1) that McWhorter summarily dismisses Seuren & Wekker (1986), placing this publication in the “one form – one meaning” camp,¹ even though these authors say explicitly (1986: 63, 66):

In the light of what we know today about semantic structures and semantic elements, it appears to be entirely unreasonable to think in terms of a condition of one-to-one mapping. Semantic structures are inevitably much richer than linguistic surface structures, mainly because they must be fully explicit and fully unambiguous. [...] There is, as yet, no generally accepted theory of semantic structure. Agreement in this area does not go beyond the almost trivial condition that the language of semantics must contain the formal means for a logical calculus on analyses in terms of predicates and their arguments, plus quantifiers and logical connectives. [...] All semantic theories agree that something like predicate calculus, with bound variables and the rest, must determine the structure of semantic analyses.

Consequently, Seuren & Wekker (1986: 64) propose that “any theory of S[emantic] T[ransparency] will have to be formulated in terms of a grammar that defines the mapping relations between surface structures and semantic analyses”.

Had McWhorter drawn the consequences from this uncontroversial and theory-neutral point of view, his proposals concerning syntactic and semantic complexity could have been more specific and better motivated, and thus more interesting, than they have turned out to be. He might, for one thing, have followed Seuren & Wekker (1986), when they discuss scope relations in semantic analyses. As the scope-bearing elements in logical structure are “lowered” into the lexical matrix-S, the elements with larger scope tend to stay to the left of those with smaller scope (compare *Not many trains are comfortable* versus *Many trains are not comfortable*). This left-to-right correspondence constraint is, however, totally disregarded in morphology, which makes Seuren & Wekker (1986: 68) observe:

This, again, leads to a ban on morphology, since, as is well known, morphological processing of lowered elements leads to a massive violation of this scope-order correspondence, and thus requires a great deal more cognitive processing than is needed for sentences with a regular scope-order correspondence. In this light it is not surprising to find that in many creole languages verbal tenses, modalities and aspects are expressed by means of preverbal particles, and not by morphological means, as in the majority of more advanced languages. The occurrence of such particles is a direct reflex of their semantic scope after lowering.

1. McWhorter’s discussion of the “one form – one meaning” constraint is, moreover, less than satisfactory. It is left without any further specification, and is, in fact, considered exclusively in terms of lexicalisation, a topic hardly touched upon in Seuren & Wekker (1986).

McWhorter might, in any case, have discussed these and similar points made in Seuren & Wekker (1986), as they are directly relevant to his concerns.

McWhorter argues against the semantic transparency hypothesis saying that “at the end of the day it is unclear that creoles are ‘semantically transparent’ overall to any greater extent than certain older languages” (Section 5.1). This may be so for “CERTAIN older languages” (under a proper definition of semantic transparency), but, like McWhorter’s complexity thesis, this is not what the transparency hypothesis is about. Seuren & Wekker might just as well say (though they will not): “at the end of the day it is unclear that creoles are ‘grammatically simple’ overall to any greater extent than certain older languages”, and use that as an argument against the complexity thesis. McWhorter’s claim is (Section 6):

[I]f all of the world’s languages could be ranked on a scale of complexity, there would be a delineable subset beginning at the “simplicity” end and continuing towards the “complexity” one all [members] of which were creoles.

This does not imply that all creoles are below the alleged cut-off point. All it says is that the simplest languages, those at the bottom end of the scale, are all creoles, and that creoles generally tend to gravitate towards that bottom end. This is the statement of a tendency. Since the transparency hypothesis states a corresponding tendency: “We now put forward the idea that creole languages are linguistically characterized by a tendency to maximize S[emantic] T[ransparency]” (Seuren & Wekker 1986: 64). McWhorter’s argument against this hypothesis cuts no ice at all. And if it did, it would equally affect his own complexity thesis.

It seems useful, in this context, to consider a suggestion (made in Seuren 1996: 344) to the effect that each language has associated with it a so-called SEMANTIC QUESTIONNAIRE that has to be “filled in” by any speaker of the language before any sentence can be formulated. Thus, to stay with McWhorter’s own example (1), when a Kikongo speaker wants to express the proposition ‘Past [I buy a goat]’ (s)he must specify first whether the ‘Past’ is recent, not so recent or remote, or else no grammatical sentence is possible. An English or Japanese speaker does not have to do that, though they must specify whether the situation described by ‘I buy a goat’ is to be located in the past or not (besides a few more specific questions for each of these two languages in particular). A Malay speaker does not even have to specify that, though (s)he may do so, if (s)he wishes. For an English sentence in the present tense it must be specified whether or not the state or action described in the matrix proposition is of transient duration; if so, the progressive form must be used, if not, the bare present tense will do. In some languages it must be specified whether the proposition is based on hearsay or comes under the speaker’s direct responsibility, or whether it is generic/habitual or not, etc. etc. Classifier lan-

guages want speakers preparing a (plural) NP to determine the broad cognitive category the object or objects spoken about are deemed to belong to.²

Drawing up precise semantic questionnaires for given languages would not only be of great use to semantic theory, it is also quite feasible. If this were done for a sufficient number of creole and non-creole languages, significant differences might show up: one might find a statistically relevant tendency for the creole languages to minimize the questionnaires. Such a result would make the notion of semantic complexity operational and would take the theory of creole languages, in this respect, beyond the merely putative or impressionistic.

A further useful notion, in this respect, is that of SECONDARY CONSTRUCTION, as specified in Stassen (1985). "A secondary construction [...] is grammaticalized only in older or more advanced languages, but its semantic content is expressed by normal creative and ad hoc means in younger or less advanced languages" (Seuren & Wekker 1986: 66). Examples are comparative constructions (dealt with in Stassen 1985), conditionals, concessives, absolute participials (*this being said* ...), statements of price, credit, debt, and the like, constructions like *the more the better*, *as soon as*, *anything but*, *more and more*, etc. etc. It would seem that older languages, in particular those spoken in a rich social and cultural setting, can afford the luxury of multiplying the number of chapters in their grammars by introducing more and more such secondary constructions. The prediction is that creole languages will have very few of them.

What creole languages will, on the whole, lack is the "luxuries" that established languages can afford more easily. "Such 'luxuries' seem to be provoked by social differences within the speech community, where speakers of higher rank have an interest in making their speech hard to imitate. But in a situation of incipient creolization, such luxuries will hardly be found" (Seuren & Wekker 1986: 68). It is as with cutlery: in some families there is a piece of cutlery for almost every specific purpose, but when they go on a camping trip they will do with the simplest of forks, knives, and spoons. Creole languages are still on a camping trip.

Received: 23 March 2001

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

Correspondence address: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Postbus 310, 6500 AH Nijmegen, The Netherlands; e-mail: pieter.seuren@mpi.nl

Acknowledgment: This work was supported by a grant from the Max-Planck-Institut für evolutionäre Anthropologie in Leipzig.

2. The notion of semantic questionnaires makes it immediately clear that machine translation is not possible without taking into account the wider cognitive context of each utterance, which is unrealistic, given the resources available.

References

- Seuren, Pieter A. M. (1996). *Semantic Syntax*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (2001). *A View of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seuren, Pieter A. M. & Herman Wekker (1986). Semantic transparency as a factor in Creole genesis. In Pieter Muysken & Norval Smith (eds.), *Substrata versus Universals in Creole Genesis*, 57–70. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Stassen, Leon (1985). *Comparison and Universal Grammar*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Simple grammars, complex languagesby *Jacques Arends*

John McWhorter's claim that "the world's simplest grammars are creole grammars" is not new. It was made some thirty years ago when Saramaccan, the creole adduced by McWhorter to argue his case, featured as the world's "least complex" language in the 1971 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records* (Price & Price 1991: xii). While this claim – not founded on any serious evidence – was removed from later editions of that work, it now reappears – based, it should be noted, on more informed linguistic considerations – in the pages of *Linguistic Typology* as part of McWhorter's theory of the "Creole Prototype". According to this theory, creoles are simpler than other languages because, having evolved from an affixless pidgin in a relatively recent past, they have not existed long enough to have developed the kind of complexities found in non-creole languages.

As is readily acknowledged by McWhorter, the issue of grammatical complexity is not a simple one, if only because of the problems inherent in its measurement. However, since his aim is to compare creole and non-creole languages in terms of grammatical complexity, he cannot escape from proposing some kind of complexity metric. Although his selection of the four diagnostics of complexity is based on his assumption that they will "arouse the least possible controversy from as wide a spectrum as possible of linguists" (Section 2.4.3), they are by no means uncontroversial. First of all, they are all strictly quantitative, i.e., they are all of the type "more is more complex". A grammar is judged to be more complex if it has more (marked) phonemes, more tones, more syntactic rules, more grammatically expressed semantic and/or pragmatic distinctions, more morphophonemic rules, more cases of suppletion, allomorphy, agreement. Qualitative aspects of complexity, such as the internal complexity of the rules themselves, are not taken into account. Second, the metric is strongly biased towards grammatical "building blocks", i.e., elements such as phonemes and tones, paying little attention to the PROCESSES to which these elements are subjected. As an example of the latter one could think of the complex phonological contraction rules operating in some creoles, e.g., within the