

Peter Mühlhäusler. *Pidgin & Creole linguistics. Language in Society* 11. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986. 320 pp.

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After Boretzky (1983), this book is the first general introduction to the field of Creole linguistics. It is the first, anyway, that is written in English (if we don't count Hall (1966) and Todd (1974), which are perhaps rather limited in scope). The publication of this book is timely, given the now rapidly increasing interest, also among theoretical linguists, in pidgins and creoles. And both the author and the publisher are, therefore, to be congratulated.

Most current definitions of the notion "creole language" are historical:

creoles are languages that have come about as a result of the need for improvised linguistic contact between "bosses", who were in a position of power, and labourers who found themselves in a forced labour situation, and were often the victim of forced migration. The lack of a common language gave rise first to a so-called "pidgin" language (or jargon), developed by adults strictly for the purposes of the labour situation and therefore lexically, grammatically and semantically highly restricted and unstable. When such a pidgin develops into the native language of a community we speak of a creole language. This process, in all kinds of variations, has occurred most frequently in the context of European expansion and colonisation in and after the 16th century, when slaves were bought (mostly in Africa) and massively transported to the plantation colonies in the Caribbean area and the Indian Ocean islands. Similar processes took place by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries in the Pacific Ocean, notably in Melanesia and in Hawaii. The question that interests linguists in the first place is this: is there also a *linguistic* definition of the notion "creole language", apart from the historical one just given? In other words, is there a systematic correlation between the historical circumstances of forced language formation (usually under conditions of utter deprivation) on the one hand, and certain typical linguistic features on the other? Do creole languages form a linguistic type of their own?

The question is serious, mainly because most linguists who have occupied themselves with creole languages have found, at least at an intuitive level, that there are similarities. The most striking feature is the virtually total absence of morphology in creoles. But there is also, notably, the fact that verbal tenses and aspects have a strong tendency to be expressed by means of preverbal particles, and it is frequently said that these occur in a fixed order: Tense, Modality, Aspect (TMA). Passive, moreover, tends to be either absent or hardly developed (in any case not morphologically marked). According to some, verb serialization (cp. Sebba 1987) is typical for creoles (though also found in many non-creoles). SVO word order seems to be categorical for creoles (but, of course, not unique for these). And a few more characteristic features could perhaps be mentioned. The difficulty is that no linguist, so far, has succeeded in putting together a reliable survey of creole data to confirm or disconfirm claims regarding typically creole linguistic features. It would seem that the establishment of such a database is vital to creole linguistics. What is needed most, at present, is reliable systematic data. Judging by past history, the theories will no doubt follow.

Or rather, they are already there. Two main theoretical paradigms have been developed to explain whatever creole universals may be established. According to one, whatever significant similarities there are, are due to common historical sources, in particular the (African) substratum languages brought along by (parents of) future creole speakers. No significant similarities will therefore be found (other than by pure chance) between historically unrelated groups of creoles. This paradigm goes by the name of *substratum theory*. At the other extreme one finds the *innatists*, who claim that creole language genesis, at least as far as *grammar* is concerned (the lexicon is considered accidental and ancillary), is as close as one can get to spontaneous language creation, *ab ovo* so to speak, to use Bickerton's (1981) expression, uncluttered by past linguistic history. This creative process is achieved by children at the age where, normally, children acquire the language of their environment. Instead of that, the new creole inventors, forced as they are by communicative needs as well as by innate drive, *make* the language, guided or constrained only by their innate language faculty. (Bickerton (1981) goes even so far as to claim that this process is so tightly constrained that it has the characteristics of an automatic "programme", his much criticised *bioprogram*.) Most workers in the field, however, are a bit substratist and a bit innatist: while recognising obvious substrate influences they are quite willing to accept that innate linguistic faculties play a relatively prominent role in the genesis of creole languages. The problem with these innate faculties is, however, that they have so far remained virtually totally unspecified. (Bickerton has put forward the view that "universal grammar", as proposed in the MIT-oriented Government and Binding Theory, is to be identified with the postulated innate language faculty. However, given the doubtful status of whatever specific features have been proposed for this "Universal Grammar", it does not seem that this proposal has done much to lift the veil of speculation that hangs over the innate faculty.)

The creole question is the more relevant to linguistic theory given the fact that the beginnings of some creoles are well documented, and their (relatively) short history can be followed through time, due to written records of all kinds. This means that, *if* innate factors were at work, we can observe them almost *in vitro*. The question is then: what exactly is inside the test tube? Is it just some lexical stuff, haphazardly collected, or is there also an admixture of different, perhaps partially acquired, grammars brought along by the first creole speakers of whatever age? In this case, the resulting

creole would represent, at least in part, a selective mixture of the input languages, and the question then arises according to what kind of functional criteria, if any, the selection is made. (Seuren and Wekker (1986) claim that the main criterion is maximization of *semantic transparency*.)

This is, in outline, the context in which the book under review has made its appearance. It has seven chapters. Chapter 1 does what many other books have also done: it attempts to provide some clarity as regards terminology ("pidgin", "jargon", "creole") and identification ("counting pidgins and creoles"). In Chapter 2 one finds a survey of what has been achieved in the way of pidgin and creole studies since the earliest (19th century) beginnings, together with the various evaluative attitudes towards pidgins and creoles on the part of either amateur or professional observers. Chapter 3 sketches the social and historical context of pidgin and creole genesis. The various theories of origin are discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is more directly oriented towards the central linguistic aspects of pidgin and creole formation. In this long chapter, the author takes us from unstable pidgins ("jargons"), through stabilized pidgins and expanded pidgins, to full creole languages. For each of these stages he makes divisions for phonological, lexical and grammatical features, including whatever little can be found in the way of morphology. At the end of the chapter these categories are discussed even for decreolizing ("post-creole") languages. In all these cases the author formulates typological generalizations. In Chapter 6 an attempt is made at locating pidgin and creole studies in the context of general linguistic theory. Chapter 7 gives "conclusion and outlook".

Mühlhäusler is extremely well read in the subject, as is witnessed by the abundance of illustrative material and by the almost excessive length of the bibliography, which occupies nearly 21 densely printed pages. This luxurious lacing with bibliographical references and, in particular, with illustrating material is, however, not without problems. There is first the danger, and often more than the danger, that one begins to fail to see the wood for the trees, especially where, as in Chapter 5, much of the material shown is not clearly attributable to an unstable or a stable or an expanded pidgin, to a creole or a post-creole. There is, moreover, the danger of unreliability, especially with regard to data from languages that the author is less familiar with. Here, as we shall see, the author trips more than once. A further danger, one to which the author has clearly fallen victim, is that of selective bias in the choice of illustrative data. Mühlhäusler, as is well-known, specializes in the creoles of the Pacific area adjacent to Australia.

But even if this fact was not known at all, there could have been no doubt about it after this book: wherever data are discussed with obvious competence and in clear detail, they are taken from Tok Pisin (the creole of Papua New Guinea) or some other Melanesian creole, and I would estimate that about 80 per cent of all the material discussed is of that nature. Although this makes, if my estimate is correct, for 80 per cent of well presented and well laid-out documentation, it also diminishes the value of that documentation if pancreole generalizations is what we are after. But let us take a more systematic look at the book in question.

The first four chapters I found enjoyable and instructive reading, despite some flaws, both on the factual and the theoretical level. For example, on p.29 a discussion begins about early missionary and pedagogical grammars, and 18th and 19th century missionary grammars of Virgin Islands Creole Dutch are mentioned. No mention is made, however, of the better known collection of analogous grammars of Sranan, the main Creole of Surinam. Throughout this section, missionaries are alternatively blamed and praised for their involvement with pidgins and creoles. But nowhere is the historically unique role of the Moravians mentioned. These were the first, especially in the Caribbean and the southern United States, to recognize the rights of both these languages and their speakers. Consequently, due to their systematic efforts we have now at our disposal a treasure of documentation that would otherwise not exist. Inevitably, as Schuchardt (1914) says, “they sat themselves at the loom” of the languages they worked with. This is especially obvious in the case of Sranan and the related inland creoles of Surinam. It is thus a bit surprising to read (p.65) that “in the case of Sranan a special archaic church register has been reported”, with a reference to Voorhoeve (1971) (frequently misspelt “Voorhæve”). Anyone with any knowledge of Sranan and its history knows that “Church Sranan” is a recognised variety. This fact was only “reported” by Voorhoeve to make it known to wider circles.

On the theoretical level, two points stick out. First, Mühlhäusler’s discussion of creole linguistics in the context of transformational generative grammar badly lacks in insight. It is clear that the author has neither affinity with nor much knowledge of this influential current in linguistic theorizing (pp. 39-43). Then, on pp. 60-63, one finds a discussion of the concept “natural” in linguistics. A “loose” sense is distinguished, in which one speaks of “natural” versus “artificial” language(s) — a distinction Mühlhäusler sets no great store by. Then, there is a “more technical” sense of this word. In

this sense one speaks of “natural” rules and features. A reference is made to Edmondson (1984). However, the only area in linguistic theory where this concept of naturalness has been worked out in sufficient detail to be theoretically relevant is phonology, but this is not mentioned at all.<sup>1</sup>

The discussions in Chapter 4, on the origins of pidgins and creoles, are refreshing. Mühlhäusler pays ample attention to the views, often proposed in the past (and as yet not proved to be irrelevant), that regressive speakers’ strategies (“foreigner” or “baby” talk) contributed to the formation of pidgins (and hence creoles). He discusses the thesis, often expressed, especially in connection with the French-based creoles, that superstrate influences were channelled through contacts with seamen, whose nautical jargon is often clearly recognised in creole lexicons. Substrate theories are, perhaps a bit confusingly, treated under “relexification theory” (pp.107-113), “common core theories” (pp.118-119), and “substratum theories” (pp.119-129). The general implications and (methodological) problems of substrate theories are hardly touched upon, however. Here, too, the author’s theoretical weaknesses are transparent. For example, when discussing (p.128) the extent to which substrate influences can or do affect the grammar of creoles, we find meaningless statements like: “As a general principle, it can be postulated that the more arbitrary an area of grammar, the more readily can languages borrow from one another.” (p.128). Or: “syntactic transfer is most likely to occur in areas where syntax and semantics are interwoven, for example, relative ordering of two elements where one modifies the other” (p.129). Innatist theories are to be found under “universalist theories” (pp.113-118). This has the advantage that implicational and other linguistic universals (as studied in the now flourishing branch of universalist linguistics) can be taken into account. Here again, the exposé could have been clearer and more systematic. It could also have been better informed. On p.117 e.g., Mühlhäusler mentions the fact, observed by Koefoed (1975), that Sranan violates Greenberg’s universal that if adjective precedes noun, so does, in most cases, the demonstrative. (Sranan has a prior adjective but a posterior demonstrative: *a man dati* “that man”, lit.: “the man that”.) Mühlhäusler conjectures that the grammar of modern Sranan “may have been preceded by one where [this] universal was not violated”. It is, however, perfectly known, from the first sources on, that this is not so.

The last three chapters are perhaps less satisfactory. What were minor weaknesses in the first half of the book are felt, in the second half, as

noticeable shortcomings. Thus, non-Melanesian illustrative material is often unsatisfactory. For example, on p.142, in the section on “jargons”, some material is shown from Boni (a Surinam inland creole) and the coastal Sranan, with the purpose of demonstrating that the former has a tendency to reduce consonant clusters and should thus be more “natural” (see above). However, all the material shows is a rule (which is generally known to have applied to Boni and Saramaccan) or *r*-deletion (whatever its origin). The same point recurs on p.212, in the section on full creoles, with some hardly interpretable material from Djuka (another inland Surinam creole). Fortunately there is a reference to Smith (1977), where the reader can satisfy his curiosity. On pp.212-213 mention is made of the fact that both Mauritian and Réunion (French based) creole have a rule whereby the final vowel of a verb is dropped (or, in some cases, the verb form is otherwise modified). As already noted by Baissac (1880), though in theoretically naive terms, this rule operates whenever the verb is followed by other VP-elements (except embedded clauses or infinitivals) (see also Seuren 1985.) This is a rare case of creole morphology or morphophonology. Mühlhäusler, however, treats it as phonology, and he only refers to Corne’s treatment of this phenomenon in Baker and Corne (1982). Here, Corne makes the rule contingent upon a notional category “action”, which remains undefined. Mühlhäusler fails to mention the fact, observed, e.g., by Stein (1984:73-74), that final vowel truncation of verbs occurs in all or most French-based creoles, though under very different conditions. As it stands, the presentation of this interesting phenomenon on pp.212-3 of the book is badly deficient and hence uninformative. Phonological reduction (depending on speech style) is treated both as phonology (p.210) and as morphology (p.216 – where the Mauritian example is inaccurate). More examples could easily be provided.

Desite the various partitions of this fifth chapter, the presentation is less than systematic. For example, phonology and lexicon are mixed up on p.212: “Many questions concerning creolization of the phonological component remain unanswered. Of particular interest, and undocumented to date, would seem to be the question whether new words are spontaneously created by children to make up for the numerous lexical gaps allegedly found in their pidgin or jargon model.” (Note that we are in the section on *creoles*.) Cases of this kind abound.

The somewhat jumpy character of the text could have been compensated for by an alphabetical index of languages and other proper names, and by a clear, reliable and systematic survey of the pidgins and creoles of

the word with their (rough) history somewhere in the book. Such a survey is painfully lacking. Some creoles are regularly referred to, but one has to guess as to their status and classification. The pidgin Hiri Motu, for example, is occasionally referred to (e.g., pp.14, 31, 105, 109, 110), but the information provided is perhaps clearer to insiders than to the outside reader. And worse, there is no index to help the reader collate the various places where this language is discussed. This lack of surveys and registers reduces the usefulness of the book. It must be added that the list of contents gives nothing more than the chapter titles and the page numbers of the chapters (plus, of course, the editor's preface, the preface, the acknowledgements, notes, bibliography, and index – which occupies barely two pages). It is thus impossible to use the list of contents for orientation in other than very global ways.

Chapter 6 (pp. 251-275) deals with the relevance of pidgin and creole studies to linguistic theory. The pages 252-258 deal with historical and comparative questions. Only one page (p.258-9) is devoted to “systematicity and rule-governedness”. And the remainder is about questions of acquisition and speech communities. None of what is said, however, cuts much ice. The same must be said of the last, short, chapter “Conclusions and outlook”. Here, the author again stresses his view that “pidgin and creole languages, like other human communication systems, are open systems in the technical sense” (p.276), a point also raised on p.258/9, where “systematicity” is at issue. Nowhere, however, does the author inform his readers of what this “technical sense” could be. As has been said, the theoretical harvest is meagre.

Such theoretical shortcomings, however, are, to some extent, typical of the field. From the very beginning creole linguistics has been more oriented towards data than towards theory and formalization. There is an antiformalist tendency in creole linguistics, already manifest in Hugo Schuchardt's work (Schuchardt was very much opposed to the formalist tendencies in works by neogrammarians). But this does not mean that books like the one under review have little theoretical significance. On the contrary, they should be a thorn in the flesh and a challenge to mainstream theorists. As such they are, or can be, very useful. More pertinent as a point of general criticism is the lack of systematicity in the presentation, as well as the lack of an adequate apparatus of surveys and indices. Yet in spite of these obvious deficiencies there remains much to be learned from and enjoyed in this book.



## NOTE

1. Yet here and there in the subsequent text (e.g. pp.142, 210) references or appeals are made to a notion of phonological naturalness, which, however, remains unexplained and thus without content.

On p.251 there is a use of "natural" which I found particularly disturbing: "Third, because pidgins and creoles arise in a maximally culture-neutral environment, they are paradigm cases of 'natural' languages." This shows total disregard for the considerable amount of cultural heritage brought along by first pidgin and creole speakers, as well as for the naturalness of culture in human societies.

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