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Mareile Schramm

THE EMERGENCE OF CREOLE SYLLABLE STRUCTURE

A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY

LA LINGUISTISCHE ARBEITEN

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Linguistische Arbeiten

Edited by
Klaus von Heusinger, Gereon Müller,
Ingo Plag, Beatrice Primus,
Elisabeth Stark and Richard Wiese

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Abbreviations and notational conventions

A. Abbreviations of language names

BD	Berbice Dutch
ESA	Early Saramaccan
ESK	Early St Kitts
GFC	Guiana French Creole
NH	Negerhollands
TFC	Trinidad French Creole

B. General terms

CHAID	Chi-squared Automatic Interaction Detection (a method used to build classification trees)
IL	interlanguage
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
L1	a speaker's native language
L2	a language learned subsequently to the L1

C. Symbols and notational conventions

C	consonant
V	vowel
#	word boundary
.	syllable boundary
σ	syllable
< >	orthographic representation
/ /	phonological (i.e. underlying) representation
[]	phonetic representation

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1 Introduction

Pidgins and creoles were long regarded as defective or broken forms of their respective lexifier languages. The realisation that the observed deviations from the lexifier norm are in fact the product of independent linguistic systems led to the establishment of pidgin and creole studies as an academic discipline in the second half of the 20th century. Since then, it has been shown that the study of pidgins and creoles can contribute significantly to discussions in different areas of linguistics, including language contact, language change, second language acquisition and sociolinguistics (cf. Holm 2000: 3f).

In the last decades, the body of literature on creoles has grown considerably. On a theoretical level, the question of creole genesis has been – and continues to be – the subject of intensive debate. On a more descriptive level, numerous studies have addressed different grammatical structures of creoles and thus advanced our understanding of the nature of contact languages. However, not all aspects of creole structure were equally well covered in either the more descriptively oriented works or the more theoretical discussions. In the area of creole phonology, most research has focused on segmental inventories, whereas syllable structure, like other suprasegmental aspects, has received relatively little attention. One reason for this state of affairs may well be the long-standing claim that creole syllables tend to follow a simple CV pattern (Holm 1988, 2000, Romaine 1988), a claim that also shaped the discussion concerning the origin of creole syllable structure. In recent years, more detailed studies of creole syllables have shown that most creoles do not in fact restrict their inventory to CV syllables (e.g. Stolz 1986, Sabino 1990, 1993, Aceto 1996, Meade 1995, Singler 1996, Lipski 2000, Plag and Schramm 2006, Bhatt 2007). Instead, creoles typically allow also more marked structures such as V, VC, CVC, CCV and CCVC (Klein 2011). The range of attested syllable structures in creoles is thus much wider than commonly assumed. Moreover, some creoles are considerably more permissive than others (e.g. Plag and Schramm 2006, Klein 2011). Apart from rendering the simplicity claim untenable, these findings stress the importance of an empirically adequate description as a basis for the discussion of creole formation. They also raise the question as to how the observed cross-creole variation can be explained. Which creole structures do we find for different sets of contributing languages, to what extent can these structures be traced back to the respective superstrate or substrate languages and which role do universals of language acquisition and development play in shaping creole syllables?

Although recent years have seen an increase in studies addressing either particular aspects of syllable structure in individual languages or particular phe-

nomena of phonotactic restructuring (especially vowel paragoge, cf. e.g. Plag and Uffmann 2000, Uffmann 2008), there is still a lack of both comprehensive accounts for individual languages and large-scale comparative studies investigating the emergence of creole syllable structure. Such studies are important as they allow us to determine the degree to which different combinations of potentially influential factors lead to different structures in the creole (see, for instance, Plag and Schramm 2006 on the effects that variation in the kind of contact had on syllable structure in English-based Caribbean creoles). Cross-linguistic studies can thus help us evaluate the relative impact of different factors on the outcome of creolisation.

The present study is concerned with the emergence of syllable structure in six Caribbean creoles. It extends and refines the comparative approach taken by Plag and Schramm (2006), covering data from two English-based, two Dutch-based and two French-based creoles. This selection makes it possible to investigate both variation across creoles with the same lexifier and variation across creoles with different lexifiers. Concentrating on Caribbean creoles rather than including creoles from different regions has two important advantages. First, reliable data from early stages is available for a number of Caribbean creoles. Such data is of particular interest in the discussion of creole genesis as language-internal developments may obscure the original structures in later stages of the creole (cf. e.g. Aceto (1996) on syllable onsets in Saramaccan). Second, the conditions under which the Caribbean creoles developed were very similar. Concentrating on this region therefore reduces the number of additional variables which might have influenced the creole outcome.

The aim of this study is two-fold. The first objective is to determine which syllable structures are attested in the different creoles and whether or not they deviate from those in the respective superstrate and substrate languages and from structures in creoles with similar contributing languages. The second aim is to investigate what factors determine the creole outcome. Current claims about the emergence of creole phonology (Plag 2009, Uffmann 2009), which have not yet been tested on a broader empirical basis, will be evaluated in the light of the findings on creole syllables.

This study will thus offer insights into the mechanisms at work in creole formation. It will also have implications for the question of whether or not creoles should be considered as being typologically different from non-creole languages in terms of syllable structure.

We will also see that creoles with similar contributing languages may show not only considerably different syllable structures but also different preferences in terms of repair strategies for illicit structures. Empirical support will be provided for the position that the main mechanisms in the formation of creole syllable

bles are transfer of substrate grammatical structures, substrate levelling, regular language transmission and acquisition of superstrate structures. It will be shown that both markedness and perceptual salience influence the probability of retention of different structures in the creole. With respect to phonotactic restructuring I will argue that adaptations of input structures can take place in perception as well as production.

The linguistic data for the empirical investigation are taken from six different sources, ranging in date from the 18th through the 20th century, depending on the availability of reliable material for the individual creoles. Sources from similar periods were used for pairs of creoles with the same lexifier.

The book is organised as follows. In the next chapter, I will give a brief outline of the different positions researchers have taken in the discussion of creole formation in general and the emergence of creole syllable structure in particular. The chapter also includes an overview of existing models of syllable structure and comments on the categories and terminology chosen for this study. In chapter 3, I will motivate the choice of creole languages and specific source texts used in this study and provide an overview of the historical background of the individual creoles. Methodological issues concerning data coding and analysis will also be covered. Chapters 4 through 6 will be concerned with the results of the empirical investigation of syllable structure and phonotactic restructuring in the individual creole languages, covering the Dutch-based, English-based and French-based creoles in turn. I will establish which kinds of structural categories are targeted by repair mechanisms in the creole and identify cross-category differences in both the rate and the nature of phonotactic restructuring. Chapter 7 will then bring together and compare some of the findings from the preceding chapters, focussing on cross-creole similarities and differences with regard to constraints on syllable structure. In chapter 8, I will discuss the extent to which the observed creole patterns can be explained by current theories of creolisation that ascribe an important role to processes of second language acquisition. The final chapter contains a general conclusion concerning both the emergence and the nature of creole syllable structure.

2 Creole genesis and syllable structure

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces some of the central issues in the discussion of creole formation, focusing on those aspects which are most relevant to creole syllable structure and creole phonology in more general. I will first give a brief outline of different approaches to creolisation and then relate the most prominent claims advanced in the literature about the nature and emergence of creole syllable structure in particular. I will restrict myself to a sketch of the general positions here. A detailed description of the two proposals which are tested in this study will be given in chapter 8. In section 2.4, I will first provide an overview of different syllable models that have been suggested in the literature and then explain which approach was chosen for this study. A short summary of the chapter is given in section 2.5.

2.2 Sources of creole structure and mechanisms in creolisation

The question of how creoles come into being, of the mechanisms involved in their creation, is one of the central issues in the study of creole languages and has been the subject of ongoing debate for decades. In their search for the origin of creole features, researchers have taken different, sometimes strongly opposing views, attributing the most important role in creolisation alternatively to the superstrate, to the substrate languages or to universals of language acquisition and development. In the discussion of creole syllables, the universalist and the substratist positions have been most prominent.

The most influential proposals at the universalist end is the language bioprogram hypothesis (Bickerton 1981, 1984). Supporters of this hypothesis view creole structures as the result of first language acquisition by children who receive only inadequate input in the form of a pidgin. According to the theory, such children resort to strategies provided by some innate capacity for language, a core grammar that Bickerton calls the language bioprogram, to create a fully-fledged language, the new creole. In the absence of positive evidence in the input for more complex structures, this new language will be characterised by a strong tendency towards unmarked structures.

This view has been challenged by proponents of the substratist hypothesis who regard adults, not children, as the main agents of creolisation. Substratists

assume that the majority of creole features have their origin in the native languages of the slaves. In support of this position, numerous researchers have pointed out parallels between creole structures and structures found in the substrate languages (e.g. Boretzky 1983, Migge 1998, Lefebvre 1998, Parkvall 2000, Singler 2000, Siegel 2003, see also the contributions in Lefebvre 2011). Especially where marked features are concerned, it has been argued that the universalist approach fails to account for these parallels. Under the substratist hypothesis, the main processes assumed to be at work in creolisation are transfer or retention of grammatical structures from the substrate languages and relexification, i.e. the replacement of native lexical items by phonetic strings from the superstrate (Lefebvre 1998). In addition, reanalysis and dialect levelling are claimed to play a role.

In recent years, the focus in the study of creole genesis has shifted away from identifying the single most important factor in creole formation to determining how different factors might interact (Kouwenberg and Singler 2008a). A growing number of researchers thus take a more integrative view, regarding creolisation as a complex process in which several factors play a role (Siegel 1999, Smith 2001, Migge 2003, Uffmann 2003, 2009, Steele and Brousseau 2006, Braun 2009, Plag 2009). Most creolists today agree that processes of second language acquisition are of central importance in creole formation. Proposals focusing on SLA parallels often treat creolisation as a particular case of L2 acquisition, namely one involving limited access to the target language. It is not always clear, however, how many of the creole structures can in fact be attributed to SLA, which other mechanisms might be involved and how they interact in determining the creole outcome.

The next section gives a brief overview of claims that supporters of different creolisation theories have advanced with respect to the nature and development of creole syllable structure.

2.3 Creolisation and syllable structure

Suprasegmental aspects of creole phonology have long been neglected in descriptive as well as theoretical accounts. In the past, general statements on syllable structure often did not extend beyond the claim of simplicity. Thus, the most commonly stated generalisation was that CV syllables, that is, open syllables with no more than a single consonant preceding the vowel, dominate in creole languages. A particularly extreme statement comes from Romaine (1988) who maintains that “[c]reoles have no initial or final consonant clusters. They have a simple syllable structure which consists of alternating consonants and vowels, e.g.

CVCV” (Romaine 1988: 63). Cases of phonotactic restructuring in creoles such as the ones in (1) were taken as evidence for the CV hypothesis.

(1) Creation of CV syllables in creoles (data taken from Holm 2000: 141ff)

<i>Creole form</i>		<i>Etymon</i>	<i>Language</i>
kini	<	D. knie	Negerhollands
méze	<	P. mès	Príncipe CP
sisá	<	E. sister	Sranan
taki	<	E. talk	Sranan
vale	<	F. avaler	Trinidad CF

Supporters of a universalist approach to creole genesis attributed such modifications to a preference for CV as the most unmarked syllable type. Substratists, on the other hand, interpreted the creation of CV syllables as the result of transfer of phonotactic restrictions from substrate languages. For instance, Holm (2000: 239) advances that “[p]erhaps the single most important factor shaping the phonology of many of the Atlantic creoles was the retention of the substrate phonotactic rules tending to give syllables a CV structure.”

More detailed studies of syllable structure in individual creole languages have shown, however, that the CV claim is empirically not well-supported. Rather than showing only the most unmarked type of syllable, many creoles also allow more complex structures such as word-initial clusters or word-final singleton consonants (see e.g. the findings by Tinelli 1979, Stolz 1986, Sabino 1990, Singler 1996, Lipski 2000, Plag and Schramm 2006, Bhatt 2007, Klein 2011). In a typological study of syllable templates in creole and non-creole languages, Klein (2011: 183) comes to the conclusion that “creoles cluster in the higher end of the typological middle” and that “no creole language features exclusively CV syllables”. Crucially, the latter statement is true even for early varieties of radical creoles, such as the Surinamese creoles Sranan and Saramaccan (cf. Plag and Schramm 2006). This renders an explanation of non-CV structures as effects of decreolisation or later borrowings, as suggested, for instance, by Alleyne (1980) and Boretzky (1983), unlikely.

While it seems that the simplicity hypothesis has to be rejected, it may be true that the range of syllable structures we find in creoles is overall smaller than the range we find in other languages. Comrie (2011) picks up on this point. Looking at creole tone systems and syllable codas from a typological perspective, he finds that complex structures are considerably less frequent in creoles than in