The Emergence of Hybrid Grammars

Children are extremely gifted in acquiring their native languages, but languages nevertheless change over time. Why does this paradox exist? In this study of creole languages, Enoch Aboh addresses this question, arguing that language acquisition requires contact between different linguistic subsystems that feed into the hybrid grammars that learners develop. There is no qualitative difference between a child learning their language in a multilingual environment and a child raised in a monolingual environment. In both situations, children learn to master multiple linguistic subsystems that are in contact and may be combined to produce new variants. These new variants are part of the inputs for subsequent learners. Contributing to the debate on language acquisition and change, Aboh shows that language learning is always imperfect: learners' motivation is not to replicate the target language faithfully but to develop a system close enough to the target that guarantees successful communication and group membership.

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Language Contact and Change

Enoch Oladé Aboh

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Foreword

SALIKOKO S. MUFWENE

The present book represents the outcome of research that Enoch Oladé Aboh has conducted on structures of especially his mother tongue Gungbe and on Haitian, Sranan, and Saramaccan, over the past fifteen years, counting from the time when I first met him at a conference on African linguistics at the University of Cape Town, in January 2000. He has since then contributed, in paper after paper, an enlightening comparative perspective that sheds informative light on how far similarities obtain between the Gbe languages and these three creoles. This subject matter has become central in the literature on the emergence of creoles thanks to some relexificationists who claim that grammars of creoles are patterned on those of their most important substrate languages.

In the case of these specific creoles, the field has been blessed to see some of the relevant issues addressed by a linguist who is a native speaker of one of the Gbe languages, who is impeccably well trained in the generative framework used by prominent relexificationists such as Claire Lefebvre and John Lumsden, and who has relentlessly investigated aspects of the grammars of the relevant creoles based on not only the literature but also work with their native speakers, as well as collaboration with other experts on the relevant languages. So, this book brings to its readers the fruits of the application of the comparative approach (not to be confused with the comparative method of historical linguistics) to the letter. The reader will find in the following pages plenty of data that raise issues about the Relexification Hypothesis applied to Haitian, Sranan, and Saramaccan.

Contrary to claims that creoles form a typological class of their own, Aboh also shows that the grammatical structures of these particular creoles are not identical, not even in some respects that can be associated with their apparently most conspicuous Gbe substrates. Some of the structures that distinguish them from their lexifiers are not shared identically in the Gbe group either. Although this does not mean that we should deny substrate influence on creoles' structures, we nevertheless should not continue thinking of structural similarities between creoles and their dominant susbstrates in the traditional way, viz., that particular meanings or structures from a particular language or group thereof were transferred intact into the system of the emergent language (variety).

The same comparative approach, once promoted earlier in the 1990s by Robert Chaudenson but executed in detail by Aboh, also shows that, while we cannot deny the legacy of the lexifiers on their metamorphic offspring (so to speak), it is important to pay attention not only to what has been retained but also to how those particular retentions have been integrated in the overall emergent grammar. How has the initial koinéized system been restructured? Does this prove exceptional evolution on the part of creoles? Arguing like Michel DeGraff and myself against "creole exceptionalism," Aboh's answer is a resounding "no."

His answer is also negative to the question of whether there is some hope of salvaging any version of Derek Bickerton's Language Bioprogram Hypothesis, which presupposes pidgin ancestors for the emergence of creoles and claims that the latter were created by children. A most innovative part of Aboh's arguments, developed in Chapter 2, lies in showing that the slave trade on the western coast of Africa, especially in the Kingdom of Allada, in today's Benin, did not proceed as traditionally assumed in the literature. No incipient pidgin is reported to have emerged out of the initial contacts between Europeans and African traders. Instead, the trade was organized like today's international, if not so globalized, partnerships, involving powerful companies and institutions, with brokers/intermediaries conducting business for them in languages that they had some acceptable command of.

The study is very consistent with Mufwene (2014), which argues that the history of trade between Europeans and non-Europeans from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century suggests that this relied heavily on interpreters, also identified as intermediaries and linguists. Genetic creolists should not have ignored them and should have investigated how they developed. The satisficing answer to date lies in the fact that, like other important traders in Asia and the Pacific, the African kings and chiefs sent princes and children of their entourages to Europe, to learn the language of their prospective trade partners, while the European explorers left some members of their crews behind as gages of good faith. On both sides, the concerned individuals learned the languages of their hosts by immersion; those who survived these exchanges would serve as interpreters when trade started in earnest years after the first encounters. Immersed in European families in the host countries, the Africans had no reason to develop pidgins, no more than did the European crew members who were left behind in Africa or the *lançados* and future *factors* who settled there by choice. There were no open slave bazaars where just anybody could bring captives or disavowed relatives to sell to Europeans. Nor were the slave markets as business institutions like open fields where just any European can walk with his gun and money and purchase slaves. Rather, this ignominious trade was well organized and constrained in its patterns of interactions, contrary to the traditional

assumption that sporadic encounters between European traders and societally multilingual Africans unavoidably triggered the emergence of pidgins. It is in fact noteworthy that the merchants of (Asian) bazaars, the antecedents of modern shopping malls, have typically been polyglots, ready to speak the buyer's language. The contact history summarized in Mufwene (2014) shows that the European trade and exploitation colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific relied heavily on interpreters, precluding extensive direct interactions between the Natives and Europeans.

As a matter of fact, European trade on the African and Asian coasts relied heavily on Portuguese as the lingua franca till the late eighteenth century, if not the early nineteenth century. Pidgins appear to have emerged later than traditionally assumed, perhaps later than creoles of the Caribbean and Indian Ocean. I conjecture that their emergence, so late indeed, was the consequence of trade expansion, which then produced a shortage of good interpreters. The pidginization process must thus have been similar to the basilectalization hypothesized by Robert Chaudenson for the emergence of creoles, with the non-native productions of the lexifier becoming more and more divergent from the closer approximations produced earlier by those who had learned the language under contact conditions more favorable to "faithful" learning. Thus, in addition to all the sound arguments based on structural features of Haitian, Sranan, and Saramaccan marshalled by Aboh against the Language Bioprogram Hypothesis, one cannot overlook the fact that the history of the slave trade does not support it.

For those who still thought that Ingo Plag's Interlanguage Hypothesis, which suggests that creoles reflect convergent interlanguages in arrested stage, is the alternative to the Language Bioprogram Hypothesis, Aboh also adduces a variety of structural evidence against it. He likewise shows how misinformed it is to claim, like John McWhorter, that creoles are among the world's simplest languages. Both fail to realize that the plantation settlement colonies left no room for the break in the transmission of the lexifiers traditionally associated with the ecology of the emergence of creoles. Once race segregation (not to be confused with race-based discrimination) was instituted during the transition from the homestead phase to the plantation phase, there were already cohorts of Black Creoles who spoke the same colonial koinés as the White Creoles. Language transmission in these colonies must therefore be approached in terms of who spoke which variety and when, which underscores the significance of population structure and periodization of the peopling of the colonies, rather than with the simplistic equation "Race Segregation = Break in Transmission." Otherwise, it would be like assuming, inaccurately, that English is spreading around the world today through the dispersal of primarily the Brits and Americans, whereas reality shows that a very large proportion of English speakers today have learned it from non-native speakers outside the United Kingdom, the Anglophone North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

Aboh likewise mines the alleged simplicity of creoles not only by providing counterevidence but also by asking whether a linguistic system should be reduced to its morphosyntax, detached of its semantics. Is it accurate to reduce morphosyntactic complexity/simplicity to what Michel DeGraff has identified as "bit complexity," which amounts to how many units (phonemic, morphemic, and syntactic rules) a linguistic system is populated with? How about the constraints that govern the usage of the relevant units and the ways in which rules of their use interact with each other, either in feeding or bleeding some of them? How about the impact of an overall simplicity of a language on its expected capacity to convey information successfully, allowing easy discrimination between different contents?

A great number of John McWhorter's claims has also depended on his assumption that creoles are young languages. Assuming that there is genetic discontinuity between the lexifier and the relevant creoles, is complexity really a function of how old a language is? Did modern "young languages" start from scratch in the same ways that the hominine species evolved from having no linguistic communication to producing languages, going through an embryonic protolinguistic stage that involved short lists of denoting terms and minimal grammar? Did the minds of the inventors of modern language varieties such as creoles or even pidgins regress to the state of the mind of *Homo erectus* or early *Homo sapiens*? There is no evidence in these language varieties or the ecologies of their emergence suggesting that they may illustrate the disputable position that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny."

As a matter of fact, one should also ask whether, for instance, Gullah is younger than other American English varieties and whether it is justified to deny its ultimate ancestry in Old English, or perhaps the ancestors thereof. From a genetic linguistics point of view, wouldn't a more adequate account of the differential evolution of English be one that does not too hastily invoke overall simplification for some varieties simply because they have been disfranchised as creoles for reasons that appear to be fundamentally social? Besides, the morphological simplification of English does not appear to be an exclusive peculiarity of the formation of creoles; it appears to have been the general evolutionary trajectory of the language since the transition to Middle English. Even if the producers of creoles have overextended the simplification of the lexifier's morphology, haven't they also complexified some other aspects of the grammars of the emergent language varieties? In the final analysis, don't things boil down to the typological realignment of some parameters of the creoles' grammars compared to their lexifier?

It is in the context of the above considerations that Aboh submits the hypothesis of hybrid grammars. This notion is so much the more interesting as it addresses the emergence of new language varieties from both the ontogenetic and the communal perspectives, focusing respectively on

language development in individual speakers and on the convergence of emergent idiolects into new sociolects, dialects, or varieties such as creoles that have been stipulated by linguists to be separate languages altogether. Aboh presents data that question both the uniparental conception of language "transmission" in genetic linguistics and the idea that native speakers of a particular language "acquire" it intact from the population of speakers they learn it from. Idiolects are as hybrid in kind as creoles have been claimed to be because they integrate selectively elements from different sources. An idiolect is as different from those of the model speakers as a creole is from the languages out of whose contact it emerged. As I see it, both are shaped gradually, constantly influenced by the increasing and sometimes competing inputs and adapting themselves to communicative pressures. The main differences lie in the number of generations, the size of the population (one versus many speakers from the point of view of the learners), and of course in the richness/diversity of variants in the feature pool, where the competition and selection that shape the new varieties arise and take place, respectively.

Overlooking differences in learning skills, the nature of the feature pool (consisting of variants from the target language and the other languages that it may be in contact with) plays a critical role in determining the outcome of language "transmission," bearing in mind that the pool is naturally constrained by the relevant population structure and by the particular period in which one learns a variety. One must always remember that, as economic ventures, the plantations were not produced overnight; they typically developed incrementally, with their populations increasing depending on when need arose and/or when their owners could afford them. Thus, the presence and/or numerical strength of particular ethnolinguistic groups varied according to what the market provided at specific times, notwithstanding the speed of population replacement, especially at the time when the slave population grew more by importation than by birth. To make matters more complex, these ecological factors may have varied from one plantation to another, though there were general trends in particular colonies, on which Aboh, like other creolists working on the subject matter, capitalizes to shed light on the grammatical hybridity of the emergent creoles.

Aboh takes us a step further than the feature-recombination that I invoked in the work that he cites, thus making the Complementary Hypothesis, as I conceived of it, more explicit. Like Richard Lewontin in 1970, in the context of biological evolution, he raises implicitly the issue of what the units of selection are in both language "acquisition" and the restructuring processes that produced creoles as communal varieties. We are reminded that linguistic systems consist of forms, structures, rules, and meanings and that each one of these kinds of elements can be complex. Shedding light on the often-invoked notion of congruence as a factor favoring some of the competing variants, Aboh

shows that even a rule from a particular source language can be selected partially; substrate grammatical patterns were not necessarily faithfully reproduced in the emergent creoles and certainly not in identical ways from one creole to another. This is as obvious with serial verb constructions as with determiners and predicate fronting. Substratists should especially remember that even the semantics was not faithfully reproduced, aside from the fact that internal dynamics of the emergent systems generated some peculiarities that can be traced to neither the lexifier nor the particular substrate languages singled out in the present study.

This book reveals how complex the subject matter of the emergence of creoles is and how germane it is to that of the formation of idiolects and communal language creation in general. It is a demonstration of the useful contribution that genetic creolistics can make to the study of language acquisition and change, as well as to theoretical linguistics. Transcending the traditionally narrow confines of discussions in creolistics, the book is both a strong argument against creole exceptionalism and an invitation to keep away from simplistic accounts. For those who have been complaining about lack of data that support the contention that creoles have evolved like other natural languages (bearing in mind that every case of language evolution is local, constrained by ecological factors specific to the setting and time of its emergence), there is no scarcity of data in this book. One is instead struck by the modesty of the author and the soft tone of his claims. As I said in Mufwene (2001), creolistics should not be a consumer discipline content with borrowing ideas from other areas of linguistics (and other disciplines); it should also contribute to understanding issues relevant to linguistics at large. Being more detailed in the analyses of a wide range of constructions than is typical in creolistics, *The emergence of hybrid grammars* has passed another milestone toward that goal. Non-creolists that are typologically inclined will find it compelling, while theoretically inclined creolists will appreciate the ways in which the author makes the data relevant to formal syntax and historical linguistics. I am so proud that Aboh chose Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact to defend his positions and flattered that he invited me to write a foreword for it.

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Acknowledgments

I became familiar with some of the literature in creolistics in the mid 1990s when I was writing my thesis. Back then, part of the generative literature on the Gbe (and more generally Kwa) languages stemmed from work by Claire Lefebvre and her team at UQAM. It also happened that most of this study was meant to show substrate influence in creole genesis: the role of Gbe (Kwa) languages in the emergence of the Caribbean creoles. While some of the features or patterns identified in the creoles as Gbe/Kwa substrate influence looked reasonable to me (e.g., predicate cleft), some others (e.g., the directionality of certain functional items) appeared doubtful. In addition, even the features that could be ascribed to the substrate languages never seemed replicated identically in the creole. This observation led me to think that the creoles I was reading about then might be telling us something more fundamental about language acquisition in general: how learners weave together different aspects of the heterogeneous inputs they are exposed to. The chapters in this book present some of my thinking on this question over the past decade.

Since the mid 1990s, I've had opportunities to talk to many people who helped me think harder and reformulate the conclusions presented in this book. I probably don't recall everyone who took part in what turned out to be a fantastic journey for me, but none of this could have been possible without the friendship and support of Norval Smith, Pieter Muysken, Michel DeGraff, and Salikoko Mufwene.

My thoughts actually started taking form when in 2001 Norval and Pieter offered me a postdoc position in their NWO project: *The TransAtlantic Sprachbund*. During the following ten years or so, I've have daily discussions with Norval both in our offices over a coffee and on the train on our way back home. Needless to say I learned a lot during these discussions, but most importantly, I realized that history matters. Thanks, Norval. And thank you, Pieter, for being always supportive and for always pointing me in the right direction. My gratitude also goes to other members of the *TransAtlantic* research team: Felix Ameka, Adrienne Bruyn, James Essegbey, and Margot van den Berg.

It was also during this time that I met Michel DeGraff and Salikoko Mufwene. I'm immensely indebted to both of them for their friendship and support. Michel and Sali commented on almost all my writings related to creolistics. Their numerous constructive comments, suggestions, and positive criticisms throughout these years helped me refine the theory developed in this book, broaden my research, and think harder about the big picture. I owe a great deal of the literature cited in this work to them, and both gave me several opportunities to present my work to broader audiences: Michel by inviting me to teach a semester at MIT in spring 2008 and Sali by giving me the chance to publish this book in this series. Sali's role as a friend and editor of the Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact series cannot be overestimated. He has been supportive of this project from the very early phases. Despite his busy schedule, he has always managed to find the time to critically evaluate the manuscripts I sent him, starting from the book proposal up to the final product now in the hands of the reader. It is not an overstatement to say that this book could not have existed without his contribution. *Kouzen* and *Grand-Frère*, I alone assume full responsibility for all remaining shortcomings and hope that the end result does not let you down: *ùn dó kpé ná mì*.

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Parts of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 were previously published as self-contained essays, but much of this book took form in 2011–2012 when I was offered a Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) fellowship for a year. I'm grateful to NIAS for believing in this project and for giving me the chance to complete it. I'm particularly indebted to my colleague Aafke Hulk, then the rector of NIAS. It is clear to my mind that I could never have written this book if I had not been given the opportunity to spend a whole year at NIAS, writing, meeting with people of different backgrounds in the humanities, and contemplating the wonders of nature in Wassenaar. Aafke, thanks for giving me this opportunity.

Finally, I owe the greatest debt to Anne, my wife, our son Fèmi and daughters Aniola and Orê for always being there for me. Thanks for your love. This book is dedicated to you.

Abbreviations

A:DCL	affirmative declarative
ABL	ablative
ABS	absolutive
ADV	adverb/adverbializer
CL	clitique
CMP	comparative
CO	cooperative object
DCL	declarative
DEF	definite
DEM	demonstrative
DET	determiner
DIM	diminutive
DIR	direction
DS	different subject
EMPH	emphatic
F	feminine
FOC	focus
FUT	future
GEN	genitive
HAB	habitual
IMP	imperative
INC	incompletive
INDEF	indefinite
INF	infinitive
INSTR	instrument
INTER	interrogative
INTL	intentional
IO	indirect object
LOC	locative
M	masculine
MID	middle voice
MOM	momentaneous

MOOD	modality marker
NEG	negation
NUM	number
NVR	non-veridical
PERM	permissive
PCL	particle
PF	perfective aspect
PL	plural
POL	polite form
POS	possessive
PRN	pronoun
PST	past
REL	relative
S	subject
SBJ	subjective
SG	singular
SG.F	singular feminine
SG.M	singular masculine
TOP	topic
WH	question word