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The Ecology of Language Evolution

This major new work explores the development of creoles and other new languages, focusing on the conceptual and methodological issues they raise for genetic linguistics. Written by an internationally renowned linguist, the book discusses the nature and significance of internal and external factors – or “ecologies” – that bear on the evolution of a language. The book surveys a wide range of examples of changes in the structure, function and vitality of languages, and suggests that similar ecologies have played the same kinds of roles in all cases of language evolution. Drawing on major theories of language formation, macroecology and population genetics, Mufwene proposes a common approach to the development of creoles and other new languages. *The Ecology of Language Evolution* will be welcomed by students and researchers in creolistics, sociolinguistics, theoretical linguistics, and theories of evolution.

SALIKOKO S. MUFWENE is Professor and Chair in the Department of Linguistics, University of Chicago. He has written extensively on the development of creoles, genetic linguistics, and language endangerment. He is editor of *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties* (1993), and co-editor of *Topics in African Linguistics* (with Lioba Moshi, 1993), and *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use* (with John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh, 1998).

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To the memory of

Ntazyel,
Ekyey,
Osum,
Zaki,
Sevehna,
and
Tumunete

I am indebted to all of you
for courage and determination

For

Tazie
and
Embu

Together we work for a better world

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Preface

This book presents some of my positions over the past decade regarding the development of creole vernaculars in relation to *language evolution* in general. The latter notion is used here to cover long-term changes observable in the structures and pragmatics of a language, as well as the not-so-unusual cases where a language speciates into daughter varieties identified at times as new dialects and at others as new languages. It also covers questions of language endangerment and death.

Together, these writings reflect the growth of my scholarship on, among other things, subjects conventionally identified as “creole genesis,”¹ second-language acquisition, and genetic linguistics. They are responses to some colleagues’ invitations that I propose a cogent alternative to hypotheses which I have disputed. Those responses boil down to the position that creoles are epistemologically special only by an accident of the way we have been doing linguistics, not because they have developed by any evolutionary processes that have not occurred in the developments of other languages, nor because their geneses are embedded in sociohistorical ecologies that are drastically different in kind from those in which noncreole languages have evolved, nor even because they represent any global structural type of linguistic systems. They are as natural as noncreole languages. As a matter of fact, the better we understand them, the more we should be prompted to re-examine a number of things we thought we understood well about Language.

I have organized the essays chronologically, in the order in which they were written. I thought this the best way to capture progress in my thinking especially over the following topics: the development of creoles, the nature and significance of language-contact ecology in determining their structures, whether or not similar ecologies have not played the same kinds of roles in the changes as have traditionally concerned genetic linguists, whether it is true that creoles are not genetically related to their lexifiers, and whether we should continue to treat them as “children out of wedlock.” Also, I try to answer the questions of what can we learn about language diversification, and what light can research on the development of

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creoles shed on the present heightened concern among linguists with language endangerment?

This selection also reveals that the enterprise I have embarked on is much more complex than the relevant literature has typically led us to believe. It seems necessary in diachronic linguistics to develop a research program of the same name as the title of this book, addressing the actuation question with the ecology of language evolution in focus. This amounts to paying attention not only to the socioeconomic and ethnographic environment in which a language has evolved (its *external ecology*) – such as the contact setting and power relations between groups of speakers – but also to the nature of the coexistence of the units and principles of a linguistic system before and/or during the change (its *internal ecology*). I argue that both external and internal ecologies play significant roles in determining the evolutionary trajectories of a language, which I analogize with a biological parasitic species.

Inspired by population genetics, I capitalize on variation within a species, or within a larger population consisting of several coexistent species. I show how ecology rolls the dice in the competitions and selections which determine not only which of the competing languages prevails but also which units and principles are selected into the prevailing variety. Basically the same processes that produced creole vernaculars have also yielded new noncreole varieties from the same lexifiers during the same period of time. From the same perspective we can also understand what causes a language to thrive at the expense of others and conversely what erodes the vitality of a language in a particular socioeconomic ecology. While the chapters of this book show that these questions are all inter-related, they also reveal that I am just scraping the tip of the iceberg and much more work remains to be done, including rethinking some working assumptions of genetic linguistics. I introduce the issues more specifically in chapter 1.

Typically I use creoles as the starting point of my discussions, simply because this is where I have done more research and can pretend to understand anything about language evolution. I am otherwise pursuing the expected dialogue between research on specific languages and that on Language, focusing here on the contribution that scholarship on creoles can make to understanding Language. In the case of this book, things are somewhat complicated by the fact that creoles have been grouped together and distinguished from other languages more because of similarities in the sociohistorical conditions of their development than for any other convincing reason.

Contrary to what has often been claimed by several creolists, creole vernaculars are not abrupt evolutions, nor are they by-products of breaks in

the transmission of the languages from which they developed. A genetic connection is established between them most conspicuously by the fact that the overwhelming proportion of their vocabularies comes from these European languages, identified in this context as their *lexifiers*. The origins of creoles' grammars are a more complex matter, but one can hardly deny the contributions of their heterogeneous nonstandard lexifiers to these new systems, derived by blending inheritance. Neither did creoles emerge in settings where there was no target, though one can concede that, given the availability of diverse varieties (native and non-native) of the lexifier in the plantation colonies, such a target was definitely more diffused than in other cases of language transmission. Nor were these new vernaculars created by children; they would not be as complex as they are and they surely give no indication of being in an arrested developmental stage compared to non-creole languages. They are not the only cases of language restructuring – or system reorganization – prompted by contact, nor are the kinds of contact that motivated their developments different from those that should be invoked in, for instance, the speciation of Vulgar Latin into the Romance languages.

In the way I identify them in chapter 1, creole vernaculars are new language varieties which originated in the appropriation of nonstandard varieties of Western European languages by populations that were not (fully) of European descent in seventeenth-to-nineteenth century European (sub)-tropical colonies. Like any other vernacular that developed from a Western European language in the same (ex-)colonies, they have diverged structurally from the varieties spoken in Europe and from each other. Although it has typically been argued that some of the new vernaculars differ from their metropolitan counterparts and from one another – some to a greater extent than others – there is no operational yardstick for this assessment, starting with the fact that the lexifier was hardly the same from one setting to another. Mutual intelligibility is not reliable, especially since there are other colonial vernaculars spoken by descendants of Europeans that rate equally low on the mutual intelligibility scale but have not been identified as creoles, e.g., English in the Old Amish communities in North America. The main implicit criterion, which is embarrassing for linguistics but has not been discussed, is the ethnicity of their speakers. Most hypotheses proposed in creolistics to account for the development of creoles would have been better thought out, had it not been partly for this factor, as strong as my accusation may sound. The other reasons are given below and discussed in the following chapters.

I have been encouraged in the approach presented in this book by questions which research on the emergence of creoles has shown to be relevant to understanding language evolution but which appear to have been unduly

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overlooked in genetic linguistics, for instance: the role of ecology in language speciation. The essays included in this book reflect an effort to prevent creolistics from simply being a consumer subdiscipline which espouses gratuitously, without questions asked, some still-unjustified working assumptions and theoretical models accepted in other subdisciplines of linguistics. Like any of these, creolistics should contribute to understanding Language in part by highlighting those assumptions about this peculiarity of humans which are not supported by any creole data.

Five of the following chapters (2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) have been published as self-contained essays in different fora. Perhaps just a handful of creolists who share my research interests have read them all as covering inter-related topics. The purpose of this book is to make them more accessible and highlight the unifying threads that link them. They are complemented here with some recent, hitherto unpublished essays (chapters 1, 7, and 8) which continue the unfolding of my research program on language evolution and my effort to bridge topics on the development of creoles with issues in genetic linguistics and on language endangerment. Those who have read at least some of the previously published essays should know that these have been revised, sometimes extensively, to keep up with my current thinking on the subject matter. I have used this opportunity to clarify some earlier positions, to correct some mistakes that I recognize, or simply to restate things more accurately. I have also made every effort to make the book less repetitive, by crossreferencing the chapters and excising portions of the original essays that became redundant under the same cover.

The approach to language evolution presented here owes part of its present form to Bill Smith (Piedmont College) and Chuck Peters (University of Georgia). The first encouraged me to read literature on chaos theory (given my interest in nonrectilinear and nonunilinear evolutionary paths) and the second introduced me to ecology and population genetics. I have also benefited enormously from discussions with Bill Wimsatt (University of Chicago). Thanks to him, I gave up unsuccessful attempts to clone the linguistic species on the biological species (which one?) and developed my own notion of a linguistic species with its own kinds of peculiarities, especially feature transmission properties. Not all species evolve according to the same principles. It is thus as normal for linguistic species to reproduce themselves according to their own patterns of feature transmission and evolutionary principles as it is for bacterial species to differ in the same respects from animal species. It remains that all evolution presupposes variation within the relevant species, heredity (or generational continuity) of features, and differential reproduction, while being subject to various ecological factors. Chapters 1, 2, and 6 have benefited in clarity from the Ecology of Language Evolution course that I taught in

Spring 1999 and from the *Biological and Cultural Evolution* course that Bill, Jerry Sadock, and I taught in Autumn 1999. They have also benefited from generous comments from Robert Perlman (biologist, University of Chicago) and from Manuel O. Díaz (geneticist, Loyola University of Chicago).

My general thinking on several genetic linguistic issues owes a lot to discussions and friendship with several other colleagues, chiefly, the late Guy Hazaël-Massieux, Robert Chaudenson, Louis-Jean Calvet (all of the Université d'Aix-en-Provence), and Sali Tagliamonte (University of York). Sali also encouraged me the most consistently to bring the present essays together in the form of a book, as she thought it was time I started outlining the big picture that should be emerging from them. Eyamba Bokamba and Braj Kachru (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) were especially helpful in inviting me to test my hypotheses against the development of indigenized Englishes. They offered me the right conference platforms where I was prompted to think of the big picture and situate problems of the development of creoles in those of language evolution in general, and thus to relate genetic creolistics to genetic linguistics.

Several of my discussions in chapter 1 owe part of their substance and clarity to questions from Michel DeGraff (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Marlyse Baptista (University of Georgia), and Rakesh Bhatt (University of Illinois at Urbana), mostly from the point of view of theoretical linguistics. They reminded me that I address scholars of diverse persuasions and backgrounds in my essays and that I cannot take it for granted that other creolists, let alone other linguists and nonlinguists, share my working assumptions or know what I am talking about. I was served this message again by Bernd Heine (University of Cologne) and Richard C. Lewontin (Harvard), in their comments on the last draft of the same chapter. I hope that thanks to all of them my positions are presented more clearly and accessibly to readers of different backgrounds.

Among my students at the University of Chicago, off of whom I bounced several of my earlier “heresies” and who knew the right questions to ask, Chris Corcoran and Sheri Pargman deserve special mention. They read a few drafts of subsets of the present essays and pointed out unclarities and omissions, which I hope do not stand out any more, at least not as eyesores. Drew Clark, a first-year graduate student of mine, decided that reading the whole manuscript and checking its accessibility was a reasonable way of not getting bored during his 1999–2000 Christmas break. I could not have had a more dedicated style reader. I feel equally indebted to Citi Potts for carefully copy-editing the essays with a keen eye on their accessibility.

Jenny Sheppard helped me by producing electronically all my maps of Africa in this book and the illustrations of competition and selection

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included in the inset in chapter 1. She was very good in implementing cartographically ideas I expressed verbally. A month of residence as a Visiting Scientist at the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig in May 2000 enabled me to complete the preparation of this book. To all the above individuals and institutions, and to several colleagues whose names I cannot continue listing and who have assisted me one way or another, especially in challenging me with alternative views, I feel very much indebted. I assume alone full responsibility for all the remaining shortcomings.

Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to Tazie and Pat for accommodating me with more time than I could have afforded to write these essays and revise them. Time has been more than a highly priced commodity during the last phase of this exercise, while chairing a prestigious linguistics department in a tragic and daunting transition, after the death of a dear colleague and former major professor, Jim McCawley, whose practice of linguistics was absolutely encyclopedic and very inspiring to me. My days too last twenty-four hours. I could not have accomplished this project without Tazie's and Pat's concessions in family time, even after I have cheated myself of indispensable sleep time.

I hope this end result does not let down most of you family, friends, colleagues, and students who have supported me all along, as well as you interested readers who are patient enough to explore the workings of my occasionally contentious mind.

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