1 Problems in the description of creole systems

No less than two centuries have elapsed since the publication of the first grammar of a creole language (Magens 1770), and the subsequent scope and amplitude of pidgin and creole studies are well attested by the wealth of entries in Reinecke et al. 1974. However, and irrespective of their theoretical bias, practically all published descriptions of pidgin and creole languages have had at least one thing in common: they have assumed that the objects of description were unitary, homogeneous languages that could be adequately described in terms of a single monolithic grammar. It is true that in some areas (especially Jamaica; cf. DeCamp 1961, 1964; B. L. Bailey 1966, etc.) the heterogeneity of the primary speech data was explicitly recognised. But until the appearance of such papers as DeCamp 1971a and Tsuzaki 1971, such recognition had little practical influence on published descriptions.

However, the changed approach which these two papers exemplify was in part at least a reflection of changing priorities in general linguistics. While a concern with linguistic variation (traditionally the terrain of dialectology) had always been maintained by a minority of scholars in both historical (e.g. Politzer 1949) and synchronic (e.g. Pulgram 1961) linguistics, it was not until the appearance of Labov's early work (Labov 1963, 1966) that variation began to be seen as central rather than peripheral to major linguistic issues. Since then, a number of publications (of which perhaps the most influential have been Weinreich et al. 1968, Labov 1970 and C.-J. N. Bailey 1971) have posed cogent alternatives to the monosystemic assumptions about language which had for so long appeared to dominate the discipline. It was only natural that such a development should affect creole studies (since variation in some creoles is more widespread and involves 'deeper' categories than is normally the case in non-creole languages), and that, in turn, new approaches to creoles should contribute in both theory and methodology to the study of language in general.

Yet, despite the pioneering work of the last decade, it would be wrong to suggest that linguistic variation is thoroughly understood, or that an adequate formalism for its description has been devised. The linguist confronted by highly variable data has still the task of determining exactly what he is

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going to describe, and exactly how he is going to describe it. A sizeable part
of the present study will concern itself with precisely these issues, and will
try to resolve them in ways which, hopefully, will have a general applica-
tion. For, although it is limited in coverage to the creole English of
Guyana, and, within that, to a single, if crucial, area of the grammar (the
system of tense and aspect), the decisions it has to make and the procedures
it has to follow should be relevant, not merely in other creole-speaking
areas, but wherever 'normal' languages (e.g. Fijian; cf. Schütz 1972) show a
high degree of internal variation.

   These are, of course, not the only issues involved in the study of creole
variation. A study such as the present one must inevitably make some con-
tribution to a number of other open questions in current linguistics. One of
these is how to determine the bounds of a linguistic system (Labov 1971a,
1971b): at what stage, if any, can we say that English stops and Guyanese
Creole begins? Another is whether it is possible to study syntactic change
synchronically; so far, writings on syntactic change (e.g. Closs 1965) have
assumed that it is not, and have indeed complained about the constraints
that a limited corpus and the absence of informants place upon the inves-
tigator. If, however, that end of what DeCamp (1971a) has called a 'post-
creole continuum' which is furthest from English in fact represents an
'older' form, and varieties between it and English, progressively younger
ones, then it should, in theory, be possible to 'do diachronic syntax
synchronically' (Bickerton MS.).

   However, questions of this type, interesting though they are, are method-
ologically posterior to an adequate description of the primary data, and the
problem most immediately before us is, therefore, how such a description
may best be provided. The type as well as the magnitude of this problem
may perhaps best be illustrated by looking at three samples of the type of
material we shall have to deal with:

> A1. And in none of the many chapters they have in there have this fellow
> condemn white man for all that he did. All he said is that for you to achieve
> your aim you will have to do it, ahm, constitutionally. By the other side with
> the two names I have mentioned, Stokeley Carmichael and Rap Brown, they
> are talking about change also but from a different angle – just talking about
> gun bullet. How the hell they going use gun bullet pon the white people and
> they are the very people who are controlling the armoury and the arms? Is
> silly, man, silly.

> B1. As he see blood he does get eye turn, you know, and I tell he when you
> weeding mustn't hold grass and fire chop. He hold grass and fire chop till he

chop he finger. See little blood, he begin run. And by the time he meet the trench he fall down . . . And how he drink. You know the estate give five dollar advance to buy cutlass and file for the commencement to this crop. Well he never buy cutlass neither file. Well he take the money and yesterday he start drink at Lenora. He come. He run out the wife out of the house. Last night whole night he been do this do that. He come back. What little he had he mussy buy one little thing and he bounce up.

C1. But in awe village been get one black lady he name Aunty Punch. He son them come for carry am away because she a the only black woman what dey in this village and them frighten sey them go kill out am so them come night time for start carry away the lady. And when them people see that in Bushlot, them start beat them drum again and them – and all them people start come out again in flock flock. One of them chap been get gun and when them run they run go see. When they see sey nobody not come, soldier run in pon am. A chap drop a gun, you see he lay down flat in a potopoto and them blackman a other side run for go way a other place . . . Man a that the only thing what me can say.

Even when, as here, these passages have been 'normalised' by being reduced, in so far as that is possible, to standard English orthography, the differences between them are still very considerable. Moreover, a common hypothesis about variable situations – that they arise simply through un-equal mixtures of two 'pure' ingredients – is very difficult to maintain in the face of such evidence. It could, it is true, be argued that A1 is simply an En-glish marked by a few surviving creole features – copula omission in *they going*, absence of both determiner and pluraliser in the (itself non-standard) 'generic' noun phrase *gun bullet*, dummy-pronoun deletion in *is silly* [1] and so on. Equally, it could be argued that C1 represents a creole with a pre-dominantly English lexicon. But what is B1? The fact that it combines ele-ments as opaque to the naive standard-English-speaker as anything in C1 (*eye turn*, giddiness, *fire chop*, to strike a blow with a sharp instrument) with elements that suggest an attempt to master some 'frozen' variety of English (*for the commencement to this crop*) might suggest, to a supporter of the 'mix-ture' hypothesis, that the passage resulted from the struggles of a socially in-secure speaker of a creole vernacular to adjust his speech 'upwards' in the presence of some representative of the superordinate culture. In fact, noth-ing could be farther from the truth. The passage was surreptitiously recorded by a relative of the speaker, and probably represents, as nearly as one can

[1] It should be noted that this *is* is phonetically [ɪz] and thus non-identical with the sandhi form (phonetically [is]) in U.S. Black English arises through deletion of the apical stop in *it's*. Most Guyanese speakers lack dummy *it*.

ever determine such things, the undiluted vernacular of that speaker – a ver-
nacular, incidentally, by no means untypical for one of his particular back-
ground.[2] Moreover, while such a speaker can certainly vary his output in an
upward and perhaps even a downward direction, it is unlikely that he could
for long maintain consistently the varieties illustrated by A1 and C1 – the
'pure' varieties which his output is supposed to 'mix'. In other words, the
'mixture' is certainly not in the perception of the speaker – rather in that of
the standard-speaking observer, who automatically dichotomises the data
into 'what is like English' and 'what is not'.

It would, however, be equally false to suggest that we are merely in the
presence of three discrete language-varieties rather than two. As DeCamp
1971a showed for Jamaica, there are many (if not, perhaps, infinitely many)
varieties intermediate between A1 and B1, and between B1 and C1. More-
over, while (as stated above) a speaker whose uninhibited speech falls near
the middle of the continuum might have difficulty in attaining or at least in
maintaining speech at or near its limits, this must not be taken to mean that
he cannot approach those limits when occasion arises. Of the following
three samples from the same speaker, the second, B2 (taken from free con-
versation with a peer-group member, with the author present), probably rep-
resents something close to if a little above his vernacular, while A2 repre-
sents his formal narrative style to the author, and C2, his simulated dialogue
of non-standard-speaking characters within the context of that same narra-
tive:

> A2. He got up – he went and he put on his chocolate on the fire to boil. He
> wasn't sleeping because his noise arouse me. And I was watching him through
> my hammock bar. I see the boy went and he took up the double barrel gun
> and he have it at side of him. I wonder what is this boy doing with this gun?
> Catch his fire, put on his saucepan. As a matter of fact in every crew they has
> a man they calls him the general. You know as, ahm, we may have a set of
> men working, you have a leading hand, the general is the leading hand. He
> got up and this man went and he pick up what-do-you-call, yari-yari, a wood
> they call yari-yari, young ones he had as a ramrod to punch out cartridges
> from the gun. When he pick up he give the boy two lashes and the boy took
> the hot boiling cup of chocolate, a saucepan of chocolate off the fire and dash
> it on him and burn him.

[2] This speaker is identical with speaker 99/125 in Bickerton 1973a, 1973b; some per-
sonal data on him are given in the latter paper, as well as in Appendix II in the pres-
ent volume. His speech is fairly typical of that of rural Africans in manual jobs within
a twenty-mile radius of Georgetown.

B2. [Interlocutor's comments omitted]
I give it name Brownie, you can't pass that there.
. . . . .
You pick up a stick at it, it worse. The eyes become green green green. You can't pass.
. . . . .
And a great hunter. Hunt anything. Would hunt until –
. . . . .
He hunt until he hunt heself in the tiger mouth.
. . . . .
Yes it hunt until he hunt himself, he hunt heself in the tiger mouth. One night I see somebody passing. When I open this window there was nobody but this dog barking, jumping in the bush and coming up, jumping in the bush until he –
. . . . .
– jump in the tiger mouth: wow!
. . . . .
Next morning we see little bit of blood and the tiger gone.

C2. 'And you ain't know what for do?' he say. 'Them not got gun?' He say, 'Yes.' 'You take the gun, load the gun, hide am. You doesn't get up pon a morning for make tea?' He say, 'Yes, them a wake me. If me a sleep some time them a beat me and wake me for go make tea.' He say, 'All right. When them beat you and wake you,' he say, 'cry. But me go tell you what for do.' He say, 'When you put that chocolate for boil,' he say, 'but make sure that you hide the gun, and when that chocolate start for boil, quarrel, cry, say you want money for go home.' . . . . 'Me want me money. This a eighteen month me dey here and me can't get for go home and me grandmama a hungry. And ayou no want for give me money, ayou a send home money.'

It is true that, if the varieties represented by A1 and C1 are their respective targets, A2 and C2 fall somewhat short of them. As well as a number of hyper-corrections absent from A1 ('I see the boy went', 'they has', 'they calls'), there are in A2 more non-standard [3] features, e.g. auxiliary inversion in embedded Ss ('I wonder what is this boy doing'), and failure to apply gapping in co-ordinate conjoined Ss ('the boy went and he took up . . . and he have it . . .'). Likewise C2 contains several items that do not occur in the 'deepest' form of Guyanese Creole: negation with *ain't*, *does*, internal verb-

[3] The term 'non-standard' is used here in preference to 'creole' because the features which distinguish this passage from standard English are by no means all characteristic of the creole extreme. For instance, while failure to apply gapping is a creole feature, Aux-movement is definitely not; the creole equivalent of the sentence in question, *mi aks misef se wa di bai-dis a du*, could under no circumstances be realised as **mi aks misef se wa a di bai-dis du*. This issue is further discussed in Bickerton MS.

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phrase negation, complementiser-deletion after *say* [4] and so on. However, A2, C2 are respectively closer to A1, C1 than they are to one another, and the distance between them is far greater than that which normally separates speech styles of the same speaker; both these points seem to me to constitute powerful arguments for a unitary treatment of Guyanese speech data.

However, at least one further aspect of such a treatment should be made clear immediately. During recent years, attempts have been made to draw the study of creoles ever further under the umbrella of sociolinguistics. It is assumed (e.g. Hymes 1971) that the observer confronted by variable data such as we have just examined will be mainly if not exclusively concerned with determining the social and cultural correlates of the different varieties, and indeed much recent work on Anglo-Caribbean speech (e.g. Reisman 1965; Edwards 1968, 1970, 1972; Abrahams and Bauman 1971) has followed this approach. However, interesting though some of its results may be, it is no substitute for linguistic analysis. Indeed, one could well argue that accurate linguistic analysis is methodologically prior to it, in that one can hardly determine the sociocultural function of a given speech-variety unless that variety itself has been very precisely defined; one might further suggest that failure to appreciate this point is what underlies the above-mentioned studies' failure to find a middle way between the purely anecdotal ('Well, this is how it happened on one particular occasion') on the one hand, and generalities too broad to be of interest on the other. On this issue, Labov has surely had the last word:

> If [sociolinguistics] refers to the use of data from the speech community to solve problems of linguistic theory, then I would agree that it applies to the research described here. But sociolinguistics is more frequently used to suggest a new interdisciplinary field – the comprehensive description of the relations of language and society. This seems to me an unfortunate notion, foreshadowing a long series of purely descriptive studies with little bearing on the central theoretical problems of linguistics or sociology (1966:v).

Similarly, while the present writer is far from uninterested in the culture and social organisation of the community under study, his concerns here will be exclusively linguistic – linguistic, moreover, in the sense of Chomsky's statement that the 'goals of linguistic theory' are 'to characterize

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[4] The creole version of the sentence in question would actually be *taak se yu waan moni* . . . The verb *say* is unknown at this level, where the phonologically similar complementiser *se* (equivalent to English *that*) is obligatory before sentential complements. This construction, and the dubious etymology for it offered by Cruikshank (1916), is mentioned again in Chapter 2.

in the most neutral possible terms the knowledge of the language that pro-
vides the basis for actual use of language by a speaker–hearer' [5] and thereby
shed light on 'the general character of one's capacity to acquire knowledge'
(1965:9, 59). The only important difference between my position and
Chomsky's lies in my belief that an heuristic model of a uniform and
homogeneous speech-community does not necessarily constitute the best
means of attaining these goals. On the contrary, it would seem that a line
of approach which made different languages look as unlike as possible (an
inevitable consequence of Chomskyan idealisation) would be rather less
likely to 'develop an account of linguistic universals that . . . will not be fal-
sified by the actual diversity of languages' (Chomsky 1965:28) than one
which recognised the existence of dialect chains, creole continuums and
similar phenomena which link many languages traditionally treated as dis-
crete. Some attempt to justify this position will be made in the final chapter;
our primary task is, first, to demonstrate that a true continuum exists, and
second, to show how it works.

Having established the general nature of the problem before us, we must
now examine not only works that deal specifically with Guyanese Creole
and related Caribbean dialects, but treatments of linguistic variation of other
types and in other areas, to see to what extent these can offer us assistance.

Most of the little written on Guyanese Creole prior to 1970 followed
traditional lines. Apart from notes in travellers' tales, collections of songs
and/or proverbs, and a few non-technical articles,[6] the only useful sources are
Quow (1877), van Sertima (1905), Cruikshank (1916) and Allsopp (1958a,
1958b, 1962). The first-named of these, though not a linguistic work in any

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[5] Note the transition in this passage from '*the* language' to 'language' *tout court*. Chomsky
is far from being alone in this particular sleight-of-hand, in which two totally different
things are equated or confused. As a result, it is seldom clear whether it is the speaker's
'language capacity' or 'capacity to speak a (given) language' that is at issue, and therefore
impossible to determine what might be the relationship between the two. Chomsky's
theory of knowledge attributes tacit knowledge of universals to the child, and defines his
'problem' as 'being to determine which of the (humanly) possible languages is that of the
community in which he is placed' (1965:27). This seems perfectly reasonable; but what
is supposed to happen to the child's knowledge of universals, once he has 'chosen the
right language'? Arguments by Halle (1964) and Lenneberg (1967), attacked on quite
other grounds in Chapter 5 below, would imply that he somehow 'forgets' them – an
implausible conclusion, if one adopts the only plausible explanation of universal knowl-
edge, that it is based on physiological features of brain structure. I would prefer to argue
that it is precisely because of such knowledge that we can learn other languages and
other varieties of our own.

[6] A reasonably complete list of these is given in Reinecke, DeCamp, Hancock, Tsuzaki
and Wood 1974.

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accepted sense of the term, deserves some mention, since it represents an at-
tempt by a writer with ample first-hand experience [7] to re-create the vernac-
ular of working-class Afro-Guyanese in the third quarter of the nineteenth
century. Either it is an unusually accurate record of this vernacular, or the
author, by some remarkable feat of prognostication, was able to specify
nearly all of the features characteristic of Indo-Guyanese rural working-class
vernacular in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Since the former
hypothesis is intrinsically more probable, we may legitimately conclude that
the massive influx of Indian indentured labourers into nineteenth-century
Guyana did not bring about any significant repidginisation or recreolisation
of pre-1837 Creole,[8] but that the latter was learnt as a foreign language by
the immigrants and preserved with a fair degree of accuracy. It is worth
mentioning in passing that much of Quow's work is of a high literary stan-
dard and deserves a wider audience than it has yet received.

Van Sertima 1905 and Cruikshank 1916 are both brief works by talented
amateurs. The former, while it attempts a higher degree of rigour – there is
a chapter on 'accidence', and tables of verb-paradigms (*I go*, *you go*, *he go*
etc.) – is the less helpful of the two, since, without ever explicitly avowing
this restriction, it limits itself exclusively to a variety of partially decreolised
creole found nowadays mainly in urban areas. Again, there are two possibil-
ities: that the author, either through unfamiliarity with rural speech or
because of the difficulties of multidialectal description, deliberately limited
himself to the urban vernacular of his time, or that the extremer forms of
creole recorded in Quow's work had somehow died out only to be resur-
rected later in the present century. Again, the first seems the more probable.
If it is correct, we have the further interesting suggestion that the continuum
of Guyanese speech, far from being a recent innovation, is at least the better
part of a century old.

[7] Michael McTurk, the pseudonymous author, was a Resident Magistrate in rural districts
of Guyana for many years during the mid-nineteenth century. The nature of his work
must have brought him into daily contact with creole speakers.

[8] This issue raises a number of questions, such as: is a language such as Krio, native to
some but used as a (second) contact language by many more, a pidgin, a creole, or both
at the same time? Is a speaker who acquires a creole as a second language a pidgin-
speaker, or merely a foreign-language speaker of a creole? – and so on. There is not
space to deal with such matters here. That Indian immigration could have brought
about repidginisation is a hypothesis worth considering, though inherently unlikely –
pidgins, as Whinnom (1971) points out, seem to need more than two parents, and the
bulk of immigrants were monolingual in Hindi. In fact, however, the linguistic evi-
dence for such a process, some of which will be examined later in this volume, seems
very slight indeed.

In contrast, Cruikshank 1916 has all the virtues as well as some of the vices of good amateur work. It is lively, observant and readable – ready, too, long before Herskovits and Herskovits 1934 [9] to give the contributions of African languages their due. However, it falls victim to what Dillard (1970) has aptly termed the 'Cafeteria Principle' of deriving creole phonology from a variety of disparate British dialects, and it perpetuates a number of folk-etymologies such as that of *talk say*.[10] For our present purposes, its virtual limitation to the contents of the lexicon sharply reduces its relevance.

The work of Allsopp, however, is on a different level altogether, representing as it does the first attempt to handle the Guyanese situation with the tools of (relatively) modern linguistic analysis; moreover, the area of grammar covered by Allsopp 1962 is virtually identical with that covered in the present study. Allsopp 1958a contains the first clear example which showed how the variety of forms found in the Guyanese continuum could be arranged hierarchically on a scale from nearest-to-English to farthest-from-English, and that this scale corresponded to that of social stratification.[11] The example was that of possible realisations of the sentence 'I told him':

1. *ai tɔuld hɪm.*	6. *ai tɛl i.*
2. *ai to:ld hɪm.*	7. *a tɛl i.*
3. *ai to:l ɪm.*	8. *mi tɛl i.*
4. *ai tɛl ɪm.*	9. *mi tɛl am.*
5. *a tɛl ɪm.*	

According to Allsopp, varieties 1–3 were characteristic of middle-class usage; 4–7, of the lower-middle and urban working classes; 8, of the bulk of the rural working class; 9, of old and illiterate (and predominantly Indian) rural labourers. Though this schema, as Cave (1970) has observed, is excessively rigid, and fails to allow for the flexibility of Guyanese speech as illustrated in the examples at the beginning of this chapter, it constitutes a useful guidepost to the labyrinth of Guyanese variation.

In his longer works, Allsopp sought to explore two areas in the speech of

[9] In fact, the African residue in creoles, and in particular in neighbouring Sranan, had already been amply recognised by Schuchardt (1914). There is no evidence that Cruikshank had encountered Schuchardt's work, however.

[10] Cruikshank treats this as an example of that good old creolist's standby, 'reduplication' – even though *semantic* reduplication using distinct morphs is very unlike morphological reduplication. For a better etymology tracing the Twi origins of the expression, see Cassidy 1960:63, or the entry under *se* in Cassidy and LePage 1967.

[11] Of course, numerous writers had pointed out this relationship anecdotally, but Allsopp's is the first specific matching of morphology with class level known to me. Similar observations for Jamaica seem not to have been made prior to Craig 1966.

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the urban working class – the pronominal system and the system of tense
and aspect. Allsopp's field methods were generally in advance of his time,
and his observance of Labov's 'Principle of Accountability' – that the ob-
server should list and quantify *all* variables in his data, not just those which
happen to fit his analysis (Labov 1969) – is exemplary. The major weakness
of his analysis is the absence of any theoretical framework adequate to deal
with creole continuums; but then, none had been formulated when he
wrote. Another (probably resulting from the first) was his assumption that if
his informants constituted a homogeneous sample regionally (all were from
the Greater Georgetown area), educationally (none had more than elemen-
tary schooling) and occupationally (all were in non-clerical occupations),
then their dialect would in turn constitute a homogeneous object capable of
unitary description. Such assumptions can produce plausible if often
counter-factual results where (as in Sivertsen's study of Cockney [1960]) the
material under analysis represents an end-of-dialect-chain phenomenon,
and where, in consequence, the analyst can abstract a system of sorts by
merely assembling the most non-standard constructions; there is nothing
'beyond Cockney, but like it' to which such constructions might more prop-
erly belong. However, there *is* something 'beyond the dialect of George-
town, but like it' – to wit, the more creolised varieties of speech found in
the rural areas which van Sertima too had ignored but which still vigorously
persist and which cannot, except by arbitrary procedures, he divided from
the 'rougher' types of Georgetown speech.

Allsopp's failure to take rural creole into account, and his consequent fail-
ure to relate non-standard structures in his data to the rural forms from
which these urbanisms have developed, sharply reduces the explanatory
power of his work, since there are many structures common in urban speech
which can appear quite mystifying unless their origins are taken into ac-
count.[12] However, despite its limitations, his work remains an invaluable
source of information on working-class Georgetown usage.

[12] See, for instance, Labov's (Labov et al. 1968 I:265–6) rather puzzled treatment of 'the
quasi-modal *done*' in Black English, and compare it with the treatment of Guyanese *don*
in Chapters 2 and 3 below; see also Carden's uncertainty as to the best analysis of Black
English 'embedded questions' (Carden 1972), and the way the problem is resolved in
Bickerton MS. Most striking, however, is the way in which failure to consider rural
forms needlessly complicated Allsopp's analysis of '*is*-initial' sentences (Allsopp 1962:II,
251–4); he derives this structure from Gaelic initial *is* (which by no means always has
the function of Guyanese *iz*) via a putative and apparently unattested variety of Irish En-
glish, and fails to mention that identical sentence-types with *a* instead of *iz* are common
throughout rural Guyana. When equative *a* is replaced by *iz* in other contexts (cf.
Bickerton 1973a, 1973b), replacement in this context naturally takes place also. Ob-
viously there is no argument for deriving *a* from Gaelic, and if there were, one would