

I Creole languages

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on how Creole-speaking children acquire their native language. Like other children acquiring their first language (L1), they show creativity and ingenuity through which we get some insight into the acquisition of complex structures. Before I address the acquisition issue, I will briefly define and describe Creole languages.

Creole languages came into existence under specific circumstances of language contact, that is, during colonisation, and they are closely associated with Pidgins. It is generally accepted that Pidgins represent speech forms that are essentially used as a means of communication among people who do not speak the same language. As such, Pidgins do not have native speakers. Mühlhäusler (1986), among others, distinguishes three basic forms of Pidgin (jargons, stable Pidgins and expanded Pidgins) to account for the various degrees of sophistication and development that a Pidgin can reach in its life cycle before it develops into a Creole, as in the case of Tok Pisin in New Guinea. However, a Pidgin does not always develop into a Creole. The fundamental difference between Creole languages and Pidgins is that Creole languages have native speakers. At this point I refer the reader to Arends *et al.* (1994), and Holm and Michaelis (2008) for an overview of Creole studies.

CREOLISATION REVISITED

When a Pidgin turns into a Creole language, we refer to this process as creolisation (Hall 1966, Todd 1990, among others). In the discussion on creolisation, which without doubt is one of the most

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controversial issues in the field, the genesis of Creole languages *per se*, and their ‘exceptional’ status have been addressed.

The classical view that creolisation is a process that takes place when a Pidgin becomes the mother tongue of its speakers assumes that a Pidgin is a structurally and lexically simplified system which emerges in a language contact situation and eventually develops into a fully fledged language, that is, a Creole. As a simplified system, a Pidgin typically has the following characteristics: a very restricted lexicon, no inflectional morphology, no functional categories and a highly variable word order. In contrast, a Creole system typically shows an elaborate lexicon, derivational and some inflectional morphology, functional categories and an underlying word order. The Creole system is less variable than the Pidgin one. The creolisation process here takes place as soon the first generation of children acquires the Pidgin as a first language.

Another view is that creolisation takes place when Pidgins expand into Creole languages without nativisation. Scholars such as Sankoff (1979), Chaudenson (1992), Singler (1992, 1996), Arends (1993) and McWhorter (1997) have argued against the nativisation-based view of creolisation. Through detailed historical reconstruction, scholars have pointed out that creolisation can be a gradual process taking place over several generations of speakers (see Arends 1993, Plag 1993, Roberts 1995 for Hawaiian Creole, Baptista 2002 for Cape Verde Creole, and Bollée 2007 for Reunion Creole). In this view, creolisation equates to language change. It implies continuity in the linguistic systems between the superstrate/substrate languages and the Creole systems formed. Case studies presented by Plag (1993) and Mufwene (1996), as well as several papers in Baker and Sycia (1996), show that the development of grammatical structures in the formation of Creoles can be accounted for by universal principles of grammaticalisation operative in languages in the same way. This view of creolisation is plausible and can be assumed to account for the emergence of some Creoles. More recently, some scholars have discussed grammaticalisation and creolisation as

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processes that are not mutually exclusive (Plag 1998, Adone 2009, among others).

Bickerton (1981 and subsequent work), taking a universalist stand, rejected this view and proposed that there is a break in the transmission between the lexifier languages and the Creoles. This has led Bickerton (1984, 1990 and subsequent work) to argue that creolisation must be abrupt if there is a breakdown in transmission of language. In his Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (1984) Bickerton argues that Pidgin adult speakers passed on their Pidgin to their children. His hypothesis is that this first generation of Creole speakers, that is, children, must have been exposed to some 'macaronic form' of language since their parents were Pidgin speakers. These children (i.e. the first generation of Creole speakers) were exposed to deficient input. As a result, they had to rely on their 'language bioprogram' (a sort of default grammar that children bounce back on when the input is inadequate) to invent language. The basic idea here is that this type of creolisation, which is abrupt, is an instance of first language acquisition in the absence of input. It is nativisation which takes place as soon as a Pidgin becomes the first language for its speakers (cf. Bickerton 1974, Thomason and Kaufmann 1988, Adone and Plag 1994, Mufwene 1999, Adone 2001b, 2003).

Arends (1993) and Singler (1995, 1996), among others, on the basis of a series of well-documented socio-historical facts, questioned the plausibility of Bickerton's claim. Since then, the role of children and adults in the process of creolisation has become a subject of great debate within the field. In the current debate most scholars adhere to the view that adults rather than children must have been the ones creolising the system (Singler 1992, Lumsden 1999a, b, Lefèbvre 1998, Siegel 1999, Veenstra 2003, among others). For other scholars, such as Bickerton (1984, 1990), Adone and Vainikka (1999), Bruyn *et al.* (1999) and Mufwene (1999), Adone (2001b), children were the ones mainly responsible for creolisation. Nowadays, it is obvious that both adults and children must have contributed to the process of creolisation (cf. Plag 1998, DeGraff 1999, Baptista 2002, among others). As a result

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of an insufficient historical record on the development of most Creole languages, there is no reliable data available, especially for the early stages of formation in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial plantation communities. Also, most Creole languages emerged in the context of European colonial expansion, which was practised from the sixteenth century onwards, with rigid social stratification of the society, master–slave relationships and plantation environments (Arends *et al.* 1994). While it is not possible to reconstruct the creolisation process, experimental studies such as those conducted by Newport and colleagues contribute significantly to clarifying the unique role of children in creolisation. However, it is this socio-historical dimension that distinguishes Creole languages from non-Creole languages (see DeGraff 2003).

The second question regarding the exceptional status of Creoles has also been hotly debated. While scholars such as Muysken (1988) and, more recently, Mufwene (2000), DeGraff (2003) and Ansaldo and Matthews (2007) have argued that there is no such thing as Creole exceptionalism or uniqueness, other scholars such as McWhorter (2001) have presented arguments for a distinction between Creole and non-Creole languages. Furthermore, McWhorter argues that Creole grammars are ‘the world’s simplest grammars’ (for similar views see Heine and Kuteva 2005). To discuss this issue at length would certainly go beyond the scope of this book. But at this point, I would like to add that the burden of proof is surely on those who argue that Creole languages have simple grammars. The dichotomy Creole and non-Creole languages is artificial. However, if we are to make a distinction among languages, the only relevant difference would be in terms of the age factor. Creole languages, like sign languages, for instance, are relatively ‘young’ languages, and are not established, given their recent genesis.

MORISYEN

Morisyen is the language spoken in the Republic of Mauritius, which has a population of roughly 1.5 million. The island is situated

in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and its population consists of several ethnic groups of various origins, such as French, Chinese, Indian, African and 'mixed' types. Demographically speaking, the majority of Mauritians nowadays are of Indian descent (68%). The second group consists of the '*population générale*' (27%), followed by Sino-mauritians (3%) and Franco-mauritians (2%) (cf. Baggioni and de Robillard 1990, Florigny 2010).

Morisyen is one of the languages spoken along with French and English. Officially it is the national language of the country. However, as the national language, it does not enjoy the prestige attributed to French and English. Morisyen, a French-based Creole, is still not regarded as a full-fledged language by many of its native speakers. According to the 2003 census conducted by the Bureau Central des Statistiques Mauricien, it is spoken as the first language by 80 per cent of the population (Florigny 2010).

SESELWA

Seselwa is one of the official languages of the Republic of Seychelles, along with French and English. The country is made up of over 115 islands in the southwest of the Indian Ocean. The main island is Mahé, located a few thousand kilometres east of Kenya. The population is concentrated on the islands of Mahé, La Digue and Praslin and was estimated to be 70,000 in 2000 (personal communication, Mahoune). Similar to Mauritius, the population consists of several ethnic groups (Chinese, Indian, African and French origins), but is predominantly African. According to Bollée (1993), 94 per cent of the population has Seselwa as its L1. At the same time, 97 per cent of the population speaks Seselwa fluently.

Seselwa was established as the national language with an official orthography in 1981. It is not considered to have the prestige status of French or English, but it is not subject to such invidious judgment as Morisyen. Bollée (1993) argues that Seselwa is accepted as the first national language of the Seychelles. It is also regarded as the most important element of national identity. According to M.T. Choppy

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(personal communication), there is a growing tendency to use English or French in public functions. Together with Morisyen, Rodrigue and Reunione (the Creole languages of the neighbouring islands) it forms the Isle de France Creole of the Indian Ocean. Similar to Morisyen, it is a French-based Creole. According to Ravel and Thomas (1985), instead of a continuum there are three main varieties seen: 'Créole populaire', Creole of the middle class and of the educated class and Creole of the media.

THE SCOPE AND GOALS OF THIS STUDY

In this study I investigate how Creole-speaking children acquire certain complex structures in their L1. The questions I address here are:

1. What is the nature of input in the Creole context and how does it affect acquisition?
2. How (dis)similar is the acquisition of Creole languages when compared to that of other 'established' languages?
3. What does the acquisition of Creole languages reveal of the part played by children in acquisition?

Previous work of mine focused on spontaneous data gathered on Morisyen and Ngukurr Kriol (Australia) (Adone 1994a, b, 1997). In this study, I focus on the acquisition of four complex structures, namely references (pronouns and reflexives), double-object, passive and serial verb constructions in Seselwa. Although both spontaneous and experimental data are analysed, the emphasis is on experimental data elicited from Seselwa-speaking children. I also included naturalistic data on Morisyen in the relevant chapters, for three reasons: first, because acquisition data on Creole languages in general is rare, second, because these two languages are sister languages, and third, because the combination of these different methods, though by no means complete, does give us some new insights into first language acquisition, for example, on the question of input and the question of how children acquire their first language.

This book has been written with the strong conviction that there is considerable value to be gained through interdisciplinary

work. This is why I have included findings from other fields including sign languages, home signs and gesture, learning theories, computational theories of language learning and evolution, the emergence of language, and language typology, among others, and have tried to integrate them into the general discussion.

The study is organised as follows: Chapter 2 examines the theoretical issues involved in first language acquisition studies, especially innateness, and Universal Grammar. The discussion is centred on exposure to input and its consequences for acquisition. First, I define what language acquisition with a language model implies. I then look at several cases of language acquisition, starting with deprivation of input, as seen in the case of feral children and deaf children with hearing parents, and extending to cases of language invention (presumably, in the case of the first generation of children, to home signers). Finally, I focus on cases of language acquisition in which children do get a language model, as is the case with Creole-speaking children. Chapter 3 briefly describes some complex structures in adult Seselwa grammar and these are compared to Morisyen, which is a sister language of Seselwa. Chapter 4 analyses the methods of data collection used in this study. Chapters 5 to 8 examine the production of pronouns and reflexives, double-object, passive and, finally, serial verb constructions. These areas of grammar have been chosen because of the challenge they pose for acquisition. Cross-linguistic studies show that these structures are difficult to acquire. Chapter 9 embeds the acquisition findings of the previous chapters into the discussion on the role of children in acquisition. The overall results of this study strongly support the view that children surpass their input.

2 Issues in first language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The capacity for language is what makes our species different from other species. This statement has been made repeatedly since the 1950s and has provoked much controversial discussion since then. The assumption behind the statement above is that our species has a biological predisposition to acquire language, independent of its modality. At the core of the discussion within Linguistics are two concepts – Universal Grammar and innateness. Although these concepts have been at the heart of conceptual motives for grammatical studies, they have been typically used in different ways, misunderstood or even oversimplified. This chapter will thus first give an overview of some central issues within the generative field of language acquisition, such as innateness, Universal Grammar, the logical problem of first language acquisition and negative evidence, because they are crucial to the line of argument and understanding in this work. For the purpose of this chapter I will focus on relating these issues to the question of exposure to input affecting first language acquisition. Nonetheless, this chapter should serve as an overview of the state of the art in linguistic nativism.

INNATENESS

Innateness is one of the most controversial topics in Linguistics, especially among scholars of the formal and functional approaches. Although it is widely assumed that humans are the only species capable of acquiring language when exposed to it, there are a number of open issues related to this area. Children, under different circumstances, have been reported to acquire language when exposed to

it. Animals, on the contrary, have not been successful in acquiring language, in spite of the amazing statistical learning capacities that some of them have demonstrated in experiments (Kanzi (Savage-Rumbaugh *et al.* 1993), for example). Some species seem to have means of communication but no species has demonstrated the form of the languages that humans acquire. The dance of the honeybees, the alarm calls of vervets or birdsong might all have structures but these systems do not seem to have structures resembling grammatical categories, word order, etc. (Valian 2009). This species-specificity argument has been taken to be the piece of evidence par excellence to argue for the innateness of language. In fact, both camps acknowledge this argument and it is not the source of disagreement between the formal and functional scholars.

Another point relevant in the innateness debate is the domain-specificity argument. According to the generative approach, the language faculty of humans is due to a specialised domain-specific organ in the brain. It is genetically endowed. In contrast, the functional view is that language is an inherent part of our cognitive make-up. It would certainly go beyond the scope of this study to focus on the debate between the functional and formal views. However, some arguments used by proponents of functionalism have been taken to cast serious doubts on the innate domain-specificity view. Findings on learning have been interpreted as counter-evidence to domain specificity. Studies such as Squire and Kandel (1999) have revealed that learning depends heavily on the connections between the activated neurons. Findings on the plasticity of brain tissue have been taken to provide evidence against the domain-specificity argument. Furthermore, studies have revealed that the impact of experience on the brain circuitry is bigger than previously assumed. Thus, this argument, together with others, speaks against the innateness view and for the equipotentiality hypothesis (Elman *et al.* 1996).

Connectionist neural network models account for learning in terms of networks of input–output related to each other by connections. These networks have been successful in tasks such as

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producing the English past tense for real and nonce verbs (Hinton 1992, Elman *et al.* 1996, Marcus 2001). It has become clear from these networks that several factors such as frequency distribution, similarity and statistical correlations are relevant to successful associative learning. The arguments from the connectionists have been refuted by formal linguists such as Chomsky (2002) and Pinker (2002), who presented strong evidence showing that the brain is organised in a domain-specific manner. More recently, findings can be taken to indicate that the organisation of the brain is genetically specified. Further, the dissociation between language and other cognitive capacities in genetic disorders such as Specific Language Impairment (SLI) or children with Williams Syndrome is another argument supporting the domain-specificity argument. In spite of normal cognitive development, children with SLI show deficits in core areas of grammar. Children with Williams Syndrome have excellent language skills despite severe mental retardation, as shown in several studies (Gopnik and Crago 1991, van der Lely 1996, Clahsen and Almazan 1998, Penke personal communication).

Another idea that seems equally important is to distinguish several levels of innateness, as Maratsos (1999) does. One level deals with the innate features common to many species, a second one refers to the species-specific innate features of humans in particular, and a third level applies to the faculty-specific innate features of grammar acquisition.

Eimas *et al.* (1971) found that young human infants perceive certain voiced–voiceless perceptual boundaries innately. These boundaries are seen in phoneme pairs like /p/–/b/, /t/–/d/, /k/–/g/. Experiments using the high-amplitude-sucking method show that newborns have the ability to discriminate their first language from other languages (Mehler *et al.* 1988, Venditti and Swerts 1996). Interestingly, Jusczyk (1997) suggests that prenatal hearing experience is a possible source of explanation for this early sensitivity to language-specific prosodic properties of speech in children. However, Kuhl and Miller (1975) found that chinchillas make similar auditory