Introduction

There was a time when all linguists, even if only from a distance, thought of creole languages as interesting.

This was especially the case for a shining fifteen years or so, in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Until then, creoles had been largely thought of as a concern local to sociolinguistics. Even today, pidgins and creoles are often classified in textbooks and conference programs as sociolinguistic matters. In the 1970s, to the extent that other linguists were urged to attend to creoles, the most compelling object of attention was scholarship describing the lectal continua of Caribbean English creoles. The idea was that the creolophone's control of such a range of variation called into question a linguistics based on the Chomskyan conception of the idealized speaker-hearer.

However, it would be hard to say that much synergy between generativists and creolists resulted. Syntactic theory transformed apace in neglect of data from Jamaica, and, by 1981, a creole anthology could still be titled *Generative studies on creole languages* (Muysken 1981), with the implication that such studies were an exception to the rule. At the time, they were, and none of the papers in that volume addressed creole continua.

But then came the bioprogram. Derek Bickerton made creole languages seem interesting and even intriguing to the larger linguistic community, with a proposal (1981) that creoles instantiate Universal Grammar with parameters unset, the "default" of language, produced by children under the unusual circumstance of acquiring language amidst starkly restricted input. Under this analysis, creoles are the closest we can come in our era to human language without the historical and cultural accretions of what he called "bric-a-brac" (Bickerton 1984: 188), which all other languages had taken on over the countless millennia since the dawn of the linguistic capacity. Bickerton's hypothesis made its way into textbooks and anthologies, was the subject of an issue of *Brain and Behavioral Sciences* rich with

1

commentary by linguists of all kinds (Bickerton 1984), and was even
featured in the popular press.

* * *

But that was a long time ago, and most of the underpinnings of the
bioprogram proposal have been eaten away by subsequent findings.
For example, Roberts (1998, 2000) put paid to the idea that the
children who created Hawaiian Creole English did so because of
linguistic deprivation. They were going to school daily in English,
and despite Bickerton's early claim otherwise, spoke their parents'
languages at home. Meanwhile, Bickerton's claim that the native lan-
guages of creoles' creators made no significant contribution to the
creoles has been soundly refuted by general studies such as Holm
(1989), Holm & Patrick (2007), Lefebvre (2011) and many studies
of individual creoles. Then, the bioprogram was couched in the then-
current Government–Binding schema of generative syntax. Bickerton
has written little to bring his proposal into line with the Minimalist
revision, and it is unclear how such a conception would work, espe-
cially given how much less enthusiasm there is among syntacticians
today for the idea of syntactic parameters. Bickerton has, in any case,
written little about creoles since the 1990s, having transitioned into
pioneering work on language evolution (Bickerton 1990, 1995, 2009).

   These days, among linguists, the word on the street about creoles is,
instead, that they are not interesting at all.

* * *

This message has been purveyed most vigorously by Salikoko
Mufwene and Michel DeGraff. The grand old idea was once that
adults created pidgins – makeshift lingos of restricted lexicon and
elementary, loosely conventionalized syntax – and that children turned
these pidgins into creoles, natural human languages. However,
DeGraff's claim (see 1999a) is that creoles develop via second-
language acquisition by adults of an only moderately disruptive nature,
eliminating only certain features especially difficult for adults to
acquire. Under his schema, creolization entails nothing qualifying as
a break in transmission. Rather, some syntactic parameters have been
reset, and often to the "weak" one, but the kind of change that resulted
is typical of normal language diachrony, such as that which turned Old

Norse into the Mainland Scandinavian languages, or Old English into Modern English. To the extent that we do not consider Swedish or English "exotic" languages, DeGraff argues that we should apply no such definition to, for example, Haitian Creole.

Meanwhile, Mufwene (summarily, 2001 and 2008) concurs with DeGraff, but argues that, to the extent that creoles are also mixed languages, the mixture in question is simply that – hybridization, with pidginization or a break in the normal transmission of language irrelevant. Mufwene's proposal is that creoles develop via a selection of the various features that languages in contact contribute to a "pool," analogized to the mechanisms of population genetics in biology. Under this mechanism, too, there is no break in transmission. Rather, creoles developed via the same mixture of features as Romanian did in the encounter between Proto-Romance and Balkan languages, or Ethio-Semitic languages did in the encounter between Semitic and Cushitic. Enoch Aboh has couched Mufwene's conception in generative syntactic terms (most summarily Aboh 2015) under an open assertion that creoles develop when linguistic features undergo "Competition and selection: that's all!" (2009).

The essence of these arguments is that it is a scientific mistake to treat creoles as a type of language in the synchronic or diachronic sense. Aboh has titled a keynote presentation "Creoles are not distinct languages!" (Aboh 2011). Mufwene (1997a) has explicitly called for the term *creole* to be recast as only sociohistorical, referring to certain languages that emerged via hybridization amidst the colonial slave trade between certain European and African languages. To wit, we are to suppose that, contrary to what we have so often been taught, creoles are not interesting.

It will surprise few that these claims have sociopolitical underpinnings as well. Mufwene has deemed the idea that creoles are a kind of language "colonial" (1989), constituting a tarring of such languages as "illegitimate," a classification he considers "pernicious" (Mufwene 2001: 124). Umberto Ansaldo, DeGraff's and Mufwene's most dedicated supporter alongside Aboh, insists that the idea that creoles are a type of language that emerged from pidgins is the product of "a set of sociohistorically rooted dogmas, with foundations in (neo)colonial power relations" (Ansaldo, Matthews & Lim 2007: 14). DeGraff, too, treats the traditional conception of creoles as a kind of language as "The broken transmission and linguistic fossils dogmas,"

supposedly "robustly disconfirmed by a range of comparative data and empirical and theoretical observations" (2003: 398).

These are, in view of what was once thought to be the ABCs of how pidgins and creoles work, radical proposals. Yet they have acquired considerable influence and exposure. Mufwene speaks, writes and is cited especially widely, and DeGraff's passion about the issue is well known, especially from a notoriously voluminous contribution (DeGraff 2001a) to an issue of *Linguistic Typology* devoted to the topic. More recently, Enoch Aboh and Umberto Ansaldo have developed bodies of work building on these positions, including book-length monographs (e.g. Aboh 2015) and anthologies (Ansaldo, Matthews & Lim 2007). Within creole studies, the very term *pidgin-creole life cycle* now carries an air of dismissal, implying an outmoded generalization unworthy of the committed linguist. The work of Mufwene, DeGraff, and later Ansaldo and Aboh has been directly responsible for this change in connotation.

As a result, since the turn of the millennium, it has been easy for a linguist to internalize that the idea that creoles come from pidgins is, at least, controversial – which, in reality, is easy to interpret as "defunct." The sociopolitical angle, with its quiet moral threat, can only increase the gut instinct to accept such a proposal.

* * *

It bears mentioning, however, that, in the writings of Mufwene and DeGraff in particular, the ratio of prose to data is much greater than is typical in the work of modern academic linguists. Reading their work, the reader may understandably assume that the textual assertions are founded upon previous articles of theirs in which substantial amounts of data were engaged closely. This, however, is not the case.

All of Mufwene's work on creole genesis, from the 1990s on, is cast largely in prose. This is also true of almost all of DeGraff's work since 1999, when he dedicated his work explicitly to arguing for his hypothesis. Both authors' positions are more proclaimed than demonstrated. Many linguists, presented with the relevant creole data, would question whether this radical conception of creoles has been demonstrated with what most would consider a substantial amount of, in DeGraff's terms from above, "comparative data" or "empirical observations."

A brief preview of the problem can be demonstrated with, for example, this sentence of Sranan Creole English. This creole, spoken in Surinam, was created mainly by speakers of the Niger-Congo language Fongbe.

(1)   A   hondiman no   ben   e   bai wan oso   gi   mi.
       the hunter   NEG   PAST PROG buy a   house give me

       "The hunter was not buying a house for me."

Under DeGraff's framework, the Sranan sentence differs from English in the mere elimination of certain features difficult for adults to acquire. However, apart from the fact that few would consider the derivational suffix *-er* especially obscure or acquisitionally challenging, the main problem with DeGraff's position is the sheer volume of what else Sranan's creators did not acquire from English:

(a) The preverbal clitics *ben* for the past and *e* for the progressive indicate that the creators acquired neither the suffixes for past nor progressive marking.
(b) The definite article *a* is a grammaticalization of an initial *dati* "that," while the indefinite article *wan* is a grammaticalization of an initial word for "one." Neither are derived from the English equivalents, which means that the creators did not acquire *the* or *a*.
(c) Sranan's creators did not acquire the postverbal negator *not*, and instead substituted a preverbal *no*.

None of these features of English that Sranan eschewed would strike linguists as "marked," and they certainly are not stochastically infrequent. As such, Sranan cannot be explained as the result of modest disruptions amidst a fundamentally robust acquisition of a second language. Pointedly, if these features were as fundamentally evanescent as DeGraff's perspective requires, then there would be at least some nonstandard dialects of English that had by chance shed agentive *-er*, past inflection *-ed*, progressive inflection *-ing*, the determiners *the* and *a*, or postverbal *not*. Yet none is attested. Nor can generative parameter theory account for the difference between English and Sranan. Among the English features lost, only past and progressive inflectional affixes fall under an analyis as "weak" parameter settings.

DeGraff's framework, then, cannot *explain* – which leads to an approach that does. Namely, all of these things together suggest a break in the transmission of English. DeGraff insists that such an

analysis is based on an unsavory "dogma," but many would see it as based on empiricism.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

Meanwhile, under Mufwene's "Feature Pool" analysis, it is inaccurate to claim that Sranan's creators acquired English incompletely: rather, they are thought to have combined a number of English features with a number of Fongbe features. As such, we should no more think of Sranan as having emerged after the broken transmission of English than we should think of Romanian as the product of "broken" transmission of Latin.

This idea is attractive, in offering theoretical economy. Given that creoles are indeed hybrid languages, we might welcome the news that it has been a mistake to see creoles as anything but the same kinds of language mixtures as all languages are. However, the Feature Pool analysis, like DeGraff's, simply does not correspond with actual creole data.

The serial verb construction in (1) is clearly modeled on Fongbe, in which verb serialization is common, and Fongbe also has an agentive marker (Lefebvre & Brousseau 2001: 189) that *-man* could be a calque upon. However, a great deal of the material in this sentence traces neither to English nor to Fongbe, and indicates, again, a break in the transmission of English followed by reconstitution – i.e. the traditional conception of how creoles form.

(a) While Fongbe has definite and indefinite determiners, Sranan's equivalents are grammaticalizations from the items for *that* and *one* respectively. This shows, given that grammaticalization occurs over time, that originally Sranan's creators eschewed both English's *the* and *a* as well as the Fongbe equivalents, and later developed Sranan's *a* and *wan* internally (see Bakker 2016b: 429-430).

(b) Unlike Sranan, Fongbe has no overt past marker (2016b: 91). Thus, we must trace Sranan's past marking to English. But if Sranan's creators simply mixed "features," why did they mark the past with a preverbal clitic rather than the acquisitionally salient *-ed* suffix English offered? The source item *been* shows that they modeled past marking on an overgeneralization of English's periphrastic past progressive construction (*been going*). This process, in which Fongbe played no part, was, again, a break in the transmission of English itself.

(c) Fongbe has a case distinction in singular pronouns (2016b: 63), just as English does, but in the Sranan sentence the first person pronoun is

invariant for case. If Sranan simply combined English and Fongbe's features, we would expect a case distinction in Sranan's first person pronouns.

(d) Fongbe marks the progressive with not only a locative verb, as Sranan does with its *e* derived from locative verb *de*, but also with a concurrent postverbal marker *wè*.

(2) Kɔkú   ɖɔ̀   àsɔ́n   ɔ́   ɖù   **wɛ̀.**
     Koku   be.at   crab   DEF   eat   INF

"Koku is eating the crab."   (Lefebvre & Brousseau 2001: 96)

If Sranan simply combined "features" from English and Fongbe, then the positional and functional likeness of English's *-ing* inflection and Fongbe's *wè* would presumably have led to either the retention of *-ing*, or the retention of the Fongbe *wè* complete with its phonetic form. Such substrate borrowings are not uncommon in creoles. Germane is that Saramaccan Creole English, a sister creole to Sranan, inherited the Fongbe focus marker fortuitously similar to this progressive marker – namely, *wɛ*. Instead, Sranan's rendition of the progressive is an abbreviation, structurally, of its rendition in both source languages.

The idea that a creole combines the features of its source languages in the same way as an individual animal combines the genes of its parents seems reasonable. However, the data simply do not support it. Crucially, despite the sheer volume of writings contesting the idea of creolization as a distinct process, in none of it are observations of the above kind engaged in any substantial way.

* * *

It has not been disproven, then, that creole languages' creators started from a stark abbreviation of language and built outwards. In Surinam, for example, the language they created was neither English as usual nor, solely, one part English and one part Fongbe. It was founded on simplified English and also simplified Fongbe, transformed via expansion of those resources into a new language. A mere few centuries later, it is still distinguishable, structurally, from languages that have undergone millennia of the accretion of grammaticalizations, reanalyses, redundancies and irregularities that define the vast majority of languages spoken worldwide.

To certain creolists, the above paragraph qualifies as heresy. This book will explain why, and demonstrate that the charge is inappropriate. Hitherto, the relevant arguments have been confined to articles

scattered among assorted journals and anthologies. But the future of creole studies demands that its defense as a discipline be presented in a unitary presentation.

The linguist may have have heard that "creoles don't come from pidgins," and may have internalized, from the terms such claims have been couched in, that to dissociate creoles from pidgins is to be a "real" (i.e. generative?) linguist, and to be sociopolitically astute in the bargain. But despite the allure and influence of claims otherwise, creoles do come from pidgins – or, if that term is dispreferred, from a break in the transmission of language from one generation to the next. The idea that creoles are simply mixed languages, no more or less affected by adult acquisition than Spanish, Mandarin or Swahili, is an error.

This book is a call for a return to a truly empirical, curious approach to the world's newest languages, and what they can teach us and point us toward. I will refer to the position of Mufwene, DeGraff, Aboh and Ansaldo as the *Uniformitarian Hypothesis*, in line with a term DeGraff has often used. It refers to the idea that creoles have developed via the same processes of change and contact as other languages, analogized to biologists' assumption that natural processes have been the same during all of the earth's history. I will refer to the opposing hypothesis as *Creole Exceptionalism*.

Too often, the modern message on creoles of late has been "Move on, there's nothing to see." No – I beseech the reader to linger for a spell.