A Comparative Study of the Relationship between French-based Atlantic and Indian Ocean Creoles

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1. Introduction

In linguistics, pidgins and creoles (PCs) are languages that are formed by the mixing of two or more languages. The pidgin or creole’s lexicon is based on one language, which is called the superstrate or lexifier language, and its grammar is based on another language, called the substrate. PCs are often classified by their lexifier language and the geographic area in which they are spoken. PCs with French as a lexifier language are typically categorized into two groups: the Atlantic PCs, mainly spoken in the Caribbean; and the Isle de France PCs, spoken in the islands of the Indian Ocean. Interestingly, despite their geographical distance and difference in substrata, these two groups have been noted to be strikingly similar in grammatical structure (Holm 2000:86). This paper intends to examine this phenomenon by first verifying that there is a structural similarity between the two groups and then discussing the possible origins of such a similarity.

1.1. Methodology

In order to ascertain a structural similarity between French-based Atlantic and Isle de France creoles, a synchronic comparison was performed on the grammatical positioning and use of both creole groups’ morphosyntactic features. To be able to judge the amount of similarity between the French-based creoles, a parallel comparison was done on Portuguese-based creoles from the same areas, i.e. the Atlantic and Indian Ocean. Therefore, if more correlations are found between the French-based Atlantic and Isle de France creoles than the Portuguese-based Atlantic and Indian Ocean creoles, it can be said that there are structural similarities between the French-based creoles. The creoles used in the comparison of the French-based creoles were Haitian Creole (HC) for the Atlantic and Seychellois Creole (SC) for the Isle de France area. For the Portuguese-based creoles, data was taken from Cape Verdean Creole (CV) for the Atlantic and Korlai Creole Portuguese (KP) for the Indian Ocean creoles. The morphosyntactic structures and processes used in the comparisons were tense, mood and aspect (TMA) markers, copula deletion, negation and subject referencing pronouns (SRPs). The second part of the paper explores the possible origins of the phenomenon in question by diachronically analyzing the most advocated theories.

2. Sociohistory

For a full understanding of the topic, it is necessary to provide a brief description of each creole’s historical sociolinguistics. The sociohistory of Portuguese-based creoles are discussed as well in order to provide a complete evaluation.

2.1. French-based Creoles, 2.1.1. Haitian Creole

HC emerged in the 17th and 18th century from a combination of French and various West African substrate languages such as Bambara and Fon (Baker & Corne 1982:101). During the colonial era, HC was used as a *lingua franca* of the island (Baker & Corne 1982:102). It was isolated from its lexifier language in 1804 after slave revolts in Haiti led to the country’s independence from France (Holm 2000:88). HC grew to become one of the official languages of Haiti and the main vernacular of the people (Baker & Corne 1982:102).

2.1.2. Seychellois Creole

Seychelles is an island in the Indian Ocean that the French began colonizing in the 1770s. The majority of Seychelles’ population came from Mauritius, which was colonized earlier in 1721 (Holm & Patrick 2007:333). By the time Seychelles was colonized, Mauritian Creole (MC) was already established as the *lingua franca* of Mauritius. Thus it became the vehicular language of Seychelles as well (Baker & Corne 1982:117). By the late 18th century, 85% of the population of Mauritius consisted of East and West African, Indian, and Malagasy slaves, whose languages are hypothesized to have contributed to MC (Holm & Patrick 2007:333). As a British colony, Mauritius continued to govern Seychelles from 1810 to 1903 (Baker & Corne 1982:117).
2.2. Portuguese-based Creoles, 2.2.1. Cape Veridian Creole

In 1445, the Portuguese arrived on the island of Cape Verde off the coast of northwest Africa (Baptista 2011:24). However, because of the poor climate and soil, it was only used as a trading post for the slave trade and not for agriculture (Holm & Patrick 2007:53). CV has many West African languages as its substrata, including Bamara (Holm & Patrick 2007:54).

2.2.2. Korlai Creole Portuguese

KP is spoken in the village of Korlai on India’s northwest coast. It is attested to have formed sometime in the early 16th century, around 30 years after initial contact with the Portuguese (Holm & Patrick 2007:153). Its main substrate is the Indo-European language Marathi. The people of Korlai are mostly Indian Christians, some with a Portuguese background, who to this day remain a mostly endogamous community. Since 1740 KP has been isolated from its lexifier language except through contact with Portuguese-speaking priests, which discontinued in the mid-20th century (Clements 1993:321).

3. Morphosyntactic Data

The morphological and syntactic structures and processes presented in this section were chosen because of their importance within creole studies and previous work on French-based creoles. The data is first divided by lexifier language and then by geographical area.

3.1. French-based Creoles, 3.1.1. Anterior Marker

(1) Haitian Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:103)
Bouki te konn repons lan
Bouki ANT know answer DEF ‘Bouki knew the answer.’

(2) Seychellois Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:334)
Alors ê zur ti truv ana ê Sûgula…
then IND day ANT find have IND Sûgula
‘One day there was a Soungoula…’

3.1.2. Progressive marker

(3) Haitian Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:104)
M ap manje
1s PROG eat
‘I am eating.’

(4) Seychellois Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:336)
I tultâ pe maze
3s always PROG eat
‘He is always eating.’

3.1.3. Copula Deletion before an Adjective

(5) Haitian Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:115)
Elifét ø malad
Elifét __ sick
‘Elifét is sick.’

(6) Seychellois Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:346)
3.1.4. Negation

(7) Haitian Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:111)
Jan pa t av ale nan mache
Jan NEG ANT IRR go to market
‘Jan would not have gone to market.’

(8) Seychellois Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:343)
I pa ti äkor arive
3s NEG ANT yet arrive
‘He hadn’t arrived.’

3.1.5. Subject Referencing Pronoun

(9a) Haitian Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:112)
Machin ø lank raze
car SRP DEF demolished
‘The car is demolished.’

(9b) Haitian Creole (1790) (Baker & Corne 1982:213)
Pays moi li là
country mine SRP there
‘Mine [sic] country there.’

(10) Seychellois Creole (Baker & Corne 1982:212)
Dimiel i bó
honey SRP good
‘The honey is good.’

3.2. Portuguese-based Creoles, 3.2.1. Anterior Marker

(11) Cape Verdean Creole (Baptista 2011:11)
Nu pasa-ba fomi sen nunbru
1p go-ANT hunger without number
‘We had gone hungry countless times.’

(12a) Korlai Creole Portuguese (Clements & Koontz-Garboden, 2002:225)
Teru nu te kat-a
Teru NEG be.PRES sing
‘Teru does not sing.’

(12b) Korlai Creole Portuguese (Clements & Koontz-Garboden, 2002:225)
Teru nu kat-o
Teru NEG sing-ANT
‘Teru did not sing.’

3.2.2. Progressive marker

(13) Cape Verdean Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:56)
El sta morre
3s PROG die
‘He is dying.’

(14) Korlai Creole Portuguese (Holm & Patrick 2007:156)
Teru kata-n
Teru sing-PROG
‘Teru is singing.’

3.2.3. Copula Deletion before an Adjective

(15) Cape Verdean Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:71)
El e bonito
3s COP handsome
‘He is handsome.’

(16) Korlai Creole Portuguese (Holm & Patrick 2007:165)
Yo tɛ buni
1s COP good
‘I am good.’

3.2.4. Negation

(17) Cape Verdean Creole (Holm & Patrick 2007:66)
Nha pai e ka dotor
1s father COP NEG doctor
‘My father is not a doctor.’

(18) Korlai Creole Portuguese (Clements & Koontz-Garboden, 2002:225)
Teru nu tɛ kata
Teru NEG be.PRES sing
‘Teru does not sing.’

3.2.5. Subject Referencing Pronoun

SRPs are not seen in either CV or KP.

4. Morphosyntactic Comparison, 4.1. French-based Creoles

The data set reveals many similarities between HC and SC in the positioning and use of their morphosyntactic features. In both French-based creoles, the anterior marker appears before the verb in the sentence. Similarly, progressive markers also appear before the verb in both creoles. Both creoles employ copula deletion before an adjective and both have negators which precede the main verb and its markers. SRPs are seen in SC but not in modern HC. However, as (9b) demonstrates, HC did use SRPs in the late 18th century. In addition, the positioning of the SRP in historical HC is the same as modern SC. Therefore, all five examined morphosyntactic features behave similarly in HC and SC.

4.2. Portuguese-based Creoles

CV and KP differed in many of the grammatical structures examined. In CV, the anterior tense is expressed by adding the suffix -ba to the verb root (Baptista 2011:9). In contrast, the KP anterior construction requires verbal conjugation. Therefore, the verb ending changes from –a in the present tense to –ə in the anterior, as in example (12a) and (12b) respectively (Clements & Koontz-Garboden 2002:212). In terms of the progressive marker, they differ again as KP employs a post-verbal suffix and CV uses a preverbal marker. Both creoles are, however, similar in copula positioning as they both retain the copula before an adjective. Nevertheless, they differ again in the positioning of the negator.
5. Diachronic Discussion

Overall, there are more structural correlations between the examined French-based creoles than the Portuguese-based creoles. This finding suggests that there is in fact substantial grammatical similarity between French-based Atlantic and Isle de France creoles. The source of this similarity, however, remains disputed as many linguists have suggested various theories to account for the phenomenon. From the synchronic comparison, it is evident that a shared superstrate could not have caused the observed similarity since the Portuguese-based creoles had this in common as well but were still grammatically different. Some linguists have proposed that the similarity between the French-based creoles may have simply occurred by chance. Baker and Corne dispute this, stating that the French-based Atlantic and Indian Ocean creoles share too many similarities to be accounted simply by independent evolution. Instead, they suggest that the similarity between the two groups originates from early West African influence on the Isle de France creoles, particularly MC (1982:120). Baker found that from 1730 to 1735, West African slaves made up a majority of the slave population on Mauritius (1982:136). These West Africans likely spoke Wolof, Fon and Bambara (Holm 1989:397). From this initial contact, Baker believes that MC was fully creolized by the 465 slave children that lived on the island at the time (1989:397). This West African influence would have had the same effect on SC since SC and MC are historically related and today are mutually intelligible (Holm 1989:396). Therefore, SC and HC would have had a near identical West African substrata influence, causing them to become grammatically similar. Another prevalent theory relates to the nautical variety of French, called “parler des Isles”, that sailors used during colonial times (Baker & Corne 1982:120). This nautical French could have brought influences from the French-based Atlantic creoles to the Isle de France area when sailors moved between the two colonies. Thus it would have caused the Isle de France creoles to become more like the Atlantic creoles. Furthermore, it is possible that this theory may have worked in tandem with the previous theory and that it was a combination of West African and nautical French influences that made the French-based Atlantic and Isle de France creoles grammatically similar to one another.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored how French-based creoles are structurally similar to each other despite a vast difference in geography. Specifically, these similarities are seen in the positioning of TMA markers, negative markers, copula deletion and the use of SRPs. Since these features are grammatical in nature, it is likely that shared substrata caused the observed structural similarity. Evidence that West African languages had an early influence on the Isle de France creoles strengthens this hypothesis as West African languages were the main substrata for the French-based Atlantic creoles as well. The other main theory, that nautical French could have influenced the Isle de France creoles, may not be functional as theory on its own. Therefore, it is more likely that it was a combination of West African and nautical French influences that caused the structural similarity. Possible origins notwithstanding, the grammatical similarity found between the French-based Atlantic and Isle de France creoles suggests a reanalysis of traditional creole classification and a possible single grouping of the French-based Atlantic and Isle de France creoles.
Appendix

Abbreviations

1s = First person singular
3s = Third person singular
1p = First person plural
ANT = Anterior marker
COP = Copula
COMP = Completive marker
DEF = Definite article
IND = Indefinite article
IRR = Irrealis marker
NEG = Negator
PRES = Present tense
PROG = Progressive marker
SRP = Subject Referencing Pronoun
References


