# Epilogue: of theories, typology and empirical data

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**Epilogue: Of Theories, Typology and empirical data**

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This book examines the place of creoles from a typological perspective using modern phylogenetic modeling tools. Exploring the similarities and differences that exist among creoles and between creoles and their input languages, the authors aim to generate new insights into persistent and at times hotly debated topics such as creole genesis and the relationships among creoles and between creoles and other languages, most specifically their input languages. The volume casts a very wide net. It investigates creoles from the Atlantic, Asian, Pacific and Africa region and also considers creoles associated with a range of so-called lexifiers (Arabic, Dutch, English, French and Iberian), common superstrates and some of the substrate inputs. But diversity does not stop there either. The authors also examine data from a range of linguistic levels, including phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic phenomena.

The first four chapters set the stage for the research reported on in this volume. Chapter 1 introduces readers to the topics to be investigated in this volume via a broad style overview of what the research team consider to be the most important issues in research on creoles. For instance, the chapter sketches some positions on the linguistic processes and agents of creole genesis, opposing views on what constitutes a creole and whether they are a typologically distinct group of languages, and presents some of the proposals as to the reasons for their alleged uniqueness. The second chapter provides a very insightful introduction to current phylogenetic work, including discussion of its origin, development and methods. Chapter three 'scores' creoles from different regions and with different European and substrate input languages using a range of linguistic features (phonology, morphology, constituent ordering, lexicon) while chapter four critically examines prior typological research on creole languages. Chapters five to thirteen report on the different types of phylogenetic analyses carried out by the research team. The relative homogeneity of African input languages to Atlantic creoles and their impact on creoles is examined in chapter five while chapters six, eight, nine and ten examine the relationships among creoles that were influenced by French, Dutch, and Iberian languages, respectively and between them and their main European input language. Chapter seven investigates the similarities and differences between Juba Arabic, one of the Arabic contact varieties, and its input languages. Finally, Chapters twelve and thirteen explore the representation of lexical concepts across a broad range of creoles (Chapter twelve) and among creoles for whom English was an important input language (Chapter thirteen).

Based on the results of the different scoring exercises, the authors arrive at a number of conclusions about the typology of creoles:
(a) "there are no linguistic properties that are unique to creole languages"
(b) creole grammars are not inherently simpler than those of other languages
(c) however, there are broad generalizations that cover most or all creoles
(d) the broad similarities between creoles are due to processes of simplification that took place prior to their genesis
(e) most creoles with the same European inputs cluster together but they do not form a homogeneous group; sets of subclusters can be identified

(f) creoles do not cluster with their substrate inputs

The team's use of phylogenetic research methods can be taken to provide an empirically grounded insight into longstanding hunches and issues invoked by people working on creoles and those from related fields. Two things that I keep hearing from linguists working on other languages, including institutions that fund research on language documentation, for instance, is the either openly worded or implicitly presented assumption that all creoles are alike and are naturally simpler or unmarked linguistic entities.[1] The analyses presented in this volume visually represented by the numerous phylogenetic trees clearly belie these received notions, showing that there is, in fact, quite a bit of variety among the languages referred to as creoles. Equally interesting is the fact that this diversity is not simply due to differences in lexifers, but also occurs among creoles that were influenced by the same European language. Leaving aside for a moment the empirical difficulties inherent in defining notions such as simplicity and complexity, chapter three in particular highlights the fact that creoles are not inherently lacking in complexity but, like all languages, show different degrees of complexity across different areas of grammar. While I don't have hopes that the rest of the linguistic community will, on foot of this book, magically deconstruct their long-standing views about contact languages that continue to be deeply rooted in the colonial linguistic enterprise (e.g. Mühleisen 2002), it definitely presents another important piece of evidence towards confirming that creoles are natural languages.

Reading the different contributions I was also struck by a number of issues. For reasons of space, I will limit my discussion to only a few that seem most pertinent to me right now. My main caveat concerns the choice of features. While the team made a concerted effort to draw on a wide range of linguistic features, I cannot stop but feeling uneasy when looking at the various phylogenetic trees and the wide-ranging conclusions that are drawn based on them. For once, while the authors identified various problems with previous, in many cases more localized, typological approaches, I am not convinced that the analyses in this volume resolve the main issue that plagues all typological studies: representativeness. The selected features, though enriched by features used for broad cross-linguistic comparisons (e.g. WALS),[2] remain abstract and in many ways closely overlap in type and kind with those used in previous attempts. As a result, the authors are not able to report any ground breaking new results as such, but are mostly confirming or adding some (minor?) detail to previous typological endeavors based however on newer data sets for the creoles (e.g. APiCs database) and using enhanced modeling methods.

Second, and more fundamentally problematic are the assumptions underlying this enterprise. I find it surprising or actually disconcerting that after decades of research on a wide range of aspects relating to language it is apparently still considered perfectly normal to assume that the essence of a language can be captured based on a narrowly defined set of structural features. While it is true, and regrettably so in my opinion, that the bulk of linguistic

[1]And thus, due to their alleged lack of unique features, are of lesser interest to structural, documentation and typological research.
[2]See Kouwenberg (2010a&b) for a discussion of the usefulness of WALS features (Dryer et al 2013) in typological research on creoles.

research continues to be preoccupied with a narrow set of phonological, morpho-syntactic, semantic and lexical etc phenomena mostly derived from a decontextualized set of sentences or word lists obtain using behaviorist data collection methods (e.g. elicitation), I am not sure that it is simultaneously warranted to assume that these features are in any way central to defining languages and central to defining relationships between languages. This kind of reasoning seems to be a highly problematic and indicative of a lack of critical reflection among linguists about their endeavors, including its historical roots and developments. If we are interested in getting new insights into the relationships between languages, should we not first deconstruct common assumptions about what constitutes a language and consequently our own endeavors (linguistic research),[3] second consider what is central or indicative about human communication systems and how we can study it and third invest more time and effort in the reconstruction of the contact settings (and the histories of speakers of languages)?[4] I submit that this is particularly important when dealing with non-European languages such as creoles that have had to suffer from centuries of willful and accidental distortion by mostly Euro-American (trained and untrained) linguists. My feeling is that uncritical feature crutching is perpetuating and maybe also infusing new life into received notions about language simply by using more sophisticated tools to do it. Just to clarify: I have no problem with feature crutching, but you have to critically assess what you are crunching and to what end. Why do pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of language never feature in typological work?

Every time I engage with speakers of Maroon languages in Suriname, French Guiana or beyond in both mundane and more formal settings in urban and rural contexts through oral communication or emedia, I am always struck by the vast amount of meaning making that takes place that has to date remained firmly below the surface of most of our research activities. In fact, research into these aspects of language which require more than just passing knowledge of a few decontextualized features continues to be overtly and covertly discouraged because it is unsettling as it requires engaging with and developing new kinds of research modalities and much closer and democratic collaboration with the speakers of the languages that we study. But I believe that embarking on this unknown adventure will fundamentally expand our current thinking about creole languages and languages in general and will help us to rise above impoverished feature matrixes and dubious word lists. In order to get there, however, we need to critically examine Chomskyan notions of (linguistic) competence that continue to dominate much of what's going on in the field of linguistics and transition towards Hymesian notions of communicative competence and beyond.

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[3] The interested reader might start with reading some recent publications about what has come to be known as colonial linguistics (e.g. Errington 2008; Makoni and Pennycook 2007) and to consider recent discussions in the area of language documentation (e.g. Childs et al 2014).

[4] In this regard, it is equally important to take on board Kouwenberg's (2010a&b) remarks on whether it makes sense to compare creoles to existing typological databases that are unsuitable for dealing with contact languages.

Chapters twelve and thirteen make an attempt at breaking away from the stranglehold of typical structural linguistic concerns by focusing on semantics or what the authors call patterns of lexicalizations. Instead of using the Swadish list, the authors are basing their work on current lexico-semantic approaches. However, oddly enough, the comparisons focus for the most part on the nature of the etymological shapes of words and their most basic meaning rather than on a full analysis of the actual meanings and functions of the words (Huttar et al 2007). So again, in order to enable broad comparisons, the languages have been reduced to simplified objects. Can we not imagine a more sophisticated way of doing comparisons that will not require erasure of potentially important information?

A final point about features relates to the notion of stable linguistic features invoked in Chapter five. Here a selection of creoles and African languages (and European languages) are compared "to test the claim that the African languages involved in the colonial settings, and hence in the creation of various creole languages, were typologically homogeneous." However, instead of selecting a range of features, curiously, the authors base their comparison on what they describe as features that are "relatively stable over time" because they "were most likely inherited rather than borrowed, these are assumed to represent well-suited markers of distant genealogical relationships". If creoles arose from creative and in many ways idiosyncratic situated interaction between different sets of linguistic practices employed by human agents to fill their communicative needs, as most people working on creole genesis nowadays believe, then why would either stable or unstable linguistic features be privileged over other features in creole genesis? It seems to me that both features have an equal chance of being propagated in this kind of a setting and thus the assumption that the presence or absence of certain kinds of linguistic features is indicative of a certain kind of relationship between creoles and their input languages is problematic.

There are also other kinds of reductionisms. For instance, in some places languages are depicted as a living organisms and sociolinguistic processes such as language contact are likened to biological processes ("lateral gene transfer"). Are we regressing to the view that languages are bounded objects and that signs of variation, change and 'outside' influence are a sign of degeneration? Even if the book uses analytical tools derived from biology, there is no need for such unwarranted metaphoric extensions. Languages are very different from cells and bodies and any attempt at reheating overcooked parallels between them are not only running the risk of misrepresenting language related matters but are also propagating views from the colonial and nationalist era. Another kind of reductionism relates to the presentation of research on creoles such as creole genesis, for instance. A rather complex and multifaceted area of investigation is reduced to a few somewhat eccentric theoretical approaches (superstratist versus relexification accounts; abrupt versus life-cycle accounts of creole formation) in order to generate a few succinct hypotheses that can serve as a basis for comparative exercises. This seems rather crude especially because there is little reference to existing critiques about these approaches so it is not quite clear what the research in this volume actually contributes to the discussion. And on the other hand, because there are few references to more nuanced approaches, it represents research in this area as somewhat simplistic.

My final point relates to the interpretation of phylogenetic trees. On the one side, these visual representations of relationships between languages are great because they allow us to grasp a great amount of complexity pretty much instantaneously. However, isn't this also part of the problem? When you look at the trees in more detail, it is in fact not quite clear how to interpret them reliably because the multitude of intersecting lines is actually quite hard to separate out. The more I look at the trees in the book, the less clear I am about how to derive significance from these webs of lines.

In summary, while I commend the authors on the huge amount of work that they put into the analyses that figure in this volume, I am uncomfortable with the uncritical glossing over a number of pertinent issues and the lack of willingness to push beyond the narrowly defined limits of current typological work.

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