

Subject relative clauses in creoles and the evolution of grammar

Tania Kuteva (jointly with Bernard Comrie)

ABSTRACT

Our starting point in the present study is the assumption that creole languages present an opportunity – in the case of some of these languages at least – for testing hypotheses on language evolution.

One way of thinking about the evolution of grammar is that language in prehistoric time had simple, functionally motivated grammatical structures, i. e. language structures were simple before they became complex (Comrie 1992, Heine & Kuteva 2002, 2007).

Here we are interested in one particular kind of complexity, which we refer to as elaborateness of grammatical marking (cf. also Comrie & Kuteva 2005, and Kuteva & Comrie 2005). More precisely, our object of investigation is the marking of the relative clause construction, more specifically relativization on subjects.

Our goal is to test the prediction that Comrie's 1992 and Heine & Kuteva's (2002, 2007) as well as McWhorter's 2001 approach to language evolution makes regarding the development of creole grammars from simple to complex.

On the basis of two samples of languages, our own convenience sample (Comrie and Kuteva *forthc.*) and the APiCS sample of 75 languages, we show that the above prediction with regard to elaborateness in marking of the relative clause construction is met: creole languages more often than not have simply marked relative clause constructions, encoded by no more than one relativization marker. This typological result stands out as particularly significant if we view it against the background of non-creole languages, for which we have been able to identify cases with or even five relativization markers (Comrie and Kuteva 2005, Kuteva and Comrie 2005).

We propose a functional explanation of the present finding about the lack of elaborateness of marking for the subject relative construction in creoles.