

On the typological classification of creoles

Creoles have been typologically classified with their superstrate languages (e.g. Chaudenson, 2003:38), with their substrate languages (e.g. Koopman 1986), or with neither (Bickerton 1984). McWhorter (1998: 790) claimed that creoles constitute a “synchronically definable typological class”. On the basis of a representative sample of some 30 creoles that have emerged from typologically different substrate languages (West African, Asian and Pacific), this paper advocates the view that creoles typologically pair with their substrate languages with some limitations due to the processes involved in their formation.

The first part of the paper considers subsystems of the grammar across the sample of creoles. Pronominal forms, classifiers, TMA systems, semantic case systems, transitivity markers, verb-doubling phenomena and discourse structures will be discussed in turn. Typological differences between subsystems of the grammar across creoles reveal typological differences between their respective substrate languages. The bulk of the data thus argues that creoles are best typologically classified with their substrate languages. This follows from the processes at work in the formation of these languages: relabelling (alias relexification) (Lefebvre 1998) or transfer (Siegel 2008).

The second part of the paper considers the constraints that the very nature of these processes imposes on the transfer of substrate typological features into the creoles. First, since these processes are semantically driven, only lexical items that have semantic content can be relabelled/transferred. This constraint will be illustrated on the basis of semantic versus syntactic case. Second, these processes require that there be a superstrate form available to relabel the substrate entry or to transfer to the features of the substrate entry. Examples of this constraint will be provided.

On the basis of the data presented in the first two parts of the paper, the third part addresses two questions. First, to what extent do creoles replicate the typological features of their substrate languages? While the properties of creole lexicons generally pair typologically with those of the substrate lexicons, the phonological component as well as word order are more problematic in this respect. Second, why are creoles typologically isolating languages? It is shown that this typological property follows from the way relabelling or transfer apply in their formation.