

CHARLENE J. SATO'S
"LANGUAGE CHANGE IN A CREOLE CONTINUUM:
DECREOLIZATION?"

MIKYUNG CHANG AND EUN-JOO LEE

University of Hawai'i

Sato, C. J. (1991). Language change in a Creole continuum: Decreolization? In K. Hyltenstam & Å. Viberg (Eds.), *Progression and regression in language* (pp. 122-143). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Summary of the Article

This article is on the process of decreolization in individuals and in social context. It focuses on decreolization from linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of the Hawai'i creole continuum. Sato begins her article by defining the main concept 'decreolization' as "the process through which a creole language gradually merges with its lexifier language, i.e., the standard language of the community, as a result of creole speakers' increased access to and 'targeting' of the latter" (Sato, 1991, p. 122). The study of this process is useful because it can reveal the consequences of language contact and the nature of language change.

The article focused on three issues related to Hawai'i Creole English (HCE). The first one was "the decreolization rates of different linguistic and discorsal features." The second one was "the proposal that substantial decreolization occurs, not over the lifetimes of individuals, but across generations of speakers." Sato obtained information about the two issues through quantitative analysis of longitudinal data from four HCE speakers. The third one was "the role of political and sociopsychological factors in decreolization." She analyzed recent public controversies involving HCE on the basis of her participant-observation.

Concerning the first two issues, there were three important findings about the question of different patterns of decreolization. The first one was from Escure (1981): "morphosyntactic but not phonological variables were decreolizing extensively." The second one was Muhlhausler (1986)'s "global phenomena" in decreolizing systems: "changes in one linguistic domain have repercussions in other domains." The third one was from Rickford's (1983) argument for "a quantitative model which indicates that the primary impact of decreolization might be in the declining proportion of people who speak

the creole or basilectal variety, rather than in any decline in the purity of that variety itself." He also reported substantial differences across generations of speakers rather than in the same speaker at different times.

Considerable debate has arisen concerning the third issue; one perspective is to limit the domain of inquiry to language-internal mechanisms of change and the other one is to argue that social and psychological factors in creole communities affect the process of decreolization in crucial ways. Sato agreed with the latter perspective and illustrated how critical institutional events perceived by creole speakers as attacks on their personal and social identity may actually serve to decelerate decreolization.

Sato regarded Hawai'i's unique ethnolinguistic diversity as resulting from massive labor importation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was also brought about by the particular stages of the linguistic development in Hawai'i: a pidginized Hawaiian by the end of the 19th century, a pidginized English during the early 1900s, a flourishing creole by the 1920s, and a widespread decreolization among HCE speakers over the last half-century. Industrialization, mass education, and urbanization increased the HCE-speaking population's exposure to American English and consequently set the last stage.

Decreolization in Individuals: A Longitudinal Study

Sato selected four informants who had participated in Bickerton's major survey about 15 years ago and did a follow-up study to find out whether they really showed an increase in the percentage of standard English (SE) surface forms from Time 1 to Time 2 as evidence of decreolization. The analysis was limited to a phonetically transcribed half-hour excerpt in which three features were examined: (a) post-vocalic r, (b) indefinite reference as encoded in articles, and (c) past time reference for nonstative verbs. The results showed that decreolization seemed to be more prominent in morphosyntactic than in phonological features. For example, in the use of indefinite reference, three of the four informants seemed to have decreolized whereas the analysis of post-vocalic r revealed that little decreolization occurred in the four informants. The results of the analysis of past time reference showed that there was more variation across the informants. That is, two of the speakers showed increased SE variants at Time 2 while the other two did not show any decreolizing change. This result indicated that there were not many changes in spite of the long period, 15 years. It seems more probable that extensive decreolization is not manifested in individuals during their lifetime. Rather, two other reasons can account for the community-wide decreolization. One is the behavior of mesolectal speakers, who may decreolize more rapidly and extensively than basilectal speakers do, owing to a "starting" point closer to the acrolect. The other is that it is in fact the generation following that of the speakers examined here to whom the mesolectal to acrolectal shift should be attributed.

The Sociopolitical Context of Decreolization

HCE was regarded as a marker of ethnic (non-white) identity and working class identity; consequently, the language attitude toward HCE has been predominantly negative on the part of creole and non-creole speakers alike. This recognition can be said to be one of the reasons that caused decreolization. In contrast, as a new marker of a pan-ethnic and local identity, HCE has recently acquired overt prestige. This change seems surprising in light of the widespread tendency in this population to adjust themselves to American ways.

Sato attempted to explain this apparent contradiction on the basis of the influence of language-external factors in creole communities. Two social events were taken as examples in order to illustrate how social forces can dramatically problematize language use in a decreolizing community. The first event was the state of Board of Education (BOE) SE-only policy in the schools. The proposed policy was perceived as discriminatory, i.e., as an unfair attack on HCE, on local culture, and on the educational rights of local people. Large numbers of objections were raised at what proved to be a historic four-hour evening meeting held by the board to receive public testimony. Such a heated display of protest against the policy forced the board to adopt a much weaker version. The second event was a lawsuit against the National Weather Service (NWS), which was charged with race and national origin discrimination. In the suit, two male meteorological technicians claimed that their candidacies were downgraded because of their HCE accents, in spite of their superior qualifications and exemplary employment records with the NWS. The court ruling was that the NWS had not discriminated against them at all, and the judge even suggested that they put more effort into improving their speech. That decision apparently showed overwhelming intolerance for language diversity and challenges to the sociolinguistic status quo.

Even though there were no large scale survey data offered regarding the lawsuit or BOE language policy, these two events raised the community's awareness of what is at stake in retaining HCE. While some HCE speakers may strive even harder to acquire a mainland U.S. accent, others appear prepared to publicly defend and retain, not only a creole accent, but other features of HCE as well.

Sato proposed a significant hypothesis that the future course of decreolization can be derived from recent governmental projections about Hawai'i's economy and plans for its continued growth—faster development of tourism. As a way to fill jobs in expanded trade and service sectors, another massive labor importation will be necessary. Accordingly, demographic effects by the year 2010 will include a 23% population increase in Honolulu and 81 % increase in the neighbor islands, precisely the areas in which "HCE is the most widespread and least decreolized." Most of the immigrants are expected to acquire HCE or to participate in its repidginization, depending on circumstances surrounding their arrival. At the same time, the socioeconomic stratification by the tourist industry will be

still maintained, and it would be surprising for HCE not to have a unifying influence among the multiethnic workforce, just as it did a century ago on the sugar plantations. Sato concluded her article by focusing on two important facts: the importance of real-time studies of the decreolization process as a means of revealing patterns and rates of change and the need to go beyond strictly linguistic constraints on decreolization for more valid accounts of language change in creole continua.

Contributions

This article gave a general description of what decreolization is and why the study of this process is necessary to people who are not accustomed to the concept. It helped for non-creole speakers and creole speakers to recognize the present status of HCE.

In addition, Sato attempted to connect some decreolization features like marking for past tense verbs with SLA. Although decreolization is not exactly the same as SLA, it can be said to be similar to learning English as a second language. To compare decreolization and ESL can be a useful way to decide whether evidence of L1 transfer exists in SLA.

Furthermore, Sato's explanation of some facts from the language-external perspective seems quite reasonable since language itself is a typical example of social interactions. Limiting the domain of inquiry to language-internal mechanisms of change tends to lose some valuable benefits which an interdisciplinary survey can get.

Given the prediction that HCE will not have a unifying influence just as it did a century ago, it seems quite imperative for creole speakers, especially people who are in higher status, to try to maintain HCE as a marker of valued identity. Though Sato did not assert her opinion explicitly, the indirect warning sounds even more persuasive.

References

- Escure, G. (1981). Decreolization in a creole continuum: Belize. In A. Highfield & A. Valdman. (Eds.), *Historicity and variation in Creole studies*. Ann Arbor: Karoma.
- Mühlhäusler, P. (1986). *Pidgin and Creole linguistics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Rickford, J. (1983). What happens in decreolization. In R. Andersen. (Ed.), *Pidginization and Creolization as language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Mikyung Chang and Eun-Joo Lee
 Department of ESL
 1890 East-West Road
 Honolulu, Hawai'i 96822

e-mail: mikyung@hawaii.edu

e-mail: eunlee@hawaii.edu