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Jargons and Pidgins and Creoles, Oh My!

Linguistics, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “the science of studying language, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and historical linguistics” (OED.com). Within this field, the study of pidgin and creole languages is the source of much controversy and disagreement. Due to their divergence from typical linguistic features and development patterns, pidgins and creoles have long been ignored by the linguistics community. Considered by many to be “inferior, haphazard, broken” versions of “older, more established languages,” these so-called “bastard tongues” were written off as unworthy of study (Todd 1). Only recently have these forms of language garnered interest from linguistic scholars known as Creolists. However, compared to their more respected and recognized counterparts, the study of pidgins and creoles remains incomplete. Modern Creolists are able to agree neither on the accepted definitions for the terms *pidgin* and *creole* nor on the status of a number of languages claiming to be either of the aforementioned terms (Muysken and Smith 3). While usually studied together, the terms *pidgin* and *creole* are used to distinguish between two very different and unique forms of speech and language (“The Origins of Pidgin” 1).

Looking first at pidgin languages, Creolists generally agree that these are languages of necessity. This means they are formed when two groups of people who do not share a common language must communicate. In order for a pidgin to form, one of the groups involved must be in a more dominant position than the other so that the less dominant group abandons their primary language in favor of creating a pidgin language (“Pidgins and Creoles”). Characterized by its “limited vocabulary and simplification or elimination of many grammatical devices,” a pidgin is a contact vernacular designed to meet the immediate needs of its speakers (DeCamp 26). Possibly the most famous example of pidginized communication can be found in the Disney

movie *Tarzan* when the movie's namesake protagonist introduces himself to his eventual love interest by saying "Me Tarzan, you Jane!" (DeCamp 31). Due to their specialized nature, pidgins are usually short-lived means of communication. It is rare for a pidgin to survive an entire century, with only one exception. The pidgin language called Sabir, better known as Mediterranean Lingua Franca, was first documented in the Middle Ages and continued until the twentieth century (DeCamp 27). As auxiliary situational languages pidgins do not have native speakers (Muysken and Smith 3) and are dependent upon the presence of interlingual contact. Once the necessary interlinguistic interaction ceases, the pidgin typically follows suit and becomes extinct (DeCamp 27).

Like the languages it refers to, the etymology of the word *pidgin* is the source of much debate. The two most viable proposals are that the word is derived from either the Hebrew word *pidjoin* meaning "business, exchange, trade" or that it is a Chinese corruption of the Portuguese word for business, *ocupacao* (Muhlhausler 1). Both of these are probable explanations because pidgins have most commonly been found in areas where business-related international contact was prevalent. Historically, pidgins have resulted from three primary occurrences: intercontinental commerce, plantation systems, and maritime activities ("The Origins of Pidgin"). Each pidgin began as a form of communication used by slave masters, plantation owners, merchants, and sailors to converse with their servants, slaves, customers, or surrounding native population (DeCamp 29).

In the last hundred years there have been several theories proposed in an attempt to explain the origin of pidgin languages. These theories of origin can be divided into five basic, slightly overlapping theories. The theories included are the baby-talk theory, independent parallel development theory, nautical jargon theory, monogenetic theory, and the Universalist

theory. While this basic group of theories is applicable to a majority of pidgins, there are still some that require a combination of theories to best explain their creation or are simply not addressed by the present system of beliefs (“Pidgins and Creoles”).

First proposed in 1876 by Charles Leland, the baby-talk theory is considered the earliest pidgin generation theory. This theory likens pidgin speakers to young children first learning how to speak. Leland noted that, like these children, pidgin speakers used a high proportion of content words and very few function words. He also noticed that in the speech of both groups morphological change was infrequent and word classes were considered far more fluid than in standard languages. He suggests that pidgins arise when slave masters or merchants intentionally simplify their way of speaking due to the subordinate class’s perceived inability to master the dominant class’s language (Muhlhausler 134-135). As English was considered “the language of the prestigious and powerful,” slave masters believed teaching it to their slaves would give them too much power, so they employed a simplified, makeshift language for communicating with the help (Bickerton 23). The resulting “baby-talk” is the masters’ attempt to imitate their servants’ incorrect speech patterns. This deprives the learners the opportunity to learn the correct model, so their only option is to learn the new “baby-talk” pidgin. The resulting language is considered a “conventionalized jargon.” Jargons are defined as “individualized solutions to cross-linguistic communication” (Muhlhausler 135) and were frequently employed by European conquerors when colonizing new slaves or assimilating tributary people (Todd 29-31). Although this theory was once accepted as the only explanation for the existence of pidgins, it is now rejected by many contemporary linguists (“Pidgins and Creoles”).

The second model used to explain the origin of pidgins maintains that the similarities found in many pidgin languages are due to their development along “independent but parallel

lines” with a common language of derivation. In layman’s terms this means that though the languages developed independently of each other they share commonalities that can be attributed to their shared parent language. The two most likely mother languages are Indo-European and some form of West African. Scholars like Robert Hall go so far as to claim that the physical conditions surrounding a pidgin’s creation are responsible for the similar linguistic structures shared by many pidgin languages. (“Pidgins and Creoles”). While the validity of this theory should not be underestimated, it does have limitations. First, Atlantic and Pacific pidgin forms of English have both structural and lexical features not found in Standard English. Both languages use “make” when giving polite orders. The Cameroon pidgin version of the English imperative “put out the fire” is *mek yu les faia*, which translates to “you make less fire.” Along the same lines both languages use the phrase ‘too much’ in place of the word “very.” In Neo-Melanesian the phrase “I’m very cold” becomes *mi, kol tumos*, or “me cold too much.” The more blatant contradiction to this theory is the fact that African slaves came from very diverse and separated geographical areas. This theory seems to put an abundance of emphasis on the similarities found in their native languages, which results in an oversimplified, generalized version of said languages (Todd 31-32).

In 1938 American linguist John Reineck was the first to note the possibility of nautical jargons being the basis for many pidgin languages. The theory hinges upon the idea that, until very recently, it was necessary for ships to develop a “common denominator” language as crews were typically composed of men speaking a wide variety of languages. For example, there were fourteen different nationalities represented by the crew on the flagship *Victory*. In order to communicate effectively these sailors established an impromptu language that was easily understood by all the men and reflected their various dialects (Todd 32). The resulting language,

known as a lingua franca, consisted of a core vocabulary of nautical terms and highly simplified grammatical practices (“Pidgins and Creoles”). This lingua franca was then passed on to Africans, Asians, Polynesians, or whomever else the crew happened to come in contact with during their journey. This nautical jargon provided the “nucleus” for the subsequently developed pidgin, which would then be expanded according to the rules of the people’s native tongue. This explanation adequately accounts for the similarities and dissimilarities found in pidgins throughout the world. The similarities can be attributed to the nautical core influence, while the dissimilarities resulted from the natives’ varying mother tongues. This theory is supported by the fact that, from the seventeenth century onwards, sailors were notorious for their unusual way of speaking. There also remains an evident nautical element in European-based pidgins today. In Cameroon pidgin, for instance, words such as *hib* (heave), *kapsai* (capsize), and *jam* (jam, to be stalemated) remain a central part of the speakers’ vocabulary. While this theory explains the frequent use of maritime terminology, it is unable to account for the structural similarities existing between different types of pidgin English and their French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch counterparts (Todd 33).

Arguably the most extreme pidgin genesis theory, the relexification theory claims that all of the world’s pidgin languages stem from a single proto-pidgin, sixteenth-century Pidgin Portuguese. Commonly referred to as the monogenetic theory of origin, the premise of this theory is that the proto-pidgin’s original grammar was maintained, but lexical units, such as vocabulary, were replaced. Originally the jargon of West African slavers (Muhlhasuler 107), Pidgin Portuguese, also known as Sabir, was the auxiliary language of both the multilingual Crusaders and the Mediterranean traders and merchants. Records show that while diction seemed to vary based on area, the structure of the languages remained, for the most part, static (Todd

35). First suggested by linguistic theorist Thompson, this theory of relexification has many flaws. Monogeneticism is a timeless concept, meaning it ignores the fact that pidgins are developing and evolving forms of communication. It is also impossible to pinpoint the exact moment in history where relexification took place (Muhlhausler 107-108). The presence of pidgins with non-European roots but identical structures to those of the supposed relexified Pidgin Portuguese descendants further casts doubt on the legitimacy of this theory, as it provides no explanation for this phenomenon (Todd 39). David DeCamp goes so far as to state that many of the non-European pidgins are “independent creations” and that “probably no monogenetic theory will ever account for absolutely all the pidgins of the world” (DeCamp 33). While the relexification theory seems to be a plausible explanation for a number of recognized pidgins, it is proven inadequate by its limited nature and dependence on a single language of origin for all pidgins.

The fifth and final theory accepted by modern creolists is the Universalist theory, which postulates that there are certain “universal forces” that act upon developing languages. These forces may take many forms but all result in a type of pidgin language (Muysken and Smith 11). Many creolists consider the universal forces to be inherent aspects of human language development, such as a tendency towards adopting a simplified syntax or forming an analytical language with simple phonology. This theory addresses the unexplained similarities found in the world’s pidgins by claiming they are simply the result of mankind’s preference for similar types of language (“Pidgins and Creoles”). One notable component of this theory is the idea of bioprogramming. Simply put, bioprogramming is the idea that modern pidgins are the inventions of children living on newly founded plantations. With only the disjointed, improvised language of their parents and plantation workers to work with, these children used their “innate linguistic capacities” to flesh out the existing language into what is now known as a functional pidgin

(Muysken and Smith 11). There is much debate about the newness of this theory. Grammarians like Muhlhausler state that the theory “is not a recent one” (Muhlhausler 113), while many others believe it to be the most recently conceived (“Pidgins and Creoles”). Like its predecessors, this theory has been hampered by a few glaring oversights. The most pressing issue with this line of thinking is the difficulty pinpointing at what point in the transition from jargon to pidgin universal forces would have come into play. The second wrench in this theory is that creolists are tasked with deciding which features of pidgins are byproducts of universal forces and which are nuances adopted by that language’s particular speakers (Muhlhausler 114). In short, this theory creates more questions than answers when it comes to the generation of pidgin languages.

An important aspect in the development of pidgin communication overlooked by all these theories is the nonverbal stage. Prior to becoming pidgins, many situational languages begin as a series of improvised nonverbal signals. This allows for the necessary amount of communication before the creation of a pidgin. An example of this can be seen when labor recruiters had to tell Pacific Islanders the length of their service on Queensland plantations. To communicate that they would be working on the Australian plantations for three years recruiters would hold up a yam and three fingers. The ‘three yam’ expression was intended to indicate the time it would take to grow three crops of yams. A very simple form of this can also be seen in Japanese Pidgin English during World War II. Though their mother tongues differed greatly, U.S. soldiers and Japanese citizens both understood the meaning behind one simple gesture: the smile. Smiles became the primary method for differentiating friends from foes for American service men. Without using words they were able to communicate their peaceful intentions and, based on a returned smile, determine if the surrounding Japanese citizens were an immediate threat to their safety (Muhlhausler 52-53).

While pidgins are effective for short-term communication, they must undergo an expansion process in order to be used as an enduring, consistent means of communicating. This process is known as nativization. A language is considered nativized when it is “taken over by a group of speakers who have previously used some other language” as their primary language. Creolization is a form of nativization in which a pidgin becomes the native language for second-generation pidgin speakers. Instead of inheriting their parents’ original mother tongue in conjunction with the pidgin, the children learn only the pidginized form of language (Muhlhausler 39). The longevity of a pidgin and likelihood of it becoming creolized are dependent upon several factors including its perceived prestige within society and the continuation of contact that led to its creation (DeCamp 35, 27). The process of creolization is best understood when thought of as a continuum rather than a group of polarizing, mutually exclusive terms. The creolization continuum is thought to contain the following stages: jargon, stabilized pidgin, expanded pidgin, and creole. It is important to note that not all languages go through every stage on their way to becoming a creole and that some languages fall in between two categories. These in-between languages are referred to as creoloids or quasi-creoles as they are more developed than a pidgin but less developed than a creole (Muhlhausler 8-10). Today, Jamaica is considered the only country with remaining language variations at each point on the developmental continuum (Bickerton 26).

The cornerstone of creolization is the reparation of a pidgin’s linguistic deficiencies. One way this is accomplished is by expanding the usual, bare-boned 300-word vocabulary of a pidgin to between 1,000 and 3,000 words (“The Origins of Pidgin”). Grammatical conventions are also imposed, though they still differ greatly from standard grammar. Where pidgins typically lack a means of denoting gender, creolized languages do so by placing the appropriate ‘male’ or

‘female’ equivalent before the base noun. This practice can be seen in such languages as Samoan Plantation English and Cameroon Pidgin English where the Standard English term ‘mare’ is expressed as *wumen hos* and *wuuman hurs* (woman horse), respectively (Muhlhausler 170). Creolization also gives rise to the use of reduplication to compensate for the absence of intensifiers. In reduplication the repetition of a single word serves as a substitute for comparative words such as ‘more’ and ‘most’. In Jamaican creole ‘small’ is just *small*, but ‘very small’ or ‘smaller’ is expressed by *smalsmal*. Similarly, in Neo-Melanesian ‘talk’ is *tok* and ‘incessant talk’ or ‘chatter’ is *toktok* (Todd 19-20). These and other necessary forms of restructuring and expansion are undertaken only by a small number of the world’s situational languages (“Pidgins and Creoles”). While undergoing creolization allows languages to move closer towards meeting the qualifications of a standard language, as of now the full circle from pidgin to Standard English has yet to be drawn (Todd 68).

The result of creolization are new forms of language known as creoles. The word ‘creole’ comes from the French *creole* and the Spanish *criollo* meaning ‘person native to a locality.’ This refers to the fact that, unlike pidgins, creoles are, by definition, the native language of a population (Thompson). In order to prevent linguists from simply labeling any language that has been nativized a creole they have established a list of prerequisites that must be met prior to being considered a “true creole.” By requiring that a language’s history, either linguistic or social, be accessible, linguists have prevented many creolized languages from qualifying as creoles since their histories were either not written down or recorded in such a way that they are now unintelligible. Another alienating pre-creole constraint is the idea of lexifer languages. A creole’s lexifer language is the standard language from which the greatest portion of vocabulary has been derived (Muysken and Smith, 4-5). Since the vast majority of creoles developed as a

result of colonization the most common lexifier, or donor, languages are English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. However, other languages such as Arabic, Hindi, and Malay have heavily influenced their fair share of creoles (Thompson). The final requirement for a potential creole is that it must readily lend itself to the practice of code switching. Code switching refers to people's inherent tendency to modify their diction and sentence structure based on their current circumstances. Creole speakers do this by altering the proportion of creole elements to lexifier elements within their speech (Bickerton 28-29). Their mastery of numerous levels of speech along the developmental continuum and ability to seamlessly shift up or down is crucial to the acceptance of a given language as a creole (Thompson).

Besides the presence of native speakers, creoles differ from pidgins in a variety of ways. Due to their extremely limited lexicon and elimination of all but the "absolutely necessary" grammatical constrictions, pidgins can be used to determine a person's ethnicity. Creoles, on the other hand, have transitioned far enough away from their lexifier language that they are not accurate indicators of ethnicity (Bickerton, 105). Another important difference is the ability of linguists to pinpoint the moment in time when the language was established. Creole languages are understood to have "come into existence at a point in time that can be established fairly precisely" through linguistic study. Non-creole languages, i.e. pidgins, are assumed to have emerged gradually and, therefore, lack a calculable point of origin (Muysken and Smith 3). These differences, along with other less obvious ones, are what separate creoles from pidgins in the eyes of linguistic scholars.

While creolization is both the most logical and most widely accepted explanation for the existence of creoles, Creolists have concocted other, more controversial theories. The alternate theories with the largest bases of support are the linguistic continuity theory, the desert island

theory, and the linguistic violence theory. Interestingly, all of these theories are contingent upon a lack of “large-scale racial mixing,” as this discourages the creation of a single creole in favor of multiple pidgins with influences from each language represented (Muhlhausler 7). The inability of the linguistic community to create one, all-encompassing theory to explain the appearance of creoles allows for the possibility of overlooking qualified creoles that do not fall within the bounds of a scholar’s preferred theory (DeCamp 27).

Somewhat related to the idea of nativization, the theory of disrupted linguistic continuity states that the creoles are “much expanded versions of pidgins” and are the direct result of a break in the “natural linguistic continuity” of a specific area. Linguistic continuity is thought to be the natural processes by which new languages are created. Advocates of this theory name the slave trade as the most significant interruption in the logical advancement of new languages (“Pidgins and Creoles”). Newly acquired slaves were put into a position where they could no longer use their native tongue to communicate either with each other or with the plantation masters. In fact, plantation owners made a habit of requesting slaves with the “greatest possible variety of languages” in the hopes that eliminating their ability to communicate would thus minimize the risk of an uprising (DeCamp 30). In order to converse, these slaves were forced to abandon their first languages and create a brand new language. The resulting language became the sole means of communication for the slave population. Supporters of this theory argue that this adoption of the improvised language as a sort of native language allows it to be classified as a creole (Todd 58-59).

The next creole genesis theory is the result of much speculation about an age-old question in the linguistic community: how is language constructed when a group of shipwrecked individuals from vastly different backgrounds are thrown together on a desert island? One of the

most important principles to emerge from such speculation is that only the most essential aspects of language would be preserved. All accidental or superfluous features, such as indicators of number or gender, would be deleted for the sake of clarity and efficiency. In order to be explained by this theory a creole must show no influence from existing pidgins, have developed in nearly total isolation, and be spoken by a mixed population of people. So far Creolists have found six languages they believe meet all these requirements. These desert island creoles are: Pitcairnese on Pitcairn Island, Tristan da Cunha English, Portuguese Creole of Annobon, Portuguese Creole of Cape Verde Islands, French Creole of the Indian Ocean, and Creole English of Providence Island in the Caribbean. These six creole languages appear to have very literally developed on deserted islands. Scholars use this aptly named theory to explain the simplified, highly analytical nature of creoles (Muhlhausler 92-93).

Violence is the focal point of the third theory. Like the disrupted linguistic continuity theory, this philosophy of creole creation forces linguists to “reckon with a break” in the standard sequential development of a language and its subsequent transmission between generations. This theory argues that such breaks are the result of linguistic violence – the forcible squelching of a language – and are usually accompanied by episodes of physical or social violence. The victims of linguistic violence have no choice but to piece together a new language from the remnants of their native tongue and the native tongue of their oppressors. The makeshift language is passed on from parents to offspring and becomes a creole (Muysken and Smith 4). Linguistic violence Creolists turn to history to find support for their beliefs. In the Americas, the most apropos example is that of the American Indians. When European explorers first encountered these natives they forced the people to surrender their mother tongue using threats of violence and infection of foreign diseases. The Native Americans, weakened by the European invasion,

learned English as a means of survival but were never able to fully abandon their original dialect, creating a creolized native-English language (DeCamp 27).

Nowadays, creoles are often employed when a group wants to reach the minority audience with its message. Thanks to the presence of creoles on every continent, this strategy has the potential to be highly successful. Creole writings can be divided into two main subcategories: ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical. Writings related to Christianity can be found wherever English-based creoles are widely used and accepted. Creolized translations of missionary prayers have been dated back to the eighteenth century (Todd 71). Negerhollands, a Dutch-based creole of the Virgin Islands, even boasts a translation of the Bible. Translations of creoles have also been used in political campaigns to appeal to a specific demographic. The unmatched success of one Jamaican politician can be attributed to his conscious efforts to learn the creole speech and accompanying social norms of his “slum constituency.” Along the same lines, the Peace Corps is currently producing language learning materials for the creoles of Jamaica, Sierra Leone, and Haitian French in an effort to effect change for a wider population of people (DeCamp 35, 39). The use of creoles in education has had mixed results. While the oral use of creoles has been accepted, the use of printed creole texts in the classroom has come under fire. Educational purists argue that teaching these “simplified...corrupt” languages is detrimental to the integrity of the educational system (Todd 83). Contrarily, a conference of linguists and educators held in Jamaica in 1964 found that the inability of West Indian school children to adequately express themselves in writing was due in part to the barrier between the creole they spoke and the standard language used in the academic setting (DeCamp 41).

Despite the many advances in creole and pidgin linguistics, there is still a frequent prejudice against recognizing them as “proper linguistic systems” (Muysken and Smith, 6).

Creole and pidgin speakers are “inseparably associated with poverty, ignorance, and lack of moral character” due to the negative public perception surrounding these languages. Commonly referred to as a “barbarous corruption” of an established language, creoles have faced much discrimination (DeCamp 35). Only recently have creoles and pidgins been added to the lists of the world’s languages. Continued disagreement between Creolists and traditional linguists has served as the catalyst in the fight to add pidgins and creoles to these lists and has resulted in nearly constant additions. Currently, six countries have named a creole as their official language with many others expected to do the same. These countries and their officially recognized creoles are: Vanuata with Bislama, Haiti with Haitian Creole, Papua New Guinea with Tok Pisin, Sao Tome Island with Saotomense, Congo with Kituba, and the Central African Republic with Sango (Thompson 8). While this represents a major milestone for Creolists, there is still much work to be done if these methods of communicating are going to overcome their negative connotation and be acknowledged as equals with standard languages. As of now, creoles and pidgins remain a controversial subject shrouded in mystery and uncertainty.

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