

John H. McWhorter (2005) *Defining Creole*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 444.

Reviewed by Angela Bartens

John McWhorter's latest book (at least to my knowledge; McWhorter is a highly prolific writer) is a collection of thirteen papers published over the past decade, updated and grouped together into three thematic sections.

While some authors resort to publishing anthologies in order to make articles dispersed in small journals of difficult access available to the wider public, this can be hardly assumed to have been McWhorter's main motive. It would rather seem that he has wanted to draw a line under his recent work, assembling it into a single volume. This is the body of work which has or at least should have changed Creolistics for good.

The thematic sections are "Is There Such a Thing as a Creole?", "Is Creole Change Different from Language Change in Older Languages?", and "The Grey Zone: The Cline of Pidginization or the Inflectional Parameter?". In the first part, McWhorter argues that contrary to conventional creolist wisdom, creoles can be identified as a synchronic typological class on the grounds of the cooccurrence or rather absence of three grammatical features which he calls the Creole Prototype: inflectional affixation is extremely rare or inexistent, tones are not used to encode morphosyntactic distinctions, and there is no noncompositional derivation. All of these features, as well as a few others, many of which McWhorter calls "ornament" (e.g., p. 98), "frills" (p. 99) or "cases of overspecification" (p. 44) arise in languages over time but are lacking from creoles because of their shallow time-depth and their genesis through initial pidginization. This entails detailed discussions of complexity, aptly entitled "The World's Simplest Grammars Are Creole Grammars" (pp. 38–71), and the necessity of postulating a pidgin precursor to creole genesis ("The Rest of the Story: Restoring Pidginization to Creole Genesis Theory", pp. 72–101).

In Part II, McWhorter argues for the role of internal innovation as opposed to transfer from the substrate in some specific cases (e.g., the [Atlantic] Creole English equative copula *da*, the locative copula *de*, modal *fi/fu/fo*), the pivotal role of previously existing English, French, and Portuguese pidgins and their transplantation in the genesis of the English-, French-, Spanish- and Portuguese-based creoles (that is, monogenesis within groups of creoles with the same lexifier language and within a larger

area such as the Atlantic and Pacific English-based creoles) as well as the inclusion of intertwined languages into Creole Studies based on the postulate that language intertwining is quantitatively but not qualitatively different from creolization (one substrate language instead of several; specialists in language intertwining may find this postulate hard to swallow). The central argument of McWhorter's 2000 book, *The missing Spanish creoles*, is taken up in the discussion of "Creole Transplantation. A Source of Solutions to Resistant Anomalies" (pp. 225–246): the two known Spanish creoles of the Americas, Papiamentu (which I would call Iberoromance-based rather than Spanish-based) and Palenquero, have arisen as a result of the transplantation of Afro-Portuguese Pidgin. The absence of other Spanish-based creoles in the Americas is explained by the fact that the Spanish did not have trade forts in Africa. Transplantation would also explain why English-based Caribbean creoles exhibit a creole continuum while corresponding French-based varieties do not: in the case of English-based creoles, a mesolectal variety would have been transplanted alongside a basilectal one, a thesis which would seem to call for (even) more empirical evidence.

Part III, finally, deals with the clinal nature of pidginization or, as other scholars would term it, restructuring, demonstrating *inter alia* that albeit not a creole, English has undergone restructuring which has made it even less overspecified than Afrikaans, nowadays generally acknowledged to be a semi-creole or a restructured variety, and that Black English, on the other hand, stems from second language acquisition of English and not, say, the spread of Gullah or some other creole over wide regions of the American south at some point in history.

Besides arguing the case for his own theory, the Creole Prototype, McWhorter takes issue with a number of current theoretical stances. Understandably, the syntactocentric positions of DeGraff and Lefebvre are discussed in several chapters. Personally, I found the last chapter of Part I, "The Founder Principle versus the Creole Prototype: Squaring Theory with Data" (pp. 142–159), most enlightening. In it, McWhorter takes issue with the superstratist position, traditionally well represented among the French creolists around Robert Chaudenson but recently also defended by Salikoko Mufwene in (mostly) English writing. According to Mufwene's Founder Principle (the founders of a colony were the first whites whose linguistic input is therefore deemed crucial in creole formation), "1. Early plantation slaves spoke not creoles, but close approximations of the lexifier. 2. Even

creoles are simply varieties of their lexifiers. 3. Nothing distinguishes creoles from other varieties that have undergone extensive language contact. 4. *Creole* is not an empirically valid classificational term. 5. One language cannot be more or less ‘creole’ than another.” (p. 145). McWhorter elegantly argues that regional varieties of e.g. French do not fully account for the make-up of today’s creoles and that creoles must already have arisen during the early phase of a colony when numerical disproportions between population groups were not yet important so that creole speakers most probably acquired both the creole and the lexifier language. The Creole Prototype and its gradient nature counter the remaining working hypotheses of the Founder Principle.

There are, of course, minor inaccuracies as in any volume of this size. Contrary to McWhorter’s affirmation (p. 23), acrolectal varieties of Cape Verdean have retained verbal morphology to an extent which does parallel the situation in Réunionnais. There is an obvious explanation for the existence of noncompositional derivational morphology in Haitian French Creole (pp. 25–26): the affixes may have been borrowed from French as part of unanalyzed lexical items. While McWhorter claims that the most likely source for the Palenquero anterior marker *-ba* is Spanish/Portuguese *acabar* ‘to finish’ (p. 237), Iberocreolists would cite the Spanish/Portuguese imperfect ending as the most likely source albeit allowing for the converging influence of morphemes like Mandingo *ban* ‘to finish’ and the Mandyak preterite suffix *-bá* (cf. e.g. Bartens 1995: 38; 65; 273). Palenquero also appears to have developed a distinction between alienable and inalienable possession (Moniño 2002), quoted as an example of un-creole frills by McWhorter (p. 60).

The author states in the Preface (p. 1) that “very few readers will have the occasion to read the anthology in its entirety, and for that reason, there are various cases where I decided that allowing the overlaps was the best choice.” While it is not quite clear to me why readers would not read the entire volume, the overlaps are infortuitous in a few rare cases: e.g. after arguing for the incorporation of intertwined languages under the umbrella of the concept of a creole language in Ch. 10, intertwined languages are cited as an outcome of language contact clearly distinct from creoles in Ch. 11 (p. 267).

Summarizing, the anthology contains the writings of the scholar who has tried to innovate the field of Creole Studies the most systematically

over the past decade. It is obligatory reading for anyone interested in creoles and in the theoretical issues related to them.

References

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