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RACE, RACIALISM, AND THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE EVOLUTION IN AMERICA*

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1. Preliminaries

The notion of ‘race’ has often been invoked in linguistics either to dispel social biases or to explain sociolinguistic behavior. In the first case, the typical assertion is that the language variety one speaks is determined by his/her social environment, not by his/her “race” constructed as a biological notion. For instance, an African American child who has been raised in a European American family or has grown up in a predominantly European American middle-class neighborhood speaks like this population with which he/she has interacted regularly, despite the “racial” differences that distinguish him/her from them. Cases have also been reported of European Americans socializing the most with African Americans and speaking like the latter (see, e.g., Hatala 1976, Labov 1980, Jacobs-Huey 1997). The second case is consistent with the first in that in the United States, for instance, communicative networks are largely determined by the members’ ethnic/racial affiliation, making it possible to speak of ways of speaking that are particularly African American or European American, although there is more obvious

regional variation in the latter case.¹ In this chapter, I question the preconceived notion of ‘race’ as biologically-based, which both cases share.

The conception of ‘race’ as biologically defined has been taken for granted in linguistics. No attention has been paid to the fact that most biologists and physical anthropologists treat ‘race’ as a social construct, as explained in Section 2. I wish to argue that the practice of both sociolinguistics and genetic linguistics can improve by adopting the biologists’ and anthropologists’ conception of race.

However, the following question arises among others: What can we make of the cases of African Americans who speak like European Americans and vice versa? As unsurprising as they are, they are nonetheless atypical in the United States. So, is it the biological or social conception of ‘race’ that makes them atypical? I maintain the traditional position that the particular idiolect a speaker ends up developing largely reflects his/her socialization practice, including the particular individuals he/she has

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¹ Experts will undoubtedly recognize a gross oversimplification in this perspective, which is essentially an outsider’s, non-European American one. It ignores more typically rural varieties such as Appalachian, Old Amish, and Ocrakoke Englishes. It also overlooks the fact that, until relatively late in the mid-20th century, it was common to distinguish European American varieties by nationality, such as German and Italian Englishes. Consistent with my the discussion in Section 2, the gradual disappearance of these distinctions can be correlated with changes in the ways race and ethnicity have been defined in the history of the United States and how the boundaries have collapsed between some groups but not others. They do not deny the observation that Americans have traditionally socialized primarily along ethnic lines.

usually interacted and/or sought to align himself/herself with.² Nonetheless, ‘race’ as a social construct has everything to do with the way an individual winds up speaking, especially in multilectal or multilingual societies in which linguistic variation is correlated with cultural and racial or ethnic variation. In societies such as the United States, “race” affects “population structure,” determining which other members of his/her society an individual interacts with and therefore which other speakers he/she wishes to identify with. This explains why African Americans and European Americans who do not speak varieties associated with their races are considered atypical.

My position is simply a consequence of another common and well-justified working assumption in linguistics: while humans are genetically endowed with a language faculty – also identified as Universal Grammar – competence in a particular language is a learned aptitude. A speaker works actively to develop it, largely influenced by his/her social ecology. Independent of his/her personal skills, the tacit knowledge that a speaker develops in his/her language is largely determined by the particular varieties (sets of particular idiolects) he/she has been exposed to. Thus, we cannot expect a speaker who has been exposed only to Midwestern white middle class English to have features of African American English in their idiolect, unless these are also peculiarities of the particular vernaculars spoken by the white speakers he/she has interacted with. Neither

² The strong adherence of modern linguistics to Cartesianism should not lead us to ignore that individuals vary as much in their mental aptitudes as in their physical skills. Even if language learners had been exposed to identical sets of utterances, subject to identical interference or “noise” factors, they would not necessarily develop identical linguistics competences from that common experience.

can we expect an African immigrant or his/her children to adopt African American English peculiarities unless they have socialized regularly with speakers of this sociolect.

I am also concerned in this chapter with positions defended in linguistics over the past few decades that raise the following question: To what extent have we emancipated ourselves from the dominant 19th-century ideology in Europe that considered European languages and cultures as superior, more evolved, or more refined than their non-European counterparts? Overall, linguists have presented themselves as fully emancipated from social biases that, for instance, posited a distinction between “languages of culture” and those that supposedly convey no “civilization” or were not considered sophisticated enough to express western European cultures. Then, anticipating Darwin (1871), Schleicher (1863, 1869), for instance, went as far as to declare that the structures of some languages, especially of those with isolating morphosyntax, were less evolved than the fusional morphology of (Indo-)European languages. His position reflected another then common assumption that some populations were biologically and/or culturally less evolved than others. It thus became customary to speak of primitive languages, in the same way some races were considered evolutionary inferior to others.³

³ Darwin (1871) never clearly says that some languages are primitive. As a matter of fact, he observes that languages of “savage” or “barbarous” races (his terms) are much more complex than the rudiments spoken by our hominid ancestors. However, he speaks so much of, on the one hand, differential evolution, selection, and perfection, and, on the other, mental, intellectual, emotional differences among the races that it is difficult not to think of his theory as “ranking” languages of the different human races (qua geographical “subspecies” of mankind) at different levels of evolution then understood as ‘progress toward perfection’. After all, he compares the highest, “anthropomorphous apes,” such as the gorilla, to the “lower/inferior races,” viz., the Australian aborigines, the “negro,” and the “aborigines of S[outh] America.” For similar assessments of Darwin’s position, see Gould (1993:266-269) and Radick (2002).

To be sure, linguists no longer subscribe to such outrageous views today. However, I wonder whether hypotheses such as the following are not a legacy of the same 19th-century assumptions about non-European populations, their minds, and their languages: 1) creoles were made by children and thus represent grammatical structures the closest to specifications of Universal Grammar (Bickerton 1984a, 1984b); and 2) from a phylogenetic perspective, pidgins give us insights into the nature of the human protolanguage (Bickerton 1990). If their structures are not protolinguistic, they are the closest thing to it.⁴

It is hard to miss parallelisms between Bickerton's hypotheses and the views expressed by some 19th-century French philologists-cum-creolists who associate the emergence of creoles with "the phonetic and grammatical genius, so to speak, of an inferior race" (Vinson 1882, 1883, my translation). Along with others such as Bertrand-Bocandé (1849), Baissac (1880), and Adam (1882, 1883), Vinson assumed the minds of African slaves to be child-like and their languages, the reflection of these minds, to be "primitive," "instinctive," "in their natural state," and "simple." An important difference is that Bickerton does not assert that the minds of "creators" of creoles are primitive, they only produced, according to his language bioprogram hypothesis, grammatical systems that are essentially protolinguistic. Another is that while the French scholars favored substratist accounts, Bickerton has favored a universalist account based on a language

⁴ Bickerton does not invoke pidgins alone in his quest for a window into the phylogenetic protolanguage. He also discusses child language (under two years of age), cases like those of Genie, who could not develop some significant syntax after being deprived for so long from participation in verbal communication, and apes trained to communicate with humans using some primitive symbolic code. What I find particularly disturbing is the hasty way in which he lumps all these cases together, in spite of the historical evidence about the development of (creoles and) pidgins that suggests otherwise (Mufwene 2006a).

bioprogram putatively accessible only to children. One can thus see why, as I observe below, Bickerton shares with substratists some of the same mistaken working assumptions that have been inherited from 19th-century linguistics.

Against such questionable working assumptions, DeGraff (2003, 2004, 2005) has done an impeccable job of documenting double standards in the ways the development and structures of creole language varieties have been accounted for in comparison with other language varieties that emerged around the same time. He has basically espoused Mufwene's (2001) uniformitarian position in arguing that creoles have evolved as naturally as non-creole language varieties, by the same restructuring processes, subject to peculiarities of the ecologies of their emergence. Below I adduce arguments that support DeGraff's position against Bickerton's (2004) response to it.

"Race" also comes to bear in studies of language evolution in the United States, especially regarding differences in the ways that English has evolved among African Americans and European Americans, a differential phenomenon dubbed since Labov & Harris (1986) as "divergence" of white and black vernaculars, regardless of how old we think the process is (cf. Bailey & Maynor 1987). The process has been made more obvious by the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, which, according to Labov (2001), has affected only urban European Americans, indicating that Americans continue to socialize along color or "race" lines.

That "race" bears differentially on language evolution has also been made obvious by Wolfram's (2000) study of the African American youth in Hyde County, North Carolina. Members of this group prefer to identify with urban African Americans rather than with

their (grand-)parents, whose speech they find too close to that of their European American neighbors.⁵ In all these cases the reason does not seem to be other than what was articulated above: “race” (under any interpretation, to be clarified below) can play an important role in a population’s structure, determining who can socialize and identify with whom; it can therefore be an important dimension of language speciation.

While none of the above approaches appears to be misguided, we would be remiss in not reexamining the ways in which we have accounted for differences in patterns of language evolution between descendants of Africans and Europeans in the New World. For instance, have the reasons typically invoked to account for structural differences between white and black vernaculars been validated by other empirical considerations such as the socio-economic history of North America? Is it evident that language contact is more significant in the evolution of European languages among descendants of Africans than among people of European descent?

Other questions can be asked too. For instance, does the fact that there has been much more research on language varieties of descendants of slaves than on those of indentured servants of the same colonial period reflect some of the biases that linguists themselves have inherited from the society in which they have evolved, although they typically do not endorse the most overt and offensive of its racial biases? Is there anything disturbing about the fact that the nonstandard vernaculars of descendants of Africans have typically

⁵ Cukor-Avila & Bailey’s (1996) longitudinal and apparent-time analysis of language evolution among their informants in Brazos Valley, Texas, had led to a similar conclusion, showing the younger generation aiming at urban variants which maximize differences between European American and African American varieties.

been compared with standard varieties of their lexifiers, although the socioeconomic histories of the relevant territories suggest that the comparisons should have been made with varieties that have evolved from the nonstandard vernaculars of the farmers and indentured servants with whom the slaves interacted? Is there a good reason for assuming, as the current literature has suggested, that only varieties spoken by descendants of Africans have “deviated” from some evolutionary norm followed by the vernaculars now spoken by populations of European descent? Do today’s nonstandard varieties have similar evolutionary histories to those of the standard varieties?

There is no doubt that “race” as a social factor bearing on population structure must be invoked to account for the differential evolution of English into African American and European American vernaculars in the United States, as well as into creole and non-creole varieties. The question is whether it is a “sufficient condition” and whether it has had no influence on the linguists themselves, for instance, in privileging analyses that appear to be questionable in the least. I address the first part of this question in Mufwene (2001), showing that a host of other socio-economic and structural ecological factors matter too. In the present essay, I focus on the second half of the question.

In other words, have we linguists been so much influenced by racialism in the New World that we could hardly have noticed what is missing from, or has gone wrong with, traditional accounts of the differential evolution of language among people of African descent and those of European descent? For instance, as pointed out by Lippi-Green (1997:184-185), is there nothing wrong with saying that the “language convergence” expected by some linguists to take place in the United States must amount to the

‘assimilation of European American linguistic patterns’ by African Americans? Although the term *convergence* does not preclude this particular kind of evolution, doesn’t the expectation on the part of linguists suggest that something would be anomalous with influence in the opposite direction? Or does it simply reflect the established expectation among lay people?

Likewise, we can ask whether it is justified to associate the “creole continuum” with “decreolization” and thereby suggest that it is of a different nature from the kinds of continua and community-internal variation evidenced by other language communities (Mufwene 1994)? Can we continue to think of creoles as “exceptional” developments (DeGraff 2003) and in fact as less “pure” than other languages? To what extent have linguists not fully emancipated themselves from (some of) the racial biases that linger in the societies that have fashioned them? However, I cannot address any of these numerous issues without articulating beforehand what *race* has meant in American society and scholarship since the 19th century. This is the focus of the next section.

2. Race and ethnicity in American history

As noted above, the notion of ‘race’ is far from being unequivocal. Two main interpretations emerge from the literature today: one biological and the other social. Overall, most biologists and physical anthropologists have avoided defining ‘race’ biologically (see below), although, as pointed out by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2002 electronic edition), the term was originally adopted to identify subspecies and applied even to non-humans. For both biologists and anthropologists, no particular genotypic features can be used reliably to define ‘race’, a reality that Darwin (1871) was already

confronted with.⁶ There can be more genotypic variation among individuals grouped in the same ‘race’ than between members of different ‘races’. Moreover, while members of different biological species rarely interbreed, members of different races can and often do, as they use the “same” reproductive mechanisms and the principal constraints on mating practices are cultural. Thus, Cavalli-Sforza & Cavalli-Sforza (1995) find it more plausible to speak of the human race than to attempt to justify any number of races into which the human population can be categorized.

This is basically the position endorsed by Marks (2002), who deplores the way some social Darwinists have misguidedly invoked race to promote racist agenda, for instance, by claiming that particular populations are biologically predetermined to have superior intellectual skills or athletic fitness (see Sarich & Miele 2004 for a more recent example). He points out that this is a kind of variation that can as easily be accounted for by the social ecologies of the populations that have been investigated. His position is shared by several other anthropologists, as evidenced by the American Association of Anthropology’s and the American Association of Physical Anthropology’s (1999) “Statements on race” and by articles in the same issue of the *American Anthropologist*.

The current anthropologists’ position is that ‘race’ is fundamentally a social notion

⁶ Quite aware of the fact that humans can interbreed across race lines, that races “graduate into each other” in ways that are independent of “intercrossing,” and that members of different races share a lot of physical, intellectual, and emotional properties among them, Darwin answers the question of whether or not races are similar to species by identifying them with “sub-species” (p. 182). Surprisingly, he also claims that the “intellectual and social faculties of [primeval] man [before the exodus from Africa] could hardly have been inferior in extreme degree to those possessed at present by the lowest savages” (187). He simply ignored empirical evidence, choosing instead to endorse the social biases of his time. An interesting question is whether modern students of language evolution are not following Darwin’s mistake.

that is unfortunately deeply embedded in social Darwinism. This tradition has posited competition and selection as the state and mechanism that account for ranking some populations as superior to others, which are assumed to be less advanced in the evolutionary trajectory of the human species. Nowadays, like biologists, anthropologists reject the biological significance of phenotypes such as complexion, eye or nose shape, eye color, size of lips, hair texture, and body shape and size, on which racial distinctions have typically been based, because they cannot reliably be correlated with race-specific genotypes. There is a lot of variation within every accepted race along these particular definitional criteria.

Although variation in human populations has been noted since antiquity, it is in the 16th century that it was especially exploited by some Europeans to justify colonization. Since the 18th century, it has been manipulated and redefined in various ways in the interest of assigning citizenship discriminatively in especially the former settlement colonies of the Americas and Australia, which were considered to be expansions of Europe.⁷ As noted above, promoters of such agenda have indeed also associated some stereotypic behavioral characteristics with some races, disregarding socio-ecological factors that affect particular evolutionary directions by natural selection and can clearly also be invoked to account for these peculiarities. The approach has rightfully also been characterized as “scientific racism,” a more negative designation than the original “social

⁷ Indeed Crosby (1986) explains settlement colonization as the European quest for territories where they could create better Europes than what they had left behind.

Darwinism.” The latter name is due to the fact that, although he was opposed to racism (Gould 1993), Darwin (1871) also spoke of populations, races, and languages that were more evolved than others, which he considered “primitive” or “savage.” (See also Radick 2002 for an informative discussion of the issue.)

Smedley (1999) argues that although older civilizations knew of geographical variation between human populations, they did not use ‘race’ as the basis of social discrimination. According to him,

The term *race* had been used to refer to humans occasionally since the sixteenth century in the English language but was rarely used to refer to populations in the slave trade. It was a mere classificatory term like *kind*, *type*, or even *breed*, or *stock*, and it had no clear meaning until the eighteenth century. During this time, the English began to have wider experiences with varied populations and gradually developed attitudes and beliefs that had not appeared before in Western history and which reflected a new kind of understanding and interpretation of human differences (1999:694).⁸

As noted above, the term *race* was used in biology to designate “subgroups of an individual species with distinctive phenotypes” (electronic *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2002). It is with the subsequent European colonial usage of the term to rank different populations that the ideologies of *mission civilisatrice* or *the white man’s burden* would emerge, along with the pretension by Europeans to attend to the “needs” of populations they considered to be inferior races.⁹

Although in today’s North America, racialism typically applies to relations between

⁸ Indeed, according to Tate (1968), it took Virginia’s English colonists until the late 17th century, about 50 years after the arrival first Africans (then indentured servants), before they separated them from white indentured servants and enslaved them for life.

⁹ It is noteworthy that the term *rank* is excessively (mis)used by Darwin (1871) for *class(ify)*.

Whites and non-Whites, according to a gradation of “races” associated with lightness of complexion, one need not go farther back than the 19th century to notice that today’s “white” race (also identified euphemistically as *Caucasian*) has not always been as unified or integrated. For instance, southern and eastern Europeans did not then count as Whites (Guglielmo & Salerno 2003), nor did the Irish (Harrison 1995). As the criteria changed over time and it became possible to include these populations, questions arose about whether populations of mixed Native American and European descent (“half-breeds”) should count as Whites (James 2001:243). To date, the question of the classification of Hispanics remains equally unresolved, with the term *white Hispanic* suggesting that a person so designated is less white than his/her non-Hispanic white counterpart (James 2001:242-243).

The above concerns reflect the old preoccupation with distinguishing a putatively pure white race from others. As the term *race* became controversial, the term *ethnicity* was introduced, curiously to be applied more to non-Whites than to Whites (Tabouret-Keller 1999, Brutt-Griffler 2005), as evidenced by designations such as *ethnic foods*, *ethnic cuisine*, and *ethnic neighborhood*, which are typically associated with non-European customs. Thus, the concept of ‘ethnicity’ has often functioned as a euphemism for that of ‘race’ (Harrison 1995), ironically also used in a more exclusionary fashion. Fenton (2003:22) tries to articulate the difference, claiming that “race makes explicit reference to physical or ‘visible’ difference as the primary marker of difference and

He constantly “ranks” races even when he means ‘class(ify)’.

inequality,” thus to phenotypes, whereas in the case of ethnicity, “the point of reference of difference is typically culture.” However, he also adds that often “the group referred to is ‘other’ (foreign, exotic, minority) to some majority who are presumed not to be ‘ethnic’.” As also pointed out by Harrison (1995), uses of the terms *race* and *ethnicity* overlap, suggesting we must be cautious when we use them to explain linguistic behavior or differential language evolution. Below I expose some problems endemic to linguistics.

3. ‘Race’ in linguistics

3.1. James (2001:244) makes a distinction between “scholars who study race and racial dynamics” and “those who routinely use the concept of race in their studies” without questioning it. The former “study race and ethnicity as social phenomena [and] understand race as dynamic and situational,” whereas the latter “tend to treat [race] as a primordial, or fixed characteristic.” They use it “as a *cause* [or basis] of a myriad of social processes and distinctions.” Linguists appear to fall in the latter category. The question is how much needs rethinking. For this we must return again to the 19th century.

Marked also by the beginning of the exploitation colonization of Africa and Asia (sanctioned by the 1884-1885 Berlin Treaty),¹⁰ the 19th century is indeed the period when racialism becomes particularly strong among Europeans. The practice finds support in

¹⁰ This distinction is explained in Mufwene (2001, 2002, 2004a). Before the second half of the 19th century, European contacts with populations of both continents were limited to trade, with “settlements” limited to trade forts here and there on the coast. The exploitation colonization period is associated with the political and economic control of large territories, which would evolve into nation states, by the colonizing nations.

Darwin's extension of his natural selection to human races, claiming that some are less evolved than others. This can be correlated with Schleicher's (1863) ranking of morphosyntactic patterns, suggesting that the isolating type is the most primitive and the European fusional type is the most advanced. It is in this context that 19th-century French philologists such as Adam (1882, 1883) and Vinson (188) could claim that the structures of sub-Saharan African languages reflected the child-like mental state of their speakers, whose speech organs were considered too "clumsy" to produce the "refined" systems of European languages.¹¹ Creoles were then considered as aberrations, because they are not pure, being mixed, and Hugo Schuchardt's interest in them was scorned.

All these academic developments were taking place, ironically, after Sir William Jones had pointed out, in 1786, that lexical similarities between, on the one hand, Sanskrit and, on the other, English, Greek, and Latin were due to their common ancestry, not to a polygenetic coincidence nor to mutual borrowings. His discovery would lead to the hypothesis that several Indo-Iranian and most European languages belong to the same genetic family now identified as Indo-European. However, as Hutton (2000) clearly shows, this hypothesis was met with resistance among (amateur) philologists, because, as is evident from Darwin (1871), language, race, and culture were then supposed to co-evolve, hand in hand. Europeans generally believed to be so superior to other races, especially those that they had colonized. Philologists such as Maine (1861f) and Freeman

¹¹ One can easily recognize here either Darwin's (1871) influence or, as suggested by Radick (2002), the general 19th-century social ecology that influenced Darwin's own references to "primitive" and "savage" races.

(1881f) could not conceive of the possibility that, as implied by Jones' hypothesis, Aryan and Indic populations may be of the same racial stock. They considered the latter too "barbaric" (similar to the "negro") to be associated with the "civilized" Europeans, even by "adoption."¹²

Freeman argued that there was no indication of cultural or racial assimilation of the Indians to the Europeans, the Indians having presumably remained distinct in their customs and languages. He remarked that where some mingling of Europeans and non-Europeans had taken place, such as in the "West Indies," this had produced a "grotesque imitation of the English ways," suggesting that "real assimilation [of the kind that had obtained in Europe relative to Greek civilization] is impossible" (quoted by Hutton 2000:65). Referring to Hispanicization in the Americas, he said, according to Hutton (*ibidem*), that "the Europeans have sunk to a lower level, in contrast to the Greeks' ability to raise the inhabitants of Sicily and Southern Italy to theirs."

Interestingly European travelers to the southern parts of the United States and the Caribbean in the late 18th and in early 19th centuries claimed that similarities between Whites' and Blacks' English varieties were due to the corruption of the former by the latter (Brasch 1981). The main culprit was suspected to be the influence of black nannies on white children. The success of writers such as Ambrose Gonzales, who had spent years of destitution among former slaves in coastal South Carolina, in representing

¹² Acquisition of civilization by "adoption" was a concession that could be made for other presumably less evolved Europeans such as the Irish and southern, Mediterranean Europeans other than the Ancient Greeks.

Gullah faithfully did not help sway opinions from this misrepresentation of language evolution in North America. His introduction to *The black border* (1922), in which he blames the “quaintness” of Gullah and divergence from white American English on the “clumsy tongues” and the “mental inferiority” of black Africans, did not help the situation, although it drew more attention to (his rendition of) it.

As argued in Mufwene (2001), history suggests that the European indentured servants, with whom the slaves interacted regularly, played no smaller part than the Africans in the development of American southern English. As suggested by Krapp (1924), Kurath (1928), and other early dialectologists, the particular way the plantation colonies evolved from the earliest homesteads (in which the slaves were a minority and integrated) limited the influence that African substrate languages could have exerted.

In a nutshell (see Chaudenson 2001 and Mufwene 2001 for more details), the homesteads were integrated communities consisting of low-class Europeans (free and indentured servants) speaking nonstandard varieties and of a minority of Africans. The colonial populations then grew more by birth than by importation. Creole children (the locally born) then learned to speak the emerging nonstandard koinés of these initial communities as their vernaculars, regardless of race. The adult African-born captives were in full-fledged communicative settings that precluded the development of pidgins as reduced means of communication, although they must have spoken second-language varieties of the colonial European koinés. Limited importations of more slaves created situations in which they remained minorities and could impact the dominant models spoken by the European and creole populations only minimally, although the possibility

of substrate influence would increase dramatically by the time of the plantation societies, when the bozal slaves, African-born, would become the majority and the newcomers would often learn the local vernacular from seasoned slaves, who were also African-born.

Thus, the creole slaves of the homestead phase became the strongest counterforce slowing down the spread and significance of substrate influence in the structures of the emergent creole vernaculars. By continuing to make available native, non-creole linguistic models to the bozal slaves, they provided the latter with variable opportunities to decrease the proportion of xenolectal elements in their competence (see Mufwene 2001, 2004b). History shows indeed that they could not stop the inevitable, but for quite some time, they must have kept it to a minimum.

The earliest creole vernaculars in the New World do not seem to have emerged before the 18th century. The earliest references to slaves' speech peculiarities date only from the same time, though we cannot deny the existence of bozal slaves' interlanguages (i.e., transitional varieties) throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods until the end of the slave trade. In any case, what we cannot deny at all about the same period is that the linguistic inputs from the European and creole populations of the homestead phase, who spoke no creole vernaculars then, consisted of nonstandard vernaculars. Variants peculiar to standard varieties were hardly part of the linguistic picture for the slaves who would develop creoles. The Gonzales style of account for peculiarities of Gullah and similar varieties, an account akin to the baby-talk theory, had no historical backing at all. The question is why it was taken so seriously in linguistics.

By the time we get to Boas (1894), the myth of inferior races and of the coevolution

of language and race has been partly put to rest,¹³ although an alternative would persist in “scientific racism” (e.g. Sarich & Miele 2004) which would associate specific races with specific skills. (See Caspari 2003 for an informative historical perspective.) Unsurprisingly, the darker races would be associated mostly with somatic skills, whereas the lighter ones with higher intellectual fitness.

3.2. Although modern linguistics has played no role in scientific racism, the question remains of whether its practitioners have really emancipated themselves from some of the working assumptions that were typical of philology and the early stages of genetic linguistics in the 19th century. Have we given up the myth of “pure” languages little influenced by others with which they came in contact? If we have, has race not been a disfranchising factor in the ways we have accounted for varieties of European languages developed and spoken primarily by non-European populations?

I address these questions below, without necessarily suggesting that the linguists associated with these particular research areas are racist. I simply wish to show that, whether or not we acknowledge it, today’s linguistics is still a partial tributary of the 19th century. As innovative as he was, Ferdinand de Saussure did not trash every linguistics legacy from the 19th century, no more than did Noam Chomsky relative to descriptivism and structuralism. All progress in science is relative. Revolutions are typically partial and

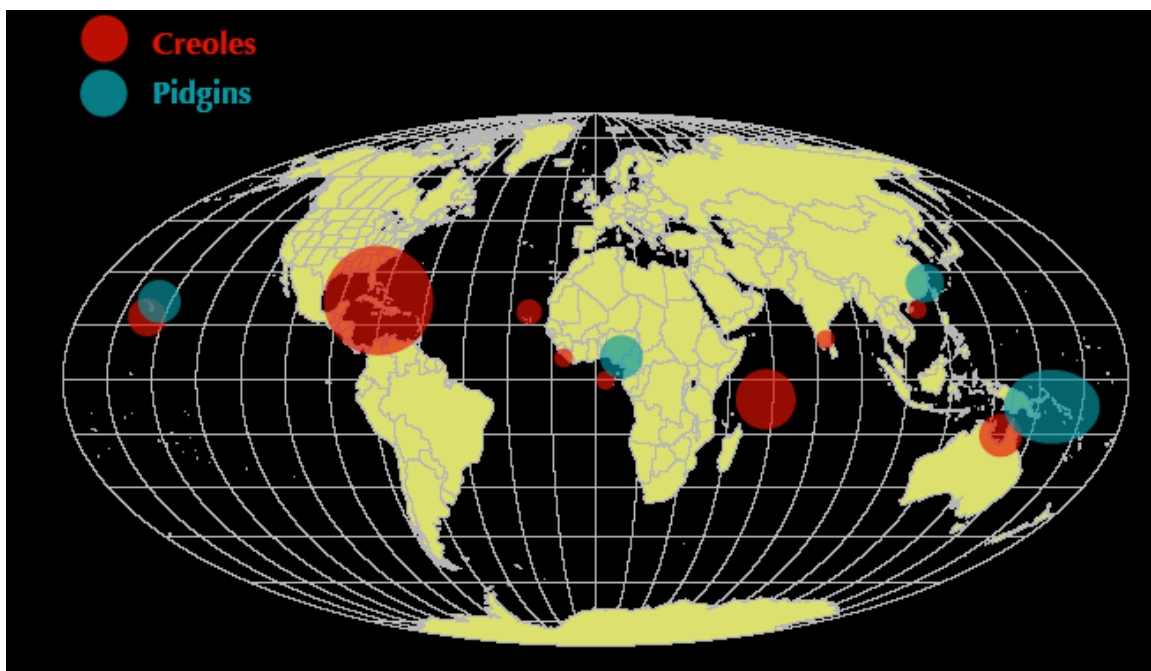
¹³ This observation applies only to scholarly works. It is also dubious whether the myth of inferior races ever dies completely. In the mid-20th century, Claude Lévi-Strauss would still find it necessary to use the lectures he was invited to give at UNESCO, in 1953 (“Race et histoire”) and 1971 (“Race et culture”) to chastise Westerners for being ethnocentric and interpreting racial and cultural differences as meaning the superiority of the white race and western civilizations. (See Levi-Strauss 2001.)

remain in some ways continuations of the traditions against which their authors argue. It is not unwarranted to reexamine our working assumptions every now and then, before we stray too far on mistaken paths.

The traditional stipulation of creoles as separate languages, rather than as dialects of the European languages they have evolved from, is a convenient starting point. To be sure, we no longer think that these recent colonial vernaculars are aberrations or adulterations of European languages by inferior minds and speech organs. On the other hand, the literature has been ambivalent over whether they are natural phenomena. Linguists have accounted for their emergence in ways that have privileged language contact and mixing over the inheritance of structural materials from their so-called “lexifiers.”¹⁴ Creoles appear to be crying out loud and clear that we reexamine our working assumptions on language evolution. Yet we seem to have refused to learn from them their “side of the story” and have chosen a priori to disfranchise them as unusual developments from a prior “pulverization” of European languages (McWhorter 2001) or non-ordinary “creations” by children, who allegedly assigned syntax to the “syntaxless” pidgins of their parents (Bickerton 1981, 1984a, 1999). Moreover, their putative pidgin ancestors have been claimed by Bickerton (1990) to offer us clues about the earliest specimens of human language (*protolanguage*) invented by our hominid ancestors about 200,000 to 50,000 years ago. We have made no effort to verify this loaded speculation.

¹⁴ The term *lexifier* itself reflects that “exceptionality” or “non-ordinary” paradigm of languages which, as expressed by Thomason (2001), have [unusually] inherited most of their vocabularies from one source but the essence of their grammars from elsewhere, regardless of whether this is the bioprogram or some substrate languages.

As observed by Chaudenson (1992f and Mufwene 1996f), none of the traditional assumptions regarding the development of creoles are supported by the socioeconomic histories of the territories where creoles have evolved. Quite interesting about the pidgin ancestry of creoles is the geographical complementary distribution of the places where the two kinds of language varieties have evolved. Pidgins, even those that have complexified into expanded pidgins, evolved in trade colonies, whereas creoles developed in plantation settlement colonies. In Hawai'i, where both varieties are claimed to have evolved, pidgins are associated with plantations, whereas creoles are associated with the city (Roberts 1998, 1999), contrary to the plantation settlement colonies of the New World and Indian Ocean. In the latter, creoles typically developed on the plantations, and closer approximations of the European languages developed in the city and in smaller rural estates, where the non-Europeans were minorities, in equal numbers as, or just slightly more numerous than, the European settlers and indentured servants with whom they interacted regularly. There was no (rigid) residential race-based segregation between the Europeans and non-Europeans in non-plantation settings.



Map 1: World-wide distribution of creoles and pidgins “lexified” by European languages

One important factor which the settings where pidgins developed share with those that produced creoles is that there had populations with overwhelming non-European majorities and at some point the proportion of non-fluent speakers (the bozal slaves on the plantations of settlement colonies) surpassed that of fluent speakers. The latter consisted of the interpreters in the case of trade colonies and of the early creole slaves in settlement colonies. Another shared factor of creoles and pidgins is that they have both been considered evolutionarily less normal and natural than non-creole languages (Hock & Joseph 1996) and therefore without the usual genetic ties to their ancestors (Thomason & Kaufman 1988, Thomason 2001), because of the critical role of language contact in their emergence.

I won't return to all the arguments articulated in Mufwene (2001, 2003, 2004b, 2005)

against these assumptions. More relevant to the focus of this paper is the question of the (relative) purity of a language. Although creoles (and pidgins) are no longer considered as aberrations, they have been misconstrued as too mixed and therefore less “pure” than other languages. If it is true that language contact has played a certain role in the evolution of, for instance, English and the Romance languages, creoles must, according to the received doctrine, have surpassed the threshold of the amount of xenolectal influence tolerable by a particular language in order to remain in the same genetic family.

The problem is that nobody has articulated in any way what that threshold is. Nor has anybody shown to what extent creoles such as Gullah and Louisiana Creole are greater evolutionary discontinuities from their “lexifiers” than, say, Old Amish English and Louisiana French, respectively. Nobody has shown in what way these particular creoles are younger than their non-creole counterparts, nor in what ways the latter are less “restructured.” As a matter of fact nobody has told us what “restructuring” actually means; Mufwene (1996, 2001) is exceptional in proposing a definition. Nobody has operationalized the notion of ‘restructuring’ in a way that enables us to tell the extent to which the evolution of non-creoles owes nothing, or less, to this process.¹⁵ In fact nobody has offered a yardstick for measuring variation in extent of restructuring even among creoles themselves. History suggests that the input itself cannot have been identical from

¹⁵ Mufwene analogizes restructuring to feature recombination in biology, making allowance for features from substrate languages to mix, in variable proportions, with those of the “lexifier” but mostly making it clear that features from the “lexifier” itself recombine often in novel ways, especially when, at the communal level, they originate from different dialects. Restructuring is the null hypothesis in idiolects, as every speaker develops their idiolects selectively from inputs from diverse speakers (Mufwene 2002b, 2004b).

one setting to another!

How can a discipline have propounded such strong hypotheses about the language varieties of particular populations without sticking to the same empirical standards of proof or plausible justification as for the non-creole colonial varieties? Why have we assumed so easily that creoles have not evolved from their “lexifiers” but have rather been “created” *de novo* under unusual conditions of language contact? Does the condition of being a slave or contract laborer affect the mechanism of language “transmission” in a way that can justifiably be characterized as a “break in the transmission of the lexifier.” How could there have been a break when the term *lexifier* itself suggests normal transmission of the vocabulary?¹⁶ Because the overwhelming proportion of the lexicon was inherited from the lexifier there cannot have been a break in the transmission of the “lexifier.” Or have creolists suggested that the break involves the “transmission” of grammar/structure? What does it mean to have a situation in which the vocabulary of a language is normally “transmitted” but the grammar is not? Does it mean that one can learn a language in a naturalistic setting paying attention only to the vocabulary but (almost) none at all to patterns of pronunciation and usage? Or is grammar expected to be transmitted intact or with little modification. These questions and more bear on the

¹⁶ Relexificationists may object to my objection and claim that creoles have borrowed only the lexicon, or rather the phonological forms of the lexical items, but have associated them with semantic and other grammatical properties of the dominant substrate languages. The whole relexificationist account of the development of creoles has repeatedly been questioned in creolistics. I need not repeat the literature here. More interested readers should see DeGraff (2002) for the most elaborate and convincing refutation. Regarding the claim that the phonetic shapes of lexical items from the “lexifier” were generally retained intact, note that it is ironically at the phonetic level that interference from previously spoken languages is the most obvious.

practice of historical linguistics and historical dialectology, especially on whether or not changes that have produced a particular variety constitute an evolutionary anomaly. To date, if they have been addressed at all, they have in ways that can more easily be associated with socially inherited racialism than with any convincing linguistic arguments.

In a somewhat different vein, isn't there anything bizarre with the fact that descriptions of creoles have focused more on features which distinguish them from their "lexifiers" (however poorly construed these are) than on features they share with the latter? Are creoles incomplete languages, due apparently to what has been characterized as "imperfect language learning"? If a creole shares structural features with (some varieties of) its "lexifier," would it not be normal to assume that the structures have been inherited from the latter but have not necessarily originated in some bioprogram or in some substrate languages? Part of learning another language naturally is the assumption that one must learn to express oneself with new devices, hence with new lexical and grammatical materials (including new combinatoric rules), except when similarities are noticed. The default expectation in this case should be that the learner tries to determine how different the target devices are, although his/her perceptions and analyses are sometimes incorrect. Relexificationists should address the question of whether there are speakers anywhere who expect the target language to differ from theirs only on the lexical or phonological level.

Why have we subscribed to hypotheses that common sense should have advised us to question seriously, especially as our knowledge of colonial history, more precisely of the

peopling of the colonies and of the ensuing population structures has improved? Or, despite our rejections of the baby-talk hypothesis, have we kept a legacy of the 19th century in assuming that some races must have their own peculiar ways of appropriating languages of the dominant populations? Note that the same literature that has professed all or some of the above disputable assumptions about creoles has not sufficiently invoked variation in the ecologies of language “transmission” as part of the explanation for why creoles diverge in some, but not all, of their structures from their “lexifiers.” “Imperfect learning” is no explanation if this applies to some extent, however variably, to all cases of language acquisition and no particular yardstick has been proposed to tell one kind of “imperfect learning” from another (Mufwene 2004b). Segregation is not a sufficient explanation if, as history suggests, model speakers of the colonial European languages need not have been European (Chaudenson 1992, 2001, Mufwene 2001). Since variation must have been rampant in colonial varieties of the “lexifiers,” segregation entails no more than fostering divergent evolutions, because the segregated communities must have inherited different patterns of variation, in which the same variants would not keep the same strengths even if they were attested in all the communities. Such disruptions of the earlier “balance of power” among the variants would trigger divergent evolutionary trajectories.

Our preoccupation with the divergence of varieties spoken by descendants of non-Europeans also raises some concerns. For instance, consider polities such as the United States and Australia, where the vast majority of European populations today have parents or ancestors who originated from continental Europe and therefore did not speak English.

Why is language contact not assumed to have been a central factor in the way that English has evolved among them? Why has it not been invoked to account as much for the divergence of American and Australian Englishes from British Englishes as for the loss of their heritage languages? Why has there been more emphasis on separation by the oceans separating North America and Australia from the British motherland than on contact?

Let us assume, like Chaudenson (1992, 2001, 2003), that the (nonstandard varieties of the) Western European languages that came in contact in the colonies were structurally more similar to each other than they were to African languages. Let us also assume that such typological kinship would have made it easier for Europeans to learn each other's language more faithfully.¹⁷ Does minimal divergence between the colonial varieties from their metropolitan counterparts entail lack of restructuring?¹⁸ Are we justified in speaking

¹⁷ I maintain, as in Mufwene (2001), that even first "language acquisition" is a (re)construction process that is imperfect, as no speaker replicates no other speaker. "Faithful" learning is a misnomer and a misconception of convenience for those cases where it can be argued that the divergence from the target is minimal.

¹⁸ The reader should realize that none of these scenarios is the full story. The colonial history of the New World also suggests that because of national segregation among them, free, non-indentured Europeans were not under immediate pressure to shift to the language of the politically and economically dominant group. For them, the process was more gradual and spread over several generations. This gradual process, correlated with the progressive integration of the European populations, would not become significant until the 19th century. In some cases, as with the Germans, the process did not become complete until the early 20th century (Salmons 2003). This suggests that the transformation of the dominant language into its colonial varieties took place with marginal influence from speakers of other languages. The other Europeans would shift gradually after these new, colonial varieties had emerged already, with the adults' non-native accents being stigmatized and avoided by their children. This scenario is similar to that of many recent immigrants, whose children have acquired the local varieties but who have not exerted any significant influence on either the varieties spoken, say, by African Americans or those spoken by European Americans. Thus, the Africans would have anglicized before the free immigrants from continental Europe.

or “restructured” versus “non-restructured” varieties, as suggested by, e.g., Holm (1989)? Isn’t this kind of opposition questioned by the notion of “degree of restructuring” that appears in the title of Neumann-Holzschuh & Schneider (2000)? In the first place, how can one measure “degree of restructuring” (limited so far to European language varieties spoken by populations of non-European descent), when there is no common yardstick?

We can also ask whether this racial bias should not be correlated with the failure of sociolinguistics and historical dialectology in North America to have learned more from creolistics than could have been possible. Why have we not readily extended notions such as ‘speech continuum’, ‘basilect’, ‘acrolect’, and ‘basilect’ to non-creole communities? They offer adequate alternative ways of discussing the traditional stratification of dialects between standard and nonstandard varieties, bridging a wide range of productions between them that do not quite fit in these polar varieties? Is it so bad to capture the similarities they suggest between creole and non-creole speech communities? Or have we been too wedded to the stipulation that the ecologies in which creoles developed or continue to function show only differences from other ecologies?

Related to the above is the stipulation that creoles are separate languages from their “lexifiers” and from their non-creole kin which are considered as colonial dialects of the same European languages. Interestingly, linguists have ordinarily left it up to speakers to determine whether or not they speak the same language as another group, regardless of the extent of structural differences between the varieties involved (such as between classical, Koranic Arabic and vernacular varieties of Arabic). They have also typically rejected mutual intelligibility between speakers of the relevant dialects as unreliable,

except in the case of creoles (Mufwene 2001). As often as Cockney has been cited as an English dialect that is largely unintelligible to standard English speakers (an ill-defined group), nobody has ever claimed it to be a separate, non-English language. So, why have we been so dogmatic regarding creoles, disputing their speakers' assertion that they speak one of the new varieties of the relevant European language? For instance, why do we insist that Gullah and Jamaican Patwa are not English while their speakers insist that they are?¹⁹

We may ask more questions. For instance, why have we been so eager to associate the creole continuum with the decreolization-qua-debasilectalization hypothesis? Why haven't we considered the alternative that the socio-economic histories of the relevant territories and the reality of language "transmission" around us have suggested, viz., that variation in the ecologies of individual speakers' language "acquisition" would have produced the same phenomenon? With every individual speaker exposed to a different subset of primary linguistic data (produced by the particular group of speakers they have interacted with), it is impossible for all speakers of a language or dialect to develop identical grammatical systems. This is the reality that justifies the notion of 'idiolect'. As Wolfram (2000) clearly shows, even members of the same nuclear family are bound to

¹⁹ To be sure, interested tourists in Jamaica can buy T-shirts and small books teaching them "the Jamaican language." One should not forget that the merchants who have produced these products respond to an appetite for exoticism, do not represent the general sentiment of the Jamaican Patwa speaker, and spit back to their potential customers what they have learned from linguists. As Irvine (2004) shows, much of the official Jamaican literature produced for foreign investors and tourists assert that only one language is spoken in Jamaica, English, although its nonstandard variety has its own local idiosyncrasies. The same treatment applies to nonstandard varieties in other parts of the world that are difficult for outsiders to understand

vary idiolectally. Siblings of different ages do not have access to the same primary linguistic data, as they may not have been talked to in identical ways, do not have identical play groups, and do not have the same classmates nor necessarily the same teachers in the same schools. Variation in their abilities to learn and use language notwithstanding, they have not had access to identical inputs for the construction of their grammars. In situations where creoles developed, things are compounded by the fact that the linguistic models for creole children and bozal slaves alike must have varied as noticeably as in situations where English has now indigenized, as in India, Nigeria, and other former British exploitation colonies of Asia and Africa.

Thus, the synchronic facts of variation alone present a situation that is simply analogous to that of the half-empty vs. half-full bottle dilemma. Only some social bias that linguists may not have harbored consciously would have favored the decreolization hypothesis. Neither DeCamp's (1971) seminal paper on the subject matter, nor its forerunners by Schuchardt (1914) and Bloomfield (1933), nor even its follow up in, for instance, Bickerton (1973) adduce diachronic evidence to prove "decreolization." As exceptional as his study is, Rickford (1987) shows that Guyanese Creole has changed over time, not that it had debasilectalized. Only Rickford & Handler (1994) demonstrate that debasilectalization may have happened in Barbados, not necessarily also in other creole-speaking polities. As a matter of fact, Lalla and D'Costa (1990) argue against the debasilectalization of Jamaican Creole, so does Mufwene (1994) for Gullah. Nevertheless, many are linguists who continue to associate the creole continuum with "decreolization."

We could actually have considered an alternative arising from Irvine (2004), viz., both the basilects and their current acrolects have evolved from the same colonial feature pools, and they are related by the continua that have interested us simply because of the particular ways they selected structural features differentially from these pools. The received doctrine seems to have assumed unjustifiably that language practice and characteristics among descendants of Africans must be fundamentally different from their counterparts in majority-European communities. Yet, colonial history does not support this view. What have we made of the research philosophy that new kinds of data should enable us to question some of our working assumptions?²⁰

3.3. The consequences of this social bias in the practice of linguistics are far-ranging. Linguists have denied creoles any genetic connection to the European languages they have evolved from, allegedly because of the central role that contact has played in their emergence (Thomason & Kaufman 1988, Thomason 2001).²¹ To be sure, Bailey & Maroldt (1977) and Schlieben-Lange (1977) were mistaken in claiming, respectively, that Middle-English and the Romance languages were creoles. The former assumed incorrectly that Norman French influence on Old English, which would be a catalyst in

²⁰ To be sure, studies of creoles have contributed significantly to the development of quantitative sociolinguistics over the past quarter of the century. While the techniques have improved thanks to data from creole societies and from African American vernacular English (AAVE), we still must search our souls and find out whether quantitative sociolinguistics has been able to extrapolate insights from these communities to others, to an extent that is warranted by the relevant findings.

²¹ These are references that articulate this position the most explicitly. It is otherwise assumed in the vast majority of the literature in genetic creolistics, by substratists and universalists alike. Mufwene (2001, 2003, 2005) and, to some extent DeGraff (2003, 2005) and Mühlhäusler (2005) are exceptions.

the emergence of Middle English, justified calling the latter a creole. He ignored the fact that the English, the overwhelming majority population and in the lower class, kept their language. It was the Normans, in the upper class, who shifted to English, an indigenous language. As for Schlieben-Lange, she was more interested in the fact that it is the influence of the Celtic languages of Iberia and of Gaul on Vulgar Latin that contributed to the evolution of the latter into the Romance languages. This latter hypothesis was more appealing because, like the African slaves on the plantations of the New World and of the Indian Ocean, the Celts, also in the lower class, did gradually give up their languages for Latin. However, she also overlooked the fact that there were many other situations, such as on the cotton and tobacco plantations of the United States, as well as in the mines and on the sugar cane plantations of Latin America, where language shift among African slaves did not result in creole varieties.

There was thus no compelling reason for identifying Middle English and the Romance languages as creoles, independent of the fact that, as argued in Mufwene (2000), there are no particular restructuring processes nor combinations therefore that define what linguists have mislabeled as *creolization*. Bailey & Maroldt could have made a better case by invoking the progressive language shift to English among the Celts and the influence they have exerted on it in during the process. One may also argue that creoles have typically evolved in “exogenous” colonies, in which both the rulers and the dominated populations were away from home (Chaudenson 1979f).

However, linguists seem to have thrown the baby with the bath water in the case of these mistaken hypotheses. Bailey & Maroldt’s and Schlieben-Lange’s positions also

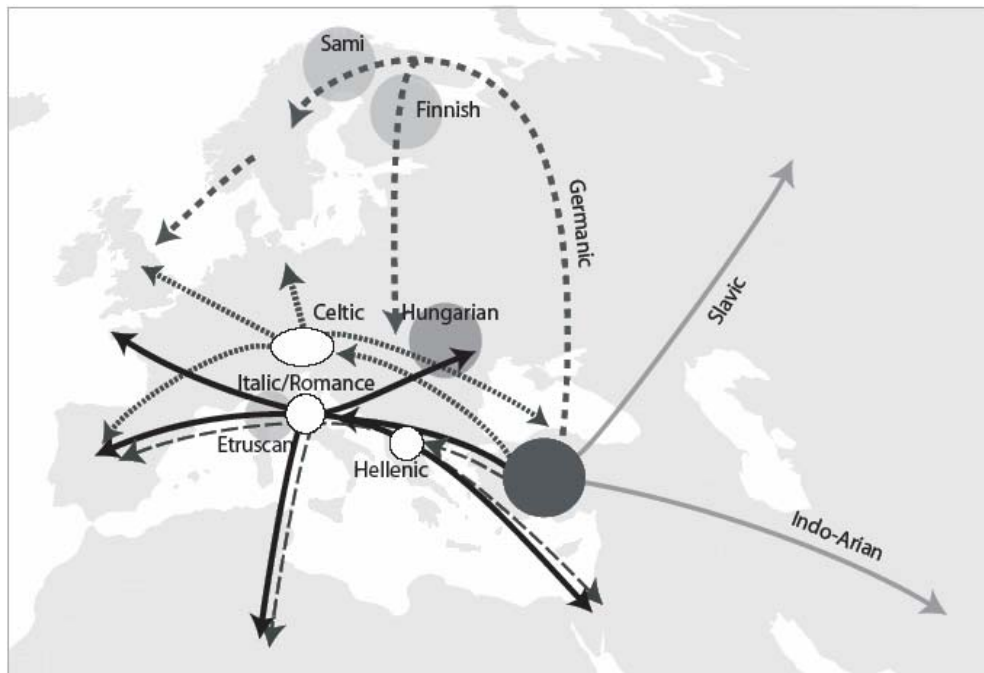
highlight the fundamental fact that language contact had played a catalyst role in the evolution of Old English to Middle English and that of Vulgar Latin to the Romance languages.²² It is not obvious that the structural changes associated with these evolutions were less drastic or extensive than those associated with the development of creoles. From the point of view of language evolution, it should not matter at all whether the contact-based evolutions incorrectly associated only with creoles take place in endogenous or exogenous settings. It should not matter whether the changes are effected by free or enslaved populations. A variant of the question addressed by DeGraff (2003) remains, viz., whether, other than the colonial, race-based bias that linguistics has inherited from the 19th century, any sound justification has ever been provided for treating creoles as “exceptional.”

Didn't Bickerton (2004) overreact to DeGraff (2003) in arguing that creolistics is not racist? Do we in linguistics have reliable criteria for not acknowledging creoles as offspring of their “lexifiers” or even, in the way that Bickerton (p. 831) misrepresents DeGraff and Mufwene (2001, 2003), as dialects of the same languages? Hasn't the received doctrine prevented us from having a closer look at non-creole varieties of the same European languages and acknowledge contact as an important ecological factor in their evolution? Using Bickerton's own terms (p. 831), did the “extraordinary socio-

²² One can add to this the hitherto unexplained emergence of Old English out of primarily the contacts of the Germanic languages brought to England in the 5th century. Note, incidentally, that these languages vanished just as Old English had emerged by the 7th century. The emergence of creoles is likewise paralleled by the disappearance of the original metropolitan varieties brought over to the colonies, even where non-creole varieties have also evolved (e.g., Jamaican English alongside Jamaican Patwa, or various American English varieties alongside Gullah).

economic conditions” under which creoles evolve really “temporarily disrupt normal language transmission”? Even in assuming the most rigid form of segregation in the plantation colonies, was there any unusual shortage of native/fluent speakers of the “lexifier” among the slaves or contract laborers to “transmit” the European languages normally? What do we make of creole slaves of the transition from the homestead to the plantation phase? Or what do we make of the role of interpreters in trade colonies? (See, e.g., Naro 1978 for West Africa, Bolton 2000, 2002 in relation to Chinese Pidgin English, Samarin 1982 for central Africa, and Reinecke 1969 and Beechert 1985 for Hawai’i.)

To date, the discourse on language diversification has been reminiscent of that on racial variation in the 19th century, which used to disfranchise Mediterranean Europeans as less white or less pure because of mixing with non-European populations during the Hellenic and Roman Empires. The ideology of race purity, rather than today’s assumption of racial variation in terms of a continuum, was so strong that even scholars ruled out by fiat the strong possibility, if not a fact, that Nordic Europeans must have mixed with the pre-Indo-European populations who must have preceded them where they went. It is not evident why population dispersal representations such as in Map 2 have not been entertained. Yet, history suggests that the Celts preceded other Indo-Europeans in their westward expansion, that the Romans colonized them, as did the Germanics some centuries later. History suggests successive contacts of Indo-Europeans not only with the pre-Indo-Europeans who preceded them (such as the Samis and the Basques) but also among themselves. This argues against the neat Stammbaums that have disregarded the role of contact in the diversification of Indo-European into so many modern languages.



Map 2: Diffusion of Indo-European languages

For some strange reason, Indo-European linguistics has made little room for language contact and has treated Sprachbund in the Balkans as an anomaly. Creole studies have developed as a byproduct of this particular ideology, which has led scholars such as Bickerton (2004) to suggest that they must have evolved in an unusual way, because the language faculties of their “creators” were confronted with non-ordinary circumstances of population and language contacts. Bickerton did apparently not bother checking the socio-economic histories of creole-speaking territories to find out that the cruelties of slavery and contract labor – no more “exceptional” than some cases of European indentured servitude – did not impede normal language “transmission” from one group of speakers to another. Although the nature of the adaptive responses to communicative challenges vary from one ecology to another, among all human populations, the particular processes involved (e.g., sound substitution or rule extension) do not, at least not in kind.

This is the essence of the uniformitarianism that DeGraff (1999f), and Mufwene (2001) have been arguing for. If Bickerton did check the relevant colonial history, the question is why so much emphasis on the alleged exceptionality of the development of creoles?

Now, is Bickerton worse than the relexificationists and substratists who have privileged some form of substrate influence over inheritance from the “lexifier”? Don’t the latter accounts likewise presuppose or entail exceptionality in the development of creoles? Studies of naturalistic language acquisition such as Klein & Perdue (1992), Perdue (1995), and Giacomi et al. (2000) prove as untenable the basic claim that one can learn a language by acquiring only its vocabulary and applying to this only, or mostly, the grammar of languages previously spoken. They provide no evidence of naturalistic language that supports relexification. Apparently, normal interference from a previously spoken language does not entail indifference to the structures of the target language. As a matter of fact, creoles share many features with their “lexifiers” which are not attested in the relevant substrate languages, such as the pronominal position of determiners and adjectives (a category that is marginal in many of them), as well as preposition-stranding in English creoles. It also seems evident that features shared by varieties of the “lexifier” and some substrate languages were favored, by congruence, to become part of the relevant creoles’ structures, for instance, usage of a preverbal marker to mark tense or aspect. After all, substrate languages did not differ in all respects from the superstrate languages. (See Chaudenson 1992, 2001 and Corne 1999 for French creoles; Mufwene 1996, 2001 for English creoles.)

What has so easily lent plausibility to hypotheses that should have been disputed from

the start? The answer to this question may lie in the state of the art regarding language change, such as in the deeply-entrenched assumption that the outcomes of internally-motivated change are significantly different from those of externally-motivated change. However, we have not demonstrated that the emergence of other, non-creole colonial vernaculars such as European American and Australian English varieties have not likewise arisen thanks to language contact. Trudgill (1986, 2004) suggests they have and Mufwene (2001, 2006b) argues that the same competition-and-selection mechanisms were involved in them as in the development of creoles. So, have linguists inherited from the social background of the majority and of most of the leading experts too much of the “inferior” race ideology to see problems with the received doctrine?

4. Conclusions

Legacy has often not been questioned even by the most significant revolutions. For instance, despite all the shifts from the structuralist and descriptivist research paradigms, the assumption that languages are community institutions whose systems have, in native communities, normally been transmitted almost intact from one generation of speakers to another has hardly been questioned. A consequence of this in theoretical linguistics is that it has become customary to work with one informant or by introspection and extrapolate one’s findings to a whole community of speakers. In sociolinguistics, inter-group variation has received more attention than inter-individual variation. In quantitative sociolinguistics, individuals that diverge from group patterns have usually been tossed aside as “outliers” who skew the statistics, despite the fact that sometimes outliers also

initiate changes that can spread in a community.²³ Overall, the notion of idiolect has been under-exploited, despite all the contributions it could make to highlighting the complexity of communal grammar, especially regarding (mis)matches between, on the one hand, the knowledge that individual speakers have of their language and, on the other, the collective, communal knowledge that the community as a whole has been assumed to have of the same dialect or language.

Likewise, unlike anthropologists (see, e.g., the 1999 special issue of the *American Anthropology* on this question), linguists have hardly questioned the notion of ‘race’. Since the 19th century, it has been assumed to be biologically based. Thus, apparently in reaction to social Darwinism, linguists have usually claimed that a child normally acquires the language of their social environment, regardless of race; the latter does not predetermine what language variety a child will have as his/her mother tongue. Thus a racially Japanese child, of Japanese parents, growing up in a socially integrated neighborhood in the United States will speak American English of the same nature as his/her non-Japanese neighbors, and an African American kid growing up in an integrated neighborhood with a white middle-class majority will speak white middle-class English rather than African American English.

Unfortunately this position in linguistics has not been in tune with the fact that definitions of the white race have changed several times in the North America since the late 18th century. Nor has it kept up with the fact the current definition of the black race in

²³ On the role of “outliers” in initiating change, see Labov’s (2001) discussion of the “actuation problem.”

North America, based on the one-drop rule of hypo-descent (Taylor 2004), has been at variance with the Caribbean practice, where a “brown” category has been interposed between the “white” and “black” ones. This variation in time and space shows clearly that ‘race’ is socially defined. The price of ignoring it has been the failure to state that within some population structures – those in which race determines where one can reside and who he or she can socialize with – race, like ethnicity, also determines what particular language variety one is most likely to have as his/her vernacular. Thus, it is certainly inaccurate to continue claiming that race does not bear on a speaker’s idiolect, because race as a social construct does, in determining what other individuals a speaker can interact with, be influenced by, and can align his/her idiolect with.

Thus, race and segregation are factors that shed light on the differential evolution of creoles and African American English compared to their colonial non-creole kin spoken by populations of European descent. They are important parts of the explanations for the divergence hypothesis regarding European American and African American English vernaculars. Labov’s findings on the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, viz, that it affects only white urbanites, is a reminder that race as a social construct is an important component of the American population structure and it bears on patterns of language evolution. The reason why African Americans have typically not participated in the Northern Cities Vowel Shift is that race barriers have prevented them from socializing (regularly) with European Americans and have discouraged them from identifying linguistically with members of other races.

In this essay, I have obviously dwelled on what can be interpreted as race-based prejudice in our current professional practice of linguistics. It was far from my intention to accuse the practitioners themselves of racism. One can be trapped in a racial ideology without wanting to be racist. Any such victim can emancipate him-/herself. I wanted to show the extent to which we linguists have not yet (fully) emancipated ourselves from some of the social biases of the 19th century. This essay is an invitation to question ourselves on some of the most tacit of our working assumptions. I hope we will be able to discuss these issues and more in a franc dialogue.

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