

# *“On the ‘Genetics’ of Creole Languages”*

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## **Abstract**

Creole languages, like creole people, are hybrid or mixed in that they draw their properties from more than one source. There are more than a hundred known creoles spoken on all five continents. The aim of this paper is threefold: describe the features that characterize the history and the structure of creoles, provide an account of these properties, and discuss the consequences of the proposal for current approaches to historical linguistics.

The paper begins with a discussion of the features that characterize situations where creoles develop. These languages emerge in multilingual communities, in need of a lingua franca, where speakers of the substrate languages generally have reduced access to the superstrate language(s). They are formed quite rapidly as compared to regular cases of linguistic change. They tend to be isolating languages. They are hybrid or mixed. However, the respective contribution of their source languages is not arbitrary. The pattern observed over and over again appears to be the following: while the forms of a creole’s lexical entries are derived from the superstrate language, the semantic and syntactic properties of these lexical entries are derived from those of the substrate lexical entries. The contribution of the source languages of a creole is thus principled as opposed to random. (Since the bulk of the data presented in this paper are drawn from Caribbean creoles, the presentation of these features will include information on these creoles and on the background of its speakers.) An optimal theory of the genesis of creoles must account for all these properties.

The second part of the paper presents an account of these properties based on the hypothesis that the process of relexification plays a major role in the formation of these languages. This process essentially reduces to relabelling which consists in assigning a new label, taken from L2, to a L1 lexical entry. This process is constrained and it applies to both lexical and functional categories. A scenario of how relabelling is hypothesized to apply in the genesis of creole languages is presented. This approach provides an optimal account of all the features that characterize the history and the structure of creoles. The parameters of variation which determine the amount of relabelling in the formation of particular creoles are also taken into account. Given the nature of this process, however, it cannot be the only one involved in the formation of creoles. The third section of the paper briefly discusses the other major processes involved in the development of creoles: grammaticalisation, reanalysis, levelling and lexical diffusion. These processes are shown to apply to the output of relabelling.

The last section of the paper discusses the consequences of the availability of relabelling as a cognitive process for language typology, and of the nature of this process for historical linguistics.