

McWhorter, John H. *The Creole Debate*, 2018. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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John McWhorter has never been afraid of controversy, be it in the realms of linguistics or in his writings on social science. This book, a crystallisation of his views and of his quarter century of work on Creole languages, is unlikely to change this. Delivered in his usual witty style and combining technical detail with polemic, it demonstrates point by point the reasons why he holds his often unpopular views on Creole languages.

McWhorter believes that creoles are not simply blends of languages mixed any which way. Nor does he see them as stable mixed languages on the (rather varied) lines of Michif, Media Lengua or Copper Island Aleut. Nor does he conceive of them as languages which followed the same diachronic paths as other languages, albeit somewhat speeded up. Instead, he avers that creoles are the result of the expansion and nativisation of pidgin languages for use as a first language (but rarely the only language) by their first generation of speakers, and that they may undergo further grammatical changes in subsequent generations. In the 1960s, this view was not controversial; indeed it was tacitly accepted as the default position of creolistic development among those linguists who contemplated the question (Hall 1962 is a classic paper on this subject). This view, now known as Creole Exceptionalism (because it emphasises the idea that creoles did not emerge from uninterrupted transmission of the European or other languages which provided them with the bulk of their most frequently-used lexicon but developed from pidgins), is no longer the orthodoxy in many circles, although the late Derek Bickerton, who disagreed with McWhorter on a number of creolistic matters, powerfully espoused a version of this (see Bickerton 2004; neither this nor Hall's paper is cited in this book). Let no reader be in doubt that the argument about creole genesis, which McWhorter styles the Creole Debate, is long and bitter.

The book can be construed as a kind of open letter to his detractors. His most vociferous opponents, who maintain that creoles are not historically derived from pidgins but have evolved through the same kinds of diachronic means as those which have seen Latin develop into French, Catalan, Spanish et cetera, include Salikoko Mufwene, with whom McWhorter has long contended, while he has also long been in dispute with Michel DeGraff, himself an L1 speaker of Haitian Creole, whose proposals are somewhat

different. More recent opponents of McWhorter's ideas have been Umberto Ansaldo and Enoch Oladé Aboh. McWhorter refers to this shared view which the above scholars have advanced as the *Uniformitarian Hypothesis*. The objections of all of them are addressed in this book, and the conclusions incorporate McWhorter's own findings.

The Introduction (pp. 1-8) and Chapter 1 (pp. 9-32) set the scene. They lay out the issues and present McWhorter's famous Creole Prototype, a typologically-oriented means with three principles (non-compositional derivation, absence of lexical tone and absence of productively-used inflections) which shows that creoles have developed from pidgins. McWhorter states that only creole languages share all the three features of the Prototype (however, many languages possess one or two of them and are not to be counted among the creoles).

Mufwene's ideas are examined in Chapter 2 (pp. 33-62). Mufwene's earlier Founder Principle (see e.g. Mufwene 1995), in which the languages which are present earliest at the creation of a creole exert the strongest influence upon them, has given way to the Feature Pool approach (FP). In this view Mufwene seeks to show that the features which occur in the greatest number of languages which are important in the early years of creolisation are the ones which will show up in great numbers in the resulting creole. This idea is enticing, it has a whiff of common sense and empiricism about it, and it sounds as though it should be the key to understanding how creoles have evolved (if one disbelieves the role of pidgins). McWhorter demonstrates how it cannot bear the weight Mufwene has put upon it. For instance, although Palenquero of Colombia grew up with a largely Kikongo substrate but with predominantly Spanish lexicon, and although we know that slaves from São Tomé (presumably using Santomense) had a role in the early days of El Palenque de San Basilio, McWhorter points out that there are important features in Palenquero (not least the dearth of bound inflectional morphology) which cannot easily be attributed to its assumed descent from any of these three languages, and the structure of Palenquero simply cannot be claimed as the fruits of the operation of a feature pool, no matter how thoroughly historically nuanced: other factors must have been crucial to its genesis.

If FP does not explain matters, what about Michel DeGraff's *Parameters, Periphery and Functional Categories Hypothesis* (PPF)? McWhorter devotes Chapter 3 (pp. 63-89) to an examination of the ideas of creole genesis espoused by DeGraff. Perhaps unsurprisingly for someone teaching at MIT, DeGraff's creole genetic ideas concentrate on the transmission and continuation of patterns of syntax, especially Haitian syntax,

advanced by DeGraff within the PPF. This hypothesis would predict the continuation into creole languages of syntactic categories found in the languages spoken by the people whose descendants were the first speakers of the creoles. However, there is no trace of Marathi ergativity in Korlai Creole Portuguese, nor any topic-focus systems of the sort found in Central Philippine languages attested in Philippine Creole Spanish languages. And McWhorter points out that although evidentials may be common in Pacific Northwest languages, they are lacking in the pidgin and creole forms of Chinook Jargon (Chinuk Wawa).

Chapter 4 (pp. 90-109) is concerned with creoles, with their rather mild structural complexity, as compared with ‘older’ languages, such as English, Kikongo, Fongbe, or Tolai. The comparative study of linguistic complexity has been much researched since about 2000, and there is a powerful if tacit assumption that all linguistic systems, including creoles, are of approximately equal complexity. McWhorter maintains that this is not the case. Creoles in his view are structurally simpler as a result of their pidgin genesis, and he asserts that Saramaccan (one of his favourite sources for creole examples) has a less complex structure than languages of the Nakh-Dagestanian group in the Eastern Caucasus, with their dense phonological and morphological systems.

Chapter 5 (pp. 110-128) deals with the more recent attacks on the potency of the explanatory power of the Creole Prototype as launched by Umberto Ansaldo and Enoch Aboh, both of whom are prolific authors in the field. Having long been writing separately, they joined forces in writing and/or editing for some joint creolist works, including an article on the role of typology in the evolution of creoles (Aboh & Ansaldo 2007) and a thematic issue of *Language Sciences* (2017) in which they proposed that creoles always grew up in multilingual areas, and thus could only be distinguished from other languages on the grounds of their sociohistorical development rather than for structural reasons. Creole Exceptionalism could then be seen as a colonialist construct without any solid foundation in historical linguistics. Aboh’s claims engage with quite a large amount of data, but again McWhorter points out (with a summary list on p. 118) that Aboh’s work fails to account for the factors (including sparsity of inflection and the homogenisation of word order) which are better handled by the precepts of the Creole Prototype. Ansaldo’s objections are more sociohistorical in nature; they are deftly skewered by McWhorter on the basis of what he asserts is Ansaldo’s superficial knowledge of the creolistic field and McWhorter’s own knowledge of powerful exceptions from a wide range of languages.

Chapter 6 (pp. 129-149), entitled *Envoi*, presents McWhorter's conclusions and his views on how the field will progress. Creoles' origins in pidgins exhibits typological distinctiveness even when compared with languages that have sparse bound inflectional morphology such as Fongbe. And McWhorter points out that work by Bakker et al. (2017), using phylogenetic software to draw Creole "family trees", supports this, as do robust qualitative data provided. McWhorter also shows that claims about the assumption of intellectual debility of creators of creoles being forced to rely on pidgins for successful communication – a charge of subtle racism often levelled at the opponents of Creole Exceptionalism – are spurious, as plentiful evidence indicates that they retained competence in the languages of at least one of their parents. References (pp. 150-164) and an index (pp. 165-175) complete the book.

If it seems to the reader that the creole debate is a complex and conflicting issue, this is because the various linguists who do not believe in Creole Exceptionalism approach this issue from different sets of angles, not all of which are mutually compatible. They do not all agree with one another at all points, although they all share forms of (possibly synthetic) anger: as McWhorter says on p. 137, "[t]he evidence is rife that the viscera determine quite a bit of the Uniformitarians' commitment". McWhorter's views, by contrast, have varied little in the 20-odd years in which he has been writing about this issue (McWhorter 2005 is a useful collection), but he has read and researched widely, and his range of examples from various relevant languages has expanded. McWhorter has criticised some of his opponents for the paucity of examples in their work, a charge which cannot be levelled at him; this book is full of sample sentences, many of which are drawn from McWhorter's own work on Saramaccan Creole, a so-called radical creole which is no longer in constant contact with its chief lexifiers English and Portuguese. There are numerous example sentences from other creoles and other languages, as well, all provided with interlinear glosses and followed by an English translation.

There are admittedly some errors of fact. For instance, on p. 12 the example *mi waka* means 'I walked' in Sranan rather than 'I walk'. Similarly, on the same page *mwen manje* in Haitian is 'I ate', not 'I eat': in both cases anteriority is zero-marked. The language family name *Chemakuan* which McWhorter offers blends the language name *Chemakum* with the family name *Chimakuan*, and the surname of the Canadian explorer *Stefánsson* also receives a mauling.

Nonetheless, this erudite and vigorously-presented work is an important demonstration and powerful defence (though it is anything but

defensive) of the strength of the Creole Prototype to help us identify creoles. McWhorter ties in this standpoint tightly and unambiguously with their development from more makeshift modes of communication which were employed so often as means of survival during the obscenity of servitude along the Atlantic and elsewhere.

The debate will continue, but this time McWhorter's detractors can have no excuse for not consulting this powerful digest of his well-argued views. And even if they condemn the contents, they can still admire the gorgeous cover.

### References

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