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Morphology in pidgins and creoles

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1. Introduction

It is often believed that pidgins and creoles have no or very little morphology. Seuren and Wekker for example (1986:66) claim that “morphology [is] essentially alien to creole languages”, and in Thomason (2001), a textbook on contact languages, one can read that “[m]ost pidgins and creoles either lack morphology entirely or have very limited mor-

phological resources compared with those of the lexifier and other input languages.” (Thomason 2001:168, see Degraff 2001 for more discussion and more pertinent references). Furthermore, it has been claimed that, if there is morphology in pidgins and creoles, it is (for the most part) regular, semantically transparent, iconic or otherwise unmarked (e.g. Seuren and Wekker 1986, McWhorter 1998, 2000, see also Thomason 2001:168).

Most recently, there is a growing body of literature on pidgin and creole morphology in which these traditional views are seriously challenged (see, for example, the papers in Plag 2003a, 2003b, Kouwenberg 2003). In the following, we will address the traditional claims in more detail and see whether they are borne out by the facts. It will become clear that all of these claims are problematic and need to be abandoned or substantially revised. Overall, we can say that, even though pidgins and creoles seem to have less morphology than their lexifiers, there is indeed morphology in pidgins and creoles, with important differences between individual languages and also between languages of different status (pidgin or creole).

Apart from the questions of the presence and nature of morphology in pidgins and creoles to be discussed in sections 2 and 3, the other major issue in pidgin and creole morphology is the question how morphology arises and develops in pidginization and creolization. What is the role of the languages involved in the particular contact situation and what is the role of universal factors like markedness and iconicity in the emergence of the pidgin and creole morphological systems? These questions will be dealt with in section 4.

2. Is there morphology?

Let us first turn to the question of how much morphology we find in pidgins and creoles. To answer that question it seems necessary to distinguish between pidgins and creoles. It is often assumed that pidgins are morphologically more impoverished than creoles (e.g. Siegel 2004a on restricted pidgins). However, recent typological research by Bakker (2003a) has shown that this is probably not the case. Based on a large sample of varieties, Bakker finds that pidgins tend to have more, rather than less inflectional morphology than creole languages. With regard to lexical morphology, Mühlhäusler (1997:166ff), for example, argues that rudimentary pidgins rely on syntactic means to expand their lexicon (cf. e.g. *gras belong fes* 'beard' in early Tok Pisin), while expanded pidgins develop also morphological means.

A serious review of the literature on creoles also refutes the claim that there is little or no morphology in these languages. Many creoles have inflectional morphology in their nominal, verbal or adjectival systems. Pertinent cases from numerous creoles can be found in the overviews by Holm (1988:95ff), Stolz (1989), Bakker (2003a), and Baptista (2003). Prominent examples are suffixes encoding plural and/or definiteness on nouns in Cape Verdian Creole or Palenquero (Baptista 2003), the long and the short verb forms in some French-based varieties to mark tense distinctions or argument/adjunct status of the following NP (e.g. Veenstra (2003) with further references), the transitivity marker *-im/-em* (derived from English third singular and plural pronouns *him/em*) in Tok Pisin and other Pacific varieties, and the superlative suffix *-st* in Negerhollands (Stolz 1989).

With regard to lexical morphology, creoles exhibit conversion, affixation, reduplication and compounding as very common processes. These processes encode semantic categories that we also find in non-creole languages, such as agent, instrument, nominalisation, intensification, diminutive, causative, resultative, relational adjective, etc. Overviews of the word-formation processes of specific creoles can, for example, be found in Dijkhoff (1993) for Spanish/Portuguese-based Papiamentu, in Degraff (2001) and LeFebvre (2003) for French-based Haitian, in Braun/Plag (2003) for English-based Sranan, and in Steinkrüger (2003) for Spanish-based Chabacano.

In sum, it is by now an established fact that creoles do have morphology to an at least non-negligible extent. This allows us to turn in more detail to an analysis of the particular characteristics of creole morphology.

3. What kind of morphology is there?

Given that there is morphology in creoles, two problems emerge. What is the nature of these systems and how do they come about? In this section we will shed light on the first problem. We will answer the question what kinds of morphology can be found in pidgins and creoles and whether pidgin and creole morphology is in some sense particularly restricted.

The first thing that is characteristic of pidgin and creole morphology in general is that it seems to be less rich than that of the lexifier languages, both in terms of formal means and in terms of the functional and semantic categories to be expressed. For ex-

ample, while English has dozens of derivational affixes plus a small number of inflectional categories, English-based creoles generally feature by far fewer affixes (see Braun/Plag 2003 for Sranan). Haitian creole has a number of derivational affixes, but the inventory is again much smaller than that of French (Lefebvre 2003). Note, however, that the inventory of a creole language is not necessarily limited to a subset of that of the lexifier; creole languages also exhibit a number of innovations (see below for examples and discussion of developmental issues involved). But even including the innovations the total inventory of processes is still smaller than that of the lexifier.

Another type of restriction concerns the kind of processes we find. In his survey of pidgin morphology, Bakker (2003b) observes that reduplication seems to be conspicuously absent in the overwhelming majority of pidgins, while it is almost universally present in creoles. In contrast, word-class marking morphology is only attested in pidgins, but not in creoles (Bakker 2003a). The reasons for these states of affairs are largely unclear, but seem to have their origin in the fact that attested pidgins emerged in contact with a much wider range of lexifier languages than creoles, involving more morphologically rich languages (see Bakker 2003a for more discussion).

Third, the nature of possible form-meaning relationships in creoles is often invoked as an important characteristic of pidgin and creole morphology, such that these languages may generally be characterized by transparent, iconic relationships in their morphological system. As we will shortly see, this is not the case either.

Transparency can be defined as the possibility of inferring a meaning of complex words from the parts of such a word. This means that the complex words must be segmentable into different morphs and that these morphs must be semantically interpret-

able (cf. e.g. Ronneberger-Sibold 2001:98). The belief that there is no semantic opacity in pidgin and creole morphology is fed by the idea that creoles are fairly young languages, so that one chief factor responsible for morphological opacity in older languages is inactive: long-term semantic drift. McWhorter (1998:798), for example, writes that the “semantic irregularity of derivation arises from the inevitable process of semantic drift and metaphorical inference”. However, apart from long-term semantic drift, opacity can also arise through various other mechanisms, borrowing chiefly among them. Plag (2001) and Braun/Plag (2003) therefore argue that opacity is predicted to arise in a language emerging through language contact, such as a creole. In their study of Early Sranan complex words, they show that semantically opaque forms occur frequently already at an early stage of creole development, and that the semantic transparency and regularity hypothesis cannot be upheld.

A similar picture emerges with regard to iconicity. Iconicity is a semiotic principle according to which there is a resemblance or analogy between the signifier and the signified. Complexity of meaning should be reflected in complexity of form. Conversion, for example is non-iconic in the sense that there are two meaning components with only one surface exponent. Plural marking by way of an additional morpheme is iconic because more of form signifies more of content. Reduplication to express plurality with nouns, or repeated action with verbs, is considered iconic because more of the same form expresses more of the same content (e.g. Sapir 1921:79, Botha 1998:3). Applying the concept of iconicity to pidgins and creoles yields, however, sobering results. The fact that conversion is one of the most widely employed strategies in pidgins and creoles for deriving new lexemes indicates that iconicity does not play a dominant role in pidgin

and creole morphology. With regard to reduplication, we find indeed cases of iconic reduplication as in *mango-mango* 'many mangoes'. However, Kouwenberg & La Charité (2003) show that there is also an abundance of productive non-iconic reduplication processes in various creoles. For example, in Ndjuka, reduplication of verbs expresses a stative result (*bai* 'buy', *bai-bai* 'bought'), and in French-based creoles reduplication of adjectives expresses similarity or diminutive (e.g. *blanch* 'white', *blanch-blanch* 'whitish').

A final characteristic of pidgin and creole morphology has often been claimed to lie in the formal means of expressing concepts. Thus, under the hypotheses of transparency and iconicity mentioned above one would expect the avoidance of the more marked or less natural morphological encoding strategies such as ablaut, subtractive morphology, root-and-pattern morphology, tonal morphology, or those involving allomorphy. This is, however, not the case. In general, comparatively unmarked strategies such as affixation, conversion, reduplication and compounding are the predominant processes, but instances of allomorphy are also not uncommon (e.g. in the pronoun systems of creoles), and even tonal morphology is attested (Good 2003, James 2003). It thus seems that there is in principle no greater limit to the formal power of the morphological system of pidgins and creoles than to that of other languages.

4. How does pidgin and creole morphology emerge?

There are three major sources of morphology in pidgins and creoles. Morphological markers can be taken directly from one of the languages involved in the contact

(‘borrowing’), or they can have developed through grammaticalization. A third possibility is that the markers can be innovated by taking the phonetic/phonological form of a morpheme from one of the input languages (usually the superstrate) and using it in the function (or with the meaning) of a semantically related morphological marker from another input language (usually the substrate). The latter process has been referred to as ‘relexification’ (e.g. Lefebvre 1998).

Examples of borrowing are the Spanish suffix *-ndo* in Papiamentu (Dijkhoff 1993), the plural prefix *ma-* in Palenquero borrowed from Kikongo (Parkvall 2000: 100), or the past tense marker *-ato* in the Italian-based pidgin Lingua Franca of the Mediterranean. Note that form and meaning of the borrowed item are not necessarily totally identical to those of the donor language, which makes borrowing sometimes hard to distinguish from grammaticalization or relexification.

Instances of grammaticalized affixes can be found among preverbal markers, which in many creoles behave like bound morphemes or clitics. For example, in French creoles, *été*, *va* and *après* grammaticalized to a tense marker *te*, a mood marker *va* and an aspect marker *ap*. Similarly, the English object pronouns *him/em* became a transitivity marker *-em/-im* in Pacific pidgins and creoles. It should be noted, however, that many apparent instances of grammaticalization turn out to be cases of substrate transfer or relexification upon closer inspection (e.g. Plag 2002, Siegel 2004b).

A clear example of relexification is the case markers in Sri Lanka Creole Portuguese, such as the dative suffix *-pa*, which was derived from the Portuguese preposition *para* ‘for’. Bakker (2003a) reports that this creole has the same set of case markers as the input languages Tamil and Sinhalese, but all of them derive from

Portuguese forms. The markers are used with a purely Tamil function, and usually also in a Tamil position. The problem with relexification is, however, that we often do not find a complete mapping of inventory, positions, meanings and functions of the substrate morphemes onto the superstrate forms (see Lefebvre (2003) and Siegel (2004b) for some discussion).

Generally speaking, it is largely unclear, when which kind of process - borrowing, grammaticalization, or relexification - is to be expected in a given contact situation. What is clear is that the different processes and their language-specific combinations lead to diverse patterns in the morphology of pidgins and creoles. On the one hand, there are many pidgins and creoles where none of the lexifier affixes have survived (e.g. Sranan and Saramaccan), while on the other hand there is a set of pidgins and creoles (e.g. Papiamentu and Haitian) that have preserved (or reconstituted) bound morphemes of their input languages. The latter set of languages refutes the claim that the derivational morphemes of the input languages are lost in creolization and are not reconstituted later (cf. Bickerton 1988:278, Jones 1995:121, Mühlhäusler 1997:169, McWhorter 1998:798).

The quite divergent morphological systems and phenomena found in pidgins and creoles have given rise to a lively debate on which forces shape the morphology of these languages. In general, the question of the emergence of structure in pidginization and creolization is among the most hotly debated issues in the field. Universals of first and second language acquisition, transfer or preservation of features from the input languages, and universal linguistic principles of grammar (such as markedness and iconicity) have all been invoked to account for the characteristics of pidgin and creole gram-

mars and lexicons. The investigation of the morphology has yielded no greater consensus among scholars about the influence of these factors than the investigation of other features of these languages.

What is indisputable is that both the socio-historical settings and the structure, availability and prominence of the languages present in the contact play an important role. Furthermore, as convincingly argued in, for example, Siegel (2004a, 2004b), the diverse cognitive and socio-linguistic processes involved in language contact and language learning must be taken into account, with contact-induced grammaticalization, language transfer, and dialect mixing and leveling chiefly among them

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