

REVIEW

"Pidgin" and "Creole" as Sociohistorical Labels

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ABSTRACT

In the conference “How Pidgins Emerged? Not as We Have Been Told” delivered by Salikoko S. Mufwene, professor at the Department of Linguistics of The University of Chicago, and distinguished specialist in the study of languages classified as pidgins and creoles, much of the traditional narrative about the emergence of pidgins and creoles is brought into question. All of Mufwene’s work challenges the traditional narrative about pidgins and creoles by, among other things, redefining the comprehension about the labels “pidgin” and “creole”. According to Mufwene, pidgin and creoles developed in separate places, in different ecologies, and in different periods. From this perspective, the labels “pidgin” and “creole” are understood as sociohistorical labels, not as indicating a structural typology or stages of a Pidgin-to-Creole life cycle.



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RESUMO

Na conferência “How Pidgins Emerged? Not as We Have Been Told” proferida por Salikoko S. Mufwene, professor do Departamento de Linguística da Universidade de Chicago, e destacado especialista na área de estudos de línguas classificadas como pidgins e crioulos, questionam-se diversos pontos da narrativa tradicional adotada por muitos linguistas sobre a emergência de pidgins e crioulos. Toda a obra de Mufwene se contrapõe à narrativa tradicional acerca de pidgins e crioulos por, entre vários outros pontos, redefinir a compreensão dos rótulos “pidgin” e “crioulo”. Segundo Mufwene, pidgins e crioulos se desenvolveram separadamente, em ecologias diversas, e em épocas diferentes. A partir desta perspectiva, os rótulos “pidgin” e “crioulo” são rótulos sócio-históricos, não estruturais e também pouco se relacionam a uma etapa de um ciclo de vida.

KEYWORDS

Creolistics. Creoles. Contact Linguistics. Pidgins.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Crioulística. Crioulos. Linguística de Contato. *Pidgins*.

Introduction

The conference “How Pidgins Emerged? Not as We Have Been Told” delivered by Salikoko S. Mufwene, professor in the Department of Linguistics, at The University of Chicago, as part of the event Abralin *ao vivo* – Linguists Online, is of remarkable importance not only for linguists whose research are in the field of Contact Linguistics, or for those whose research deal specifically with creoles and pidgins, but also to all the colleagues in other fields of research who are not aware of the long and still ongoing discussions in the field known as “creolistics”.

Creole genesis is often explained in handbooks of Linguistics, dictionaries of Linguistics, and consequently, in classes of Linguistics exclusively in the classic model known as “Pidgin-to-Creole life cycle”. Such a cycle, in summary, is said to have the following stages: pidgin → creole → post-creole (HALL 1962, 1966). It is this very cycle all of Salikoko S. Mufwene’s works challenge, and it is clearly seen in the title of the present conference I am commenting on, and also clearly shown in the many books, chapters and other papers where he deliberately mentions “Creoles and Pidgins” (in this very order!) to protest the Pidgin-to-Creole life cycle.

Mufwene commences by pointing out to the traditional narrative in Linguistics on the development of pidgins. Pidgins are said to be languages that developed from sporadic contact of European traders with non-Europeans between the 15th and the 19th centuries. Out of these contacts, reduced and less complex languages resulted because of ‘imperfect learning’ (as it is often referred to in Linguistics). As time went by, pidgins have undergone the process of nativization and now, having native speakers, they evolved into creole languages. Indeed, the traditional thinking is that pidgins do not have native speakers whereas creoles do (see BICKERTON 1984).

In many of his papers, and also in the conference that is subject of this review, Mufwene points out that the traditional narrative of creole genesis has proven to be ahistorical and anachronic. With that in mind, he introduces a series of factors that are oftentimes left aside in the traditional narrative. It is critical to understand, for instance, how trade worked and how social interaction during trade was managed. It is also very important to understand the order of the processes of globalization, and the particular ecology of each case where a contact language was created. It is important to take into account History. Since I am not going to give all the details about Mufwene’s argumentation, I advise those who are interested in this subject to refer to Mufwene (2007) in order to have a broader view of this matter.

Mufwene then proceeds with his explanation that “pidgin” and “creole” are sociohistorical labels, not stages of a cycle. Based on historical facts, he shows that creoles and pidgins developed in different ecologies and in different times. In Mufwene (2015) we read that pidgins “typically emerged in trade colonies that developed around trade forts”, whereas creoles “emerged in settlement colonies whose primary industry consisted typically of sugar cane or rice cultivation by non-European slaves”. Mufwene also emphasizes that the term “creole” emerged in late 16th century in Latin America whereas the term “pidgin” emerged in the early 19th century in Canton, China.

There are many reasons one can give to favor the idea that is it particularly important to reevaluate the traditional narrative on creole genesis. I will mention a few, in a superficial fashion, but I hope the sources I cite in this review are used by the readers to remedy it.

The idea that contact languages undergo a life cycle has also brought the idea that creole languages are an exception to all other natural languages. In turn, many creole-specific theories emerged in order to explain creole genesis. These theories, however, do not consider sociohistorical facts that are vital to take into account if one wants to understand the history of these languages as well as how their development took place.

Some of the ideas that come along with the traditional thinking in creolistics are: (1) break of regular linguistic transmission, (2) imperfect learning, (3) break in the genetic relationship of these languages with those that contributed to their emergence. It is also quite common to read works that question the complexity of pidgins and creoles. In Dixon (2010, p. 21), for instance, we read that “of the well-documented creoles, none equals the complexity—or the communicative power—of a non-creole language”. Such a view, found in a textbook of introductory linguistic theories, reflects the mainstream view that pidgins and creoles are less complex than languages that do not go by these same labels.

Well, is it so that the faculty of language of the first pidgin and creole speakers works differently from that of speakers of languages that are not labelled pidgins or creoles? For a long time, the idea prevailed that these speakers belonged to a “race that is linguistically inferior”, as we read in Julien Vinson’s “Dictionnaire des Sciences Anthropologiques” (1889 *apud* ABOH & DEGRAFF 2017). An attentive look to the beginning of the traditional narrative in creolistics will help us see that colonialist concepts about creoles and pidgins penetrated the first studies of these languages in such a way that even to this day they prevail (see DEGRAFF 2005). The traditional thinking of creoles as broken languages must be urgently reevaluated. This is exactly what Mufwene and others are doing.

Besides Mufwene, other linguists who also challenge the traditional thinking of creolistics are Enoch Aboh, Michel DeGraff and Umberto Ansaldo, to name a few. I encourage those who are interested in giving creole studies a second look to read Ansaldo *et al.* (2007). In this book, being Mufwene a coauthor of one of the chapters, the reader will find more about some myths regarding creole languages, say, the myth of simplicity, the myth of decreolization, the myth of exceptional diachrony.

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