The history of pidgins and creoles against the exceptionalism

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ABSTRACT
Salikoko S. Mufwene’s conference presents the emergence of pidgins and their relations with creole languages. The speaker describes the traditional approach (which analyses pidgins as ancestor or initial forms of creole languages) aiming to criticize it. Through a historiography-based argumentation, Mufwene introduces the uniformitarian approach, to which pidgins and creoles have no structural peculiarities that justify a differentiation from other languages that emerged from language contact. Moreover, the chronological and geographical diversion in the usage of those two concepts is argued to be an evidence of the unrelatedness of the language types to which they refer. By tracing back the emergence of the pidgins and creole concepts, Mufwene tributes the exclusivism assigned to those languages to the colonialist ideology that prevailed in Europe during the 19th century.

RESUMO
A conferência de Salikoko S. Mufwene tem como tema o surgimento de línguas pidgin e a relação destas com línguas crioulas. O conferencista introduz a abordagem tradicional (em especial a que analisa pidgins como formas ancestrais ou iniciais de línguas crioulas) para criticá-las. Por meio de uma argumentação de base historiográfica, Mufwene expõe a abordagem uniformitária, para a qual pidgins e línguas crioulas não têm peculiaridades estruturais que justifiquem sua especificidade em comparação a outras línguas surgidas em contextos de contato. Além disso, a discrepância cronológica e geográfica que existe no uso dos dois termos é colocada como evidência da ausência de relação genética entre essas línguas. Ao retrazer o surgimento da classificação de pidgins e crioulos, Mufwene
Introduction

The conference by Salikoko Mufwene, professor at the Linguistics Department from the University of Chicago, is of special interest for linguists who aim to work with the emergence of new linguistic varieties from the contact of different languages.

Mufwene begins his talk alerting that the path through which historical evidence has led his analysis conducted him in what can be considered a subversive approach. This initial warning is due to the fact that his proposal for the studies on pidgins and creole languages diverges radically from most studies in the field. These studies consider pidgins and creoles exceptional in face of the historical context in which they have emerged. The conference's main argument resides in the investigation of the historical background not only of the aforementioned linguistic varieties, but also of the theoretical and methodological approach adopted by their language descriptions and analyses.

That approach is referred to as “traditional narrative” by Mufwene and it treats pidgins as “broken languages”, which resulted from sporadic contact between Europeans and the indigenous people in different regions around the world. These Europeans would not be interested in learning local languages and the native populations could not learn European languages properly, goes this narrative. Pidgins, therefore, would be a lingua franca, simpler and underdeveloped when compared to other languages, from which creoles would evolve in settlement colonies. At this point of the conference, Mufwene presents the first historical fact that disputes this narrative: pidgins spoken in Nigeria and Cameroon do not fit in that relation between history and language evolution.

Mufwene argues that this traditional narrative has been convenient, assuming systems tend to evolve from simpler to more complex structures. That assumption makes it possible to relate the linguistic differences between Europeans and non-Europeans to different stages of human evolution, fitting in the social theories that prevailed in Europe during the 19th century.

After that, the speaker introduces other historical facts which have been ignored and could dispute the traditional narrative. First, the history of European languages itself reveals that they have evolved from morphological structures that were more complex to simpler ones. The following argument comprehends two aspects that pull the concepts of ‘pidgin’ and ‘creole’ away from each
other: their chronological and geographical contexts of emergence. While the word ‘creole’ appeared in the 16th century and was not used in reference to a colonial language variety until the 17th century, the term ‘pidgin’ only emerged in the late 18th century. Besides being distant from each other in time, both terms have also originated in very distant locations: ‘creole’ is first used in America, while ‘pidgin’ emerged in Canton, China. These facts contradict the claim that pidgins would be earlier stages of creoles.

Mufwene then exhibits a world map which highlights the areas where pidgins and creoles are spoken. The map makes it clear that those regions are in complementary distribution: in the regions where pidgins are spoken, creoles are not and vice-versa. Hawaii might seem a possible exception, but Mufwene rejects it based on the different origins of the pidgin and the creole spoken in the islands: while the pidgin variety emerged in the plantation sites, the creole started in urban centers.

Another historical fact that Mufwene claims to have been ignored by the traditional narrative is the heterogeneity and the longevity of the colonial enterprise. Tracing back to the beginnings of the European maritime expansion, it can be observed the absence of Spanish/Castillian-based or Portuguese-based pidgins, nonetheless Spanish and Portuguese were the languages spoken by the European imperial powers that virtually shared the world trade routes in the 15th century.

Trade is one of the arguments from traditional narrative in favor of the emergence of pidgins, since it would be based on sporadic interactions performed under very specific situations. Mufwene describes the trade routes established among Africans and Arabs before the European process of commercial expansion and poses a question: how many pidgins emerged from those trades? There are no studies to answer that.

The historical analysis of the trade between Europeans and Africans then becomes the focus of Mufwene’s talk. The main goods provided by Africans to Europeans were very highly valued commodities, mainly gold, ivory and human beings. The trade of those items was not handled by individual merchants nor by small owners in bazaars: these transactions were huge operations which involved large corporations and a high amount of money. Thus, there were protocols that should be followed by the European companies to trade with the rulers of organized societies in Africa. The interval between the first encounters and the consolidation of a trade relationship was rather long and it involved interpreters not only of African origins, but also those who left Europe due to the Reconquista and Inquisition conflicts in the Iberic Peninsula. This historical observation disfavors the conception of pidgins and creoles as results of a simplified and strongly gesture-based communication or of the inefficient learning of a language.

Mufwene subsequently analyzes linguistic data from both English pidgins and non-standard English varieties, in order to argue that both pidgins and creoles emerged through basilectalization, i.e. by diverting from the model of the European languages spoken by the time they emerged. The difference between pidgins, creoles and non-standard varieties resides in how much they diverge from the model: pidgins diverge from the European languages more than creoles do.

Mufwene tributes the interest in distinguishing and specifying non-European language varieties to the ideological racism that prevailed in Europe during the 19th century: there is no documentation
of ways of speaking reported as exclusively black or African before that, albeit the colonies dating to the 17th century. It was also in the 19th century that most pidgins emerged, mainly due to the changes that global commerce went through with the growing British participation in trade routes and colonies. Thus, it is no coincidence the scarce number of pidgins based in languages other than English.

The conclusion of the conference presents the history of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) and Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) as evidence that pidgins are more recent than creoles and, therefore, could not be considered their ancestors or earlier stages. In addition to that, Mufwene (following DeGraff [2003; 2005]) criticizes the Creole Exceptionalism – the assumption that pidgins and creoles are a specific type of languages – based on the fact that there is not a set of features exclusive to the grammar of creole languages.

After the conference, Mufwene answered some questions from the audience and could sketch new ideas and reinforce some arguments. He mentioned that the uniformitarian approach – for which he stands – does not allow the labeling of new language varieties as pidgins or creoles and that the usage of these concepts itself entails a methodological bias that could affect the description of these languages in a negative way.

How Pidgins Emerged? Not as We Have Been Told is an excellent introduction to Salikoko Mufwene’s view on the emergence of language varieties in contact contexts. Due to the conference time limit, the argumentation focuses on the opposition between pidgin and creole in chronological and geographical terms, although pointing to similarities in linguistic structures. These similarities are shared with non-pidgin and non-creole languages, showing that the distinction is based mainly in extra-linguistic criteria. Mufwene argues that the terms were conceived based on European perception of non-European speakers, having no basis on language structure. This argumentation can be found in more details in Mufwene’s previous works (2001, 2008).

In sum, this was a subversive conference and it stimulates a reflection not only about the studies on languages in contact, but also on descriptive linguistics itself. By retracing the history of the colonization processes, Mufwene casts light on how much linguistic descriptions are still imbued with colonialist and racist views that trace back to European evolutionary theories from the 19th century. Mufwene’s work – as well as that of DeGraff (2003, 2005), Aboh (2015), among others – is essential for the 21st-century Linguistics to overcome its colonialist traditions.

REFERENCES


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