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# Why neither demographics nor feature pools can explain the missing Spanish plantation creoles Taxonomy: Morphology, sociocultural linguistics

John H. McWhorter

*Columbia University, 319 Hamilton Hall, Mail Code 2810, 1130 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027, USA*

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## Abstract

Theories that plantation creoles were all born as pidgins at West African coast slave castles, including that proposed in [Author \(2000\)](#), have not fared well among creolists, amidst a preference for supposing that creoles are born, or not, according to factors local to a given context. In this paper I spell out why, especially in light of research since, the “Afrogenesis” paradigm is still worth serious consideration. A key fact is the following. Many creolists argue that a creole did not appear when there was extensive black-white contact and many slaves were locally-born, a scenario most often associated with the Spanish Caribbean and Reunion and now proposed for South American colonies by [Sessarego \(2014\)](#) and [Diaz-Campos and Clements \(2008\)](#). However, conditions were of just this kind in early St. Kitts and Barbados, where most scholars now locate the birth of English-based and French-based plantation creoles. The disparity in outcomes between these locations means that after fifty years, there is no coherent theory of how or why creoles come to be. I argue that only Afrogenesis shows the way out of this conundrum. I further discuss why the idea that creoles result from individual blendings of “features” in each location ([Mufwene, 2011, 2008](#)) is incommensurate with creole linguistic data.

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## 1. Introduction

Since [Baker and Corne \(1982\)](#), it has been creolist orthodoxy that in colonies where slaves quickly came to outnumber whites, creole languages formed, while in colonies in which there was a long period of numerical parity between slaves and whites, the result was a lightly restructured variety of the lexifier language. The classic contrast is between Mauritian Creole and Réunionnais French.

In [Author \(2000\)](#), I argued that in mainland Spanish colonies, no creoles formed despite that African slaves were imported in massive numbers from the outset of agricultural or mining activity, and that this suggested that the limited access model of creole genesis was mistaken. Instead, I proposed that the creoles that took root in plantation societies must have emerged not on the plantations themselves, but in slave castles on the west coast of Africa, later transported to the colonies by small, founding numbers of slaves.

*E-mail address:* [jm3156@columbia.edu](mailto:jm3156@columbia.edu).

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Under this analysis, the reason for the absence of Spanish creoles is that the Spanish, because of the Treaty of Tordesillas that divided the world according to a line that restricted the Spanish from the west African coast, were the one power that did not establish such slave castles on that coast. Therefore, there was nowhere for a Spanish creole to emerge.

My claim that slaves rapidly outnumbered whites in mainland Spanish colonies in the Americas was wrong. Sessarego (2014, 2015, 2017) and Diaz-Campos and Clements (2008) have conclusively shown, with more detailed historical research than I did, that in Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Peru, there were indeed long periods of relative parity between white and black, and that a decisive number of slaves brought to establish plantations were locally born, and therefore likely to have spoken Spanish itself rather than a creole.

However, I feel that my claim that the reason there are no Spanish plantation creoles is the Spanish's lack of west African slave castles remains correct. Many will understandably assume that work such as these articles by Sessarego, Diaz-Campos and Clements (masterful in themselves) allow us to retain the traditional creole genesis model, under which creoles formed according to disproportion of slave to white. However, these works actually reveal a gaping hole in this limited-access paradigm, which a valid creole genesis theory must seek to repair.

## 2. The problem

The findings of Sessarego and Diaz-Campos & Clements imply that when slaves and whites were at relative parity, then the result was, at most, a lightly restructured version of the lexifier rather than a creole. In other words, under this analysis the mainland Spanish colonies were analogous to Réunion rather than Mauritius. As plausible as this perspective seems in view of these Spanish colonies by themselves, it runs aground upon data elsewhere.

Quite simply, in Barbados and St. Kitts, creole English and French emerged amidst the same numerical parity and rich social interaction between whites and blacks as in the mainland Spanish colony contexts. On Barbados until the 1660s, blacks worked alongside white indentured servants (Handler and Lange, 1978:290, Watts, 1987), while conditions on St. Kitts were similar (Jennings, 1995). Yet it was on these islands that the parent creole to all of the Atlantic English-based creoles (henceforth AECs) emerged, as demonstrated by Hancock (1987), Author (1995), Baker (1999), and more recently Daval-Markussen and Bakker (2011), as well as the parent creole to the French plantation creoles (henceforth FPCs) of the Caribbean (Goodman, 1964; Parkvall, 1995; Author, 2000:146–91). (On the existence of a full-fledged AEC in Barbados despite its traditional reputation for acrolectal tendencies, cf. the findings of Rickford and Handler, 1994.)

This point about the two parent creoles is not customarily spelled out so explicitly in creolist work, such that my doing so may seem somewhat polemical or hasty. However, I am proceeding on the basis of detailed argumentation by the abovementioned authors, whose conclusions qualify, at this date, as uncontested, including that mere “diffusion” of features, as often proposed by various authors, is an insufficient explanation for the degree and kind of likeness in question. There have been only a few, cursory criticisms of these arguments for genetic relatedness between these creoles, all either too brief to constitute academic argument (e.g. passing mention in Migge, 2003; Kouwenberg, 2010) or misunderstanding the tenets of comparative reconstruction (DeGraff, 2001:296–9). The arguments for these genetic relationships are based on fundamental tenets of identifying relatedness between languages – idiosyncratic grammatical and lexical parallels – and I submit that historical linguists from outside of creole studies, presented with the arguments in question, would be unlikely to judge them erroneous.

But the conundrum the AECs and FPCs therefore present must be clear: the issue is not merely that a couple of creoles developed amidst these conditions. Rather, all of the AECs (including the West African ones termed “pidgins” such as Nigerian, Ghanaian and Cameroonian) trace directly back to Barbados, while all of the FPCs of the Caribbean trace back to St. Kitts. Thus the fact that there was considerable disproportion between slaves and whites in, for example, Surinam shortly after its founding does not constitute evidence in favor of the limited access model, because Sranan did not emerge in Surinam itself – it was imported with slaves from Barbados. The demographics in, actually, most of the New World colonies did not create creoles; rather, they shaped the local development of creoles that had been imported from elsewhere.

Thus, when considering that no creole emerged in, for example, Ecuador, we must also recall not just Réunion, but Barbados. The limited access model cannot explain why no creole emerged in Ecuador but a creole did emerge in Barbados. Moreover, Barbados cannot be treated as a fluke, because St. Kitts presents the same problem – as do the contexts that birthed Cape Verdean and Guinea-Bissau Creole Portuguese, the Gulf of Guinea Creole Portugueses, Negerhollands, and Palenquero: in not a single one of the genesis contexts of these languages did the subordinated outnumber the whites to any significant degree (Author, 2016).

Given how heterogenous creolist thought has tended to be, some might question whether there actually is a “limited access model” of creole genesis, especially since the concept was discussed more in the 1980s and early 1990s than it has been since. However, there indeed reigns a basic conception that demographic disproportion was a decisive – although hardly sole – element in plantation creole genesis. It was central to Bickerton's Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (most explicitly engaged in Bickerton, 1984); to the idea that creoles resulted from increasing numbers of

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