



Creoles and sociolinguistic complexity: Response to Ansaldo



Mikael Parkvall ^a, Peter Bakker ^{b,*}, John H. McWhorter ^c

^a Stockholm University, Sweden

^b Aarhus University, Denmark

^c Columbia University, NY, USA

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ABSTRACT

In an earlier article in this journal, Umberto Ansaldo states that creoles are sociolinguistically the most complex of languages, equalled only by the situation in South India. In our article we show that this claim is not supported by facts about global multilingualism, creole societies, creole language structures and theories of language contact. The vast majority of the world's population is multilingual: the average human speaks almost two languages. Nothing in the sociolinguistic situation of current creole societies is exceptional vis-à-vis situations of other minority languages. Yet, creoles differ structurally from the other languages of the world. That finding is supported by all empirical studies that include data on creoles and non-creoles, despite exceptionalists being accused of being inspired by ideology. The “feature pool theory” (cf. Mufwene 2001), analyzing creoles as simply language hybrids like a great many other languages, does not predict the relative analyticity of creole languages, since several equally analytic creoles and pidgins have come about from contact between morphologically rich languages. Crucially, adherents of this theory, including Ansaldo, have not responded to criticisms along these lines. Sudden language contact, as in situations of pidginization and creole genesis, leads to loss of irregularities and morphological paradigms. We argue that Ansaldo's claims are based on an insufficient familiarity with the relevant literature, as well as frequent misquotations.

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1. Introduction

In a recent issue of *Language Sciences* (vol. 60:26–35), Umberto Ansaldo published an article with the title “Creole complexity in sociolinguistic perspective” (Ansaldo, 2017). The article is particularly ill-informed and misleading, based on a paucity of data and saliently weak argumentation. We shall only deal with the most obvious shortcomings, but even those make for a rather impressive list.

The author deals with two types of facts: the first entails findings in creole studies, about which Ansaldo appears surprisingly uninformed in terms of observations, facts, hypotheses and theories that have been brought forward over the past decades, as well as in recent years. The other type of fact is claims that Ansaldo makes about other creolists' views and claims.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: parkvall@ling.su.se (M. Parkvall), linpb@cc.au.dk (P. Bakker), jm3156@columbia.edu (J.H. McWhorter).

These views and claims may be correct or incorrect, but when Ansaldo mentions them, he is more often than not wrong about what these authors actually put forward in their publications. In some cases, they have even claimed the opposite of what Ansaldo suggests.

For the uninitiated reader, the present authors have all argued that creoles are indeed structurally unusual or distinct from non-creoles, based on empirical studies including a non-creole sample of the world's languages (e.g. McWhorter, 2005; Parkvall, 2008; Bakker et al., 2017; Bakker, 2016). Ansaldo, on the other hand, is among those who have vehemently opposed the idea. For instance, in 2007 he wrote “Creole exceptionalism is a set of sociohistorically-rooted dogmas with foundations in (neo-)colonial power relations, not a scientific conclusion based on robust empirical evidence” (Ansaldo and Matthews, 2007: 14).¹

Creole exceptionalism is, in Ansaldo's view, rather an “ideological construct” resulting “from colonial practices and nation-state ideology” (Ansaldo and Matthews, 2007: 14), and “an ideological, not an empirical matter” (Ansaldo, 2009: 92), whose basis is “the culture = race = language equation” (Ansaldo, 2009: 87). We will leave it to the reader to judge whether these statements, never accompanied by much actual language data, actually constitute linguistically and scientifically valid arguments, especially given that they are presented amidst what seems to be an outright unwillingness to engage the data and results produced by others.

2. The issue of exceptionalism and the representation of work by others

At the heart of the discussion is “creole exceptionalism” – that is, the issue whether creoles represent a typologically identifiable class (often, but not always, claimed to be of lower structural complexity than non-creoles). This issue is not the focus of this particular paper of Ansaldo's, though he does mention it. The debate is summarized succinctly as follows by Austronesianist David Gil (2014: 47):

“On the one side are those who, often for ideological reasons, reject the possibility that creole languages may differ in significant ways from other older languages – see for example DeGraff (2003, 2005), Ansaldo and Matthews (2007) and others. On the other side are scholars mustering an array of empirical evidence suggesting that creole languages do in fact differ in systematic ways from their non-creole counterparts – see Bakker et al. (2011) for a recent large-scale cross-linguistic study.”

Some readers may find it unconventional to read creole exceptionalists described as those in this controversy who refer to data, as those on the other side are given to implying that creole exceptionalism is founded largely on a preconceived, and sociologically suspect, bias. However, in fact opponents of the idea of exceptionality, including Ansaldo, adduce little or no linguistic data for their position – the work of Salikoko Mufwene and Michel DeGraff, especially, consists almost entirely of prose, usually making reference to a very restricted number of languages; typically one or two. In contrast, the exceptionalists base their conclusions on massive data from a range of creoles and non-creoles. Note also that Ansaldo's phraseology that people who reach the opposite conclusion to his speculations “subscribe to an exceptionalist view” (of morphology) (p. 7) unfairly evokes ideology rather than empiricism.

We shall not reiterate the arguments here, but simply highlight a few points in Ansaldo's argumentation in this specific article which are worrying in that they, once again, raise the question as to how well he reads the papers he quotes (whether favourably or unfavourably).

First, he claims that in our work we subscribe to an “exceptionalist view of morphology” (p. 7), and quotes Parkvall (2008). That paper in fact very specifically states that morphology is largely irrelevant to the question discussed. Even a reader reluctant to venture beyond the introductory ten-line abstract can therein find the statement that:

“It is noteworthy that the differing complexity is not related to the relative lack of morphology in creoles”, which quite clearly contradicts Ansaldo's portrayal of our work.

Similarly, while McWhorter (2009) does include affixation as one aspect of complexity, he stresses that it is but one facet thereof, and that creolists are wrong to stress it in evaluating the question. McWhorter (2001) has a whole section showing that Saramaccan is “less complex” even in comparison to a modestly inflected language like Maori and a wholly analytic one such as the Sino-Tibetan language Lahu, expressly to show that affixation is **not** the crux of the matter.

The second aspect is Ansaldo's question as to:

“Why would we assume that a certain type of language – incidentally a Standard Average European type [...] is ‘normal’, and thus try to find ‘abnormality’ in the languages of ‘others’?”

However, Parkvall (2008) states not that creoles differ from Standard Average European, but that they differ from **languages of the world as a whole**. While the main point of that article is that creoles are structurally less complex than languages in general, Ansaldo forgets that creoles were not claimed to be simpler than European languages specifically, and indicates no basis for his conclusion otherwise.

¹ Ansaldo agrees here with DeGraff (2005: 576), whose rendition had been “Creole Exceptionalism is a set of sociohistorically rooted dogmas with foundations in (neo-)colonial power relations, and not a scientific conclusion based on robust evidence”.

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