Exploring genealogical blends: The Surinamese Creole cluster and the Virgin Island Dutch Creole cluster

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Abstract

This paper explores digitally archived data from three genres of 18th and 20th century texts in two Caribbean Creole language clusters: the Suriname Creoles and Virgin Island Dutch Creole. They will be approached from the perspective of variation and change within varieties that were originally *genealogical blends*: languages that are made up of typological properties from different lineages from different parts of the world, Europe and West-Africa. We will focus on the expression of property concepts in relation to aspect marking, as this feature contrasts typologically for the relevant areas, and argue that genealogical blends are a useful notion to handle the variation found in the Creole language data. Comparing two language clusters in diachronic perspective yields stronger support for our central claim that the typological dependency between verbal property concepts and aspect-orientation is a robust one.
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1. Introduction: global harmony and genealogical blends

One of the dominant research topics in contemporary linguistics concerns Linguistic Typology, concerned with the study of diversity, the distribution of linguistic features and the dependencies between them, resulting in different language types. The notion of 'language type' assumes that certain properties of language are not randomly distributed among the languages of the world, but cluster into feature bundles. Based on Greenberg (1963), Comrie (1981:17) gives the example of such a dependency between two word order features: (a) VSO and (b) Preposition – Noun, where (a) implies (b). This predicts that there should not be VSO languages that do not have a Preposition Noun order in the prepositional phrase. Implications are often linked to Greenberg's notion of harmony: two orders between which there is an implication relation may be said to be harmonic. The dependencies have another explanation in the tradition started with Chomsky (1981), where macro-parameters were assumed to account for positive distributional correlations between specific features.

Macro-parameters are fundamental choices the language learning child makes that have wide ranging implications in the different parts of the grammar that the child constructs.

There has been considerable research over the years to establish these correlations, phrased in terms of macro-parameters and harmonies in large language samples, and then to explain them. However, Dunn et al. (2011), using Bantu, Indo-European, Uto-Aztecan, and Austronesian data for clausal, noun phrase internal, and adposition phrase internal orders, have argued that the implications claimed between feature specifications in the Greenbergian and Chomskyan traditions only hold for a particular lineage or language family, rather than being universally valid. Thus correlations or harmonies may be historical accidents resulting from cultural evolution and linked to specific lineages, rather than the direct result of universal cognitive and/or functional pressures. The result of Dunn et al. (2011) still needs to be extended to other linguistic domains where typologists and generative theorists have claimed dependencies, but it raises the stakes.

Correlations between linguistic features and structural dependencies face complex issues, and indeed establishing correlations and dependencies has become a complicated task (cf. also Bickel, 2015), requiring an additional diachronic perspective. This is particularly the case because many word order patterns have a wide areal distribution, suggesting earlier historical relations (cf. e.g. Dryer, 1989, 1992), and the same holds for other grammatical features (Nichols, 1992 and much later work).

Here we would like to explore a specific angle to this issue, rooted in the study of diachronic Creole corpora, namely *genealogical blends*. Suppose speakers of languages from family X are suddenly brought into contact with speakers of languages from family Y, does the resulting language contact and mixing produce a clash between the features of both language groups? Does this clash lead to internal variation in the resulting system, and how is this clash resolved over time? Does a new harmony emerge within the new genealogical lineage? Creoles show innovations as mixed languages (e.g. Muysken, 1988), combining different features, but the notion of being mixed is hard to define. Many creoles have mixed lexical stock, but this is hardly their defining feature. They may also have mixed morphology and phonology, mixed lexemic structure, mixed syntax and semantics (see also Bhatt and Veenstra, 2013). This may lead to a mixed typology, and provide a testing ground for the issue of whether a given dependency is simply a result of a specific historical development in a family (as argued in Dunn et al., 2011) or reflect a characteristic attribute due to cognitive properties of the system of language processing.

In section 2 we will illustrate the issue of dependencies by evaluating an earlier proposed macro-parameter, Pro-drop in Papiamentu, while in section 3 we will introduce the two main language clusters that form the basis for our empirical study of variation and change: the Virgin Islands Dutch Creole (VIDC) varieties and the Surinamese Creole (SurC) cluster, as well as the linguistic variable studied here.[1] Sections 4 (SurC) and 5 (VIDC cluster) focus upon the key area to illustrate our point: the relation between the expression of property concepts and aspectual distinctions, which has been argued to constitute a typological universal (see section 3.5). Section 6 is devoted to our main conclusions and a discussion of some further issues.

2. An example from Papiamentu: the Pro-drop parameter

To further illustrate the issue at hand, consider the Pro-drop parameter (Chomsky, 1981). The original idea behind linguistic parameters, which certainly seemed very attractive, was that grammatical differences between languages were tightly correlated. The language learning child only needed to pick up the more obvious differences directly from the linguistic input, and the more subtle differences would come for free. The example which triggered this line of thinking was whether the subject is obligatory or not. Originally, two language types were postulated, English-type languages and Spanish-type languages. In Spanish-type languages, verbal agreement is ''rich'', and the identity of the subject can be gleaned from the verbal inflection, as in *comemos* 'we eat'. In English-type languages, agreement is poor, and the subject needs to be overtly marked. With this difference, a number of other features emerge in Spanish and English, such as the (im)possibility of Subject inversion and of the passivized object in post-verbal position, the obligatory nature of expletives with weather verbs and impersonal verbs, and the possibility of subject extraction out of embedded clauses.

Consider now how Papiamentu, the Creole language from the Caribbean islands Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao fits into this typology (Law and Muysken, 2001). It has resulted from the interaction of the Ibero-Romance languages, with rich agreement systems, and West-African languages without person agreement. The following discusses how Papiamentu fares on the relevant features involved in the parameter.

Verbal agreement marking. As shown in Table 1, Papiamentu comes out squarely in the camp of ''poor'' inflection languages. Where English still marks third person, there is no marking at all in Papiamentu (as in most other languages labeled ''Creole'').

Absent subject pronoun. In line with this, it is generally impossible to leave out the subject pronoun, as in English, as shown by the ungrammaticality of (1b).

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[1] Author 2 analyzed the SurC materials, while Author 1 analyzed the VIDC materials used in this paper.