Chapter 5

Symbol of Powerlessness and Degeneracy, or Symbol of Solidarity and Truth? Paradoxical Attitudes Toward Pidgins and Creoles

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I. It don't take you nowhere. It don't do good to a person . . . If one can pick up, you know, good English, you know, you see, he can spread it among his children . . . But if you start with the different kind of Creole language on them, you know, you'll make them go out the wrong side.

II. . . . yuh gat to larn fuh larn yuh, yuh own language, yuh know . . . Abee na waan dem Englishman teachin an ting da no mo, man. Dem ting da mus' done " . . . you have to learn your, your own language, you know . . . We don't want those English people's teaching and so on any more, man. Those things must end."1

Introduction

The stigma associated with non-standard language varieties in general is associated par excellence with pidgin and creole varieties, which are even more divergent from the standard language than the average non-standard dialect in Britain or the U.S.A., and which tend to be spoken by people of the "wrong" ethnic background or social status. As has often been noted, the importance of a language derives from its users. The consequences of this relationship have been pointed out by Dell Hymes for attitudes to pidgins and creoles:

Because of their origins, however, their association with poorer and darker members of a society, and through perpetuation of misleading stereotypes—such as that a pidgin is merely a broken or baby-talk version of another language—most interest, even where positive, has considered them merely curiosities. Much of the interest and information, scholarly as well as public, has been prejudicial.2

Like other non-standard varieties, however, pidgins and creoles have also been viewed as symbols of truth and reality, and embraced as signals of solidarity. These positive attitudes are not always as visible on the surface as the negative ones, and are certainly reported less often in the literature. One early report, however, is the following from Hall:

For the normal, unpretentious Haitian, use of Creole is the symbol of truth and reality, and French is the language of bluff, mystification, and duplicity.3

In the following pages we will explore the paradoxical combination of negative and positive attitudes which are found in communities where pidgin and creole varieties of English are spoken, beginning with general attitudes
reflected in newspapers and literary works, and continuing with the more specific attitudes which the application of sociolinguistic survey techniques have revealed. First, however, we need to say a few words about what pidgins and creoles are.

**Pidgins, Creoles, and Creole Continua**

While the identification of a pidgin or a creole is often a matter of considerable debate among linguists,4 initial working definitions such as the following will serve. A pidgin is nobody’s native language. It arises in situations such as plantation life, trading, or military operations, where speakers of several mutually unintelligible languages come together, usually as social subordinates to a socially dominant minority who speak yet another language. In such situations, a new “mixed” language may develop for basic communication. Its vocabulary is usually drawn primarily from the prestige language of the dominant group, while its grammar retains many features of the native languages of the subordinate groups. The prestige language which supplies the bulk of the vocabulary is the one which is usually thought of as being “pidginized”; hence “pidgin English” rather than “pidgin Yoruba” or “pidgin Twi” for the pidgin emerging from contact between English traders and African slaves from a variety of language-backgrounds. It is as if the vocabulary provides the basic material, and pidginization refers to the techniques of working it into a usable garment. These techniques in turn depend on the ways of putting material together with which the subordinate groups are accustomed (i.e. the grammars of their native languages), plus some “universal” principles of reduction or simplification which speakers seem to draw on the world over when trying to communicate across linguistic barriers. Furthermore, the dominant group may change over time, as it so often did in the African-Caribbean slave trade, and this may result either in a full-scale change-over in the source of the vocabulary, or in a sprinkling of words from the languages of each of the groups which were formerly in control. In Guyanese Creole, for instance, the vocabulary is largely English-derived, but the residue of past colonial shifts in power is represented by words like *paaling* “fence” (from Dutch), *cabane* “hut, makeshift bed” (from French), and *pikni* “child” (from Portuguese).

Pidgins have typically developed in situations with slaves or other large work-forces from widely differing ethnic communities (as in the Caribbean, or in Hawaii), but they have also developed as the language of communication among traders, and even for general everyday affairs in multilingual countries, as in modern Nigeria, where West African Pidgin English is widely used, and Papua New Guinea, where Tok Pisin, otherwise known as New Guinea Pidgin English, is spoken by the majority of the population. In communities such as Nigeria or Papua New Guinea, the pidgin has become highly stabilized and developed, and functions as a *lingua franca* or general language of communication. Indeed, from the fifties, Tok Pisin has been one of the three main vehicles for communication in Papua New Guinea (formerly called New Guinea) for the House of Assembly: English, Tok Pisin, and Hiri Motu (a pidginized local
language). English is used primarily for communication outside Papua New Guinea, while Tok Pisin is used for internal affairs. It has been used extensively for broadcasting and the press, and thus enjoys considerable positive evaluation, particularly over the native languages, of which there are a large number for so small an island, most of them mutually unintelligible. It is claimed that there are some 700 languages for a population of little over 2 1/2 million, and these languages belong to two different language groups: Austronesian and Papuan.  

When she did field work in New Guinea in the early seventies, Gillian Sankoff found that pidgin was often the norm not only in contexts where people from different regions were together, but also among people of the same area. Here, translated, is one conversation she recorded on the subject:

A. Even people from the same area don’t speak their native language. They don’t allow it, saying “Only Pidgin’s all right.” ... If we speak our language when you’re around you might say, “Hey, those two women must be mad at us or saying something bad about us two”. So we don’t like it, it’s forbidden.

B. I think after a long time, there won’t be any more Tok Ples (native languages), just Pidgin and English.

Frequently, pidgins serve limited functions, especially in their early stages. Except in a few unusual cases like Tok Pisin, they may be inadequate in the size of their lexicon, the complexity of syntactic structure, and range of styles for the range of uses to which native languages are put. When, as in the case of the slave-trade, transmission of the language from one generation to another is impossible or nearly so, a nativized pidgin, or “creole,” may arise, largely developed by children of the pidgin speakers, a process which has been discussed extensively by Derek Bickerton in *Roots of Language*. This creole is a language with significantly greater lexical, syntactic, and stylistic possibilities than the pidgin, and capable of serving the range of functions which native use requires. However, in situations like that of Tok Pisin where the pidgin is used extensively for a wide variety of purposes, the grammar of adults may show the complication of grammatical machinery associated with a nativized pidgin or creole.  

When the creole does not coexist with the standard form of the language from which it draws most of its vocabulary, the creole will develop relatively independently, as it has in the case of Sranan, the creole of Surinam. Here the creole has a basically English-derived lexicon (remarkably well preserved after only sixteen years of English colonization between 1651 and 1667) with some Dutch (the colony belonged to the Dutch, except for two brief periods, between 1667 and 1946). When the creole continues to coexist with the standard form of the language from which it draws most of its vocabulary, however, we usually find progressive “decreolization,” producing a continuum of varieties intermediate between the creole and the standard poles.

**Attitudes in the Mass Media**

Within creole-speaking communities, the view of the creole publicly aired in the mass media has typically been one of self-deprecation, with educators and public officials (some never having spoken the creole themselves, others trying
to conceal their association or competence) leading in the attack. One common
charge is that the creole is not a real or legitimate language, this claim deriving
from the erroneous but frequently-asserted claim that it has no grammar or is
merely a mangled version of the standard. One example is provided in the
following remarks about Sierra Leone Krio made at the turn of the century by
L. J. Leopold, Principal of the Educational Institute in Sierra Leone:

The Sierra Leone patois is a kind of invertebrate *omnium gatherum* of all sorts, a veritable *ola
podrida* [sic] collected from many different languages without regard to harmony or precision:
it is largely defective and sadly wanting in many of the essentials and details that make up and
dignify a language. It is a standing menace and a disgrace hindering not only educational
development but also the growth of civilization in the colony.8

Lest it be thought that such negative views are characteristic only of days
long past, Guyanese Home Affairs Minister Stanley Moore is said to have
“dubbed Creolese as a vulgar, rough and ready mode of expression,”
according to a 1981 newspaper account.9 The reference to vulgarity here
represents another cluster of negative views associated with creoles. The
category-mistake of identifying prestigious language varieties with high morals
and non-prestigious ones with low morals is age-old and by no means restricted
to attitudes toward pidgins and creoles (cf. George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygma-
lion*), but it finds a particularly ready outlet among some deprecators of these
languages.

A third tendency is to view the creole as a symbol of social and political
degradation (the attitude highlighted in our title), to the extent that it becomes
a “pernicious and insulting idea” to advocate its introduction in any form in
the public school system.10 This particular attitude derives not only from the
present-day associations of the creoles with “poorer and darker members of a
society,” but also from its historical associations with slavery, and with
attempts to keep slaves subjugated by preventing them from becoming
educated and informed. For instance, one Guyanese newspaper editorial
written in the sixties advocated the upholding of standard English in the
schools and society as a kind of trophy of war, wrested from the imperialists
who had sought to deny slaves and ex-slaves the right to learn, live, and speak
as those in power did.

The preceding quotations all come from newspapers, and represent one way
in which the press can give us evidence of local attitudes: by direct quotation of
attitudes, whether reported or printed in the form of editorials and letters to the
editor. But there is another, more subtle means by which newspapers and other
media give us information about attitudes: by the kinds of material which they
choose to represent in creole versus standard. Comic and racy materials are
often stereotypically rendered in the creole: the comic-strips, cartoons, and
gossip-columns of newspapers, for instance, or the joke-shows of radio and
TV. Straight reporting and editorializing about serious subjects is, by contrast,
almost invariably in standard English.

**Attitudes in Literature**

Like non-standard dialects, pidgins and creoles have traditionally been used to
inject comedy into a story, to present a pathetic character, or at best to suggest the folkways of the people who speak them. This is the kind of attitude that we can infer from such writings as Daniel Defoe’s *Colonel Jacques* (about a Virginian who uses pidgin English), and Harris’s *Nights with Uncle Remus* (where Daddy Jack, a former African slave, speaks a variety fairly close to Gullah, a creole still spoken in parts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Texas). Even writers like Ambrose Gonzales, who collected many Gullah tales in the 1920s and fictionalized them, in the preface to *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast*, speaks of the “grotesqueness” and “laziness” of the Gullah language, which he labels “jungle-talk.”

Recently, however, more and more writers have been using pidgins and creoles in a different way—as a vehicle for the presentation of the cultures and rich communities in which these languages flourish, often as the voice of reality, truth, and genuineness in a world otherwise largely destructive (the colonial world) or corrupt (the go-getting, often fraudulent world of post-colonial governments). Some writers have come to use it as the sole vehicle of short stories and poems. Among them are Julia Peterkin who writes of South Carolina and Gullah speakers, Samuel Selvon (for example, *Ways of Sunlight*, 1957, set in Trinidad), Edward Brathwaite, who writes of Barbados, R. O. Robinson and Louise Bennett, whose works are set in Jamaica. Especially conscious of the negative attitudes toward creole, Louise Bennett rightly points out that English has always been a mixed language in this impassioned plea against the suppression of the creole.12

**BANS O’KILLING**

So yuh a de man, me hear bout!
Ah yuh dem sey dah-teck
Whole heap o’ English oat sey dat
Yuh gwine kill dialect!

Meck me get it straight Mass Charlie
For me noh quite undastan,
Yuh gwine kill all English dialect
Or jus Jamaica one?...

Yuh wi haffe get de Oxford book
O’ English verse, an tear
Out Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle
An plenty o’ Shakespeare!

Wen yuh done kill “wit” and “humour”
Wen yuh kill “Variety”
Yuh wi haffe fine a way fe kill
Originality!...

Wit, humor, originality, poignancy, all these are functions to which the pidgin or creole may be put in literature. Above all, the multiplicity of languages and language varieties in a pidgin or creole-speaking society and the importance for survival to be able to command a range of styles often becomes a theme in itself. An amusing example can be found in Selvon’s *An Island is a World*:

“I say, awful hot weather we’re having, isn’t it?” Ranjit, schooled for five years in the usual opening sentences about the weather English people use when they get together, had forgotten that Trinidadians don’t really give a blast if it’s hot or cool. He sat and crossed his
legs, pulling up his trousers from the knees to preserve the seams. He spoke with a pseudo-Oxford accent.

Jennifer typed him at once in her mind, as she had typed all the others. The way they all spoke was ridiculous. It might have sounded all right in England; here in the house it always sounded pretentious, as if they were no longer Trinidadians but tourists paying the island a visit.

She decided to give him the usual treatment. "I ain't notice dat it making hot", she said to him in a flat voice, "must be how you just come back." 13

A particularly elaborate portrayal of different attitudes to a pidgin (in this case West African Pidgin English) can be found in Chinua Achebe's novel *A Man of the People*. A novel about the corruptness of African politics in general, it is also about the politics of language, its abuse, and its potential. The corrupt and ridiculous minister attempts to speak primarily in "pure" English or sometimes in West African Pidgin English, never his native tongue, which he despises. On the occasions when he does use the pidgin, he exploits it as a way of "reaching the people" whom he pretends to love (but only uses to get votes), or in mimicking them. At the same time, the voice of common sense is expressed by his bodyguard and others who speak the pidgin in making interpretive and evaluative comments. The Minister, in other words, uses the standard language as a vehicle of self-promotion, and also of "bluff, mystification, and duplicity"; the association of standard language and morality is called into question. The bodyguard, on the other hand, uses the pidgin to express what he perceives as truth and reality; here morality and the non-standard language are linked. The pidgin is used in other ways too, most especially as the vehicle of intimate joking and excitement.

As an author, Achebe himself is in a double bind – for him English is of course the vehicle for international and even national success (the many languages spoken in Nigeria have almost inevitably allowed English to remain as the language of the educated, even after independence). He has therefore attempted to develop a distinctly African idiom for the English he writes, a literary language with its own characteristics and its own prestige, dependent on, but not wholly the same as, the British English of the former colonialists. 14

In short, many writers seek to delineate "a possible alternative to the European cultural tradition which has been imposed on us and which we have more or less accepted and absorbed, for obvious historical reasons, as the only way of going about our business." 15 This alternative is multilingual, and language plays a key role in it; depending on who uses it and in what context, the pidgin or creole may be an object of ridicule, or the only true way in which to express the richness of the human condition, the only vehicle of creativity, or the only hope for escape from colonial oppression.

**Attitudes in the Villages and Towns**

We have dealt so far with the attitudes toward English pidgins and creoles conveyed in the mass media and in literature, but both of these tend to be avenues of expression for only a minority (albeit a powerful and influential one). What about the attitudes of the men and women who live in the towns and villages where pidgins and creoles are spoken, and who rarely have either
opportunity or inclination to express themselves in the media? Their attitudes
tend to be less well known or written about, but they can be gleaned from three
kinds of evidence: the popular reaction to materials in pidgin or creole,
anecdotal reports of conversations with individuals, and sociolinguistic
surveys conducted with socially and ethnically stratified groups.

The popular reaction to materials in pidgins and creoles is typically far more
positive than the mass-media sentiments reported above might have led one to
suspect. In the Caribbean, for instance, folklore and music (e.g. calypso and
reggae) making use of the creole have always been popular, and The Harder
They Come—a recent Jamaican film with creole dialog and English subtitles—was a box-office hit. In Papua New Guinea, the popularity of the
evangelical publication Wantok soared after it began carrying the adventures
of the Phantom translated into pidgin (a sample dialog is, Fantom, yu pren
bilong me “Phantom, you are a true friend of mine”). And in Hawaii, a recent
illustrated glossary of the local pidgin English, entitled Pidgin to da Max, had
gone through six printings for a total of 80,000 copies within its first four
months of publication, this in a total Hawaiian population of only 950,000. Its
back cover, with a picture of a plump mother-figure saying reproachfully: How
many times I tol’ you ... NO TALK LI’ DAT!! mocks the conventionally-
reported attitudes towards pidgin-creole varieties, as does the commercial
success of this book and similar ventures elsewhere.

Anecdotes about individually expressed attitudes can be very revealing, but
they provide quite unsystematic and sometimes conflicting evidence. On the
one hand, individuals are quoted as expressing negative attitudes similar to
those of the “big guns” in the media (as exemplified by the quotation at the
beginning of this paper). On the other hand, often somewhat more positive
reactions are reported. For instance, Fanakalo, a creole language in Zimbabwe
whose vocabulary is about 24 percent English, 70 percent Nguni (mainly Zulu),
and 6 percent Afrikaans, has reportedly been described by Sir Harry
Johnston as an “ugly and stupid jargon,” and the South African mining
industry apparently wants to replace it in the mines with English or Afrikaans.
But as Luis Ferraz, to whom we are grateful for the preceding information, also
noted:

However, my last informant, a hotel waiter in Johannesburg, told me that Africans had no
dislike for Fanakalo. On the contrary, he said, if I were to be walking down the street and
asked for some water in Fanakalo, they would give it to me very gladly.

Sociolinguistic group surveys provide more systematic and reliable evidence
on native-speaker language attitudes, but these are few and far between as far
as pidgin-creole speaking communities are concerned. Donald Winford, who
recently administered a survey questionnaire to 112 trainee teachers in
Trinidad, reported that in the response to a set of questions about the
appropriateness of Trinidadianese in education and the media:

...we once more find no unanimously held set of values about the language of
Trinidadians. The hostility of a few to Trinidadianese is matched by the hostility of a few to
“correct English” ... 

In Guyana, Rickford recently conducted a Matched-Guise survey with
twenty-four villagers evenly divided between the lower-income Estate Class (cane-cutters and other laborers) and the lower middle-class-income Non-Estate Class (shopkeepers, clerks, and skilled tradesmen). In the Matched-Guise technique, respondents are played samples of different speech varieties, and asked to evaluate the speakers in each case. The samples, however, are actually produced by one or more speakers recurring in the guise of different varieties, and the different evaluations are therefore attributed to the stereotypes attributed to each variety. Rickford found that there was unanimity among the respondents in so far as they associated more standard speech with better jobs, and more creole-like speech with less prestigious jobs. But the two social classes tended to disagree on the nature of the association, with the Non-Estate respondents believing that the more standard speech itself contributes to one's getting a better job, and the Estate respondents feeling that the association merely reflects the way things are, the characteristic speech of the status quo. Moreover, in their evaluations of Matched Guise "speakers" on a friendship scale, the reflected attitudes of the two groups diverged even more, with the Estate Class respondents warming most to the distinctly creole "speaker," and the Non-Estate respondents warming to him least. These results agree in part with studies in other communities which indicate that non-standard varieties often have a high affective or solidarity value, but they demonstrate further that the solidarity ratings cannot be predicted on the basis of assumptions regarding the standard or non-standard varieties as such, but on the usage of the respondents themselves. Herein lie some keys to the conflicting attitudes which we sometimes find when we step out of the mass media into the streets: the extent to which the pidgin-creole varieties are positively evaluated depends partly on the kinds of people we ask and the kinds of dimensions that we tap.

Conclusion

While we have discussed attitudes to pidgins and creoles largely without regard to the effect of political changes, it must be emphasized that pidgins and creoles owe their existence to political situations. What they have in common is a mixed society which is normally highly stratified, and in which the majority normally have little access to a standard language. But the nature of the mix and the reasons for lack of access may be very different in different communities. Necessarily, changing attitudes depend heavily on these differences. For example, in Papua New Guinea, limited access to the native languages is a function of the mountainous terrain, and the small number of speakers of any one language. The exceptionally positive attitude toward Tok Pisin can be attributed in part to the fact that it was never the language of slavery. Although indisputably a product of colonialism, it is nevertheless a language that has developed in (former) New Guinea, and is not as markedly foreign as English. As a result, it can well serve for many Papuans as the symbol of the new nationalism. A very different reason for positive attitudes to the creole can be found in Belize. Creole English, which in this case is associated with slavery, was for long held in contempt, but has recently become a target of
"refocusing" of interest, as against the originally more prestigious Spanish, in reaction to the threat of a Guatemalan take-over. Yet another context for refocusing can be found in the linguistic rebellion against colonialism and European or middle-class values that has led to the popularity of "Dread Talk," or Rastafarian speech among young Jamaicans.

To be a pidgin or creole speaker means to live in a multi-dimensional sociolinguistic world, and it therefore inevitably means to live with paradoxes. But the particular mix of these paradoxes will continually shift according to the changes in the socioeconomic and political situation.

Notes


20. Wurm and Mühlhäusler, *op. cit.*
