

Creoles as Interlanguages: Predictions and Implications

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It is widely assumed that second language acquisition (SLA) is a key process in creole genesis. Taking this seriously, one could hypothesize that creoles are conventionalized interlanguages. This paper will argue that this approach enables us to better understand and solve a number of problems in creole studies, such as the following: How can we determine that a given structure is the result of transfer? In which ways is transfer from the substrates constrained? What is the role of universals in creole genesis, what is the nature of such 'universals'? What determines the differences between creoles with regard to their proximity to superstrate and substrate? And how can we account for the alleged relative 'simplicity' of creole languages?

The paper will first present some recent insights concerning transfer and universals from SLA research, processability theory (Pienemann 1998) in particular, and then apply these ideas to different creoles with different lexifiers (English, Dutch, French, Spanish), investigating syllable structure, derivational morphology, predicate negation, word order and inflection.

I will argue that many claims about substrate transfer have been based on the fallacy that structural similarity be evidence for transfer. It will be shown instead that processing mechanisms crucially restrict what can be transferred, irrespective of similarity. Many cases of alleged transfer are in fact instantiations of structures that originated under the constraints of limited processing capacities that are universally characteristic of early stages of SLA.

The interlanguage perspective also predicts that the availability of the superstrate is a crucial factor in the development of creole structures. It will be shown that this prediction is borne out by the facts. In particular, this factor can account for some crucial differences between creoles. Finally, I will argue that the alleged simplicity of creole languages is not the consequence of their being 'young' languages, but follows straightforwardly from their nature as interlanguages.

In sum, important properties of creoles languages can be explained if these languages are conceptualized as (conventionalized) interlanguages.