Pidgins and Creoles in Anglophone West Africa

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(Pidginized) Vernacular Liberian English

The first, the first, the first time we going Monrovia, de fəc, de fəc, de fəc təy wi goə marovia, the time we, we, we no hear English self, we was talk for de tə wi, wi, wi no hiə engələ sə, wi wəta to fo Loma. From here to be-in Monrovia, we was get load, we put loma. frə hiə tu bi-e marovia, wi we gə ro, wi poi for wiah pack. Any town we reach there, we tell to the fo wə pət. sni tə wi ri de, wi təl tu di people, "Give we house, we sleep there," we can’t get it. pipə, ge wi haw, wi səli de, wi kə gəl-e. They give we the kitchen. The rice kitchen. Sometime they de ge wi di kisə. de ray kisə. sətəy de give we, we go there, all the goat-them, all what leave ge wi, wi go de, o de go-əde, o wa livi in the town, they want to fight with you for kitchen, e de tə de wəə tu fa we yu fo kisə, because their load, wiah load, they want to eat. We de biko de ro, wi ro, de wəə tu i. Wi de drive them, we sleep there, day broke, we wake up. dravi de, wi səli de, de bro, wi wek əp.
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What is a pidgin/creole?

It’s a language that arises from language contact. Ordinarily, it involves speakers of Languages B and C (and . . . n) communicating with one another using Language A but without full access to native speakers of Language A.
Basic Terminology

**Lexifier Language** (Language A in the example): Ordinarily, it is the language of political, social, and economic power; in the West African case, it was the colonial language. It is called the lexifier language because it provides the preponderance of the vocabulary (the lexicon) for the pidgin/creole.

**Substrate Languages** (Languages B and C (and . . . n)): The first languages of the bulk of the population, i.e. those who are not in positions of power, during the period of formation of the language.
English-Based Pidgins and Creoles in the World

Primary zones for English-based pidgins and creoles: the Caribbean, the South Pacific, and West Africa.

Raymond Hickey http://www.uni-due.de/SVE/VARS_Varieties.htm
Countries in West Africa where English-Lexifier Pidgins or Creoles are Spoken

Creoles: Sierra Leone, The Gambia
Pidgins: Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea
The Pidgins and Creoles of Anglophone West Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The country</th>
<th>The variety’s name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>Krio</td>
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<td>The Gambia</td>
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<td>Ghana</td>
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What’s the difference between a pidgin and a creole?

Within linguistics, even within creole studies, this is a vexed question, arising in part because of differences of opinion as to how “pidgin” and “creole” should be defined.

The “usual” idea was that a pidgin was an auxiliary language that arose for communication among people who did not have a language in common. A pidgin morphed into a creole when it became the first language for a population. The idea was that nativization expanded the pidgin, transforming it into a complete human language.
What’s the difference between a pidgin and a creole? (2)

But there are problems with this narrative:

- In the Caribbean, there is no evidence that the creoles had a prior pidgin stage. The optimal definition of a creole cannot be that it is an expanded, nativized pidgin if there was no pidgin to begin with.
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- In the South Pacific, the pidgin existed. However, research there, specifically in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, showed that expansion preceded nativization.
What’s the difference between a pidgin and a creole? (3)

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A creole is a “language of ethnic reference”; a pidgin is not.
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Go to Freetown and ask someone who is ethnically Krio, “What language do your people speak?” The answer will be “Krio.”

Go to Monrovia and ask someone who is ethnically Bassa, “What language do your people speak?” The answer will be “Bassa,” even if the person is a monolingual speaker of pidginized English.
What’s the difference between a pidgin and a creole? (4)

Another way of dividing the pidgins and creoles in West Africa is this:

If it’s designated a **creole**, it has been the main language of an ethnolinguistic community for generations, and the first language for members of that community.
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If it’s designated a **creole**, it has been the main language of an ethnolinguistic community for generations, and the first language for members of that community.

On the other hand, if it is designated a **pidgin**, this means that, while the language has native speakers, it is not the main language of a community. The existence (of large numbers) of native speakers is a relatively recent phenomenon.
In terms of syntactic complexity or the like, is there any difference between a creole like Sierra Leone Krio and a pidgin like Naijá (Nigerian Pidgin)?

No.
Compared to the rest of the world’s languages, what are the ways in which West African pidgins/creoles are defective, deficient, simplified, rudimentary, incomplete, or lacking?

There are none.

- **First half of the eighteenth century**: an English-lexifier trade language replaces the Portuguese-lexifier trade language that had been used. Across the eighteenth century, it develops greater stability.

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• **1787**: **Freetown** is founded. Four populations are settled there:
The London Poor (377 arrive in 1787), the Nova Scotians (African Americans) (1,131 in 1792), the Jamaica Maroons (525 in 1800), and the Liberated Africans (> 38,375 in the years 1808-1863)
The history of English-lexifier pidgins and creoles in West Africa (2)

- In Monrovia and along the Liberian coast more generally, the American Colonization Society resettles 16,000 African Americans in the nineteenth century, beginning in 1822. Peak years of migration: 1848-1854 and 1865-1868. In addition, the US Navy settles about 6,000 Recaptured Africans (= Sierra Leone’s Liberated Africans) there from 1838 to 1860.
Consequences of the New Population in Freetown

• In Freetown, a new ethnolinguistic group, the Krios, emerges. As the group’s name suggests, their language is a creole.
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• Through British economic and political activity elsewhere in West Africa, Krio influenced the developing pidgins in Fernando Po (Equatorial Guinea), Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana.
Consequences of the New Population in Liberia

- In Monrovia, a new ethnolinguistic group, the Settlers, emerges. However, their language is essentially a transplanted variety of African American English. It is not a creole. Nonetheless, because the Settlers dominated Liberia, Settler English influenced the local pidgin.

- For example:
  An alternative second-person plural pronoun form in many West African pidgins/creoles is *una/unu* (from Igbo *unu*), In pidginized Liberian English the second-person plural pronoun is *yɔn* (< African American English *y'all*)
Examples of African influence on West African pidgins and creoles

• The pronoun system
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- The pronoun system
- The copula system
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• The pronoun system
• The copula system
• Predicate doubling

Naijá (Farclas 1986:118)

nà wàka ẹ̀ à wàka; a no ron.
FOC walk REL I walk; I NEG run.
FOC = focus marker; REL = relative clause marker; NEG = negation

‘I walked; I didn’t run.’
Examples of African influence on West African pidgins and creoles (2)

• Serial verbs

Naijá (Faraclas 1986:76)

A tek nayf kot di nyam.
I take knife cut the yam.
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• Sentence-final particles (cf. Singler 1988)

Vernacular Liberian English
y¥ o, da ma haws des o.
yeah EMPH, FOC my house this EMPH.
‘Yeah! This is my house.’
Why are pidgins and creoles stigmatized in West Africa (but elsewhere as well)?

- They are associated with low-status workers: soldiers, police, dock workers, drivers’ mates.

Pidginized Liberian English:

góme ge mi gĩ,  
government give me gun,
góme no ge mi ĕli.  
goverment NEG give me English

‘The government gave me a gun; the government didn’t give me English.’
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- Pidgins/Creative are seen as defective.
- Pidgins/Creative are seen as **bad English**. (Speakers were aiming for English but were unable to acquire it.)
Are pidgins and creoles bad English?

- Philip Baker (1990, 1995) argues that it is misguided to see pidgins and creoles as failed attempts by speakers to acquire the speech varieties’ lexifier languages. Rather, they should be seen as **successful strategies** for communicating with others with whom one did not previously have a language in common.
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• Pidgins in West Africa came out of trade languages between local people and European traders. But they quickly shifted so that their primary purpose was communication among Africans.
Are pidgins and creoles bad English? (2)

A lexical example from Liberia can be used to illustrate Baker’s point.

Apparently, every Niger-Congo language in Liberia uses that language’s way of saying ‘to have a big heart’ to mean ‘to be ambitious, to be greedy.’ To use the idiom to mean ‘to be generous’ reflects standard English usage, but it doesn’t facilitate communication among pidginized English speakers who only know (from their first language) the “greedy/ambitious” meaning for the idiom.
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Sign on the campus of the University of Buea, Cameroon (courtesy of Konrad Tuchscherer).
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- Pidgins/Creoles are seen as connected to English and to the West; as such, they carry the prestige of English and the West.
References


References (2)


