Creole Speakers and Standard Language Education

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Abstract

Speakers of creole languages experience educational disadvantage in schools that teach in the standard language of their region, but there remain many misconceptions about why this is the case and how best to facilitate academic improvement, despite research demonstrating that actively using creoles in the classroom leads to a range of positive outcomes for these students. This paper reviews how attitudes towards creoles influence their place in educational contexts, some of the challenges for research on creoles in education, approaches to teaching creole-speaking children with particular reference to bilingual programs, and the ramifications of standardized testing for creole-speaking students.

Introduction

There are over one hundred pidgins and creoles spoken across the world, with various lexifier languages, of which Dutch, English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese are probably the most common (Tryon and Charpentier 2004). While many of these have emerged as a result of European colonization, Meyerhoff (2008), discussing the Pacific, points to the likelihood of varieties having previously developed through trading contact, given the highly mobile population.

Pidgins are the result of two (or more) language groups coming together in a situation in which communication is essential but limited to a particular domain. The result is often the development of a pidginized language where the language has a reduced form, usually because of its limited communicative need (for example, to a workplace or trade situation). Many pidgins developed as a result of European colonization, where workforce needs had to be met by the local population. Meyerhoff (2008) defines creoles as distinct from pidgins in that they are socially elaborated codes which fulfill the whole range of social functions and are structurally relatively stable, while pidgins serve a limited communicative purpose. Mufwene (2008), on the other hand, defines pidgins and creoles differently, arguing that they appear in different geographic regions and that languages such as Tok Pisin (PNG) and Nigerian Pidgin English are *expanded pidgins* where the pidgin has developed through extended use, while creoles result from regular contact between Europeans and non Europeans on plantation settlements where communication was required across all domains, and most speakers did not have anyone else who spoke their language (see also Siegel 2010a). For the purposes of this paper, however, we will adopt Meyerhoff's terminology where *creole* includes both creoles and the *expanded pidgins* of Mufwene's terminology.

In creoles and pidgins, the majority of the lexicon will usually come from one language (the lexifier language) while the structure is strongly influenced by the substrate language(s). The lexifier language is usually the colonizer (or more prestigious) language, but the lexicon may undergo considerable phonological change, as well as semantic changes which alter the meanings of words, or changes which impact on their function when adopted into the creole (Siegel 2012). The substrate language, which provides much of the structure and formal grammatical system, is influenced to varying degrees by the local language(s) (see Mufwene

2008 for a detailed discussion of this). Creoles are fully fledged languages which meet all social needs of the community; although, as we will see, their use in political and educational contexts is often controversial.

In many cases, creoles coexist alongside the standard lexifier language but are negatively viewed. Most frequently, though not always, the standard language is also the language of education. In this paper, we explore the realities of what this means for creole-speaking children when they enter the educational system.

Attitudes Toward Creoles and how These Impact on Education

Attitudes toward languages play an important role in identity and self-image. Migge, Léglise and Bartens (2010) argue that creole and pidgin-speaking children often have low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward their own home language, which is conditioned by feedback from teachers and parents, and is particularly pertinent when minority languages such as creoles are banned in the educational system. This is because the grammatical and phonological differences which are incorporated into creoles from the local languages mean that creoles may sound 'deviant' to speakers of the standard lexifier language (e.g. Siegel 1999), which contributes to negative attitudes amongst speakers of the creole. This is a widespread phenomenon. In Nigeria, with its population of over 140 million at the last census (National Population Commission, Nigeria 2006), two thirds of the population speak – among other languages – Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). While also a lingua franca in this context, NPE is not officially recognized, and attitudes toward it suggest Nigerians themselves are not supportive of its being made official or of its use in education (Akande and Salami 2010). Even in countries where language policies are very liberal, such as Nicaragua, creoles remain at a disadvantage. Koskinen (2010: 143) points out that although all regional languages in Nicaragua have official status, "the only language whose prestige is still relatively low, despite its widespread use, is Kriol" which is still regarded as 'broken' or 'bad' English by both Creoles and non-Creoles alike.

In describing a similar situation in Haiti, DeGraff (2009) adopts a politicized view of the treatment and analysis of creoles. In Haiti, Haitian Creole is the national language, and, with French, has been constitutionally recognized as an official language since 1987. French is spoken by about one-fifth of the population, but French-only policies exist, in that most official documents are written in French. DeGraff (2009: 126) calls this a "'linguistic apartheid' ... mirror[ing] Haiti's long-standing social apartheid" where French tends to be spoken "by a small but powerful élite". He advocates new ways of thinking about creoles arguing that creoles should not be seen as exceptional, or as a separate typological class, but rather that they should be viewed simply as *languages*. He points out that language contact and change happens everywhere, and seeing creoles as different reinforces the myths about them.

Negative judgments about creoles are widely held by policy makers, educators, and the general public in many countries where creoles are spoken. Such judgments can affect the way creole speakers feel about their own language and how they engage with the language used in school and whether they see creole as having a role in education. Creole speakers themselves do not necessarily support the use of either creole use in school or of bilingual education. Kells, reporting on a longitudinal study of Tex Mex[1]-speaking students, reports that he was concerned to find "the high degree of negativism that bilingual Mexican Americans exhibit towards Tex Mex as a linguistic practice. It appears that many users adopt the attitudes of the dominant culture toward their language varieties" (2006: 189).

On the other hand, Delpit discusses an observation made by Nelson-Barber (1982 cited in Delpit 2006) that the variety of spoken English used by Pima American Indian school children in Grades 1–3 was very similar to the standard variety used by their teachers; but that in Grade 4, the children moved towards pronunciations that were substantially closer to Pima English, instead of the standard. Despite the necessary competence in the standard, the children preferred their home language variety as they got older. Delpit (2006: 95) suggests this may be because they became increasingly aware of the negative attitudes towards their community and chose to identify with their identify community language rather than the standard.

However, attitudes can change. Focusing on Hawai'ian creole (known as Pidgin) Eades, Jacobs, Hargrove, and Menacker (2006) trace changing attitudes from widespread denigration to gradual acceptance. A seemingly pivotal event was the 1978 Talk Story conference, involving linguists, writers, and the public addressing links between cultural experience, stories based on these experiences, and the Pidgin language used to tell these stories. Widespread positive press reports and the establishment of a small publisher to support and encourage a Pidgin writing community have resulted in a thriving literature movement which has legitimized written Pidgin. However, as Eades *et al.* argue, there are persistent notions that Pidgin still belongs only in certain contexts, such as informal settings, or for the voices of literary characters but not the narrator. They advocate pushing the boundaries of Pidgin's perceived appropriateness to extend its usage, maintaining that Pidgin is extremely important for group identity.

We turn now to a closer examination of what speaking a creole can mean when children go to school.

Challenges for Creole-based Research in Education

As Siegel (1999, 2007) points out, very little research has been conducted on creoles in education, and as a result, very little is known about the issue. In particular, he calls for studies which document and evaluate existing educational programs and for an examination of some hypotheses about creoles in education. He argues (1999) that documentation should focus on language-related inequities, pointing out that some minimal attempts that have been made to address these such as through the yearly *Pidgins and Creoles in Education* (*PACE*) *Newsletter* (see e.g. Nichols 1996).[2]

Another major area for research raised by Siegel relates to the processing difficulties children have trying to learn to write in a language highly similar to, but at the same time different from, their home language. This is precisely the situation which arises both in Australia, where many Indigenous children speak a creole[3] or Australian Aboriginal English (AAE) as their first language and in the USA with children speaking African American Vernacular English (AAVE). However, Siegel points out that while there is very limited research on the use of creoles in education, the positive benefits are clear and include increased motivation and improvement in the standard variety as well as improvement in overall academic performance. He also notes that none of the studies in this area find either no effect or negative effects of the inclusion of creoles in education; in other words, evidence to date overwhelmingly shows the benefits of creoles in education.

Another important area for research is measuring the normal language development of children who are growing up acquiring creoles. At present, there is almost no research in this area, which means that there is no baseline against which the normal language development of the creole can be established (Rickford, Sweetland and Rickford 2004). This has significant implications across many areas, but particularly for children who may have specific language

impairments, and for the assessments of these impairments. Testing of children's language abilities tends to be done using standardized tests for lack of alternatives; not only is this inappropriate, but it is also likely to lead to incorrect diagnoses and potentially to identify a child as language delayed when this is not in fact the case (Gould 2008).

It is now widely recognized internationally that there are significant linguistic disadvantages for creole-speaking students once they enter the formal educational system. They generally exit the school system with lower literacy levels than non-creole speakers and with poorer academic performance in general (De Kleine 2009). While the evidence so far shows that the inclusion of creoles in education programs can begin to address some of these negative outcomes, there is a prevailing opinion that creoles themselves are the barrier to academic success (e.g. Higgins 2010), and this in turn hampers the implementation and assessment of programs using creoles in schools. Reporting on the work of a small advocacy group who wanted to raise awareness of the local creole in Hawai'i, Higgins notes that in an educational context, sociolinguistic awareness, such as knowledge of variation and of different discourse patterns, gives teachers a better understanding of the linguistic repertoires children bring to school and can lead to creole-speaking children being treated with more respect. This translates into positive educational benefits because when children are not criticized for their language, they have a greater sense of identity, more motivation, and a greater sense of belonging in the school context.

Teaching Creole-speaking Children

The benefits of beginning schooling in a child's home language are well documented (see for example Murtagh 1982 for the Barunga language in Australia, Bollée 1993 for Seselwa in the Seychelles and Rickford and Rickford 1995 for AAVE in the US; and reviews in Siegel 1999, 2007). However, the benefits are not well understood in educational institutions, and even when home languages are incorporated with the best of intentions, they are rarely used across all subjects in schools on a national scale (Siegel 2007). On the whole, bilingual education and studies of bilingual education have focused on children coming to school with the standardized language of the community, to learn another literate language which enjoys also considerable prestige, and where both languages are generally afforded similar standing in the school. The most researched of these example is the French/English immersion programs in Canada.

Creoles are typically not treated as equal to the standard language used at school, and nor are non-standard dialects such as AAVE. In educational contexts, creoles and non-standard dialects are treated in very similar ways, given their linguistic relationship to the standard language and their status in the community relative to the standard language.[4] As such, even when they are used with the goal of additive bilingualism or bidialectalism, most programs are strongly transitional in nature (Migge, Léglise and Bartens 2010). In an extensive study based on 700,000 records of minority students in the USA, Thomas and Collier (1997) "clearly established the educational value of fully bilingual education as a predictor of high academic performances across the board" (1997: 170), and they emphasized that the advantage came from fully bilingual, as opposed to transitional, bilingual programs.

For most creole speaking children, bilingual programs are not available, and creoles are rarely used in educational settings. Siegel (1997) identifies three main reasons why this is the case. Firstly, as we have seen, they tend to be negatively viewed as being a corrupted version of the standard language; secondly, their use is considered to be time-wasting since the goal is the standard; and thirdly, they may interfere with the acquisition of the standard. Siegel refutes the first two of these by pointing to the linguistic studies of creoles as fully

functional languages and the research showing the success of bilingual programs; for the third, there are various factors which may have an influence. These include language distance and/or typological similarity, and 'perceived distance' (1997: 89) in the sense that speakers of pidgins and creoles may not view them as a different language from the lexifier. The fact that creole features may be less complex than corresponding L2 features may either ease or hinder progress, and the marked features of the lexifier may be more difficult because unmarked/ natural features are more subject to transfer than linguistically marked features and "[a] defining characteristic of pidgins and creoles is that their linguistic features are generally unmarked" (Siegel 1997: 90). While very little research has actually been conducted on creoles in education, far from being hindered by the use of their home variety in the classroom, creole-speaking children are known to have greater success in acquiring the standard when their L1 is used in school. For example, in Australia, Murtagh (1982) showed that students in bilingual programs have higher rates of proficiency of *both* creole and the standard language, compared to students from monolingual programs. "Awareness programs", where the variety itself is studied as a topic and children are taught to separate their home variety from the standard, are said to be one of the most practical and successful ways of educating both students and their teachers about the differences and similarities between creoles and the standard form (Siegel 1999).

Eades *et al.* (2006) and Higgins (2010), both writing on education in Hawai'i, have focused on the importance of these awareness (or "contrastive analysis") programs which identify differences between the standard language and the creole, whilst maintaining respect for both languages. Where awareness programs have been introduced, the results have been generally positive, and with children performing better on various measures. One such example is the *FELIKS program* (*Fostering English Language in Kimberley Schools*) in Australia (see e.g. Berry and Hudson 1997; and also see Siegel 2007 for further discussion). While the frequent lack of descriptive and classroom materials for creoles and other minority varieties can make language awareness tasks a challenge to implement, various groups have found ways that teachers and students can use classroom activities to discover the differences between home languages and the standard. Haig, Konigsberg, and Collard suggest a variety of ways to engage children in linguistic awareness. Focusing on Australian Aboriginal English-speaking children, they suggest (2005, p.3):

- teaching children to code-switch and knowing when it is appropriate to do so;
- highlighting differences to students and teachers so that each group can "tune in" to the other;
- use of phonological awareness strategies by teachers;
- for older students, focusing on which aspects of language use are problematic and explicitly teaching about these;
- awareness by teachers of the prevalence of otitis media (a particular issue in Australia Aboriginal population (Galloway, 2008)).

Implications for the teaching of grammatical structures include:

- Creating understanding of forms through teaching via oral and written tasks, with a focus on drawing attention to patterns over time.
- The use of "scribing", where adults write down what a child says, and this is used for activities to teach literacy. This also helps children learn the relationship between speech and print.

Delpit (2006) examines the social and cultural considerations of Ebonics (AAVE) in education. Acknowledging that it is important for African American children to learn standard English in order to be able to access better economic opportunities, she questions whether the relentless

correction of their speech is the most effective way to achieve this goal. She illustrates this with an anecdote. She taught her class of pre-service teachers a new 'dialect' which required *–iz* to be added after every consonant/consonant cluster in a word. After practicing the new dialect, they performed an impromptu-speaking task. The students struggled and then lapsed into standard English or silence, commenting on how difficult it was to apply rules while trying to formulate and express a thought. Delpit suggests a range of novel ways to encourage and facilitate the learning of standard English while recognizing, and embracing, the fact that "the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community and personal identity" (2006: 95). To promote awareness of differences between varieties, she suggests discussions about differences in the speech of TV characters from different cultural groups, having students become 'language detectives' to discover differences and similarities in the way people talk through interviews and media and having groups of students create 'bilingual dictionaries' (or general, single-dialect dictionaries) to engage teachers and students in identifying different terms and discussing translations.

Cultural and conceptual awareness is equally important. As Malcolm (2011) illustrates, language varieties are a conceptual, as well as a linguistic, tool and, focusing on Australian Kriol and AAE, argues they are a product of Indigenous experience and how it has evolved. Malcolm explains that there are also social and psychological factors which contribute to the experience that Indigenous students have at school, and Indigenous students would be more willing learners if their conceptual frameworks could be taken into account in the education system. For example, "Aboriginal English encodes pervasive assumptions about reality and how it is rightly understood which conflict at many points with the corresponding assumptions which are supported by the standard English of the school system" but Malcolm (2011: 10) argues that in school, Indigenous children are exposed to language which is too abstract and focused on attributes, compared to their more familiar ways of using language to focus on experience.

The importance of increasing knowledge about sociolinguistic and sociocultural diversity and variation is not limited to the classroom. Wolfram (2009) points out that in 20 years, only two of the documentaries aired on US television about language in the US have included sections on African American Vernacular English, despite the fact that awareness of AAVE dominates discussion about language variation. He suggests that awareness of language diversity needs to be framed in historical, regional, and cultural contexts and that people learning about language variation need to do so in honest discussions rather than risking further marginalization of non-standard speakers through "deductive linguistic problematization" (2009: 259).

Creole Bilingual Programs

While there are many schools in creole-speaking communities that tolerate the use of creoles in the classroom to some extent, such as for telling stories and writing journal entries, far fewer actively use creoles as a medium of instruction (Siegel 2007). Of those that do try this approach, many are unable to continue with it once a pilot program had ended, despite positive outcomes. This reflects a typical difficulty of assessing such programs because so often pilot bilingual/bidialectal education is conducted as a pilot for a short period, whereas it is now clear that children need full immersion in a bilingual education environment for at least 5–7 years before it is realistically possible to observe and measure the benefits of such programs (Carpenter and Devonish 2010; Cummins 2001).

There are a small number of creole bilingual programs which have been introduced in educational settings recently, many in the Caribbean, to which we now turn. Koskinen (2010) addresses the role of the English lexified Kriol in Nicaragua, in a pilot study analyzing its

use in five primary schools in 2007, with English and Spanish as second languages. The program included teacher training, textbook development, and orthography development, as well as language-awareness training. The pilot study was positively evaluated with children being very enthusiastic about using Kriol in school, and teachers reporting improved academic achievements, including the children learning to read more easily and more quickly, as well as being more engaged in the learning process. Children were also apparently able to learn Spanish more easily and were able to differentiate between Kriol and English. Implementation was not completely painless, however, with varying levels of cooperation required amongst teachers, high student–teacher ratios, and a heterogeneous student population.

Carpenter and Devonish (2010) report on the introduction of a program in Jamaica which, while avoiding using the term 'Jamaican Creole' intended to use the children's 'home language' as bridge to 'school language'. A survey of attitudes towards the bilingual program conducted prior to its implementation found majority public support. Initially designed as a fully bilingual program rather than a transitional one, approval was given only for Grades 1–4 because of concerns about risk to the students' performance in the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), an important measure that determines the type and quality of education the students will receive from Grade 7 onwards (see discussion of assessment below). An evaluation of the students' language skills after 3 years revealed the bilingual students outperformed the non-bilingual group in Jamaican and marginally in English.

The early stages of a variety of other bilingual projects in the Caribbean have been reported, including Simmons-McDonald (2010), Dijkhoff and Pereira (2010) Morren (2010) for, respectively, St Lucia, Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, San Andres, Providence, and Santa Catalina. Early indications are positive, but as discussed above, longer term evaluations are needed to determine the real impact and effects of these programs. The reports on these programs perhaps begin to address Rickford's (2006) concern that the benefits of bilingual and bidialectal education are not made public enough, especially when new programs are being introduced. If reasoning and methods are not properly explained, public antipathy to such programs is likely to remain.

Standardized Testing and Policy Concerns

The lower success of creole-speaking children in educational settings requires addressing. Widespread standardized testing, particularly when the tests are high stakes, has a tendency to act as *de facto* language policy (Menken 2008a, 2008b). Shohamy (2006: 95) highlights the three major policy implications of testing: to determine the prestige and/or status of languages, to standardize and perpetuate language correctness, and to suppress language diversity. By mandating the use of standard English in tests, teachers are forced to 'teach to the test' which can reduce the viability of bilingual/bidialectal programs. In Australia, the introduction of a nationwide standardized test across four school grades resulted in the effective banning of bilingual programs in the Northern Territory (where the majority of Kriol speakers live). This was a direct consequence of very poor test results for Aboriginal students. However, as Wigglesworth, Simpson, and Loakes (2011) argue, not only were the children being tested in their second dialect, but an analysis of the practice tests revealed items which were culturally and linguistically inappropriate. Similarly, Menken (2008b) points out that since the introduction of "No Child Left Behind" in 2001, the number of bilingual programs in New York, traditionally supportive of these programs, has reduced as ESL programs have increased. For speakers of creoles, testing in the standard language may present problems throughout their schooling and impact not only on their self-esteem but their life goals.

Conclusion

The issue of creoles in education has been addressed by some researchers (typically in the field of linguistics) but remains a drastically understudied area. The small amount of research that has been carried out has shown that using creoles in education leads to positive academic outcomes for students both in acquiring the standard language and more generally. Specifically, research has shown the importance of awareness programs which highlight (to both students and teachers) structural differences between home/community languages and school languages (e.g. Eades et al. 2006; Higgins 2010, as well as the review in Siegel 1999); the importance of programs in which children are first taught almost entirely in their home language (with a gradual increase to the standard as school years progress) (Carpenter and Devonish 2010; Koskinen 2010); and that students' cultures should be embraced in the classroom (Malcolm 2011). However, creoles in education tend to be the exception, rather than the norm for a number of reasons including a lack of understanding of the benefits of using home languages in schooling contexts, a misguided belief that home languages and creoles in particular *impede* acquisition of the standard, limited teaching resources, and a lack of knowledgeable teachers.

The need for more research in this area is highlighted by the very real consequences for individuals when home/community languages are absent from, or worse, derided, in school settings. As discussed above, negative attitudes about non-standard varieties prevail, even amongst language users themselves. Such attitudes are often the result of a poor understanding of non-standard language varieties (which are usually absent from powerful institutions such as education, the government and media where the standard is the norm) and from restricted educational options for language users (i.e. lack of bilingual programs or awareness programs). The resulting impact on individuals includes psychosocial factors such as poor self-esteem, negative issues surrounding group membership and belonging, and poor motivation (Migge, Léglise and Bartens 2010). When individuals cannot perform to the required "standard" in educational settings or do not understand that their variety is different to the standard, they are likely to be disadvantaged with ramifications in later life, such as fewer higher education opportunities, and more limited subsequent occupational choices.

Aside from more research in the area of creoles in education, there is clearly a need for more general awareness programs and increased visibility of creoles in institutional settings (to normalize non-standard varieties), appropriate support mechanisms for individuals and communities (especially in educational settings), and, crucially, informed educational policies.

Short Biographies

Gillian Wigglesworth is Director of the Research Unit on Indigenous Language and Professor of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. She has worked extensively in first and second language acquisition and bilingualism. Her major research focus is on the languages indigenous children living in remote communities are learning both at home and school.

Rosey Billington is a PhD candidate and tutor at the University of Melbourne. She has a BA (Hons) in linguistics from Monash University. For her doctoral research, she is working on the phonetic and phonological documentation of Lopit, an Eastern Nilotic language spoken in the Republic of South Sudan, with a focus on vowel and tone distinctions. Rosey's research interests include the sound systems of Nilo-Saharan languages, phonetic variation in Australian English, and language variation and contact-induced change.

Deborah Loakes is a researcher at The University of Melbourne. She has a BA (Hons) from Monash University and a PhD from The University of Melbourne. Her doctoral

research investigated phonetic variability in twins' speech, and she has worked since on accent variation and sound change in Australian English, as well as on various aspects of Indigenous Australian languages.

Notes

[1] The language variety spoken by people of Mexican origin in southern Texas.

[2] These annual publications are available at http://www.hawaii.edu/spcl03/pace/.

[3] In Australia, this is widely known as Kriol, although the varieties differ to some extent depending on the TIL (Traditional Indigenous Language) of the area, as well as various sociolinguistic factors which may result in the language being more basilectal or acrolectal. These varieties occur on a continuum where basilectal is the furthest from the standard language and acrolectal is the most similar to it. Mesolectal is the term used to represent the intermediate between the two. Individual speakers may adopt more or less basilectal/acrolectal speech according to situation, interlocutor, etc.

[4] We distinguish here between non-standard dialects spoken by particular social groups, especially minority groups, and 'World Englishes' (such as Singaporean English), which are used at a national level and are less stigmatized, and have in some cases moved towards a spoken and written standard (Siegel 2010b).

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