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10
Isn’t Pidgin English just bad English?

John M. Lipski

What’s a pidgin language? Is creole more than just food? Are pidgin and creole the same thing? Are they real languages?

How una dé? Uskain nius? These two greetings, the first from Nigeria and the second from Cameroon, both mean roughly ‘Hi, what’s happening?’ Both use words from English (like ‘how’, ‘there’, and ‘news’), but combine them in new ways. They’re the kind of language we’re using when we greet someone by saying ‘long time no see’, or when we invite a friend to come have a ‘look-see’, or use ‘no can do’ when something’s not possible. When we do that, what we’re speaking is no longer English—it’s a new language, based on English words but with simpler grammar and vocabulary. ‘Look-see’ and ‘no can do’ come from a language once called *China Coast Pidgin English*, which was used by sailors and merchants throughout the Pacific. But what kind of bird is this ‘pidgin’?

Imagine for a moment that everyone reading this article spoke a different native language, and that the only English any of us knew was the result of a year or two of limited exposure somewhere earlier in our lives. If we all got stranded on the proverbial desert island, we might well find that the only way we could communicate would be to use our bits of English with one another. As the years went by, with no grammar books and no native speakers to correct us or teach us new words, we’d all develop survival skills in
this way of talking, and we'd invent combinations that a true native speaker of English would barely recognize.

A language formed like this—among people who share no native language and are forced to communicate using elements of one that none of them speaks well—is what linguists call a pidgin. The word probably comes from South Sea traders' attempt to pronounce the word *business*. Most pidgins don't form on desert islands; they're created when speakers of different languages have to communicate with each other using bits and pieces of a language imposed on them—for example as slaves on plantations in the Americas, as contract laborers on South Pacific islands, or as itinerant vendors in urban marketplaces in Africa.

Pidgins start out as bits-and-pieces languages, but something happens when children are born to pidgin-speaking parents. Like children everywhere, as they grow they absorb the language they hear around them and make it their own. Unlike other children, though, as they learn their parents' language they expand and transform it from a makeshift jargon into a full-fledged new language. These new languages, spoken natively by the next generation in the family, are called creole languages by linguists (although sometimes the name 'pidgin' continues to be used in non-specialist contexts). There are dozens of creole languages scattered around the world, derived from European languages such as English, French, and Portuguese, but also from Arabic, Swahili, and other non-European tongues. English-based creoles are used in the South Pacific from Papua New Guinea to the Solomon Islands and northern Australia. Gullah in South Carolina and Georgia and Hawaiian Pidgin are creole languages native to the U.S., while Cape Verde Portuguese Creole in Massachusetts and Haitian Creole in Miami and New York are among the U.S.'s more recent immigrant languages.

Creoles and pidgins often include words and expressions that speakers of languages like English or French would recognize, but with very different meanings. For example, *beef* in west African Pidgin English refers to any animal whose meat can be eaten. So a pig could be a 'beef'. In Papua New Guinea the word *meri* (from the English name 'Mary') is a word for woman, any woman. The grammatical structures of creole languages are often simpler than the corresponding patterns in the source languages, but creoles can also express nuances not found in the sources. They're by no means simply 'light' or 'broken' versions of 'real' languages—they've earned their status as legitimate languages in their own right.

Creole languages have millions of speakers. They have grammar books, dictionaries, and written literatures. They're taught in schools and used in radio, television, and the press. They have their own names, such as Tok Pisin in Papua-New Guinea and Bislama in Vanuatu, and are increasingly serving as official or quasi-official languages in the Philippines, the Caribbean, South America, and elsewhere. The language used at the beginning of this article is spoken in much of west Africa. It's the language of African popular music and literature, including novels by the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka.

Speakers of languages with long literary traditions sometimes laugh at creole languages, thinking of them—and their speakers—as inferior. But such views are not justified. Creoles are new languages, at most a few hundred years old, but they emerged through struggles similar to those that gave birth to many of the world's new nations, and they deserve the same respect.

Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, translated into Nigerian Pidgin English, begins: *Eve* human being, *naim dem born free and dem de equal for dignity and di rights wey we get, as human being*. Speaking a creole language with pride and dignity is one of those basic human rights.

About the author

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Suggestions for further reading

*In this book*

The ways languages begin and develop are also discussed in Chapters 5 (earliest languages), 6 (language relationships), 8 (language change), 13 (grammar), 44 (U.S. dialect change), 46 (dictionaries), 51 (origins of English), 53 (Latin), and 54 (Italian). Chapter 26 (sign languages) discusses the importance of children in transforming an invented language into a natural one.

*Elsewhere*


Either of these books would be a good place for readers to pursue the topic of this chapter in greater detail. Holm is more accessible, Romaine more comprehensive.


11 How many kinds of writing systems are there?

Peter T. Daniels

How do writing systems differ? Which one is used the most? Could we use a system other than an alphabet to write English?

Around the world, a little over thirty different writing systems are in official or widespread use today (counting all the different Roman alphabets, like English and French and even Vietnamese, as variants of a single one; likewise for all the varieties of Cyrillic and Arabic and so on). These systems, together with some used in the past to write languages now extinct, fall into about half a dozen different *kinds* of system that have been devised over the past five thousand years.

Most familiar, and most widespread, is the *alphabet*. In an alphabet, each letter represents one consonant or one vowel, and (theoretically) all the consonants and vowels in a word are written down, one by one, from left to right. But since you read and write English, you know that we are very far from that ideal! Why should *though*, *through*, *tough*, and *cough* all be spelled with *o-u-g-h*? Because we’ve been spelling pretty much the same way since printing got started in England in 1475, while English pronunciation has been changing gradually over the centuries. Spanish and Finnish and Czech do a lot better in keeping the spelling the same as the sounds. The first language to be written with an alphabet was Greek—and to this day, Greek is written with the Greek