The development of the nominal domain in creole languages: A comparative-typological approach
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Chapter 1

Introduction

As the title of the book suggests, the present study examines the properties of creole nominal expressions (NEs)\(^1\) with the intention of obtaining findings relevant to the issue of creole genesis. So, what is the issue of creole genesis and how can the study of the creole NEs shed light on it? In this opening chapter, a brief answer to these questions (sections 1.1 and 1.2) will be provided. Further, a formulation of the main aims and research questions (section 1.3) will be introduced, followed by a discussion of the methodology (1.4), the theoretical background (1.5) and, finally, the organization of the study (1.6).

1.1 The issue of creole genesis

The issue of creole genesis has been the driving force underlying creole studies from the establishment of this research area. While language contact is likely to have played a role in the development of all the languages of the world, creoles are considered special in the sense that their creation as such is a product of a special case of language contact. Most creoles as we know them today developed in the context of European colonial expansion as a result of contact between typologically distinct languages (e.g., Niger-Congo vs. Romance or Germanic in the case of Atlantic creoles). While majority of the morphosyntactic, lexical and phonological make-up of creoles manifests creoles’ resemblance to their European superstrates or to one or several of their non-European substrates, creoles also show properties which cannot be traced in a straightforward manner to any of their source languages. Another puzzling fact about creoles is that they exhibit similarity amongst each other with regard to their structural organization, such as the fact that they are almost exclusively isolating, and with regard to the interpretational properties of certain morphemes (e.g., tense-mood-apsect (TMA) markers or copulas).

The unusual synchronic and diachronic properties of creoles have triggered much interest in the process of creole genesis. The available literature on creoles

\(^{1}\) The term “nominal expression” is used here as a theory-neutral term to refer to the nominal constituent regardless of its possible structural analysis as an NP or a DP.
presents us with a vast range of conflicting ideas concerning creole genesis. While some scholars (e.g., Lefebvre 1998) claim that creoles are hybrids with the structure of a non-European substrate and the lexicon from a European superstrate, others (e.g., Mufwene 2001, and other work; Chaudenson 1977, 2003) maintain the idea that creoles represent a result of the gradual development of their European superstrates. Next to the substrate-and superstrate-oriented approaches to the process of creolization, there is a claim that the creole structure manifests universal constraints which apply in special cases of first language acquisition (Bickerton 1981 and other work). The universals of (unguided) second language acquisition have also been invoked to account for the structural properties of creoles (e.g., Plag 2008a,b, 2009a,b). The issue of creole genesis has always been the subject of a hot debate, and, up to now, scholars are far from reaching a consensus.

Prior to the present study, I carried out a study in which I investigated the development of nominal markers in Sranan, Jamaican and Haitian Creole (Bobyleva 2006). The findings of that study provided me with evidence that none of the factors mentioned above, taken in isolation, could account for the properties of creole NEs. This conclusion coincide with what had been earlier observed by Aboh (2004c, 2006). The present study sets out to substantiate this conclusion based on a larger sample of creole languages.

1.2 Creole nominal expressions

As mentioned above, the present study addresses the issue of creole genesis through the analysis of creole NEs. The primary focus of the study is on (in)definite determiners and plural markers. The study analyses the etymology, morphosyntax and semantico-pragmatic properties of these markers and tries to establish their sources.

The choice to focus on NEs is not an arbitrary one. Until recently, NEs were in the periphery of creole studies. After Bickerton (1981), much of the research focused on those aspects of creole grammar, which highlight the structural uniformity of creoles as a class. The area of TMA marking is perhaps best known for showing cross-creole uniformity. In many known creoles, tense, mood, and aspect are expressed by means of three separate preverbal particles that always appear in the same order in front of the verb. This is illustrated below in the examples from Sranan and Haitian Creole:

Sranan (Adamson and Smith 1995: 229)

(1) A ben sa e ferfi a oso
   3SG PST IRR IPFV paint DEF.SG house

‘He would be painting the house.’
The cross-creole parallelism observed in the clausal and verbal domains does not, however, extend to the nominal domain, which demonstrates considerable diversity across creoles. Creoles vary with regard to the pre- or postnominal placement of determiners and plural markers as well as with regard to their relative ordering. For instance, in Chabacano both the definite determiner and the plural marker are prenominal and occur in the DEF-PL order (3). In Haitian Creole, the order of the definite determiner and the plural marker are the same but, in contrast to their Chabacano counterparts, in Haitian Creole these elements are postnominal (4). In Jamaican Creole, the definite determiner is prenominal, while the plural marker is placed after the noun (5). In Mauritian Creole, we find a mirror image of what we observe in Jamaican (6).

Chabacano (Whinom 1956: 51)

(3) *el manga* pariente
    DEF PL relative
    ‘the relatives’

Haitian Creole (Lefebvre 1998: 85)

(4) *krab la yo*
    crab DEF PL
    ‘the crabs’

Jamaican Creole (my data)

(5) *di bwai dem*
    DEF boy PL
    ‘the boys’

Mauritian Creole (Alleesaib 2005: 2)

(6) *bann butej la*
    PL bottle DEF
    ‘the bottles’

Haitian Creole (Lefebvre 1996: 252)

(2) *Mari t’ av ap prepare pat.*
    Mary PST IRR IPFV prepare dough
    ‘Mary might eventually be preparing dough.’
Furthermore, plurality can be expressed by means of a separate morpheme, which typically occurs in combination with an (in)definite determiner, as illustrated in examples (3-6), or by means of a portmanteau element which serves to express both number and definiteness/specificity. This latter option is illustrated in examples (7a-b) from Sranan. Unlike the creoles cited above, Sranan has two forms of the definite determiner: the singular form *a* and the plural form *den*.

Sranan (Voorhoeve 1962: 58, 62)

(7)

a. *a* man
   DEF.SG man
   ‘the man’

b. *den* apresina
   DEF.PL orange
   ‘the oranges’

While a few studies have attempted to carry out a systematic comparison of the structural organization of the creole NE (e.g., Déprez 2003; Aboh 2006; Bobyleva 2006; Baptista and Guéron 2007), most studies on this issue represent individual case studies. The present study, which covers a sample of fifteen creoles (see section 1.4), attempts to increase our knowledge of the structural variation in the creole NE. This study describes the variants of the structural organization of creole NEs and establishes the limits of variation. In so doing, I expect to bring to light new evidence for the discussion of the role of superstrate languages, substrate languages, and universals, as well as the language internal and language-external factors that may affect their importance.

In contrast to their morphosyntax, the interpretational properties of creole determiners and plural markers have been claimed to show significant similarities. For instance, Bickerton (1981) lists specificity-based determiner use as a universal property of creoles. Some other studies characterize the restriction of plural marking to definite NEs as a feature common to creoles. More nuanced studies on the distribution of determiners and plural markers in one or several individual creoles (Dijkhoff 1983; Singler 1989, 1994; Sankoff and Mazzie 1991; Lucchesi 1993; Bruyn 1995; Poplack, Tagliamonte and Eze 1997; Baptista 2003; Aboh 2006; Bobyleva 2006; Stewart 2006; Baptista and Guéron 2007) have, however, shown that these generalizations oversimplify the picture and do not work equally well for all creoles.

One feature creole languages certainly have in common is the use of bare NEs (i.e. NEs that contain no overt determiners or number markers). This feature, which distinguishes creoles from their European superstrates on many counts, has received quite some attention in the literature. In 2007, Baptista and Guéron edited a volume that embraces fifteen studies of creoles with different lexifiers and focuses on the
interpretational properties of overt determiners, plural markers, and, crucially, bare NEs. Although the volume represents an extremely valuable contribution to the study of the interpretational properties of creole NEs, it surely leaves room for further research. Even though the volume has a well-defined theme, the contributions seem rather diverse and do not cover the same range of issues. They employ different definitions of the term “bare NE” as well as such terms as “specificity” (see chapter 4 for discussion). Furthermore, most of the studies included in the volume do not offer a comparative perspective. In fact, out of the fifteen studies, only three contain a systematic comparison between two or more creoles. Only four studies offer a comparison between a creole and its superstrate, while only three mention substrate influence as a possible explanation for the interpretational properties of creole NEs. Out of these three studies, only one contains a systematic comparison between a creole and its superstrate. The present study aims at complementing the volume edited by Baptista and Guéron by offering a systematic comparison of the interpretational properties of overtly determined and bare NEs in fifteen creoles contrasted to their superstrate and substrate languages.

1.3 Research questions

As I mention in section 1.1, the findings from previous research (Aboh 2004c, 2006; Bobyleva 2006) strongly suggest that neither the substratist, nor the superstratist, nor the universalist approach to creole genesis, taken in isolation, could account for the properties of creole NEs. In order to substantiate this conclusion, the present study addresses the following research questions:

(i) How is the structural organization and interpretation of NEs in creole languages different from/similar to the structural organization and interpretation of NEs in their superstrate and substrate languages?

(ii) How is the substrate and superstrate input transferred into the developing creole? Does it remain unchanged or does it undergo restructuring as a result of interaction with other contributing linguistic systems, adaptation to the new creole system, or any other factors?

In relation to these two questions, there is another research question of:

(iii) Whether all properties of creole NEs can be accounted for in terms of substrate or superstrate influence or a combination thereof? Are innovative properties of creole NEs, unattested in their source languages, suggestive of the role of universal principles in creole genesis?
If it appears that creoles are shaped by influences of the languages present in a contact setting alongside universal principles, then, paraphrasing Mufwene (1996), the main objective of the research into creole genesis is to identify the factors that would justify the particular selections made from the competing alternatives. This gives us the following research question:

(iv) Which factors, linguistic or non-linguistic, control the competing influences of substrate and superstrate languages and universal principles?

This study will attempt to provide answers to these research questions by performing a systematic comparative analysis of NEs in fifteen creoles contrasted to their superstrate and substrate languages.

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Sampling

As mentioned above, this study is based on a sample of fifteen creoles. The idea is to amass the relevant data from a collection of creole languages as diverse as possible. Therefore, the sampling is based on three principles: (i) the diversity of contributing superstrate languages, (ii) the diversity of contributing substrate languages, and (iii) geographical diversity. Each superstrate-based grouping is represented by three creoles (i.e. three English-based creoles; three Dutch-based creoles; three French-based creoles; three Spanish-based creoles; and three Portuguese-based creoles). Out of each group of three creoles, two belong to the creoles spoken on the island and coastal territories of the Atlantic area and one represents a different geographical area. The Atlantic bias is inevitable as the majority of the creoles known and studied nowadays are spoken in the Atlantic zone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Atlantic Ocean</th>
<th>Pacific Ocean</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>Indian Ocean</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>India</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Sranan</td>
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<td>Tok Pisin</td>
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<td>Dutch</td>
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<td>Negerhollands</td>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
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<td>French</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Papiamentu</td>
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<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Cape Verdean</td>
<td>Santome</td>
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<td>Diu</td>
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Table 1.1. The creoles under study classified with regard to their superstrate and geographic distribution.
The geographic bias leads to a bias in the type of substrate. Most slaves sold to the colonies in the Atlantic were from Niger-Congo speaking areas. Therefore, most of the creoles in the sample have a Niger-Congo substrate. In order to maintain the idea of the diversity of the substrate, I included Atlantic creoles with different Niger-Congo substrates (Kwa, Bantu, Benue-Congo, Atlantic, Mande, and Ijoid). The sample also includes creoles with non-Niger-Congo substrates, namely, Austronesian, Khoisan, and Indo-European. The substrates of individual creole languages are given in table 1.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creole</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Substrate</th>
<th>Further classification</th>
<th>Individual representatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jamaican Creole</td>
<td>Niger-Congo</td>
<td>Kwa</td>
<td>Gbe</td>
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<td>Sranan</td>
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<td>Akan</td>
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<td>Negerhollads</td>
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<td>Haitian Creole</td>
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<td>Bantu</td>
<td>Kikongo</td>
<td>Kimbundu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesser Antillean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Papiamentu</td>
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<td>Benue-Congo</td>
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<td>Santome</td>
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<td>Ijoid</td>
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<td>Atlantic</td>
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<td>Eastern Bantu</td>
<td>Bemba</td>
<td>Kongo</td>
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<td>Makua</td>
<td>Swahili</td>
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<td>Sena</td>
<td>Yao</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Malagasy</td>
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<td>Khoisan</td>
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<td>Indo-European</td>
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<td>Gujarati</td>
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</table>

Table 1.2. The creoles under study and their major substrates.

1.4.2 Data collection

Given the scarcity of the literature on creole languages and their substrates, the data for this study were obtained from diverse sources, including theoretical, descriptive, and learner’s grammars, studies dealing with the nominal domain, existing corpora (texts published by other researchers and/or available on the Internet), and spontaneous and
elicited data from native speakers.

Although the study is concerned with the development of creole NEs, due to its broad scope it will be largely based on the examination of the contemporary data. I only make a reference to the diachronic data when the relevant information is available from prior research (e.g., Bruyn 1995; Sankoff and Mazzi 1991; Guillemin 2009). A systematic diachronic investigation of creole NEs is a concept for future research.

As the data was collected from diverse sources, the orthographic representations were not uniform. I chose to preserve the orthography of the original sources. The same holds for the morphological analysis (if it was performed by the author of the data source), unless it did not conform to the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

1.5 Theoretical background

1.5.1 Syntactic framework

The structural analysis of NEs in the present study was performed within the generative approach. Apart from the fact that the generative framework provides one with ready-to-use descriptive and analytical tools, it contains a number of assumptions on human linguistic knowledge which are concerned with issues highly relevant in the study of creole languages and their genesis. The central issue underlying generative grammar is the question of language acquisition, that is, how the knowledge of language arises in the mind of a speaker. With regard to this, generative grammar assumes that humans are endowed with a Universal Grammar (UG), which determines the basic principles of language structure and delimits the ultimate range of possible variants of linguistic structural organization. Under this perspective, language acquisition can be conceptualized as a choice of one variant out of the total number of available variants. This choice is defined as parameter setting. While all languages are the same, in the sense that they comply with the basic principles of UG, the variation between languages is a matter of parametric variation.

One can identify two views on the role of UG in creole genesis. Some researchers, such as Bickerton (1981), assume that because of the restricted input from the existing languages (see chapter 3) UG played a special role in the process of creole genesis, providing the default options of structural organization in order to reconstitute the grammatical distinctions essential for any natural language. Others, for instance DeGraff (1999) and Aboh (2004c, 2006), do not share this view and argue that, while creoles, like any other natural languages, comply with the basic principles of the UG, they do not show any creole-specific parameter settings that set them apart from other languages.

Another important assumption underlying generative grammar, specifically, the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995b), is that every grammar is subject to specific output conditions at the interface level where grammatical form interacts with meaning.
This implies that there is a certain set of concepts that will, in one or another way, be expressed in all languages of the world. With regard to the nominal domain, Baptista and Guéron (2007: 477) assume that “individuation and identifiability are grammatical interface concepts associated with NPs which must be expressed in a language”. If this is the case, then creoles are expected to have developed (or at least be developing) the means to express these concepts.

Thus, in addition to the description and analysis of the structure of creole NEs in accordance with the phrase structure rules proposed in the generative framework, this study aims to verify these claims with regard to the role of the UG in creole genesis and about the universality of the notions of identifiability and individuation.

1.5.2 Semantic analysis: definitions

In addition to serving a function in the syntax of NEs, determiners and number markers assign NEs a number of semantic features. As mentioned above, identifiability and individuation are the major semantic concepts associated with the nominal domain. The languages of the world differ with regard to the ways in which they specify these concepts. For instance, the concept of identifiability may be realized cross-linguistically as definiteness or specificity marking. In addition, elements which are used to express these features are often also specified for such features as deixis, number, gender and animacy. Elements which realize individuation also specify NEs for number. On the other hand, some languages employ number markers which do not imply the individuated interpretation (cf. Rijkhoff 2002).

Another aspect that deserves attention in the discussion of the semantics of NEs is the lexical semantics of nouns. In the literature, there are different views on this issue. While some researchers (e.g., Borer 2005) believe that the lexical semantics of nouns is cross-linguistically uniform and grammatically inert and that the exact interpretation of a noun with regard to such features as specificity, definiteness, number, and individuation is assigned in a corresponding grammatical structure, others (e.g., Rijkhoff 2002) maintain that the cross-linguistic differences in the morphosyntactic behavior of NEs suggest that the lexical semantics of nouns varies across languages with regard to the specification for such features as number and individuation.

In the definitions and the description of the cross-linguistic realization of the features of specificity, definiteness, number and individuation, I will rely on the current linguistic theories, as well as on existing typological studies and descriptions of individual languages.

1.6 Organization of the book

The book is divided into three major parts. The first part, Setting the Stage lays the foundation for the rest of the study providing the necessary background in order to
contextualize the analysis and the claims presented here. This part of the book includes three chapters. Chapter 2 gives an overview of linguistic and non-linguistic (historical and socio-demographic) factors underlying creolization and contact language formation, focusing on the languages under study. Chapter 3 shows how these factors have been interpreted in the contemporary literature on creole genesis and discusses the main trends in the creole genesis debate. Chapter 4 provides the theoretical background relevant for the analysis of NEs presenting the current linguistic theories with regard to the interpretation and structural organization of NEs.

The data analysis is presented in the second part of the book, Analysis. This part is subdivided into 5 chapters. Chapter 5 deals with the formal properties of nominal functional elements focusing on their etymology. Chapter 6 discusses the surface structure of creole NEs paying special attention to such aspects of the structural organization as agreement, word order and interdependency of nominal markers. The next three chapters discuss the interpretation of determiners, number markers and bare NEs in the creoles under study. Chapter 7 focuses on the marking of individuation and number based on the discussion of the distributional properties of singular indefinite determiners and plural markers as opposed to bare NEs. Chapter 8 considers the behavior of indefinite determiners and bare indefinites with regard to the marking of specificity. Chapter 9 performs the same type of analysis in the domain of definite NEs.

The third part of the book, Synthesis, is represented by Chapter 10. In this chapter, I recapitulate the major findings of the study, focus on their implications for the creole genesis debate and sketch out directions for further research.