Creole Languages

These widely scattered languages show striking similarities. The development of Creole in Hawaii suggests children learn a language by first constructing an abstract form of a creole...

Derek Bickerton
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The ancient Greek historian Herodotus records the story of Psammitik I, pharaoh of Egypt in the seventh century B.C., who set out to discover the original language of humanity. On royal decree two infants were taken away from their parents and put in the care of a mute shepherd, who was instructed to raise the children in isolation from other people. The shepherd was to take note of the first word uttered by the children; "uncorrupted" by the language of their forefathers, Psammitik reasoned they would begin to speak in the pure tongue from which all other languages were derived. The first intelligible sound the children made was "belon," which meant bread in the ancient language Phrygian. Therefore, Psammitik maintained, the original language of humanity was Phrygian.

The story has amused generations of linguistic students. Most linguists, who have taken it for granted that no such experiment should ever be carried out, have dismissed the Psammitik experiment as being defective in design and unlikely to yield any useful result. Indeed, the assumption that an "original" vocabulary can be recovered & overoptimistic, and linguistic isolation of the individual, which has been documented in a few cases of severe child abuse, usually results in the absence of language. Nevertheless, a modified form of the experiment has been repeated many times over the past 500 years among the children of slaves and laborers who were pressed into service by the European colonial powers.

These children, who were shipped from many parts of the world to tend and harvest crops in Africa, the Indian Ocean region, the Orient, the Caribbean and Hawaii, were obliged to communicate within their polyglot community by means of the rudimentary speech system called pidgin. Pidgin speech is extremely impoverished in syntax and vocabulary, but for the children born into the colonial community it was the only common language available. From these modest beginnings new native languages evolved among the children, which are generically called creole languages. It can be shown that they exhibit the complexity, nuance and expressivepower universally found in the more established languages of the world.

Taken at face value, the development of many different creole languages suggests that the search for a single, original language is misguided. For many years, however, scholars have noted a re-
The historical conditions that favored the development of Creole languages are well known. Between 1500 and 1900 England, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, established numerous labor-intensive, agriculturally oriented economies on isolated tropical islands. The New World (see Figure 5.1). The colonies were engaged primarily in monoculture, usually sugar, and their economic viability depended on an abundance of cheap labor imported from distant regions under conditions of chattel slavery. Workers were drawn first from West Africa and later from East Africa, India, and the Orient, and they spoke a variety of mutually incomprehensible languages.

Under more labor-intensive conditions of immigration, for the workers or their children would eventually have assimilated the language of the local colonial power, but two factors combined to keep them from doing so. First, the number of speakers of the colonial languages rarely exceeded 20 percent of the total population, and it was often less than 10 percent. In other words, there were relatively few people from whom the dominant language could be learned. Second, the colonial societies were small, autocratic, and rigidly stratified. There were few chances for prolonged linguistic contact between laborers and the speakers of the dominant language.

Except in Hawaii, there is little reliable documentary evidence concerning the early linguistic history of the colonial societies. It has generally been assumed that pidgin developed as a contact language solely to allow communication between masters and workers and among workers from various immigrant groups. Creole languages then arose among the children of the workers through the "expansion" of pidgin: there was little occasion for the children to use the ancestral languages of their parents, and they still lacked access to the language of the dominant culture. What it means by the term "expansion" has remained obscure until my colleagues and I began our studies in Hawaii.

The unique advantage for the study of creole language in Hawaii is that the details of its formation can be reconstructed at least in part from the speech of people still living. Although Hawaiian contact with Europeans dates back to 1778, it was not until 1876 that a revision in the U.S. tariff laws, allowing the free importation of Hawaiian sugar, enabled Hawaiian sugar plantations to increase their output by several hundred percent. A polyglot force of indentured laborers, made up of Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Portuguese, Puerto Ricans and others, began to be assembled, and by 1900 the number of the other groups in Hawaii, both native and European, by a ratio of two to one (see Figure 5.2).

A pidgin based on the Polynesian languages and Hawaiian initially served as a means of communication between immigrants and the locally born, but the annexation of Hawaii by the U.S. in 1898 eventually led to the replacement of Hawaiian by English. After 1900 the Hawaiian language declined, and pidgin Hawaiian was replaced as a lingua franca by a pidgin based on English. By the time we began our intensive study of language variation in Hawaii in the early 1970s there were still many survivors, both immigrants and locally born, from the years 1900 until 1920.

Our recordings of locally born people make it clear that the process of leveling was under way by 1900 and was certainly complete by 1920. Most of the linguistic features that characterize Hawaiian Creole English are present in the speech of working-class people born in Hawaii since 1905: before that date the proportion of Creole speakers to the rest of the population falls off rapidly. On the other hand, the speed of immigrants is always some form of pidgin, although just what form it takes depends on the date of the immigrant's arrival in Hawaii as well as the immigrant's language background. The pidgin spoken by the earliest immigrant groups among our subjects is much more rudimentary than that spoken by the later ones, probably because the latter were exposed to Creole as well as
In Hawaiian creole, which emerged among the "expan-
sion of the ages of their par-
ents" language of Hawaii, it was not until it passed 1 sugar, enabled them to push and take force of 1
in sickness, Filipinos, and by 1900 it out-
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Figure 5.1 WORLDWIDE DISTRIBUTION of creole lan-
guages reflects the historical circumstances of their devel-
opment. Among all creoles arose on isolated tropical is-
lands, where colonial powers had established
agricultural economies based on cheap immigrant labor.

The geographic dispersion of the colonies suggests that
creole languages developed independently of one another.
The letters in parentheses after the name of each language
indicate the colonial language from which most of the
vocabulary of the creole is borrowed.
Figure 5.2 INDENTURED SUGARCANE WORKERS, who spoke a rudimentary language called pidgin, are shown in a photograph made in Hawaii by the late Ray Jerome Baker in 1934. Thousands of such workers from sixty countries were brought to Hawaii in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to meet the labor demands of large sugarcane and pineapple plantations. Pidgin language developed out of the need for communication among the various language groups within this pidgin labor force. Socioeconomic circumstances similar to those in Hawaii frequently gave rise to pidgin languages throughout the world; these languages were later developed into creole languages by the children of indentured laborers.

Pidgin. Nevertheless, the distinction between pidgin and Creole remains fundamental. Anyone familiar with Hawaii can quickly identify the ethnic origins of any immigrant on the basis of speech patterns alone. Without a conversational topic or a person's physical appearance as a guide, however, no one can reliably identify the ethnic origins of any locally born speaker solely on the basis of the speaker's pronunciation or the grammatical structure of the utterances. One of the main characteristics of pidgin, therefore, is its variable from speaker to speaker. Each
Creole language is often seen as having gone about the task of forming a makeshift language in some individual way, for example, pidgin speakers of Japanese origin generally place the verb at the end of a sentence, as is "The poor people all potato eat" ("All the poor people ate were potatoes"). Filipino pidgin, however, places the verb before the subject: "Work hard those people" ("These people work hard"). More often words order follows no fixed principle except the pragmatic one that old, shared information is stated near the beginning of a sentence and new information near the end.

It's probably the case that anything expressible in Creole, or in English for that matter, can also be expressed in pidgin. Nevertheless, the pidgin speaker is at a great disadvantage, a disadvantage that pidgin is the beginning of the building blocks possessed by all native languages. Such everyday necessities of language as articles, prepositions and auxiliary verbs are often absent or appear sporadically in a quite unpredictable fashion. Pidgin sentences have no subordinate clauses, and single-clause utterances are frequently lacking words (see Figure 5.3).

The first of the following examples was recorded from a pidgin-speaking Korean; omitted words are bracketed in the translation: "And a too much children, small children, house money pay" ("And I had too many children, small children, I had to pay the rent"). The second example was recorded from a Japanese speaker: "Before mill no more Filipino no nothing" ("Before the mill was built, there were no Filipinos here at all"). The example, recorded from the speech of a retired bus driver, illustrates the heroic measures needed to say anything at all of the ordinary in pidgin: "Sometimes good road get, sometimes, all same bend get, enguna angle get, not? Any kind same. All same human life, all same" ("Sometimes there's a good road, sometimes there's, like, bends, corners, right? Every'-thing's like that. Human life's just like that").

The language-learning task confronted by the child born into a community of such speakers is far different from the task imposed on the child who is surrounded by linguistically competent adults. The children of English or Chinese parents, for example, are presented with accurate models to follow. Although their mistakes are seldom overtly corrected, they can almost constantly check their own utterances against those of older speakers and adapt to them where necessary. When they have mastered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PIDGIN</th>
<th>HAWAIIAN CREEOLE ENGLISH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building-high place—wall past—time—now-time—and—now temperature every time give you.</td>
<td>Get one [There is an] electric sign high up on wall at do building show you what time temperature get is (a) right now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now days ah, house ah, indoor, wash clothes nothing get (no) before time ah, no more. Ah, kind then pipe no more, water pipe no more.</td>
<td>These days on get (there was) no more washing machine, no more pipe water come (there is) inside house no water, oh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, the man, ah, pau (tired) work—they go many gardens. Plant lots, get cabbage; like that. Plant potato, like that.</td>
<td>When work pau (is tired) da guys they go find [have] jobs [to make] garden for plant potato or vegetables; after long while do some talk story, almost the break.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good, this one, kapu (food) any kind this one. Pidgin faster no good. No more money.</td>
<td>Hawaiian more better than Philippines, ever here get [there is]许多 kaua (food), even same can eat, like [touched], you no eat money for buy kaua (food), a beauty. That's why.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.3 PIDDING AND CREEOLE versions of identical sentences illustrate the structural differences between pidgin and Creole in Hawaii. Pidgin, which is spoken only by immigrants, varies widely from speaker to speaker and is extremely archaic. Pidgin sentences are little more than strings of nouns, words and adjectives, often arranged to place old, shared information first and new information later in the sentence. Creole arises in Hawaii only among the children of immigrants, and it is much richer in grammatical structure than pidgin. Moreover, the rules of Creole grammar are taught from speaker to speaker, and they resemble the structural rules of other creoles. English versions of words and phrases are given in brackets.
the simpler structures of their language, more complex structures are readily available.

As for the Hawaiian immigrant parents, however, there was no continual linguistic model for the basic word order of simple sentences and often no model at all for the more complex sentences of language. Many such children were born of bilingual or intermarriage, and so even at home there was little occasion to speak the native language of either parent. Moreover, even among the children not born of linguistically mixed parents there was considerable incentive to abandon the parents’ native language and adopt some version of pidgin in the company of peers and neighboring adults. Like film-generation immigrant children elsewhere, the children of Hawaiian immigrants often became bilingual or even trilingual, and they adopted the common language of their peers as a native language in spite of considerable efforts by their parents to maintain the ancestral tongue.

The historical evidence is consistent with the view that the structure of Creole arose without significant borrowing from other languages. Bilingual or trilingual children of school age need not (and usually do not) mix up the structural features of the language they speak, and there is no reason to suspect such crossing over was common in Hawaii. The most compelling argument for the spontaneous emergence of Creole, however, is its observed uniformity. How, within a single generation, did such a consistent and uniform language develop out of the linguistic free-for-all that was pidgin in Hawaii? Even if all the children of various immigrant groups had begun by learning the language of their parents, and even if the differences among the various pidgins had been smoothed by interaction and contact among the children, the homogeneity of the language that developed would be in need of explanation. Fifty years of contact among pidgin-speaking adults were not enough to erase the differences among the national language groups; the homogeneity must have resulted from the differences between children and adults.

One might still suppose the structural uniformity of Creole is derived from certain structures of one of the ancestral languages of perhaps from certain structures of English, the language of the plantation owners. There are numerous differences, however, between the structure of Creole and the structure of any of the languages with which Creole speakers might have been in contact (see Figure 2-4). In English, for example, it is possible to refer to an object or a group of objects in a nonspatial way, but English grammar forces the speaker to state in advance whether the number of unspecified objects is one or many, singular or plural. One must say either “I am going to the store to buy a shirt” or “I am going to the store to buy shirts,” even though one may not want to commit oneself in advance to buying any particular number of shirts.

In Creole a grammatically neutral marker for number can be employed on the noun “shirt” in order to avoid specifying number: “I stay go da store for buy shirt.” (I am going to the store to buy a shirt”). Moreover, in Creole the addition of a definite or an indefinite article to “shirt” changes the meaning of the sentence. In saying “I stay go da store for buy one shirt,” the Creole speaker asserts the shirt is a specific one; in the sentence “I stay go da store for buy da shirt,” the speaker further presupposes that the listener is already familiar with the shirt the speaker is going to buy.

There are many other features of Creole that distinguish it from English. Whereas in English there is a part tense, which is usually marked with the suffix “-ed,” in Creole there is a tense called the anterior tense, which is marked with “but” for older speakers and with “ves” for younger speakers. The anterior tense is somewhat like the English past perfect: “had walked” in English is “he walked” in Creole, and “walked” in English is simply “walk” in Creole. In order to distinguish tenses, as possible, actions or processes from actual ones English employs the conditional or the future tense. In Creole all such tenses are expressed by the particles “go,” which is placed before the main verb and marks what linguists call modality. For example, the sentence “If I had a car, I would drive home” is rendered in Creole as “If I bis get car, I go drive home.”

There is also a Creole auxiliary verb that marks what linguists call aspect: it is too placed before the main verb and indicates that the action expressed by the verb is not yet complete, or in other words repeated, habitual, continuing or incomplete. In order to say “I run in Kapilani Park every evening” in Creole one must say “I stay run in Kapilani Park every evening.” If the particle “stay” is omitted by the Creole speaker, the action is understood to be completed on noncompetitive.

In English there is no straightforward way to distinguish purposes that have been accomplished from those that have not begun or have not begun well and the C and the E. If it does not ‘speak n Mary.”

Similar grammatical structure can be found in the language of the Malagasy language and in the language of the Nauru language, among others. The English language, on the other hand, is different. In English, one can say “I stay run in Kapilani Park every evening,” but in Creole the particle “stay” is always included in the sentence.

In Creole lan linguistic...
The two of us had a hard time raising dogs.

John and Mary think that they are raising the fruit.

I didn’t want to play because they told me.

How do you expect to finish your homework?

It would have been better if I’d gone to Honolulu to buy it.

The man who told me that the woman had quoted me a price.

There was a woman who had three daughters.

She can’t go because she hasn’t any money.

Figure 5.4 STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SENTENCES IN HAWAIIAN CREELE AND THEIR ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS show that the grammar of Creele did not originate as a grammar borrowed from English. There are also relatively insignificant lexical differences between the two languages. One way in which this is more noticeable is in the frequent use of the word "kaukau," which may be derived from the Chinese pidgin term "chowchow," is a common word for "food." Equally striking structural differences are found between Hawaiian Creele and other languages, such as Chinese, Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, or the Philippine languages, with which speakers of Hawaiian Creele might have been in contact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
<th>HAWAIIAN CREELE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The two of us had a hard time raising dogs.</td>
<td>We two bin get hard time raising dog.</td>
<td>John and Mary thought that they were raising the fruit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t want to play because they told me.</td>
<td>He didn’t want to play because they told me.</td>
<td>The man who told me that the woman had quoted me a price.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you expect to finish your homework?</td>
<td>How you expect to finish your homework?</td>
<td>There was a woman who had three daughters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would have been better if I’d gone to Honolulu to buy it.</td>
<td>It would have been better if I’d gone to Honolulu to buy it.</td>
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Even if it could be demonstrated that all the grammatical structures of Creele were borrowed, the modern Creele-style, form one contact language or another, the uniformity of Creele would present a difficult question: How did the speakers "invented" Creele come to agree on which structure to borrow from which language? Without such an agreement Creele could not be a uniform as it is. Yet it seems highly implausible that the agreement could have been reached so quickly. If there had been massive borrowing from ancestral languages, differences in the version of Creele spoken by various groups would have persisted at least one generation beyond the first generation of speakers. There is another dimension to the problem of the uniformity of Hawaiian Creele. It turns out that creole languages throughout the world exhibit the same uniformity and even the same grammatical structures that are observed in Hawaii. The finding is all the more remarkable when it is compared with the other poor correspondence in structure I have noted between Hawaiian Creele and other languages in Hawaii. For example, the distinction made in Hawaiian Creele between singular, plural, and neutral number is also made in all other creole
languages. Similarly, in all other creole languages there are three invariant particles that act as auxiliary verbs and play the roles that "is," "go," and "stay" play in Hawaiian Creole (see Figure 5.5).

In Haitian Creole, for example, the word "te" marks the anterior tense of the verb; the word "araj" marks irreval modality and the word "ap" marks the aspect of the verb as nonpast.

In Haitian Creole the phrase "I have been walking" is rendered "m j[ap (te + ap) makh]." Similarly, in Sranan, an English-based creole found in Suriname (formerly Netherlands Guiana), the anterior tense marker is "do," the irreval modality marker is "na," and the nonpast aspect marker is "e." The phrase "He would have been walking" is rendered "A [te] ben sa e wa." Most important, there is an order that must be followed in all creole lan-
guages; when more than one of these markers is present in a sentence, the particle for tenses pre-
cedes the particle for modality, and the particle for modality precedes the particle for aspect.

Finally, consider the grammatical distinction I have noted between purposes accomplished and unaccomplished. The same distinction, whose in English, is found in all creoles. In Mauritian Creole, a creole based on the French vocabulary that is used on the island of Mauritius, a sentence such as "He decided to eat meat" can be expressed in two ways. If the subject of the sentence carried out his decision, the sentence is rendered "Li ti desal al mi javan," which literally means "he decided to eat meat." If the decision was not carried out, the sentence is rendered as "Li ti desal pa mi javan," or literally "He decided not to eat meat." In Jamaican Creole the sentence "He went to the bank" must be rendered either as "Im gawn fi bide" ("He went with the intention of washing") or as "Im go bide" ("He went to wash and complete the tank").

These examples only suggest the extent of the structural similarities among creole languages. The similarities are well reflected by the wide geographical dispersion of the creole and the variation among the languages such as Dutch, English, and French from which they draw the greatest part of their vocabulary. Scholars such as Hugo Schuchardt began to point out the resemblance in the 19th century, and in the 1960's many examples were explored in detail by Douglas Taylor, by Robert Wallace Thompson of the University of the West Indies, and by Keith Wiithorn of the University of Exeter. Thus even before the development of the creole was reasonably well understood the grammatical similarities among the creole languages of the world were recognized as an important finding that required explanation.

The linguist's first reaction to such a finding is to look for a common ancestor to the similar lan-
guages. For example it has been conjectured that the linguistic ancestor was a contact language that grew out of Portuguese and certain West African languages in the course of the first Portuguese explorations in Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries. According to the hypothesis, the creole language was subsequently spread around the world by Portuguese sailors, changing its vocabulary but not its syntax or semantics as it entered the sphere of influ-

ence of another colonial power. Superficially such an explanation might seem to be consistent with the development of Creole in Hawaii, because Portuguese traders were brought to the islands in large numbers during the late 19th and early 20th cen-
turies.

There are several serious flaws in the account. First, Hawaiian Creole bears scant resemblance to any of the contact languages, including Portuguese. Second, the claims of linguistic similarity between creoles and Portuguese or between creoles and West African languages are grossly exaggerated. Most important, our study of hundreds of Hawaiian speakers has made it clear that Hawaiian Creole...
The verb "walk" is similar in all superficial lexical differences. Like "take" and "love," actual aspect in English is in a full passive verb. The monogamist creole languages used as an important dialect.

But to such a finding is to accent a contrast between the earlier and certain West African of the first Portuguese e 17th and 16th centuries, this creole language around the world by Zor, its vocabulary but not its sphere of influence. Superficially such it is to be consistent with the R, Hawaii, become Polynesian to the sounds in large 19th and early 20th change in the account, exact resemblance to get, including Portuguese, stylistic similarity between between creoles and West pressly exaggerated. Most 1 hundred of Hawaiian was to the Hawaiian Creole almost certainly originated in Hawaii. We found if surviving immigrant who speaks some variety of pidgin. If Hawaii Creole was originally an important language, it would have been carried by immigrants, and presumably its vocabulary would have been learned by others among the creole population. One must therefore conclude that Hawaiian Creole arose among the children of immigrants, where it is now found. Moreover, if a creole language could develop in Hawaii without ancestry, it can exist anywhere else in a similar way. The implications of these findings are far-reaching. Because the grammatical structure of creole languages are similar to one another than they are to the structure of any other language, it is reasonable to suppose that most if not all creoles were invented by the children of pidgin-speaking immigrants. Moreover, since creoles must have been invented in isolation, it is likely that some general ability, common to all people, is responsible for the linguistic similarities (see Figure 5.6).

The suggestion that people are biologically pre-adapted to use language is not a new one, but more than two decades Noah Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has argued that there is an innate universal grammar underlying all human languages. The universal grammar is postulated largely on the grounds that only by its means could children acquire a system as enormously complex as a human language in the short time they do. Studies by the late Eric K. Lenneberg tend to confirm Chomsky's hypothesis. The acquisition of language resembles the acquisition of other complex and flexible aspects of the child's behavior, such as walking, which are undoubtedly controlled to some degree by neurophysiological development. The universal grammar conjectured by Chomsky is a computing device, somehow realized neurologically, that it makes a wide range of grammatical models available to the child. According to Chomsky, the child must then "select" which of the available grammatical models matches the grammar of the language into which the child is born. The evidence from creole language suggests that first-language acquisition is mediated by an innate device of a rather different kind. Instead of making a range of grammatical models available, the device provides the child with a single and fairly specific grammatical model. It was only in pidgin-speaking communities, where there was no grammatical model, that children could compare their child's innate grammar, that the innate grammatical model was not eventually transposed. The innate grammar was then cloaked in whatever vocabulary was locally
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHILD LANGUAGE</th>
<th>ENGLISH TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where I go out?</td>
<td>Where I go out? (which?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't go out? They'll get you.</td>
<td>Don't go out? They'll get you. (lawyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to the lawyer.</td>
<td>I go to the lawyer. (lawyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at the lawyer.</td>
<td>Look at the lawyer. (lawyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobody don't see me.</td>
<td>Nobody don't see me. (lawyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm see do it.</td>
<td>I'm see do it. (lawyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They say more than me.</td>
<td>They say more than me. (lawyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let Eddie get me and tell me.</td>
<td>Let Eddie get me and tell me. (lawyers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tore better me.</td>
<td>tore better me. (lawyers)</td>
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Figure 5A: SENTENCES SPOKEN BY CHILDREN between two and four years old, all born of English-speaking parents, are strikingly similar to sentences in English-based creole languages. The similarities among child language and the likelihood that the languages were independently or simultaneously suggest that creole develop

available and gave rise to the creole languages heard today.

The implications of this hypothesis call into question an idea that more linguists, including Chomsky, have widely accepted for many years, namely that no one of the world's languages is easier or harder for the child to acquire than any other. If there is a creole grammar somehow imprinted in the mind, creole languages should be easier to acquire than other languages. How is it, then, that not all children grow up speaking a creole language? The answer is they do their best to do just that. People around them, however, persist in speaking English or French or some other language, and so the child must modify the grammar of the native creole until it conforms to that of the local language. Two kinds of linguistic evidence are relevant to testing the hypothesis. First, if some grammatical feature of creole is at variance with the corresponding grammatical structure of the local language, one should find that children make systematic errors with respect to the structure of the local language. On the other hand, if the two grammatical structures tend to agree, one should find extremely early, rapid, and consistent acquisition of the local-language structure.

Consider the systematic error observed by David McNellis of the University of Michigan in the speech of a four-year-old boy. In one of McNellis's observing sessions the boy complained, "Nobody don't like me." And the boy's mother responded by correcting the sentence, "Nobody likes me." The boy then repeated his sentence and the mother repeated her correction no fewer than eight times. Finally, the child altered his sentence and shouted in exasperation, "Nobody don't likes me.

The error is found in many English-speaking children between three and a half and four years old, including children who are not exposed to dialects of English that employ double negatives. There are many languages, such as French and Spanish, that also employ double negatives, but the only languages that allow negative subjects with negative verbs are creoles. For example, in Papi Kriol, the Portuguese-based creole language of the Malay Peninsula, one can say, "Angela's tree muffin," or literally, "Nothing not have value." In Guyanese Creole, which is based on English and found in Guyana (formerly British Guiana), one can say, "Nun dog nu bai non knut," or literally, "No dog did not bite no cat.

A second instance of systematic error is found in our formation of children's questions. Children learning English tend to question only by their intonation, the subject and the auxiliary verb are almost never reversed. For example, children frequently say things such as "You can fix this?" even though they have heard countless questions such as "Can you fix this?" Similarly, no creole language distinguishes questions and statements on the basis of word order, the difference is marked by intonation alone.

Consider the sentence "A got full Angel's bucket." Although such a sentence is unaccept