

# Language Universals in Pidgins and Creoles

**Myung-Sup Byun**

(Dept. of English Language & Literature)

## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Phylogeny in Pidgins and Creoles
  - 2.1 Overview
  - 2.2 The Language Bioprogram Hypothesis
  - 2.3 Language and Evolution
3. Conclusion

## 1. Introduction

Language varies systematically from person to person, area to area, situation to situation. There is variation at every level of structure. Much of it is unconscious. It appears that the schools of theoretical linguistics have attempted, more or less successfully, to explain why linguistic changes take the particular courses they do once they have begun, but none is able to explain that beginning. That is, the problems of the actuation or initiation of linguistic change still remain mysterious

to us, and the issue of how or why changes move from speaker to speaker or from generation to generation has not been easy to solve.

In this paper, I will attempt to solve these problems by invoking linguistic variation, which I argue is also biologically linked with creolization of language. In my view, "variation" is regarded as the result of linguistic innovation, and linguistic variation within language is considered to be an inherent property of the human mind.

In addition, I will discuss the relationship between pidgin and creole languages and the universality of language. I will regard pidgins and creoles as developments from the universal human language faculty. Following Pinker's view (1990, 1994) on the role of natural selection in the evolution of language, I will further elaborate that creolization is evidence of adaptations.

Finally, I will discuss the notion of phylogeny in terms of language universals as exhibited in pidgins and creoles. In doing this, I will point out that: (1) creole languages are, ultimately, a manifestation of the human language faculty, not a random, idiosyncratic residue. that (2) pidgins and creoles are the result of a linguistic innovation, and that (3) a creole is an autonomous language with its own legitimacy.

## 2. Phylogeny in Pidgins and Creoles

### 2.1 Overview

There are two approaches to the interpretation of pidgins and

creoles: one is historical and stresses continuities; the other is structural-functional and stresses creativity. Along these lines, in creolistics there has been a debate on "continuity" versus "creativity." In creolistics, "continuity" refers to the notion that the linguistic nature of pidgins and creoles is to be interpreted in terms of continuities from their source languages, implying also discontinuities and borrowings from the dominant culture.

On the other hand, "creativity" refers to the idea that man is not molded by his environment but is already biologically wired or programmed with certain capacities. This latter idea holds that pidgin and creole languages were created or generated by these universal mental processes, albeit in response to existing inputs in the environment. In creole linguistics, therefore, there is a current debate as to whether creole languages involve more from universal principles (i.e. Bickerton's bioprogram) or from the substrate languages present in the original contact situation. This debate has resulted in special interest in the field of creole language genesis. Of particular interest here is the new hypothesis that creole language forms are the direct product of this innate language capacity possessed by human beings but most readily accessed and manifested by children. This idea that creole languages spoken in the United States, the Caribbean, and South and Central America were created or generated by these universal mental processes is antithetical to the earlier position that they are the result of existing inputs from the environment (Alleyne 1993: 168-169)

## 2.2 The Language Bioprogram Hypothesis

The language bioprogram hypothesis (Bickerton 1981, 1984) seeks for universal principles, i.e. similarities in creole grammars in the structure of a species-specific program for language that is relatively unaffected by input from pre-existing languages. The validity of this claim depends on (1) the circumstances of creole origins (e.g., colonial plantation societies) and (2) the nature of putative universal similarities. For example, all creoles show a loss of inflection, such as case-marking and verb agreement, preserve those for tense, aspect, and modality, show predominantly SVO word order, and partially lose prepositions and adjectives. Bickerton describes creole grammar as a "default" or "core" of syntax, which can be added to or overridden as language change.

Creolization is characterized by catastrophic, non-uniformitarian change. Uniformitarian change (e.g., the Great Vowel Shift) reflects continuity, while catastrophic change reflects discontinuity. Although creoles display phenomena inherited from source languages, they are uniquely distinguished by disruption of grammatical input-patterns on every linguistic level. They are also typified by discontinuity and have their own creations.

It is possible that a creole grammar, i.e. the universality of the bioprogram is the default, hard-wired grammar for no other reason than evolutionary accident. The bioprogram must be autonomous because cognitive psychology has not subsumed syntax. The study of syntax may yield insights into other cognitive processes.

Linguistic universals are a manifestation of the belief that

there exist linguistic properties beyond the essential definitional properties of language that hold for all languages. There are two major approaches to language universals in the late twenties century, one of which is associated with the generative approach to the study of grammar (i.e. Chomskyan universals) and the other, with the typological approach (i.e. Greenbergian universals).

Within the Chomskyan framework, the goal of linguistic theory is to characterize I-language, the internalized knowledge incorporated in the brain of individual native speakers. Part of this knowledge, a set of linguistic principles known as 'universal grammar,' is claimed to be an innate property of the human mind. The properties of particular languages then derive from the setting of various 'parameters' permitted by the principles of universal grammar. This overall approach to language is known as the 'principles and parameters' approach (Chomsky 1981). The innate universals posited by generative grammar are intended to explain linguistic structure.

The universals posited by typology are intended to represent generalizations that call for explanation in terms of more general cognitive, social-interactive, processing, perceptual, or other abilities (Comrie 1989, Croft 1990). These abilities may also be innate, but they extend beyond language per se. The generative grammarian argues that the discovery of innate principles that the child brings to bear in learning a single language in general (Chomsky 1981).

The typologist argues that a grammatical analysis based on one language or a small number of languages will not suffice to reveal linguistic universals; only a systematic empirical survey

can do that (Greenberg 1963, 1966). The Greenbergian universals are the position that I will adopt here in my discussion. After all, explanations for linguistic universals rest on universal human abilities, which may or may not be language-specific, and which probably have a significant innate component, though perhaps are not entirely innate.

Bickerton (1981, 1984) presented a unified theory of language universals as exhibited in pidgins and creoles and language acquisition, and he used this as evidence for a hypothesis of the origins of languages. Analysis of the origins of languages provides far-reaching implications for the nature of our language ability and general cognition, differing from Chomsky's comparatively narrow language acquisition device.

On the whole, Bickerton (1981, 1984) views language ability as a dynamic evolutionary process with a direct correlation with the human species' cognitive development and ability to infer generalizations from the myriad of impressions which stimulate our sensory input. All other species' communicative systems are likewise limited to their neurological capacity to perceive and respond to stimuli. The overt human expression of our communicative ability, and hence the extent of the evolutionary process in regard to man, is best visualized through creole languages such as Saramaccan which necessarily developed largely from innate capabilities (Black et al. 1991).

In contrast, Chomsky, who relies on language organ for his theories, views language as a species-specific device whose origins are unknowable (i.e. ontogeny), evading evolutionary issues. However, Bickerton, relying on bioprogram, advocates an evolutionary view of language capacity and development (i.e.

phylogeny). Chomsky posits the necessity of a universal grammar that would consist of general linguistic principles from which the grammars of particular languages could be derived. Bickerton (1981: 191) proposes the genetic source of the universal linguistic principles, attempts to connect universals of language with adaptive aspects of human and nonhuman cognition, and identify aspects of core grammar arranged in a hierarchy of universality that ought to reflect the relative antiquities of the underlying cognitive capacities. Both Chomsky and Bickerton have innateness in common, but they differ in their theories. For Chomsky, for instance, innateness theory is more concrete and substantive, and it imposes greater genetic determinacy and less creativity during language acquisition.

For Chomsky, the role of syntax is central: Chomsky claims that the deep structure of all language (which he leaves unspecified) is the same. Bickerton specifically posits SVO as the word order found in the bioprogram language. In this regard, Bickerton (1980, 1981) and cognitive grammar stress semantics as the crucial feature of language rather than syntax; Bickerton's theory is founded on four distinctions (specific/nonspecific, state/process, punctual/nonpunctual, causative/noncausative), which are primarily semantic, but whose syntactic realizations are irretrievably connected to their semantic content. On the other hand, Chomsky (1981) would like no part of semantics and relegates it to the lexicon or to such questionably adequate devices as truth conditions and theta-theory.

## 2.3 Language and Evolution

Based on evidence from pidgins and creoles, Bickerton proposes that aspect was probably the first verbal distinction due to its proximity to the verb, followed by mood and tense. According to Bickerton (1981: 286, cited from Black 1991: 112), the mechanism of origins of language works in the following way:

Early humans had the cognitive structures necessary for a basic language . . . Bickerton claims that speakers of the first language could: (1) lexicalize simple concepts at the generic level, (2) lexicalize complex concepts via conjunctions of simple concepts, (3) produce short utterances in the form of topic-comment, and (4) distinguish [X-Vs-Y] from [Y-Vs-X], or subject from object . . . To develop further, language then needed displacement, which required stable word order (i.e. SVO). The first words that required replacement were verbs of perception and reporting, and he proposes that the use of such verbs was achieved via verb serialization . . . Pidgins and creoles, aquisition data, and pragmatic speculations are given to prove his claim of verb serialization and SVO word order . . . Based on structures neurally available, then, tense-modality-aspect systems proceeded to develop . . . The aspectual punctual /nonpunctual distinction is a plausible candidate for having been the first to appear



in language . . . This brings us to the state of full fledged, albeit basic language - one which reaches the complexity of most creoles. It is here that the biological development of language ceased and the cultural development began (Bickerton 1981: 287). In fact, it is cultural overlay which distinguishes creoles from other languages; and it is the addition of culture which in turn leads to the decreolization of creoles.

Bickerton's innateness lies, in part, in biological plausibility, supported by synchronic and developmental linguistic data. Bickerton's claims for the origins of language, with respect to creole languages, further need to be elaborated and incorporated into part of the bioprogram, based on extralinguistic evidence, from archaeology, paleobiology, ape language experiments, DNA evidence, and a semantically-based theory of language (e.g., cognitive grammar).

In this regard, Pinker and Bloom (1990) and Pinker (1994), who view the developments of language as natural selection (i.e. complex design to carry out some reproductive significant function), agree, though not entirely, to Bickerton's hypothesis, but disagree to Chomskyan views of the nature of the human language faculty in terms of the autonomy of syntax (i.e. the existence of a developmental, or random process capable of explaining the structure's existence).

Pinker and Bloom (1990) and Pinker (1994) view the evolution of the human language faculty as Darwinian natural selection, that is, a biological specialization for grammar evolved by Darwinian natural selection. So, for them human language is the

product of Darwinian natural selection. They argue that language shows signs of design for the communication of prepositional structures over a serial channel; it shows a genetic variation; it could exist in any intermediate forms; it confers selective advantage. According to them, evolutionary theory offers clear criteria for when a trait should be attributed to natural selection (i.e. complex design for some function). Grammar is a complex mechanism tailored to the transmission of prepositional structure through a serial interface. They further argue that autonomous and arbitrary grammatical phenomena as counterexamples to the position that language is an adaption is wrong. Instead, communication protocols (code of behavior) depend on arbitrary conventions that are adaptive as long as they are shared. Language acquisition in the child systematically differ from language evolution in the species. Pinker (1994: 356) claims that language, like other instincts, evolved by natural selection:

Natural selection applies to any set of entities with the properties of multiplication, and heredity. multiplication means that the entities copy themselves, that the copies are also capable of copying themselves, and so on. Variation means that the copying is not perfect; errors crop up from time to time, and these errors may give an entity traits that enable it to copy itself at higher or lower rates relative to other entities. Heredity means that a variant trait produced by a copying error reappears in subsequent copies, so the trait is perpetuated in the lineage. Natural selection is the mathematically

necessary outcome that any traits that foster superior replication will tend to spread through the population over many generations. As a result, the entities will come to have traits that appear to have been designed for effective replication, including traits that are means to this end, like the ability to gather energy and materials from the environment and to safeguard from them competitors. These replicating entities are what we recognize as "organism," and the replication-enhancing traits they accumulated by this process are called "adaptations."

In applying the concept of these mechanisms to language, I would equate "organism" with the knowledge of language, and "adaptations" with creolization. In this respect, I regard pidgins and creoles as developments from the universal human language faculty. Pidgins and creoles should not be regarded as bad varieties of a language, but rather be seen as a basic language, newly developed via creolization. From a perspective of language phylogeny, they are a new system created as a result of adaptations, rather than derivations from other systems. They are not just bad varieties of a language, but a new language with its own legitimacy.

Despite all differences between views on language universals, there is broad agreement that a substantial number of universals exist that are common for all languages. One of these is that pidgins and creoles derive from the direct realization of natural universals.

### 3. Conclusion

In general usage, there is no distinction between language and dialect. Language and dialect can be employed virtually interchangeably. The distinction between language and dialect depends entirely on extralinguistic considerations, particularly on certain political or social factors. The standard variety of any language is actually only the preferred norm of that language. It is the variety that has been chosen for some reason, perhaps political, social, or economic, to serve as the norm for other varieties. Therefore, a certain norm, or a dialect, or a creole language for that matter, is just one variety of language with its own legitimacy.

Accordingly, the general theme of this paper is in line with the assertion that there is no need to use terms like bad grammar, fractured syntax, and incorrect usage when referring to pidgin and creole languages.

Pidgins and creoles are significant in every sense, despite their negative social status, because of their importance to linguistic and anthropological theory, as well as their practical value. It is now recognized that there are no primitive languages extant any longer in the sense that the language's development has not yet reached the stage of having clearly definable linguistic units. All languages spoken as the native languages of human speech communities, no matter how their speakers may seem to be technologically backward, are as amenable to description and formulation as are any other languages in every respect of linguistic science.

## References

- Alleyne, Mervyn C. Continuity versus creativity. In: Mufwene, S. ed., *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties*, 167-181. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press 1993.
- Bickerton, Derek. 1980. Creolization, linguistic universals, natural semantax and the brain. In: Day, Richard R., ed., *Issues in English Creoles. Papers from the 1975 Hawaii Conferences*, 1-18. Heidelberg: Julius Groos Verlag 1980.
- Bickerton, Derek. 1981. *Roots of Language*. Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma.
- Bickerton, Derek. 1984. The language bioprogram hypothesis. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 7: 173-221.
- Black, Mary and Gilbert, G. 1991. A reexamination of Bickerton's phylogensis hypothesis. In: Byrne, Francis and Huebner, Thom, ed., *Development and Structures of Creole Languages: Essays in Honor of Derek Bickerton*, 111-120. Amsterdam: John Benjamins 1991.
- Chomsky, N. 1981. *Lectures on Government and Binding*. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1989. Linguistic typology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 17: 145-159.
- Croft, W. 1990. *Typology and Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greenberg, J. H. 1963. *Universals of Language: Report of a Conference Held at Dobbs Ferry, New York, April 13-15, 1961*. Cambridge: MIT.
- Greenberg, J. H. ed., 1966. *Universals of Grammar*, (2nd edition).

Cambridge: MIT.

Pinker, Steven. 1994. *The Language Instinct*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Pinker, S., Bloom, P. 1990. Natural Language and natural selection. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 13: 707-784.

## 국문초록

## 보편문법으로서의 피진어와 크리올어

## 변명섭

인간 언어(human language)에 대한 핵심적 문제이면서 아직도 해결이 요원한 문제는 인간 언어의 mechanism이다. 이에 대한 한 쪽의 이론은 Chomsky의 관점으로서 심장이나 폐처럼 mental organ의 존재를 인정한다. 인간의 언어능력은 본유적으로 존재하며 이의 정체는 원리체계(a set of principles)로 구성된 보편문법(universal grammar)이 그것이며, 그 밖의 것은 환경적 입력(environmental input)으로서 매개변항(a set of parameters)을 구성한다.

Bickerton의 언어생득설(language bioprogram hypothesis)은 보편문법으로서 “inner core grammar”가 인간에게 존재하는 것으로 본다. 이 보편문법 속에는 인간이 언어습득을 하기 이전에 이미 많은 보편적인 문법규칙들이 포함되어 있다고 보고 그 정체가 크리올 문법이라고 본다. 따라서 크리올 문법은 언어에 관한 한 인간이 최초로 만들어 내는 언어의 모습인 셈이다. 이런 이유 때문에 전세계의 크리올어의 문법구조가 서로 유사하다고 본다.

Chomsky와 Bickerton의 견해는 언어능력이 인간의 생체적 기관으로서 유전적·독자적으로 존재(autonomous entity)하는 것을 인정하는 점이 서로 같다. 그러나 Pinker의 입장에서 보면 인간의 언어능력은 언어설계(language design)로서 유기체 내의 생체공학적 역할에 의한 진화로 본다. 언어진화는 무에서 유를 창조하는 것이 아니라 유전적 언어구조(genetic mechanism)에서의 자연선택(natural selection)에 의하여 언어를 조작한다고 본다. 이 때, 그 결

과는 인간 누구에게나 공통적인 보편문법의 특성을 띠며, 크리올 문법을 만들어 내는 크리올어 사용 어린이들의 언어능력이 인간이 가지고 있는 언어 최초의 모습이라고 본다.

보편문법에서의 언어진화론은 아직도 논쟁이 많지만 크리올 문법이 인류언어의 최초의 언어 모습이라는 입장은 점점 일반화되어 가고 있다. 이러한 관점에서 보면, 어느 특정 언어들에 대한 비언어 학자들의 편견은 비논리적인 것이 된다. 피진어나 크리올 언어에 대한 일반적 편견도 잘못된 것이며 결과적으로 보면은 어떠한 언어도 인간의 언어인 이상은 독자성을 가진 고유의 언어로 보아야 한다.