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contribution to the heated (suspiciously male)**

'Exceptionalism' debate

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Against Uniformitarianism: a book-length contribution to the heated (suspiciously male) ‘Exceptionalism’ debate

John McWhorter. 2018. *The Creole Debate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In this book, John McWhorter, one of the central figures in the ‘creole exceptionalism’ debate, presents a large collection of arguments and a wealth of data to support his theory that creole languages are typologically different from non-creole languages. In this sense, the overall argument of the book is not new; and yet, in the face of publications that are critical of his position, McWhorter is eager to substantiate his claims and to present his points in a book-length publication. It is basically devoted to rejecting the work of those who argue that creoles are not a structurally definable class. Overall, the book presents a clear idea of the foundations of McWhorter’s concepts, introduces an impressive data set from different creole languages, and at the same time gives insight into how polarized the discussion is, at least in McWhorter’s eyes, on whether or not creole languages form a structurally particular class.

The book is divided into six chapters and an introduction. In the introduction, the reader becomes acquainted with McWhorter’s position in the exceptionalism debate. He strongly rejects positions that argue that creoles are in essence not different from other types of languages, describing them as scientifically unfounded, not empirically valid, politically problematic and threatening the discipline of creole linguistics. His opponents are explicitly mentioned right in the beginning (and many times throughout the rest of the book); these are, in particular, Mufwene, Ansaldo, Aboh and DeGraff, the authors of what McWhorter calls the *Uniformitarian Hypothesis*. A central claim in McWhorter’s position is the concept of “break in transmission”, which he posits as the reason why creole languages show structural traits that are different from so-called ‘older’ languages. What exactly this break is and how it came about socio-historically, however, is not clearly explained. It seems to denote a situation in which adult speakers stop using the languages they have learned as children, start using a language to which they have limited access and then subsequently transmit this to a younger generation. This, according to McWhorter, results in the ‘disruption’ of the complex syntax of the languages involved. In other words, he posits that there must have been a pidgin stage from which the creoles were reconstituted.

When referring to the debate’s different positions, McWhorter’s discourse style tends to show parallels to current political discourse in which a ‘victim’ position is created in order to attack an opponent (see also Schneider & Heyd, to appear). Thus, the first sentence of the introduction maintains that “[t]here was a time when all linguists, even if only from a distance,

thought of creole languages as interesting” (p. 1). This suggests that everyone – and Mufwene, Ansaldo, Aboh, and DeGraff in particular – who does not align with the idea that creole languages result from a “break in transmission” and are a “type of language” are in effect saying that creole languages are “not interesting at all” (p. 2). The very personal identification of the authors who have different positions in the debate is a bit surprising, as is the impression that the book was written precisely in order to counter the writings of the above-mentioned authors.

The most important strategy to support his assumption is the discussion of data from a large number of different creole languages, which are mostly presented in single sentences. This approach is already present in the introduction with a sentence of Sranan Creole English, which I introduce here to show the line of argumentation that is central in McWhorter’s reasoning throughout the book. According to McWhorter, the following sentence shows features that are impossible to explain. He argues that only features that are difficult to acquire for adults have been eliminated (as DeGraff does, according to McWhorter – the exact reference of DeGraff is not given in the text).

- (1) A *hondiman* *no* *ben* *e* *bai* *wan* *oso* *gi* *mi*
 The hunter NEG PAST PROG buy a house give me
 “The hunter was not buying a house for me.” (p. 5)

McWhorter convincingly argues that *ben* for past and *e* for progressive, as well as *a* as definite article, *wan* as indefinite article and preverbal *no* for ‘not’ cannot be explained by loss through second language acquisition of adults, because the features that were not acquired (past tense, progressive, articles, negation) do not belong to those that are typical for deletion in second language acquisition. Therefore, the presence of these creole features can only be explained, if we follow McWhorter, by assuming that there has been a ‘break in transmission’. This form of discussing data as representing ‘a language’, in this case Sranan Creole English, is what McWhorter refers to as ‘based on empiricism’ (p. 6). Nevertheless, it still needs to be acknowledged that the existence of a prior pidgin state remains a hypothetical construct, which is not directly proven through the presence of these features. The epistemological foundations of the approach – the assumption that *languages* are systemic entities whose essence can be captured by studying isolated single sentences – is not discussed. Newer approaches on the discursive construction of *languages*, as currently debated in sociolinguistics (see e.g. García and Wei, 2014; Creese and Blackledge, 2010; Pennycook, 2004), are not taken into account. This is lamentable, as the critique that empirical data should generally feed into the debate (and is indeed not often treated in detail by the *Uniformitarians*) is quite accurate. And yet, the

discussion of empirical data is problematic where the epistemological *a priori* assumptions of what *a language* is are not scrutinized. Here, McWhorter runs the risk of giving the impression of an uncritical reproduction of traditional Western concepts of language, in which language is treated as a 'given' object that is guided by cognitive capacities of individuals and where potentially diverging language ideologies are not considered. In a study on language ideologies in creole-speaking contexts of Belize, it could be shown that non-standardness, fast language change and linguistic creativity may be considered a cultural value, and may thus also have an impact on language structure (see Schneider to appear). It is a hypothetical argument that such ideologies are the source of language structures such as the above – but it is similarly hypothetical to say that they stem from “a break in transmission” (after all, it is unlikely that speakers in multilingual contact situations forget their native languages and stop using them from one day to the other, in particular when raising young children).

Chapter 1 starts by mentioning that the idea of creating a book that is basically devoted to showing why others are wrong is problematic, but McWhorter assumes that this is mitigated in this chapter, which presents his own ideas on where creoles come from and why they are different. His primary claims are that creoles come from pidginization, which the author discusses with an array of empirical examples showing grammatical peculiarities (e.g. omission of copula, generalization of the infinitive, etc.), and he compares this with substrate influence and intertwined languages. Therefore, the current structure of creoles “reveals their origins in robust simplification of source language structures” (p. 21). The central hypothesis, then, is that there is a *creole prototype*, which is a “distinct synchronic class from older languages” (p. 21) that is characterized by three areas in which simplification happens: inflection, tone and semantics. McWhorter is careful to argue that this does not imply that there is no inflection, tone or lexicalization in creoles. With regards to inflection, paradigmatic inflection (conjugational paradigms, case declension) is absent; with regards to tone, he offers no clear statement on what uses of tone are absent in a prototypical creole, but he argues that creoles “lack a certain use of tone” (p. 23). He gives no further specification and allows that we do not find it in certain examples of creole languages. In the case of lexicalization, McWhorter says that creoles demonstrate “an absence of derivation of compositionally opaque denotation” (p. 24). As in all other chapters, these claims are backed up with empirical examples. And yet, the argument would clearly be more convincing if this was combined with quantitative, comparative data that is able to show that this is generally different in languages that are treated as 'old' or 'normal' languages (see e.g. Velupillai, 2015; who uses the Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures, see Michaelis et al., 2013, to make quantitative comparisons).

The subsequent two chapters are concerned with refuting the arguments that creolization is language mixture (chapter 2), and that creolization is second-language acquisition (chapter 3). Chapter two is thus presenting arguments to refute Mufwene's *Feature Pool* theory, which maintains that languages develop through the selection of features from a 'pool' that is available to speakers in multilingual contact situations (see e.g. Mufwene, 2008). Chapter 3, in turn, is mainly devoted to counter DeGraff's idea that creoles do not derive from pidgins, but are basically an effect of adult second-language acquisition. Mufwene's and DeGraff's positions are contrasted with an impressively long list of counter arguments and rich details in examples from many different languages. However, again McWhorter's examples are mostly single sentences, understood as representing *languages*, that are discussed; in addition, the reader who is not acquainted with a large number of creole languages cannot possibly know why McWhorter chooses these, and not other examples. The reader is therefore unable to decide whether a certain degree of cherry-picking of data influences the line (and clarity) of argument. However, it is very obvious that McWhorter knows his subject in great detail and is highly motivated to share his insights in very careful, precise and therefore also convincing discussions with the reader.

The fourth chapter brings up a new topic, namely the issue of complexity. McWhorter follows the traditional argument here that "creole languages are less grammatically complex than the world's other languages" (p. 90). Here, he shows examples of (non-creole) languages that are highly complex in their morphosyntax and show many forms of over-specification, which he in turn compares with creole language features, thus countering the idea that creoles' lack of grammatical complexity is based on the same lack in their lexifiers. In the conclusion to the chapter, he maintains, however, that even though he is convinced of creoles having less grammatical complexity, the complexity argument is less strong than the proposition of the Creole Prototype (p. 109).

Chapter 5, the last chapter before McWhorter's concluding discussion in Chapter 6, examines newer publications that counter the prototype approach, namely those by Aboh and Ansaldo. They argue that creoles are a type of language in a socio-historical, but not in a structural sense (Aboh, 2016; Ansaldo, 2017). McWhorter argues here that Ansaldo does not engage with data at all – "there is nothing in Ansaldo's work that suggests the familiarity with creolist data" (p. 128). He then argues that Aboh does not use data from enough different languages (p. 110). Thus, in McWhorter's eyes, their sociolinguistic approach is unable to refute the linguistic realities that are shown in his data sections.

The final chapter, *Envoi*, summarizes the arguments, addresses potential counterarguments to his positions, and gives some more arguments on why creoles are a structurally definable class (comparison to English, pp. 131-134, phylogenetic evidence, pp. 134-136). Finally, McWhorter discusses the sociopolitical aspects in this debate, accusing *Uniformitarians* of “sacrificing empiricism and precision on the altar of Political Correctness” (pp. 136-137), and hinting at the danger that the existence of creole studies as a linguistic sub-discipline might be threatened if we do away with the concept of creole languages as a structural class (pp. 141-143). One wonders whether it is a wise strategy to argue that a concept like ‘creole’ should be maintained for the sake of maintaining disciplinary boundaries. The final chapter frequently refers to the figures who McWhorter identifies as the main actors of the *Uniformitarian* side again – Mufwene, Aboh, Ansaldo and DeGraff – and it is here that the reader will understand that this book tells us as much about structures of creole languages as it does about the structures of the (masculine?) politics of science. Overall, there are many similarities in the interests of both *Exceptionalism* and *Uniformitarianism*, and despite some major opposing ideas, there are also similarities in argumentation (e.g. that language acquisition of adults impacts language structures, which one may or may not refer to with terms that clearly have problematic normative overtones, such as ‘break in transmission’ or ‘disruption’). Thus, the construction of entirely contrasting schools, as it is presented in this text, seems to have its sources not only in diverging interpretations of data, but also in the social structures and discursive rituals of science.

Overall, the reader can find fascinating details on many different creole languages and interesting data analyses in this volume, but the question of why the participants engage in *The Creole Debate* with such passion, and whether it is relevant for the speakers of creole languages, seems to be left unanswered.

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