

Consonant cluster retention and simplification in creole languages

Mareile Schramm (Universität Siegen)

It has often been observed that contact languages such as pidgins and creoles tend to have only unmarked CV syllables (e.g. Romaine 1988). While this claim has been shown to be untenable in its extreme form (e.g. Plag and Schramm 2003, Klein (to appear)), most researchers would agree that the restrictions on syllable structure are usually tighter in a pidgin or creole than in its lexifier language(s). Lexifier words which do not meet the requirements often undergo phonotactic restructuring such as consonant deletion or vowel epenthesis. Due to their rather more complex nature, consonant clusters are particularly prone to simplification.

In this paper I will take a closer look at the treatment of consonant clusters in six Caribbean creoles, with different (European) lexifier languages, including two creoles derived from each English, Dutch, and French.

While the degree of restructuring varies across the investigated creole languages, a comparison of patterns of cluster simplification reveals some interesting overall tendencies. Some types of clusters are readily preserved in most creoles (e.g. word-initial obstruent-glide or obstruent-liquid sequences), whereas others are typically simplified (especially sequences of two obstruents). Moreover, among the simplified sequences, some are preferably repaired by consonant deletion, others by vowel epenthesis. Sonority sequencing, but also manner and place features appear to play a role in determining a) whether or not a cluster is simplified in a given creole, and b) which kind of restructuring applies in case of simplification.

On the basis of the creole data, I will propose a ranking of the investigated cluster types according to their relative likelihood of undergoing simplification.

References

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