The Ecology of Language Evolution

Salikoko S. Mufwene

Cambridge University Press
This major new work explores the development of creoles and other new languages, focusing on the conceptual and methodological issues they raise for genetic linguistics. Written by an internationally renowned linguist, the book discusses the nature and significance of internal and external factors—or “ecologies”—that bear on the evolution of a language. The book surveys a wide range of examples of changes in the structure, function and vitality of languages, and suggests that similar ecologies have played the same kinds of roles in all cases of language evolution. Drawing on major theories of language formation, macroecology and population genetics, Mufwene proposes a common approach to the development of creoles and other new languages. *The Ecology of Language Evolution* will be welcomed by students and researchers in creolistics, sociolinguistics, theoretical linguistics, and theories of evolution.

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To the memory of

Ntazyel,
Ekyey,
Osum,
Zaki,
Sevehna,
and
Tumunete

I am indebted to all of you
for courage and determination

For

Tazie
and
Embu

Together we work for a better world
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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of illustrations</th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Introduction  
1.1 Communal languages as ensembles of I-languages  
1.2 Pidgins, creoles, and koinés  
1.3 Language evolution  
1.4 Thinking of a language as a species  
1.5 What is the ecology of language?  

2 The Founder Principle in the development of creoles  
2.1 Introduction  
2.2 The development of creoles: what the histories of individual colonies suggest  
2.3 Evidence for the Founder Principle  
2.4 Conclusions  

3 The development of American Englishes: factoring contact in and the social bias out  
3.1 Introduction  
3.2 Why are WAEVs (White American English Vernaculars) not creoles?  
3.3 The development of AAE (African-American English)  
3.4 The development of WAEVs: a creole perspective  
3.5 Conclusions  

4 The legitimate and illegitimate offspring of English  
4.1 Introduction  
4.2 An insidious naming tradition  
4.3 How language contact has been downplayed  
4.4 The development of English in England: when does substrate influence matter?  
4.5 The significance of ethnographic ecology  
4.6 Mutual intelligibility and the contact history of English  
4.7 The cost of capitalizing on mutual intelligibility  
4.8 In conclusion
5 What research on the development of creoles can contribute to genetic linguistics

5.1 Preliminaries
5.2 Some noteworthy facts on the development of creoles
5.3 Ecology and linguistic evolution
5.4 “Creolization” as a social process
5.5 The role of contact in the histories of English and French
5.6 Language as a species: whence the significance of variation
5.7 Some conclusions

6 Language contact, evolution, and death: how ecology rolls the dice

6.1 Introduction
6.2 Language as a species
6.3 The ecology of language
6.4 In conclusion, how history repeats itself

7 Past and recent population movements in Africa: their impact on its linguistic landscape

7.1 Preliminaries
7.2 The linguistic impact of European colonization
7.3 Population movements and language contacts in precolonial Africa
7.4 The linguistic consequences of Black populations’ precolonial dispersal
7.5 Conclusions: the differentiating role of ecology

8 Conclusions: the big picture

8.1 From the development of creoles to language evolution from a population genetics perspective
8.2 Language vitality and endangerment as aspects of language evolution
8.3 Integration and segregation as key ecological factors in language evolution
8.4 Colonization styles and language evolution
8.5 Overall . . .

Notes
References
Author index
Subject index
Illustrations

Restructuring into koinés, creoles and other varieties
(with inset text)  

MAPS

1. Africa: some historical regions and major language groups 40
2. European colonial languages in Africa in the 1950s 174
4. Nilotic migrations by 1750 181
5. The spread of Arabic in Africa since the seventh century 183
7. Sub-Saharan populations before the Bantu dispersal 187
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This book presents some of my positions over the past decade regarding the development of creole vernaculars in relation to language evolution in general. The latter notion is used here to cover long-term changes observable in the structures and pragmatics of a language, as well as the not-so-unusual cases where a language speciates into daughter varieties identified at times as new dialects and at others as new languages. It also covers questions of language endangerment and death.

Together, these writings reflect the growth of my scholarship on, among other things, subjects conventionally identified as “creole genesis,” second-language acquisition, and genetic linguistics. They are responses to some colleagues’ invitations that I propose a cogent alternative to hypotheses which I have disputed. Those responses boil down to the position that creoles are epistemologically special only by an accident of the way we have been doing linguistics, not because they have developed by any evolutionary processes that have not occurred in the developments of other languages, nor because their genoses are embedded in sociohistorical ecologies that are drastically different in kind from those in which noncreole languages have evolved, nor even because they represent any global structural type of linguistic systems. They are as natural as noncreole languages. As a matter of fact, the better we understand them, the more we should be prompted to re-examine a number of things we thought we understood well about Language.

I have organized the essays chronologically, in the order in which they were written. I thought this the best way to capture progress in my thinking especially over the following topics: the development of creoles, the nature and significance of language-contact ecology in determining their structures, whether or not similar ecologies have not played the same kinds of roles in the changes as have traditionally concerned genetic linguists, whether it is true that creoles are not genetically related to their lexifiers, and whether we should continue to treat them as “children out of wedlock.” Also, I try to answer the questions of what can we learn about language diversification, and what light can research on the development of
creoles shed on the present heightened concern among linguists with language endangerment?

This selection also reveals that the enterprise I have embarked on is much more complex than the relevant literature has typically led us to believe. It seems necessary in diachronic linguistics to develop a research program of the same name as the title of this book, addressing the actuation question with the ecology of language evolution in focus. This amounts to paying attention not only to the socioeconomic and ethnographic environment in which a language has evolved (its external ecology) – such as the contact setting and power relations between groups of speakers – but also to the nature of the coexistence of the units and principles of a linguistic system before and/or during the change (its internal ecology). I argue that both external and internal ecologies play significant roles in determining the evolutionary trajectories of a language, which I analogize with a biological parasitic species.

Inspired by population genetics, I capitalize on variation within a species, or within a larger population consisting of several coexistent species. I show how ecology rolls the dice in the competitions and selections which determine not only which of the competing languages prevails but also which units and principles are selected into the prevailing variety. Basically the same processes that produced creole vernaculars have also yielded new noncreole varieties from the same lexifiers during the same period of time. From the same perspective we can also understand what causes a language to thrive at the expense of others and conversely what erodes the vitality of a language in a particular socioeconomic ecology. While the chapters of this book show that these questions are all interrelated, they also reveal that I am just scraping the tip of the iceberg and much more work remains to be done, including rethinking some working assumptions of genetic linguistics. I introduce the issues more specifically in chapter 1.

Typically I use creoles as the starting point of my discussions, simply because this is where I have done more research and can pretend to understand anything about language evolution. I am otherwise pursuing the expected dialogue between research on specific languages and that on Language, focusing here on the contribution that scholarship on creoles can make to understanding Language. In the case of this book, things are somewhat complicated by the fact that creoles have been grouped together and distinguished from other languages more because of similarities in the sociohistorical conditions of their development than for any other convincing reason.

Contrary to what has often been claimed by several creolists, creole vernaculars are not abrupt evolutions, nor are they by-products of breaks in
the transmission of the languages from which they developed. A genetic connection is established between them most conspicuously by the fact that the overwhelming proportion of their vocabularies comes from these European languages, identified in this context as their lexifiers. The origins of creoles’ grammars are a more complex matter, but one can hardly deny the contributions of their heterogeneous nonstandard lexifiers to these new systems, derived by blending inheritance. Neither did creoles emerge in settings where there was no target, though one can concede that, given the availability of diverse varieties (native and non-native) of the lexifier in the plantation colonies, such a target was definitely more diffused than in other cases of language transmission. Nor were these new vernaculars created by children; they would not be as complex as they are and they surely give no indication of being in an arrested developmental stage compared to non-creole languages. They are not the only cases of language restructuring – or system reorganization – prompted by contact, nor are the kinds of contact that motivated their developments different from those that should be invoked in, for instance, the speciation of Vulgar Latin into the Romance languages.

In the way I identify them in chapter 1, creole vernaculars are new language varieties which originated in the appropriation of nonstandard varieties of Western European languages by populations that were not (fully) of European descent in seventeenth-to-nineteenth century European (sub-)tropical colonies. Like any other vernacular that developed from a Western European language in the same (ex-)colonies, they have diverged structurally from the varieties spoken in Europe and from each other. Although it has typically been argued that some of the new vernaculars differ from their metropolitan counterparts and from one another – some to a greater extent than others – there is no operational yardstick for this assessment, starting with the fact that the lexifier was hardly the same from one setting to another. Mutual intelligibility is not reliable, especially since there are other colonial vernaculars spoken by descendants of Europeans that rate equally low on the mutual intelligibility scale but have not been identified as creoles, e.g., English in the Old Amish communities in North America. The main implicit criterion, which is embarrassing for linguistics but has not been discussed, is the ethnicity of their speakers. Most hypotheses proposed in creolistics to account for the development of creoles would have been better thought out, had it not been partly for this factor, as strong as my accusation may sound. The other reasons are given below and discussed in the following chapters.

I have been encouraged in the approach presented in this book by questions which research on the emergence of creoles has shown to be relevant to understanding language evolution but which appear to have been unduly
overlooked in genetic linguistics, for instance: the role of ecology in language speciation. The essays included in this book reflect an effort to prevent creolistics from simply being a consumer subdiscipline which espouses gratuitously, without questions asked, some still-unjustified working assumptions and theoretical models accepted in other subdisciplines of linguistics. Like any of these, creolistics should contribute to understanding Language in part by highlighting those assumptions about this peculiarity of humans which are not supported by any creole data.

Five of the following chapters (2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) have been published as self-contained essays in different fora. Perhaps just a handful of creolists who share my research interests have read them all as covering inter-related topics. The purpose of this book is to make them more accessible and highlight the unifying threads that link them. They are complemented here with some recent, hitherto unpublished essays (chapters 1, 7, and 8) which continue the unfolding of my research program on language evolution and my effort to bridge topics on the development of creoles with issues in genetic linguistics and on language endangerment. Those who have read at least some of the previously published essays should know that these have been revised, sometimes extensively, to keep up with my current thinking on the subject matter. I have used this opportunity to clarify some earlier positions, to correct some mistakes that I recognize, or simply to restate things more accurately. I have also made every effort to make the book less repetitive, by crossreferencing the chapters and excising portions of the original essays that became redundant under the same cover.

The approach to language evolution presented here owes part of its present form to Bill Smith (Piedmont College) and Chuck Peters (University of Georgia). The first encouraged me to read literature on chaos theory (given my interest in nonrectilinear and nonunilinear evolutionary paths) and the second introduced me to ecology and population genetics. I have also benefited enormously from discussions with Bill Wimsatt (University of Chicago). Thanks to him, I gave up unsuccessful attempts to clone the linguistic species on the biological species (which one?) and developed my own notion of a linguistic species with its own kinds of peculiarities, especially feature transmission properties. Not all species evolve according to the same principles. It is thus as normal for linguistic species to reproduce themselves according to their own patterns of feature transmission and evolutionary principles as it is for bacterial species to differ in the same respects from animal species. It remains that all evolution presupposes variation within the relevant species, heredity (or generational continuity) of features, and differential reproduction, while being subject to various ecological factors. Chapters 1, 2, and 6 have benefited in clarity from the Ecology of Language Evolution course that I taught in...
Spring 1999 and from the Biological and Cultural Evolution course that Bill, Jerry Sadock, and I taught in Autumn 1999. They have also benefited from generous comments from Robert Perlman (biologist, University of Chicago) and from Manuel O. Diaz (geneticist, Loyola University of Chicago).

My general thinking on several genetic linguistic issues owes a lot to discussions and friendship with several other colleagues, chiefly, the late Guy Hazaël-Massieux, Robert Chaudenson, Louis-Jean Calvet (all of the Université d’Aix-en-Provence), and Sali Tagliamonte (University of York). Sali also encouraged me the most consistently to bring the present essays together in the form of a book, as she thought it was time I started outlining the big picture that should be emerging from them. Eyamba Bokamba and Braj Kachru (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) were especially helpful in inviting me to test my hypotheses against the development of indigenized Englishes. They offered me the right conference platforms where I was prompted to think of the big picture and situate problems of the development of creoles in those of language evolution in general, and thus to relate genetic creolistics to genetic linguistics.

Several of my discussions in chapter 1 owe part of their substance and clarity to questions from Michel DeGraff (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Marlyse Baptista (University of Georgia), and Rakesh Bhatt (University of Illinois at Urbana), mostly from the point of view of theoretical linguistics. They reminded me that I address scholars of diverse persuasions and backgrounds in my essays and that I cannot take it for granted that other creolists, let alone other linguists and nonlinguists, share my working assumptions or know what I am talking about. I was served this message again by Bernd Heine (University of Cologne) and Richard C. Lewontin (Harvard), in their comments on the last draft of the same chapter. I hope that thanks to all of them my positions are presented more clearly and accessibly to readers of different backgrounds.

Among my students at the University of Chicago, off of whom I bounced several of my earlier “heresies” and who knew the right questions to ask, Chris Corcoran and Sheri Pargman deserve special mention. They read a few drafts of subsets of the present essays and pointed out unclarities and omissions, which I hope do not stand out any more, at least not as eyesores. Drew Clark, a first-year graduate student of mine, decided that reading the whole manuscript and checking its accessibility was a reasonable way of not getting bored during his 1999–2000 Christmas break. I could not have had a more dedicated style reader. I feel equally indebted to Citi Potts for carefully copy-editing the essays with a keen eye on their accessibility.

Jenny Sheppard helped me by producing electronically all my maps of Africa in this book and the illustrations of competition and selection
included in the inset in chapter 1. She was very good in implementing carto-
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Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to Tazie and Pat for accommod-
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and revise them. Time has been more than a highly priced commodity
during the last phase of this exercise, while chairing a prestigious linguistics
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without Tazie’s and Pat’s concessions in family time, even after I have
cheated myself of indispensable sleep time.

I hope this end result does not let down most of you family, friends, col-
leagues, and students who have supported me all along, as well as you inter-
ested readers who are patient enough to explore the workings of my
occasionally contentious mind.

*Tables and Maps*

Chapter 2, table 1, from *The Atlantic Slave Trade* by Philip D. Curtin © 1969, reproduced with permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.

Chapter 2, tables 2, 3, and 4, from “Substrate influence in creole language formation: the case of serial verb constructions in Sranan” (MA thesis) by Bettina Migge, Ohio State University, 1993.


Chapter 2, table 6 (“Africans arriving in South Carolina”) from *Black
xviii  Acknowledgments

*Majority* by Peter H. Wood © 1974, reprinted with permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a Division of Random House Inc.


1 Introduction

This chapter is written primarily to clarify concepts such as “ecology,” “evolution,” and “language,” which are central to the book. It also states some of my most important arguments, e.g., (1) creoles have developed by the same restructuring processes that mark the evolutions of noncreole languages; (2) contact is an important factor in all such developments; and (3) the external ecological factors that bear on restructuring also bear on aspects of language vitality, among which is language endangerment. I will go beyond the brief explanations given in the Preface but will not pre-empt the more elaborate discussions presented in, for instance, chapters 2 and 6. In the present chapter, I simply provide basic information that readers will find useful to understand the book.

1.1 Communal languages as ensembles of I-languages

To the lay person the term language means something like “way of speaking.” Thus English originally meant “the way the English people speak” and kiSwahili “the way the waSwahili speak.” In the case of kiSwahili, the Bantu noun class system makes it clear through the instrumental prefix ki-, which suggests a means used by waSwahili to communicate. Those more knowledgeable about communication extend the notion “language” beyond the spoken mode, applying it also to written and signed means.

Linguists have focused more on the abstract systems that generate utterances and written or signed strings of symbols identified as English, American Signed Language, or the like in lay speech. The systems consist of sets of units and principles, which are selected and applied differently from one language to another, despite many similarities. The units are identifiable in various interfacing modules: e.g., the phonological system (dealing with sounds), the morphological system (dealing with minimal meaningful combinations of sounds), and syntax (how words combine into sentences). Some principles are generally combinatoric, in the form of positive rules and negative constraints on how the units can combine together into larger units. Some others are distributive, specifying, for instance, how the phoneme /t/ in American English is pronounced differently in words such as
tea, state, and water, viz., aspirated before a stressed vowel, unaspirated after /s/ regardless of what follows, often with unreleased air at the end of a word, and as a flap between a stressed and an unstressed vowel.

Language change is generally about different aspects of linguistic systems. For the purposes of language transmission from one group of speakers to another, any of these units and principles may be identified as a linguistic feature, roughly on the model of gene in biology. Let us bear in mind that the notion of linguistic species proposed below need not be analogous to that of biological species in all respects, not any more than there is an empirically validated unified notion of biological species in the first place.

Quite germane to some of my arguments about language evolution is Chomsky’s (1986:19–24) distinction between internalized language (I-language) and externalized language (E-language). An I-language is basically an idiolect, an individual speaker’s system of a language. It is to a language what an individual is to a species in population genetics. Among the questions I address are the following: How and when can features of individual idiolects be extrapolated as characteristic of a language as a communal system? Is knowledge of a language as a property of an individual speaker coextensive with knowledge of a language as a property of a population? What is the status of variation in the two cases and how does it bear on language evolution?

Chomsky defines an “E-language” as the set of sentences produced by a population speaking a particular language. This conception of a language is inadequate (McCawley 1976). Chomsky is correct in rejecting it as leading the linguist nowhere toward understanding how language works in the mind. It just provides data for analysis. Fortunately, few linguists have subscribed to this notion of a language. Most linguists have been Saussurean, both in treating languages as mental systems and in assuming them to be social institutions to which speakers are enculturated. Meanwhile they have failed to address the following question: What role do individual speakers play in language change? This question is central to language evolution and I return to it below.

Idiolects and communal languages represent different levels of abstraction. The former are first-level abstractions from speech, the latter are extrapolations that can be characterized as ensembles of I-languages. Neil Smith (1999:138) denies the validity of “collective language.” However, we cannot speak of language change or evolution, which is identified at the population level, without accepting the existence of a communal language.

To be sure, a communal language is an abstraction inferred by the observer. It is an extrapolation from I-languages whose speakers communicate successfully with each other most of the time. It is internalized to the extent that we can also project a collective mind that is an ensemble of individual minds in a population. Since this higher-level abstraction is what
discussions of language change are based on, I capitalize on interidiolectal variation, among other properties of communal languages, and argue in chapter 6 that a language is a species. I will then use the competition-and-selection dynamics of the coexistence of I-languages to explain how a language evolves over time.

Two questions arise from this position:

(i) Is every feature that is true of a communal language qua species also necessarily true of I-languages? For instance, does the fact that the following sentences are acceptable in some nonstandard English dialects necessarily make them well formed in all English idiolects or even dialects?

1. \textit{I ain't told you no such thing.}
   “I haven’t told you such a thing” or “I didn’t tell you such a thing.”

2. \textit{Let me tell you everything what Allison said at the party.}
   “Let me tell you everything that Allison said at the party.”

(ii) When do changes that affect individual members amount to communal changes?

As noted above, the latter level of change is among the phenomena I identify as language evolution. This can also involve nonstructural changes, for instance, the acceptability of peculiarities of the sentences in (1–2) for a larger or smaller proportion of speakers in a community. This book says almost nothing about such nonstructural changes. However, much attention is devoted to speciation, when, for structural or ideological reasons, it is found more appropriate to no longer group together I-languages that used to form one communal language. Rather, they are classed into subgroups identified as separate languages or as dialects of the same language. This is precisely where the identification of creoles as separate languages fits, in contrast with the equally novel and contact-based varieties of European languages spoken by descendants of Europeans (e.g., American English and Québécois French) which have been identified as dialects of their lexifiers (chapters 4–5). I return to these questions in sections 1.3 and 1.4.

1.2 Pidgins, creoles, and koinés

Pidgins and koinés play a very negligible part in the next chapters. However, it is difficult to define creoles without mentioning them and it is almost impossible to make sense of some of the issues I raise in this book without also clarifying the conceptual distinction between creoles and koinés. There is a genetic relationship between these two, because the lexifiers of creoles, those varieties from which they have inherited most of their vocabularies, have often been correctly identified as colonial koinés. These are compromise varieties from among diverse dialects of the same language. Instead of selecting one single dialect as their lingua franca, speakers of the European
lexifiers wound up developing a new colonial dialect which included their common features but only some of those that distinguished them from one another. Such selections did not necessarily originate from the same dialect, nor were they the same from one colony to another—a fact that accounts in part for regional variation. Why those particular selections were made and not others is a question that deserves as much attention as the selections that produced different creoles from the same lexifier (chapters 2 and 3). The inset text sheds some light on this question.

### Restructuring into koineś, creoles and other varieties

These three diagrams illustrate dialect and language contact where creoles developed. They suggest that basically the same mechanisms were involved in the restructuring processes which produced creoles as in those which generated koineś. They show that the contact of the different metropolitan varieties brought over by the European colonists (represented in the upper tiers) produced the “feature pool” shown by the box in the middle tiers. The outputs (represented in the bottom tiers) are the local, colonial varieties as they developed in forms that differed from the metropolitan varieties. There is no particular input-to-output ratio of number of varieties. There may be fewer outputs than input varieties and vice versa, just as the number may be equal. What matters is that the structures of the output and input varieties are not identical.

The middle tiers represents the “arena” where features associated with the same or similar grammatical functions came to compete with each other. It is also the locus of “blending inheritance,” in that features which are similar but
not necessarily identical came to reinforce each other, regardless of their sources, and produced modified variants of the originals in the emergent varieties. The outputs represent variation in the ways particular (combinations of) features were selected into the emergent varieties, according to principles that still must be articulated more explicitly as we get to understand language evolution more adequately. Markedness has been proposed to be among those principles, but the subject matter can also be approached with alternative constraint models, as long as they account for the specific choices made by speakers of particular varieties. The diagrams also suggest that there is little in the structures of the new vernaculars that has not been “recycled” from the lexifier and/or the other languages it came in contact with. What makes the new varieties restructured is not only the particular combinations of features selected, often from different sources, into the new language varieties but also the way in which the features themselves have been modified, “exapted,” to fit into the new systems.

The first diagram represents what has been identified as koinéization. It diverges from the established position that koinés develop by leveling out differences among dialects of the same language or among genetically and typologically related languages, and by reducing the varieties in contact to their common denominator. This is not what has been observed in places where, for instance, English dialects in England have been in contact with each other. The outcomes show apparent replacive adoptions by some dialects of elements from other dialects, more like the results of competition and selection than any kind of common denominators of the dialects in contact. Simplification of morphosyntax in the development of the original koiné in the Hellenic world did not amount to a common denominator of
Greek dialects. After all cross-dialectal variation had been eliminated, it would have consisted of a skeletal basic system that probably would not have been helpful to the Greeks themselves, barring any concurrent drastic changes in their world view. The name left alone, *koinéization* is but the restructuring of a language into a new dialect out of the contact of its pre-existing dialects or, by extension, the development of a new language variety out of the contact of genetically and typologically related languages.

The other two diagrams illustrate what happened when those metropolitan dialects of a prevailing European language came in contact with other languages. Since linguistic features are abstractions that are in a way different from the forms that carry them, those other languages too made their contribution to the feature pool, increasing the complexity of the condition of competition. Thus they bore on the structures of the outcome varieties, making allowance for selection of features from outside the range provided by the metropolitan dialects of the lexifier. For instance, languages that allow copula-less adjectival predicates would make this syntactic option an alternative for the colonial varieties of the lexifier. In some cases they simply favored an option that was already available in some of the metropolitan varieties but was statistically too insignificant to produce the same output under different ecological conditions. The colonial varieties of European languages reflect this more complex level of feature competition. Thus aside from the social bias in the naming practice, the diachronic difference between koinés, creoles, and other new varieties lies not in the restructuring process but in the numbers and kinds of languages that came in contact, and sadly also in the ethnic identities of their typical speakers.
What I present below about pidgins and creoles is only a brief summary of what is discussed in substantial detail in Mühlhäusler (1986), Chaudenson (1992), and Mufwene (1997a). Pidgins have traditionally been characterized as reduced linguistic systems which are used for specific communicative functions, typically in trade between speakers of different, mutually unintelligible languages. They are second-language varieties that developed in settings where the speakers of the lexifier had only sporadic contacts with the populations they traded with. The adoption of the lexifier as a lingua franca by multilingual populations who had little exposure to fluent models accounts in part for its reduced and, to some linguists such as Bickerton (1981, 1984, 1999) and Holm (1988), seemingly chaotic structure.

Although part of colonial history has tied the development of pidgins with slavery, the connection is accidental. In trades between the Europeans and Native Americans, fur was the chief indigenous commodity. On the West coast of Africa, not only slaves but also food supplies (especially along the “Grain Coast”), ivory, and gold were traded. The common denominator is the sporadic pattern of the trade contacts and this is equally true of those varieties identified pejoratively by the French colonists or travelers as *baragouins* “gibberish, broken language” and more commonly by others as jargon, with almost the same meaning.

In many parts of the world, as in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Papua New Guinea, pidgins have increased their communicative functions and are also spoken both as mother tongues for large proportions of their populations and as major lingua francas. They are called expanded pidgins. The stabilization and complexification of their systems have to do less with nativization than with more regular usage and increased communicative functions.

Creoles have been defined as nativized pidgins. Aside from the arguments presented below against this position, it is useful to consider the following. If creoles had really been developed by children, they would be languages in arrested development stage (Mufwene 1999a). The alternative is that they would have acquired adult structures when the children became adults, which raises the question of why their parents would have been incapable of developing such structures during the pidgin stage. Would slavery have affected their language faculties so adversely?

The irony of deriving creoles from pidgins lies partly in the fact that the term *pidgin* (from the English word *business*, in the phrase *business English*) emerged only in 1807 (Baker and Mühlhäusler 1990), over one century since the term *creole* had been used in Romance languages for a vernacular. The date of 1825 reported by the *OED* for *creole* applies to English only. In the colonies where new vernaculars which developed from European languages were identified by laymen as *creoles or patois* the term *pidgin* is nowhere attested in reference to earlier stages of their developments. Besides, the first variety to have been identified as *pidgin English*
(< business English) developed in Canton in the late eighteenth century, long after most creoles had developed. Moreover, no creole has been identified in that part of the world.

These arguments are not intended to deny the plausible hypothesis that those who contributed the most to the restructuring of the European languages into the classic creoles (e.g., Jamaican, Guyanese, Gullah, Mauritian, Seychellois, and Papiamentu) must have gone through interlanguage stages. However, interlanguages are individual phenomena, restricted to the development of I-languages. They are based on no communal norm, especially in the settings where the creoles developed (chapter 2). In this respect, they are very much unlike the pidgins as communal systems.

The socioeconomic history of European colonization suggests a territorial division of labor between the places where creoles developed and those where pidgin and indigenized varieties of European languages did. The best known pidgins developed in European trade colonies of Africa and the Pacific (around trade forts and on trade routes), before they were appropriated politically and expanded into exploitation colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century. They were based on the nonstandard vernaculars spoken by the European traders, to which their non-European counterparts were exposed during their occasional mercantile encounters. Although they have often evolved structurally and ethnographically to serve diverse and more complex communicative functions, originally they were indeed structurally reduced and served very basic and limited communicative functions. Note that in trade transactions nonverbal communication often compensates for shortcomings in the verbal mode (Calvet 1999).

During the exploitation colony period, when territories larger than the original trade colonies were under the administrative control of European nations, scholastic varieties of their languages were introduced through the scholastic medium, so that they could serve as lingua francas between the indigenous colonial auxiliaries and the colonizers. Owing to regional multilingualism, the colonial rankings of languages led the emerging local elite to appropriate these scholastic varieties as lingua francas for communication among themselves too. This process nurtured their indigenization into what is now identified with geographical names such as Nigerian, Indian, and East African Englishes.

In places like Nigeria and Cameroon, Pidgin English and the local indigenized English varieties have coexisted happily, with the pidgin almost identified as an indigenous language (vernacular for some but lingua franca for others) while the indigenized variety is associated with the intellectual elite. An important difference remains between, on the one hand, pidgins (including also West African “français tirailleur” and “le français populaire d’Abidjan”) and, on the other, indigenized varieties of European languages
1.2 Pidgins, creoles, and koinés

(e.g., Indian English and African French), lying in the following fact: the former’s lexifiers are nonstandard varieties, whereas the latter have developed from the scholastic English or French introduced through the school system, usually through teachers who were not native speakers. See, e.g., Kachru (1983), Gupta (1991), and Bamgbose et al. (1995) on the latter varieties.

Pidgins in the Americas developed out of similar trade contacts between Europeans and Native Americans, before the latter were absorbed by the expanding European settlements. However, creoles developed in settlement colonies, marked by contacts that were initially regular and intimate between the slaves and the European colonists. Most of these were indentured servants and a large proportion of them did not speak the European lexifier natively (chapter 2). Like pidgins, creoles too had nonstandard lexifiers.

The socioeconomic histories of the New World and Indian Ocean, on which our heuristic prototypes of creoles are based, do not suggest that these vernaculars have any structural features which are not attested in pidgins (Mufwene 1991a; Baker 1995a), nor that creoles developed (necessarily) from pidgins (Alleyne 1971, 1980; Chaudenson 1979, 1992), nor that creoles developed by nativization, as acquisition of a community of native speakers, from any erstwhile pidgins (Mufwene 1999a, contra Bickerton 1999). In the New World, it is not obvious that European-lexifier jargons or pidgins spoken by Native Americans contributed more than some lexical entries to the creoles developed by the African slaves. From the founding stages of the colonies until the times when these new vernaculars developed, the Africans interacted regularly with speakers of the lexifiers, although these were not always native or fluent speakers (chapter 2).

Creole vernaculars, originally confined to plantations of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean island and coastal colonies, emerged in contact settings where the development of pidgins would be inconsistent with the received doctrine that they are reduced systems for limited and specialized communicative functions. Creole populations, those born in the settlement colonies from at least one nonindigenous parent, preceded the emergence of creole vernaculars, in the homestead conditions in which non-Europeans were minorities and well integrated, though socially discriminated against. They had full access to European languages, albeit their colonial, koiné varieties, which they acquired through regular interactions with their native or fluent speakers, just like European indentured servants did (Tate 1965; Chaudenson 1979, 1989, 1992; Berlin 1998; Corne 1999). They did not speak the varieties identified later on as creoles.

It was indeed later approximations of their colonial vernaculars by slaves of the plantation period which produced creole vernaculars, through what Lass (1997:112) characterizes as “imperfect replication” and Deacon (1997:114) as “transmission error.” This process was intensified this time by
the decreasing disproportion of native and fluent speakers (creole and seasoned slaves) relative to nonproficient speakers (the bozal slaves). As discussed in chapter 2, the basilectalization process that produced creoles was gradual. However, avoiding treating it as a regular case of language evolution, some creolists (e.g., Bickerton 1984; Thomason and Kaufman 1988) have characterized the process as abrupt. Ironically, there is no evidence that, for example, Gullah – the creole of coastal South Carolina and Georgia in the USA – developed more rapidly than any other North American English variety. Nor has it been proved that the evolution that produced it was not as gradual as those that yielded other contemporary English varieties, which developed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

The development of creoles has also been associated with a break in the transmission of the lexifier (e.g., Polomé 1983). There is, however, hardly any evidence of this, even in polities such as Suriname, where native and large proportions of speakers of the lexifier left roughly fifteen years after the colony was founded in the mid-seventeenth century. A break in the transmission of the lexifier would have entailed no exposure to any form of the language and therefore nothing to restructure. This is quite different from the historical reality that the slaves who arrived during the plantation period were exposed to varieties more and more different from the languages brought from Europe or spoken in earlier colonial periods.

As noted above, the earliest documentation of the term pidgin is reported to be 1907 (Baker and Mühlhäusler 1990). This was over two hundred years after the term creole had been in usage in reference to colonial language varieties, in contradistinction from the metropolitan ways. Linguists have posited in anachronistic order the dubious developmental link between pidgins and creoles. No evidence other than that pidgins have more reduced systems than creoles has been adduced.

In the absence of evidence of structural features peculiar to creoles (Mufwene 1986a, 2000a), Chaudenson’s (1992) characterization that creoles are specific vernaculars which are defined by the time, place, and conditions of their development seems correct. They emerged during the European colonization of the rest of the world starting in the seventeenth century, typically on island or coastal colonies between the tropics, in the contact settings of plantations. In these places, the non-European labor outnumbered even the European indentured servants, not only the native speakers of the lexifier. The creoles developed during a period when the populations were also racially segregated and grew more by importations of new labor than by birth.

Consequently, I use the term creole in its sociohistorical sense to identify primarily those varieties that have been identified as “creole” or “patois” by nonlinguists. I use it also loosely for varieties such as Gullah, which linguists
have identified as creoles because they developed under conditions similar to varieties such as Louisiana, Haitian, and Mauritian Creoles. Although I claim in Mufwene (1997a) that creole vernaculars were originally associated with creole populations, Chaudenson (p.c., October 1999) has reminded me that in Martinique the classic creole populations are White, called Beke, and are not the ones primarily associated with Martinican Creole. In Louisiana, Creole is associated only with Black creole populations but not with the White ones; and in Mauritius the creole population is of Black African ancestry, while Creole is claimed by Mauritians of diverse ethnic groups to be their national language. The historical practice of identifying some new colonial vernaculars as creoles does not have the kind of logic that linguists have mistakenly invoked to justify it. Thus, I will resist applying the term creole to contact varieties which developed in continental Africa, because there were no European settlement colonies there, except in South Africa, where the identification of Afrikaans as a creole remains controversial. No creole populations in the historical sense developed in the rest of continental Africa, and European languages were not appropriated as vernaculars by the indigenous Africans. Identifying varieties such as (Kikongo-)Kituba, Lingala, and Sango, which were lexified by indigenous African languages, as creoles just adds more confusion (Mufwene 1997a). Though they show some similarities in patterns of morphosyntactic restructuring, they also show some important structural differences from classic creoles (for instance in the domain of time reference). As I argue in chapters 3, 4, and 5, the fact that more general explanations can be proposed for some structural evolutions attested both in classic creoles and in other languages is good reason not to assume a dubious structural process of “creolization.”

1.3 Language evolution

As in biology, I use the term evolution without suggesting progress of any kind from a less satisfactory state to a more satisfactory one (e.g., Gould 1993:303), nor necessarily from a simpler to a more complex system or vice versa. Evolution has no goal, certainly not to repair any putative deficiencies in a language. Linguistic change is inadvertent, a consequence of “imperfect replication” in the interactions of individual speakers as they adapt their communicative strategies to one another or to new needs. Such adaptations are similar to exaptations in biology or perhaps to kludges in computing. They can introduce generalizations or increase irregularities, just as they can introduce or obliterate useful distinctions (Keller 1994; Croft 2000).

Since linguistic change occurs even when no contact of languages is involved, it is evident that non-native speakers of a language are not the