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Wherever you are
and whatever you do,
language makes a difference!

— The Five-Minute Linguist

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Are pidgins and creoles real languages?

John M. Lipski

What's a pidgin language? Is creole more than just food? Are pidgin and creole the same thing?

How una dé? Uskain nius? These two greetings, the first from Nigeria and the second from Cameroon, both mean roughly 'Hi, what's happening?' Both use words from English, but combine them in new ways. They're the kind of language we're using when we greet someone by saying 'long time no see,' or when we invite a friend to come have a 'look-see,' or use 'no can do' when something's not possible. When we do that, what we're speaking is no longer English—it's a new language, based on English words but with simpler grammar and vocabulary. 'Look-see' and 'no can do' come from a language once called *China Coast Pidgin English*, which was used by sailors and merchants throughout the Pacific. But what kind of bird is this 'pidgin'?

Imagine for a moment that everyone reading this article spoke a different native language, and that the only English any of us knew was the result of a year or two of limited exposure somewhere earlier in our lives. If we all got stranded on the proverbial desert island, we might well find that the only way we could communicate would be to use our bits of English with one another. As the years went by, with no grammar books and no native speakers to correct us or teach us new words, we'd all develop survival skills in this way of talking, and we'd invent combinations that a true native speaker of English would barely recognize.

A language formed like this—among people who share no native language and are forced to communicate using elements of one that none of them speaks well—is what linguists call a pidgin. The word probably comes from South Sea traders' attempt to pronounce the word *business*. Most pidgins do not form on desert islands; they are formed when speakers of different languages have to speak to one another using bits and pieces of a language imposed on them—for example as slaves, contract laborers, or itinerant vendors. Pidgins have been used on slave plantations in the Americas, on South Pacific islands that imported laborers from widely scattered islands, and in Africa and the Pacific where urban marketplaces bring together people speaking a wide variety of languages.

Pidgins start out as simplified languages, but something happens when children are born to pidgin-speaking parents. Like children everywhere, as they grow they absorb the language they hear around them and make it their own. Unlike other children, though, as they learn their parents' language they expand and transform it from a makeshift jargon into a full-fledged new language. These new languages, spoken natively by the next generation in the family, are called *creole* languages by linguists (although sometimes the name 'pidgin' continues to be used in non-specialist contexts). There are dozens of creole languages scattered around the world, derived from European languages such as English, French, and Portuguese, but also from Arabic, Swahili, and other non-European tongues.

English-based creoles are used in the South Pacific from Papua New Guinea to the Solomon Islands and northern Australia. Gullah in South Carolina and Georgia and Hawaiian Pidgin are creole languages native to the U.S., while Cape Verde Portuguese Creole in Massachusetts and Haitian Creole in Miami and New York are among our country's immigrant languages.

Creole languages have millions of speakers. And they aren't 'broken' versions of what you might think of as 'real' languages. They have established grammars, they're taught in schools, and they're used in radio, television, and the press. They even have their own names and may serve as official languages, such as Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, Bislama in Vanuatu, and Papiamentu in Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire. The language used in the first sentence of this article is spoken in much of West Africa. While many people mistakenly refer to it as 'broken English,' it's the language of African popular music and literature, and of novels by the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka.

Creoles and pidgins often include words and expressions that speakers of languages like English or French would recognize, but with very different meanings. For example, *beef* in West African Pidgin English refers to any animal whose meat can be eaten. So a pig could be a 'beef'. In Papua New Guinea the word *Meri* (from the English name 'Mary') is a word for woman, any woman.

Speakers of languages with long literary traditions sometimes laugh at creole languages, thinking of them—and their speakers—as inferior. But that kind of viewpoint has no basis in fact. Creoles are new languages, at most a few hundred years old, and deserve the same respect as the world's new nations, many of which also emerged through struggle.

Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human rights, translated into Nigerian Pidgin English, begins: *Everi human being, naim dem born free and dem de equal for dignity and di rights wey we get, as human being*. Speaking a creole language with pride and dignity is one of those basic human rights.

About the author

John M. Lipski is Professor of Spanish Linguistics in the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese at the Pennsylvania State University. He received his B.A. from Rice University, in Texas, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Alberta, Canada; he has taught Spanish, Romance, and general linguistics, translation, language acquisition and methodology, Latin American literature, and a variety of language courses at colleges and universities in New Jersey, Michigan, Texas, Florida, and New Mexico. His research interests include Spanish phonology, Spanish and Portuguese dialectology and language variation, the linguistic aspects of bilingualism, and the African contribution to Spanish and Portuguese. He is the author of eleven books and more than two hundred articles on all aspects of linguistics. He is also Editor of the journal *Hispanic Linguistics* and has served as Associate Editor of *Hispania* for Theoretical Linguistics. He has done fieldwork in Spain (including the Canary Islands), Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America, the Philippines, Guam, and many Spanish-speaking communities within the United States.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book: The ways languages begin and develop are also discussed in chapters 4 (earliest languages), 5 (language relationships), 7 (language change), 11 (grammar), 41 (dialect change), 43 (dictionaries), 48 (origins of English), 50 (Latin), and 51 (Italian). Chapter 23 (sign languages) discusses the importance of children in transforming an invented language into a natural one.

Elsewhere:

Todd, Loreto. *Pidgins and Creoles* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974). A very basic book, still not outdated in terms of the general concepts.

Holm, John. *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Romaine, Suzanne. *Pidgin and Creole Languages* (Longman, 1988). Either of these books would be a good place for readers to pursue the topic of this chapter in greater detail. Holm is more accessible, Romaine more comprehensive.