

Isn't Pidgin English just bad English?

John M. Lipski

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

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 (like 'how', 'there', and 'news'), 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 don't form on desert islands; they're created when speakers of different languages have to communicate with each other using bits and pieces of a language imposed on them—for example as slaves on plantations in the Americas, as contract laborers on South Pacific islands, or as itinerant vendors in urban marketplaces in Africa.

Pidgins start out as bits-and-pieces 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 the U.S.'s more recent immigrant languages.

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. The grammatical structures of creole languages are often simpler than the corresponding patterns in the source languages, but creoles can also express nuances not found in the sources. They're by no means simply 'light' or 'broken' versions of 'real' languages—they've earned their status as legitimate languages in their own right.

Creole languages have millions of speakers. They have grammar books, dictionaries, and written literatures. They're taught in schools and used in radio, television, and the press. They have their own names, such as Tok Pisin in Papua-New Guinea and Bislama in Vanuatu, and are increasingly serving as official or quasi-official languages in the Philippines, the Caribbean, South America, and elsewhere. The language used at the beginning of this article is spoken in much of west Africa. It's the language of African popular music and literature, including novels by the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka.

Speakers of languages with long literary traditions sometimes laugh at creole languages, thinking of them—and their speakers—as inferior. But such views are not justified. Creoles are new languages, at most a few hundred years old, but they emerged through struggles similar to those that gave birth to many of the world's new nations, and they deserve the same respect.

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 Edwin Erle Sparks 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 twelve books and more than 250 articles on all aspects of linguistics. He has served as associate editor of *Hispania* for theoretical linguistics, and is currently editor of the journal *Hispanic Linguistics* and a Georgetown University Press series on Hispanic linguistics. He has done fieldwork in Spain (including the Canary Islands), Africa, Brazil and all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin 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 5 (earliest languages), 6 (language relationships), 8 (language change), 13 (grammar), 44 (U.S. dialect change), 46 (dictionaries), 51 (origins of English), 53 (Latin), and 54 (Italian). Chapter 26 (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.

Mufwene, Salikoko. *The Ecology of Language Evolution* (Cambridge, 2001). This book places creole language formation in a broader context of language in society.