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Should creoles be made official languages and / or media of instruction in countries where they are the first language of the majority of the population?

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ABSTRACT: More than 75 million people speak pidgin and creole languages, but a vast majority of their speakers acquire literacy in another language – usually the language of a former colonial power (Siegel, 2005). Sebba (1997, p. 233) calls pidgins and creoles as "developing" with the emphasis on their potentiality to fulfill the same function as any other "developed" language, like English or French. He argues that they do have a potential to develop. In spite of the negative attitudes towards these developing languages from their own speakers, creoles can go up to the level of any other official languages. Attitudes towards pidgins and creoles and the problems that the creole speakers face and the role of linguistic and political power involved in making creoles official languages and medium of instructions in their countries are the major issues to focus on.

Key words: Creoles, Pidgins, official language, attitudes, contact languages, monolingualism, bilingualism, multilingualism, native speakers, standardization, diglossia.

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I. INTRODUCTION

With the need to communicate arose the need for languages and with the expanding economical and educational needs increased the use of these languages. Just like languages are basic to human nature, their advancement, expansion, change, decay and death is inevitable. There are constant changes that take place in language. The languages that arose due to contact with other languages and need to communicate with the people of different languages are also not exempted from this change. Which means even pidgins and creoles can't escape this change. More than 75 million people speak pidgin and creole languages, but the vast majority of their speakers acquire literacy in another language – usually the language of a former colonial power (Siegel, 2005). Sebba (1997, p. 233) calls pidgins and creoles as "developing" with the emphasis on their potentiality to fulfill the same function as any other "developed" language, like English or French. He argues that they do have a potential to develop. In spite of the negative attitudes towards these developing languages from their own speakers, creoles can go up to the level of any other official languages. This essay will look at what pidgins and creoles are and a few characteristics of them. It will then focus on the various attitudes towards pidgins and creoles, problems of creole speakers and the role of linguistic and political power involved in making creoles official languages and medium of instructions in their countries. It will further explore some of the advantages and disadvantages of making creoles official languages and/or medium of instruction and towards the end discuss a few cases where they are actually used to teach initial literacy.

The need to communicate with each other, in situations, which involved trade, slavery, colonialism, occupation by negotiation, etc. led to the creation of new languages- the 'Contact Languages'. Contact languages refer to languages, which were created due to contacts that were sudden and sustained between groups of people speaking mutually unintelligible languages. Such situations gave birth to new languages, new systems of communication- Pidgins and Creoles (Bickerton, 1981).

Pidgins, according to Hall (1962), Bickerton (1981), are languages without native speakers; creoles on the other hand are languages with native speakers. Some of the characteristics of Pidgins and Creoles are:

- They are phonological simplified. For example: they have fewer phonemes: Rounded front vowel [y] replaced with [i], Fricatives /th/, /dh/ replaced with stops /t/ /d/, Fricatives /f/ replaced with /p/, etc.
- No definite articles
- Different or new words. For example:*Sikspela man* for 'six men' *and wanpela man* for 'a man' (TokPisin)
- Reduced pronoun system (no case or gender distinctions) TokPisin*em* 'him/her/it'

- Loss of inflection compensated by periphrases. For example: In TokPisin John's house is said as *'hausbilong John'*

Attitudes towards Creoles:

Creoles, languages with native speakers, give people a sense of identity. They give people a voice and a sense of belongingness. A person is also said to be belonging to a particular community by the language he speaks (Devonish, 1986a; Devonish, 1986b; Siegel, 1997; Sebba, 1997). In spite of this, creole speakers often like to call themselves 'English or French Speakers'.Devonish (1986a, p. 114) comments that for a large number of creole speaking population there lies two disadvantages in calling themselves "English speakers", that is it excludes them from accessing both the official language for internal communication and the international language for external communication. It puts them in a kind of dilemma and removes them far from the sense of belongingness. He points out that by recognizing themselves as creole-speakers they can avoid such dilemma and awkwardness.

Creoles are simply seen to be inferior, bad or broken with a little sympathy for making them language of education. For this reason there has been a lot of resistance in making creoles the medium of education (Shnukal, 1992, p. 4, cited in Siegel, 1997, p. 87). In a Letter to the Trinidad Guardian (quoted in Edwards, 1979, cited in Sebba, 1997, p. 256) it was written:

" If the language of the barrack yard and the market place is to be the accepted mode of expression in the school-room, in the office and in life generally, all books would be useless, there would be nothing for our children to learn and we could be well close the schools and universities, save the high wages of these experts and set them free to go and plant peas and gather nutmegs where they could give full play to this dialect stuff."

Kephart (1992, p. 68, cited in Siegel, 1997, p. 87) with reference to educators' attitudes towards creole in the Caribbean states:

"…you can't express yourself precisely or accurately in Creole, children should be taken away from their creole speaking parents at birth and placed in standard-English speaking homes, because if they spend their whole lives speaking creole, their brain cells will deteriorate."

Such beliefs that creoles are inferior to the standard languages like English or French, that use of creoles would damage children's chances at school or prevent them from getting jobs; and that there are too many practical difficulties in teaching creoles, prevents any large-scale classrooms to use creoles (Sebba, 1997).

Creoles not only had low status, but also were not considered as languages. Sebba (1997, p. 235) strongly opposes the traditional viewpoint that pidgins and creoles are not even worth calling languages but are simply 'lingos'. In many countries, where the majority of the population speaks creole language, the official language of the state still remains the equivalent developed language. This limits the ability of majority to participate in the decisions of the state that are crucial to their lives. Only in 1944, according to Bateson (1944, p. 139, cited in Adler, 1977, p. 123), Hall (1955, p. 14) and Hall (1966, pp. 126-137) it was recognized that creoles are languages even if they contain only small amount of words. They are the expression of a third culture which is neither European nor native and which is common meeting ground of both the cultures.

This is not to say that no country uses creoles as medium of education. As Devonish (1986a) discusses, in countries such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana, Creole is at least recognized as the home language of many children entering schools. However, there are no foreseeable future possibilities of accepting Creoles in these countries as a medium of education.

Communication with Creoles:

Dutcher (1995, p. 6) puts forth that creole-speaking population requires support from another language of wider communication. Creoles are not considered as equal to any other standard variety. Creoles are always considered as insufficient for wider communication. Therefore, an opinion is formed that all countries speaking creoles are underdeveloped. Smith (1999, p. 181), Bébel-Gisler and Hurbon (1975, p. 129, cited in Dejean, 2010) challenge the opinion that one of the reasons for a country's underdevelopment is the lack of a language of wider communication, the vehicle that ensures social and human progress. If this statement is to be considered true, then it suggests that any country's development can be attributed to the inherent properties of language spoken by its people. This means that some languages possess in them some traits that produce development while some other languages do not, which can never be true. Dejean (2010) and Adler (1977, p. 31) argue that human communication is fundamentally an activity that enables individuals to communicate with one another at specific points in time and space. If creole-speakers can sufficiently communicate amongst themselves and find no need to talk to the outside world, except for a few engaged in international trade, then

why should creole not be made their official language. To support this argument, Dejean (2010) cites examples of majority of Americans, Saudi Arabians, Haitians, Mexicans, Italians and Japanese, who neither need to nor have the ability to understand and speak a language that is not their own. Thus, the idea of making creole-speakers learn a foreign language is, according to Dejean (2010), not only socially and economically impractical but also unnecessary.

Dejean (2010) and Adler (1977) further argue that all human languages are equal in the sense that they all possess the same expressive potential. They further add that the mother tongue (in this case Creole) is always loaded with emotions from childhood. This makes them easier to find expressions in that language. And such a language cannot by itself prevent its users from gaining access to knowledge. The argument that creole as a medium of instructions would hamper children's intellectual growth is not supported by research (Dejean, 2010; Adler, 1997; Siegel, 2005, etc.). Monolingual creole speaking population have the right to develop their cognitive skills by accessing all types of knowledge in Creole without having to wait until they learn French or English. In fact this will reduce illiteracy among children and adults and in a way contribute towards economic development. Higher literacy rates spurred by mother tongue instruction, would have not only allow access to knowledge but also bring about social change and transformation in these countries (Trouillot-Lévy, 2010, pp. 217-228). If this isn't true, monolinguals in countries like Japan or France would have never gained access to any knowledge. Moreover, it does not in any way mean that if creole were made an official language then its speakers would cease to learn other languages.

Creole as an official language and the medium of instruction:

Sebba (1997, p. 258) points out that an official language is the one, which is used by a nation or government for administrative purposes and is acknowledged by the laws of that country. But it can be argued that many times in certain countries, even though a language performs these functions, it is not an official language in those countries. For example: English in India is used for administrative purposes, is the language of the courts and also the medium of education and communication in higher educational institutions. But it is still not termed as "the official language" of India. There are also cases in which the term is largely symbolic, like in the Republic of Ireland, where Irish is an official language but not politically powerful and spoken natively only by minorities. Therefore, as Sebba (1997, p. 258) states there can be three possibilities that should be considered while looking at pidgins and creoles as official languages. A pidgin and creole might:

- have both official status (e.g. in the constitution) and be used for administrative purposes. That is an official language in "word and deed".
- be an official language in practice. That is being the language of education.
- be an official language in symbolic purposes, without being used much in practice.

But if looked at the actual scenario, the main hindrance that comes in the way of making creoles the official languages is that of low status that comes from within. A creole has often quite low status in a country. It might have been important as communicative tool and used for administrative purposes, but never the only official language of any country (Sebba, 1997, p. 258).

According to Sebba (1997, p. 259) Afrikaans has, however, enjoyed this status along with English (though strangely it is not considered to be a creole language.) It is only in the South Pacific that pidgins have had a major success in becoming an official language. In Papua New Guinea, TokPisin is an official language and medium of instruction besides English. Mühlhäusler (1997, p. 283) points out that TokPisin was used not only in primary education but also in adult education such as in para-medical training. In Vanuatu, Bislama also enjoys similar official status. There has been some progress seen in other parts of the world, for instance in Haiti and the Seychelles. Elsewhere in the world, however, it is quite difficult for a creole to attain this status (Todd, 1990, pp. 78-82).

Sebba (1997) points out few possibilities for a creole to become an official language at this time, when for example: English, French, Spanish often play an important role in administration and education. Those who hold power in a society need to have a positive attitude towards determining the relative status of languages as well as in maintaining the existing power relations. Even where the creole is acknowledged in education and administrative policies, it is always limited in its status as an official language.

The main argument that goes against creole being the national language, according to Sebba (1997, pp. 259-260), is that a 'national' language should also be an 'international' language. This is in a way true, when we think about the global intelligibility and communication. A native speaker of a language that is also an international language does not have to learn any other language (such as English) for higher education, to engage in international trade or use Internet. This can be seen as an advantage but is definitely not the limit of the creole speakers. There are many bi- and multilingual people and also many monolingual people who have succeeded in learning English as a second or foreign language and with conscious efforts been successful in

their language acquisition. The question that often bothers the speakers of creole and the creole-speaking countries like Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad, etc. is that they would be at a higher position if they name themselves as "English speakers", like the majority of the world population instead of been called as "learners of English as a foreign language" (Sebba, 1997).

Standardization of Creoles:

If creole has to be an official language and medium of instruction then it has to be standardized first. Sebba (1997, pp. 236-240) points out four substantial problems, which historically have stood in the way of pidgins and creoles in becoming standard languages: Status, distance, variability and development. Pidgins and Creoles have always had low *status*. There is a situation of *diglossia* in countries where the majority speaks creoles. In a diglossic situation, one language (the one which is overtly valued in the world) takes an important function and the other (usually the creole language of that country) is given a lower status and used for functions associated with everyday life and communication within family. The elite may even reject the creole for these purposes and consider it to be the language of lower social classes. *Distance* (equivalent to the German term 'Abstand' used by Heinz Kloss, 1967, cited in Sebba, 1997, p. 237) Distance refers to the perception of two languages as separate entities, with differences in vocabulary and grammar. Creoles are often thought to be a bad form of a standard language variety and not really as a separate language. Its norms of correctness are often equated to the standard variety with substantial low status to the creole. *Variability*: there are problems with standardization due to the debates over the acceptable forms. These variations in terms of phonology, grammar, lexis, increase the complexity of the creoles rather than simplify them. *Development*: In order to be used for administrative functions and in education, a language has to develop formal, stylistic registers, which are appropriate for these situations (Sebba, 1997, p. 240). But these are challenges that every language has had at one time or another, but this kind of development is thought to be difficult for creoles. After all, all languages, including pidgins and creoles have a potential to develop in terms of style, register and vocabulary.

According to Sebba (1997), Adler (1977), Todd (1990) all languages have been standardized on the basis of an existing model. If creole has to be standardized then it has to follow the 'high' language already present in the community. But if it does so, then it is termed as a 'standard dialect' and ceases to be the creole anymore. Thus a creole is trapped between developing on the model of a high language on the one hand and distancing itself from the high language on the other hand.

In spite of lack of standardization of creoles, there has been writing that has taken place at many places. There is certain amount of creole writing that is allowed in creoles in some schools, however, children are not encouraged enough to do so. On the contrary, there is also a great deal of writing seen in some creoles such as Sranan, Papiamentu and Jamaican Creole. For example, there are newspapers, some amount of novels and poetry published in Papiamentu (Sebba, 1997, pp. 240-241).

Creoles, as mentioned are just like any other language, with its own grammatical, phonological, morphological systems. Devonish (1986b, p. 37) is a strong advocate of the use of Creole for official purposes in the Caribbean. He writes that democracy is actually present only when the mass of Creole speakers can access language that concerns political issues and decisions that affect their lives. It is not to say that the political elites are not aware of the linguistic problems that exist in these countries in communication with their public.

Disadvantages according to some:

Critics think that if creole were made the official language in that particular region, the creole-speakers would be deprived of educating themselves in international language like French or English. Moreover, this will cease their abilities to become competent bilinguals and push them towards 'near universal monolingualism' Dejean (2010, pp. 213-215). However, saying that the exclusive use of creoles would limit their access to the knowledge available in the outside world, suggests that creole speakers would not be taught any other language once their language becomes an official language. This is definitely not true. Just as mentioned earlier, making creoles the official language of those countries does not cease the opportunities of its speakers to learn other languages of the world. This would be similar to saying that just because German is the official language in Germany, it ceases their opportunity to learn any other language.

Macaulay (1930, p. 458, cited in Adler, 1977, p. 132) discusses a disadvantage of speakers of creoles. He states that creoles cannot be used at international conferences of scientists and other formal gatherings. For formal or intellectual relations, full-grown languages are required, and unless creole rise to the level of being an official language, it cannot be used in this sense. Mühlhäusler (1997, p. 301) argues that as long as creole-speakers are also able to function in at least one major international language, the choice of creole as a medium of instruction would seem justifiable. However, Adler (1977), Hall (1966), Devonish (1986a), Sebba (1997), Dejean (2010) argue that once creoles get their equal rights as an independent language and those in power start thinking of it not to be of 'lower status', and change their attitudes towards it, there would be no reason as to why creoles would not be used as international languages.

Adler (1977, p. 131) talks about another disadvantage that creoles suffer from. He argues that creoles cannot be transferred into another society and are bound to a specific area and thus they fail to fulfill the requirement of an international language: to be spoken and understood by the rest of the world, but this is true for many other languages in the world. Therefore, this cannot be considered as a valid argument against creoles as official language.

Some examples:

Devonish (1986a, p. 138) talks about the revolutionary period of the early 1980s in Grenada, where it was concluded that both English and Creole complement each other as each has its own importance. In Grenada, English remains the official, public-formal and written language variety and Creole is the language of everyday informal communication. Devonish (1986a, p. 138) puts it as "These two language varieties complemented each other in the same way as do the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate, each with his estate clearly ordered". What this shows is that Creole does not have an equal status with the European languages. It is acceptable that both languages in bilingualism will not be equally used in all domains but there should not be a convenient camouflage of equality, where actually the European language is at a higher level and all low functions are fulfilled by a creole (Sebba, 1997, p. 260).

Another good example is in Haiti (Hall, 1966; Sebba, 1997; Dejean, 2010). An official Haitian Creole orthography was adopted for use in schools in 1979. Creole was medium of instruction as well as a school subject for first four years of primary education. French was taught as a foreign language during those years and after the first four years vocational education in Creole and French and higher education mainly in French was available (Sebba, 1997, pp. 256-258; Dejean, 2010, p. 199; Todd, 1990, pp. 78-82). The aim was to produce students who were balanced bilinguals. This programme, however, according to Devonish (1986a, pp. 64-65) received a lot of resistance from the French-speaking elite class and parents. The results were also not satisfactory. This programme was undertaken half-heartedly, the government did not put enough efforts into the programme, teachers did not have enough training, and there was also an absence of enough resources like libraries and laboratories and opposition from parents. (Hadjadi, 2000, cited in Dejean, 2010) Trouillot-Lévy (2010, pp. 217-228) addresses parents' attitudes towards the use of Haitian Creole in schools. The parents of upper socioeconomic strata, older generations, school heads and teachers demand that the children speak French in their presence. This is viewed as a sign of respect and all these adults view speaking Creole in their presence as unacceptable. They also see their children's achieving a high proficiency level in French as a necessity for career success and international mobility. One main reason that came forth, as to why parents did not favour Creole as a medium of instruction, was parents' incapability in reading and writing their native language. Some parents, on the contrary, observed that their children seemed happier in learning environments that were in Creole. They also managed to work independently and required less supervision in homework than those in French-medium schools (Trouillot-Lévy, 2010, pp. 217-228).

The efforts still continued in some schools. In Haiti, the school CollègeUniversitaireCaraïbe (CUC) advertised its trilingual mission of teaching in three languages- French, Haitian Creole and English. Teachers often took pride in the fact that their older students were able to write proficiently in both French and Creole. It was also observed that when given bilingual books in math or science, students at CUC were more likely to utilize the Creole section of the school books rather than the French one. It was also observed that students seemed to relate more to the Creole literatures and found them more engaging as it was familiar to them since childhood (Trouillot-Lévy, 2010, pp. 217-228).

At CUC teachers use a bilingual approach with two languages of instruction- Creole and French. French and Creole teachers are encouraged to work together in preparing lesson plans. Administrators are in full support of this approach and do not criticize teachers if they choose to teach an entire lesson in Creole. It is believed and observed that when the students grasp concepts in their native language, and then the information is reintroduced in second language, students gain a better mastery over the subject. They do not have to struggle to understand academic concepts in unfamiliar language.

Another example is of Papua New Guinea, which represents vast linguistic diversity and complexity, and this diversity is according to Pickford (2005, cited in Franken and August, 2011, p. 221) somewhat challenging to capture and enumerate. The numbers of speakers of particular languages and the numbers of languages themselves are unclear (Mühlhäusler, 1997; Pickford 2005, cited in Franken and August, 2011). There are three official languages- TokPisin, HiriMotu and English. English, however, was the language of instruction in schools for many decades until education reform in the 1990s (Franken and August, 2011).

In Papua New Guinea, primary and adult education in TokPisin had dealt a severe blow, in July 1953,

when the UN Trusteeship Council urged to stop the use of Pidgin English in that territory. In 1969, in the University of New Papua Guinea, the chancellor, Gunther advocated primary education in English, with the objective of saving money and discontinued the support for TokPisin. He felt this could be achieved by a moderate financial investment. His views were based on the general assumption of English being the key to success and to well-paid jobs. But it was soon realized that universal education in English was extremely expensive with dubious chances of success. The first Minister of Education, Olewale, later advocated unofficially that every child should receive at least part of its education in TokPisin (Mühlhäusler, 1997, pp. 279-284).

In 1989 began a pre-school program with an aim of preparing children (5-6 years) for further education by promoting initial literacy as well as initial numeracy, basic health, crafts, religion, and other subjects in TokPisin (Siegel, 1997, pp. 90-91). Research has shown that teachers think that the students who went through this pre-school programme are more active in participation in class, have better attendance records and have lower drop out rates than students, who did not attend this programme. They are well adjusted, co-operative, and quick at learning. Teachers also report that there are no special problems of interference. These students in fact learn English easily. It is only sometimes that influence of TokPisin can be seen in spellings and pronunciation, but this can be seen in any other language speakers learning any other language (Siegel, 1997, pp. 90-93).

In a recent policy document, the education plan for 2005–2014 (Papua New Guinea Department of Education 2004, cited in Franken and August, 2011, pp. 222-223), the Secretary of Education states that when children have learnt to read and write in the language they speak at home, their abilities to gain knowledge and acquire another language gets expanded. Thus, TokPisin would continue to be the language of instruction and the first language taught while bridging to English takes place. This will allow students to continue to develop their thinking, and decision-making skills as well as skills in speaking and listening, reading and writing in the language that they speak while acquiring English.

Similarly, in Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, the Netherlands Antilles, the creole Papiamentu was introduced as a school subject throughout the primary school. But there was a lot of opposition to the same who thought that Papiamentu was a 'minor language' and could not fulfill the educational functions. Appel and Verhoeven (1994, citen in Sebba, 1997, p. 257) noted that this reform might get obstructed either by lack of human resources or financial resources. Today, roughly 80% of island residents speak Papiamentu as a first language. Dutch,English and Spanish are still the languages used in the classroombut despite the multilingualism, Papiamentu does not seem to be in danger of dying out (Sanchez, 2012).

According to Trouillot-Lévy (2010, pp. 217-228) and Todd (1990) if there is a place where all agree on the use of Creole, then it is in literacy programme for adults. Creole is often thought to be the language of peasants and others at the bottom of the social scale, whereas the language of the government, school and elite remains the standard language. If creole is made the official language then these monolingual Creole speakers, who are literate but cannot read or understand government documents or fill forms or participate in decision-making in a democratic country, would get an equal say in the true sense. The school system divides the society in two- the have-mores and the have-less or have-nots. Trouillot-Lévy (2010) and Todd (1990) argue that if creole were made the language of instruction, this distinction would not arise. But doesn't this distinction arise in other countries like England or France where the medium of instruction is their first language.

To conclude we can say that it is not possible to make general assumptions and predictions for each part of the world about the future of pidgins and creoles. What can be said with certain amount of certainty is that education in Creole is no hindrance, but benefit. Children find easy to acquire new knowledge and a foreign language if they have a support from the concepts taught in their early stages in their mother tongues initially. There will be, however, no positive changes in the status of creole unless there is a political will to amend. Along with that there must be sufficient resources to enable teachers, linguists and writers to develop materials that can help advance creoles as a standard and official form. Creoles continue to be used in day-to-day conversations, bring creole-speakers together and perform many other functions, but linguistically often looked down upon. There is, therefore, a need to raise the status of creoles by changing public attitudes towards the use of creoles in some functions from which they are now excluded. This gradual process might take longer to be brought into action but should not be halted by external forces. With the world becoming smaller and coming closer, and with international relations ever increasing, creoles will win the debate and soon become the official languages and medium of instruction in the countries where the majority of population uses them as their first language.

(4882 words)

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