

Morphosyntactic implications in Afro-Hispanic language: new data on creole pathways

In creole studies the notion of “simplification,” while all-pervasive, rarely acquires an empirically grounded definition. In particular the manner in which Ibero-Romance verbal, nominal, and adjectival morphosyntax becomes transformed into creole paradigms such as those found in Palenquero, Papiamentu, Cape Verdean and São Tomé creole Portuguese has not been satisfactorily explained. Although all of these creole languages have eliminated Spanish and Portuguese morphological agreement in favor of invariant forms, occasional fossil remains of fully agreeing combinations suggest a gradual step-wise restructuring. A major obstacle in reconstructing the formation of Romance-derived creoles is time depth: there is little reliable information on the earliest stages of creolization and restructuring, and few contemporary configurations contain enough remnants of the first stages of the “big bang” of creole formation to provide corroborative data. This is nowhere more evident than in the case of creoles arising from the contact between Spanish and a variety of African languages. Only Palenquero and Papiamentu remain as survivors of what was probably a much richer set of contact varieties. The present study broadens the quantitative analysis of creolization and decreolization by means of data from a recently-discovered and nearly intact Afro-Hispanic language, spoken in remote areas of Bolivia by descendants of African slaves who arrived in the 16th century. Afro-Bolivian speech, now confined to the oldest members of a few tiny and very isolated communities, has preserved a restructured morphosyntax that demonstrate the feasibility of early creolization of Spanish in several independent locations. Among the creole-like structures found in the most basilectal form of the Afro-Bolivian dialect are an invariant number-gender system for nouns and adjectives, invariant verbs, null articles, and a partially restructured pronominal paradigm. Given the gradual displacement of the traditional Afro-Bolivian dialect by modern Bolivian Spanish over the past three generations, there is considerable morphosyntactic variation across generations and as a factor of exposure to standard Spanish. There are also regional isoglosses radiating outward from a geographical locus where the most basilectal variety is spoken. Both the regional and generational variation are systematic enough as to reveal unidirectional implicational relationships. Ranging from the most creole-like features to the least, the Afro-Bolivian implicational scale is as follows:

TRAIT	EXAMPLE
Invariant 3 s. verb forms for 1 s. >>	<i>yo va trabajá</i> “I am going to work”
Invariant 3 s. verb forms for 1 pl. >>	<i>nojotro va trabajá</i> “we are going to work”
Invariant 3 s. verb forms for 3 >>	<i>eyu(s) va trabajá</i> “they are going to work”
Invariant plural article <i>lu(s)</i> >>	<i>lu(s) mujé</i> “the women”
Lack of gender concord in adjective suffixes >>	<i>esos fiesta</i> “those parties”
Bare plurals >>	<i>algunos cosa</i> “some things”
Invariant plurals	<i>lu(s) patron</i> “the landowners”

The implications provide the basis for an analysis within the framework of optimality theory, in which successive stages of (de)creolization result from the relative strengths of constraints seeking to minimize allomorphy and constraints that favor morphological agreement. These scales and the resulting constraint rankings provide a prototype for Ibero-Romance creolization, related in turn to broad West African areal features such as the lack of nominal, adjectival and verbal inflectional suffixes.