

Creole phonology: No such discipline, but what a lot you can learn from it!

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In this talk I will claim that no such thing exists as a compartmentalized discipline of creole phonology. Creole phonology is just a type of contact phonology – one where it is, of course, not always easy to identify the relevant languages in contact. Luckily, it is however possible on occasion to identify the languages concerned with some confidence.

Most creole languages, or those identified as such at least, have one or other of the languages of the various European colonial powers as their major source of vocabulary. We speak of English-based, French-based, etc. creoles, or rather more politically correctly, English-lexifier, French-lexifier, etc. creoles. However these same creole languages vary considerably in the degree to which their phonologies resemble those of such *superstrate* languages. The briefer their contacts with the superstrate languages have been, the more deviant they appear to be in respect of these languages in their phonological structures. It appears then that the phonological patterning of these languages will tend to reflect the phonology or phonologies of the original languages of the first speakers of the creole languages in question.

I will adduce a number of cases of the insights that can be gained from the study of such cases of brief superstrate contact. I will draw most of my exemplification from the extreme case of Saramaccan, a well-known maroon creole language spoken in the interior of Surinam in South America. Due to the brevity of its contacts with European languages, it exhibits phonological structures that are very unlike those of typical European languages – open syllable structure, lexical tone, grammatical tone, labial-velar stops, implosive stops, and so on.

These phenomena can be used as additional evidence to support the identifications of the primary African substrate languages that have already been proposed. Often too, the different strands of vocabulary provide evidence of differential phonological development. These, we can use to identify or confirm hypothesis regarding the ways in which these different linguistic sources were welded together in the process of creolization, or re-creolization.