Nicholas Faraclas (ed.)


This stimulating, challenging critique of traditional creolistics provides fresh insight into the complexity of the colonial world and the oft-forgotten role of subaltern societies. In the first chapter, “Marginalized Peoples, Racialized Slavery and the Emergence of the Atlantic Creoles,” Nicholas Faraclas & Marta Viada Bellido de Luna outline the major theme to be developed in the following seven chapters: Although marginalized groups—African and Indigenous—were denied agency in traditional studies of colonization, the whole volume adduces historical, demographic, and linguistic data showing how preslave and nonslave societies made essential contributions that shaped the matrix of creolization. Renegade communities, sailors, pirates, maroons, lançados, beachcombers, and indigenous populations of various ethnic backgrounds came together as sociétés de cohabitation—a term coined to define a new category based on, but distinct from Robert Chaudenson’s sociétés d’habitation and sociétés de plantation.

Chapter 2, “African Agency in the Emergence of the Atlantic Creoles” (by Faraclas and eight co-authors), refutes conventional assumptions about colonial societies—in particular, Eurocentric notions of monolingualism in the Caribbean, classifications of African languages that overlooked hybridity, and monocausal scenarios for language development (i.e., substrate, superstrate, universal).

Women have generally been invisible in discussions of creolization, but this book’s third chapter, “Women and Colonial Era Creolization” (by Faraclas), recognizes the agency of Indigenous and African women who held crucial interactive roles as consorts of European men. In addition, their daily subsistence and market activities put them in an ideal position to contribute to the creation and transmission of new forms of communication. But are there specific linguistic features of creoles that can be attributed to women? Faraclas identifies a feature common in Caribbean creoles—declarative rising intonation contours—that may reflect the influence of non-European feminized speech (present in Niger-Congo, but occurring also in Celtic, as well as in white middle-class American/British English). Defining feminized speech is a daunting task, considering the stylistic and social spectrum women (and men) control. The agency of women in language development is more likely to be found in their ability to adapt as mediators and communicators, a fundamental notion in creolization.
The following two chapters (both by Faroclas and Bellido de Luna) document the interactions between European and Indigenous populations. Chapter 4, “Indigenous Peoples and the Emergence of the Caribbean Creoles,” focuses on the historical and geographical context and Chapter 5, “Linguistic Evidence for the Influence of Indigenous Caribbean Grammars on the Grammars of the Atlantic Creoles,” on indigenous linguistic sources. Hybrid societies/sociétés de cohabitation were established in North America and the Caribbean (palenques in Hispaniola, Blue Mountain maroons in Jamaica, Afro-Indian Garinagu [“Black Caribs”] in the French Caribbean). Afro-Indigenous maroons created interisland networks that allowed linguistic diffusion throughout the Greater Antilles.

Chapter 5 compares a short list of general characteristics of English-based Caribbean creoles—mostly morphosyntactic (e.g., frequent use of topicalizers, serialization, copular constructions, and TMA system)—to similar linguistic features in North Arawakan languages. The examples are drawn from three Amazonian languages—Maipure, Tariana, Bare—as well as from Garifuna, the only related language spoken in the Caribbean region (Belize and Honduras), which Faroclas classifies as Arawakan. (I believe that this classification is problematic, since Garifuna has a large Carib component and has also assimilated a great deal of French, English, and Spanish. Garifuna is clearly a hybrid language.) However, the authors conclude that Atlantic Creole features may be “the result of convergence between Arawakan, West African and ... nonstandard West European grammatical patterns” (p. 148). The copular construction (i.e., absence of copula) is considered to be crucial evidence of Arawakan influence because it does not occur in West African languages. But this interpretation is somewhat weakened by the fact that some of the “creolized and pidginized varieties of African languages that the slaves brought with them” (p. 49) may have lacked copular constructions and thus contributed to the process of creolization. Regardless of the interpretation, we can only agree that “the importance of indigenous languages in the genesis of Atlantic Creoles can no longer be ignored” (p. 148).

Chapter 6, “Sociétés de cohabitation and the Similarities between the English Lexifier Creoles of the Atlantic and the Pacific” (by Faroclas, Micah Corum, Rhoda Arrindell & Jean Ourdy Pierre), is an interesting, well-documented validation of the Atlantic to Pacific linguistic diffusion. It draws on a large sample of historical and linguistic sources, and contributes effectively to the major theme that heteroglossic sociétés de cohabitation must hold a central place in any study of creolization. Chapter 7, “Influences of Houma Ancestral Languages on Houma French” (by the United Houma Nation and eight supporting authors), focuses on some phonological features that suggest Indigenous
(mostly Muskogean) influence in a variety of French spoken by the Houma Nation in Louisiana. The appendix includes an excellent eight-page data transcript of a conversation in Houma French.

The final chapter, “Marginalized Peoples and Creole Genesis: Sociétés de cohabitation and the Founder Principle” (by Faracas and eight others), is a critique of the hypothesis that Founder populations determine the language evolution—an approach notably used by Chaudenson and Salikoko Mufwene to show that Réunionnais was inspired by French vernaculars, thus denying African agency. Faracas reiterates in this context the central theme of the book, namely that dominant colonial models of society obliterate the essential roles played by the mixed societies where Europeans did not predominate, and thus warp our interpretation of creole societies. I entirely agree. The contributors to this book have opened new, challenging perspectives into the history of the “multiplex matrix” from which Caribbean Creoles emerged that will be inspiring not only to linguists (especially creolists), but also to anthropologists and historians.

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