Chapter 2

Creolization and Pidginization as Concepts of Language, Culture and Identity

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Creole and Creolization: Terminology and Meaning

The study of creolization and pidginization in contexts of postcolonial diversity is important not because the latter are the only contexts in which creolization and pidginization may occur, but because these are the contexts in which they achieve particular social and political meanings and relevance. I will focus on the terminology and meaning of creole and creolization first and will deal with how pidgin and pidginization relates to and differs from it later on.

Creolization is only one possible path the interaction between people of heterogeneous backgrounds can take and it consists of more than just the more or less random mixture of cultural features and social practices. An historical perspective shows that, irrespective of the manifold meanings the notions of ‘creole’ has adopted in different local contexts at different times, creolization has always been connected to processes of (various degrees of) indigenization\(^1\) and the creation of new common identity among peoples of different origins that relate to and are associated with commonalities with regard to (historical) experiences, language, localities, conditions of life, social and cultural practices (Olson 1983; Patterson 1975, 1982).\(^2\) Although diversity of origins is a constitutive dimension of creoleness – manifested in social and cultural practices and collective identification – creolization as an identity-related process implies demarcation in that the emerging creole group/
category of people demonstrates varying degrees of closure and openness.\(^3\)

It will not merely be associated with specific cultural characteristics, but also
with a – more or less – specific mixture concerning its ancestry and heritage
Palmié 2007a, b). Whereas ‘regular’ ethnic groups tend to emphasize (and be
ascribed) common origin, sameness and homogeneity as their groups’ fea-
tures, ethno-creole groups emphasize (and are ascribed) diversity of origin in
terms of people and features as a major constituent and distinguishing feature
of their identity. It is particularly its perception as being mixed and (therefore)
different from other not-so-mixed identities and cultural forms that make
creoleness – of groups, identities, sociocultural features and languages –
achieve particular roles and functions in contexts of (ethnic) diversity.

Creolization is likely to occur in contexts of forced or voluntary migration
in which identities based on original heritages become insufficient as a frame
of reference and where at the same time (full) integration into the majority
society is impossible or difficult to achieve. Creolization – as a process involv-
ing indigenization and different degrees of (re-)ethnicizing – also seems to be
more prevalent when and where large parts of a given population are new-
comers and where ethnic identity is a socially structuring principle in people’s
societies of origin and/or their host societies (Knörr 2007a, 2007b, 2010a, 2014).

Given the rather undifferentiated use of the term ‘creolization’ to describe
contemporary social and cultural processes some resistance has developed to
use the term to refer to anything but the historical context of slave exile.\(^4\)
We agree that it is a mistake to use ‘creolization’ interchangeably with ‘transna-
tionalism,’ ‘syncretization,’ ‘hybridization’\(^5\) et cetera, but rather than restricting

\(^3\) Cf., Eriksen (2007, 174): “Creole essentialism is far from unknown in Mauritius. Occasionally,
Creoles will claim that they are the only ‘vrais Mauriciens’, real Mauritians, since they are the
only group who, as it were, emerged from the Mauritian soil.” Cf., Knörr (1995) on the Krios of

\(^4\) Concerning such demands to limit the creole terminology to historically specific phenom-
ena, see also Cohen and Toninato (2009); cf., Chaudenson (2001, chapter 1 and 2).

\(^5\) ‘Syncretization’ refers to the mixing of belief systems or religions that are otherwise unre-
related (for example, Voodoo). ‘Hybridization’ is derived from botany and zoology and denotes
a process whereby humans ‘implant’ certain characteristics of one plant into another with the
goal of creating a plant with mixed characteristics. The plant itself has no active role in
this process. We do not consider the use of the term ‘hybridization’ appropriate for char-
acterizing the active process of cultural change. Furthermore, the model of ‘hybridization’
implies a ‘pre-hybridization purity,’ which is fiction as regards the social and cultural world
(see Friedman 1994). ‘Transnationalism’ refers to the social dynamics that exist across
national borders (for example transnational networks).