
Tjerk Hagemeijer (Centro de Linguística da Universidade de Lisboa - Lisbon)

Description of the book

Principense (PR) or Lung’lé, one of the four Portuguese-related Gulf of Guinea creoles, is a 16th century creole spoken on the small island of Príncipe (142 km²) which, together with the island of São Tomé forms the Democratic Republic of São Tome, Gulf of Guinea (Africa). Principe, which is probably best known as the island where Einstein’s Theory of Relativity was proven in 1919, has currently approximately seven thousand inhabitants of which “about twenty to thirty people over sixty and a few younger ones” (p. 3) still have reasonable active command of the creole. Portuguese, the official language, as well as Cape Verdean creole, spoken by the descendants of contract laborers, are the dominant languages on the island. PR is also spoken by small numbers of speakers in the Diaspora, especially in the Lisbon area (Portugal).

Chapter 1, the introduction, provides a number of sociohistorical and sociolinguistic facts, a short overview of the few previous sources on PR, and the information that the linguistic material was intermittently collected during field work on Príncipe and in the Lisbon (Portugal) area since 1991.

Chapter 2 (7-28) deals with the phonology of the language. Maurer first introduces the spelling conventions and then goes on showing that PR exhibits seven oral vowels, all of which exhibit a nasal counterpart, and twenty-two consonants, which include, for instance, implosives and labiovelars. Minimal pairs are presented for vowels and consonants. He further argues that alveolar fricatives s and z are in complementary distribution with palatalized ʃ and ʒ (before i and y). The syllable structure is strictly (C)V and a sandhi rule is described whereby a word-final vowel is deleted when followed by a word-initial vowel. The remainder of the chapter, which corresponds to its most substantial part, is dedicated to the tonal patterns of the language. Against previous work by Günther (1973) and Ferraz & Traill (1981), Maurer presents a large number of spectrograms in order to demonstrate that PR is a tone language.

Chapter 3 (29-172) forms the core of the book. Here, detailed descriptions of the Noun Phrase, the Verb Phrase and simple and complex sentences are presented. Like other creole languages, PR is a highly analytic language with strict SVO word order lacking morphologically marked number and gender. The different subsections on the Noun Phrase show that PR typically exhibits the following word order: PL-NUM-DIM/AUGM-N-DEM-POSS-ADJ-REL. The language also exhibits a postnominal singular indefinite article. Note further that the plural marker (ine) is also used as 3pl (cf. other Atlantic creoles). Restrictions on its use are related to animacy, since non-human nouns can only be pluralized when followed by a demonstrative. In some specific cases, the demonstrative marker occurs to the right of adjectives or full clauses (e.g. relative clauses).

Subject, object and plural possessive and plural independent pronouns essentially exhibit the same phonetic shape. Singular independent and singular possessive pronouns, however, exhibit distinct forms. An alternative possessive paradigm is obtained by ki + POSS (‘with’+POSS). PR lacks null referential subjects, but a few cases null expletives are attested (e.g. tê tôvada ‘it’s stormy’, lit. have storm), but they are generally in free variation with their overt counterpart.

The chapter on the Verb Phrase addresses several key issues in creole studies, such as TAM-marking, copula clauses and serial verb constructions in considerable detail. Maurer shows that PR
exhibits four preverbal TMA-markers, which may occur independently or in five combinations. He provides a fine-grained description of the semantics of each of the markers. As in the other Gulf of Guinea creoles (Hagemeijer 2007; Maurer 1995), the order of the markers is MTA. Following his 1995 work on Angolar, Maurer also argues for a basic syntactic distinction between dynamic verbs and two types of stative verbs (according to lexical aspect), which can be distinguished as follows: type-A statives do not exhibit an aspectual opposition in the past, whereas the type-B statives do. Habitual and future aspect marker ka changes to sa in negated sentences. The tables on p. 91-2 provide a clear overview of the functions of the TAMA-markers. Furthermore, locative copula constructions in PR require the use of the copula; in all other environments the copula is typically omitted.

Like its sister creoles, PR exhibits widespread verb serialization, which includes a few more unusual types, such as the use of vwa ‘to fly’ in the V1 slot indicating “the rapidity of the action associated with the second verb in the series (p. 117)”, for instance in vwa fêzê ‘rapidly prepare’ (lit. fly make). This construction is also attested in sister creole Santome and Papiamentu. In addition to serial verb constructions, PR also presents a small array of mostly nominal prepositions.

PR further has a standard clause or sentence-final negation marker (fa). Arguments and adjuncts typically occur to the left of fa. Only a few specific temporal adjuncts, such as clauses introduced by dina ‘since’ occur to the right of fa. However, there are a few exceptions to the final marker: a preverbal marker (na), without the final marker, occurs in purposive and desiderative clauses introduced by pa ‘for’. This brings me to another interesting feature of PR, which is apparently not attested in the other Gulf of Guinea creoles, namely the validator na. This functional element has the same shape as the rare preverbal negation marker. It occurs between the subject and TAMA-markers and “reinforces the assertion of the truth value of a proposition in affirmative sentences (p. 67).”

In the section on simple sentences, Maurer addresses a whole range of constructions. Focus, Topics and interrogatives are derived by fronting constituents. Interrogative sentences are accompanied by an optional clause final interrogative marker (a). It is shown that when fronted constituents are recovered by an anaphoric pronoun, animacy plays a role: plural human antecedents are recovered by a 3pl pronoun, whereas plural non-humans, especially inanimates, show a tendency toward 3sg. As expected from an analytic language, voice (causative, reciprocal, reflexive, etc.) is expressed syntactically. Maurer further briefly shows that PR exhibits asyndetic and syntetic coordination. He also provides an overview of argument and adjunct clauses and the complementizers and conjunctions they are introduced by. Chapter 3 ends with an overview of the three sentence final particles a, ê and ò, as well as the presentational marker ya.

Chapter 4 (173-177), “Miscellaneous features”, deals very briefly with examples of interjections and onomatopoeic expressions, reduplication and ideophones, which is a well-represented feature of the Gulf of Guinea creoles. Ideophones in PR modify adjectives, participles, nouns and verbs.

Chapter 5 (179-210) contains seven stories from PR’s oral tradition and three songs. All the texts have translations, but only the first three stories are glossed as well. Chapter 6 (211-244) and Chapter 7 (245-256) contain, respectively, the PR-English and the English-PR word lists. The PR-English glossary also provides etymologies of the listed items. The great majority of lexicon is derived from Portuguese, but PR also exhibits quite some African lexicon. It is mentioned on p. 211 that 14% of the lexicon is related to Nigerian languages (overwhelmingly derived from Edo languages), but this percentage appears to rest on a mistake, since out of 1650 lexical entries only approximately 100 items are Nigerian-related (= approx. 6%).

Appendix I (257-260) contains a story and a respective word list in the three creole languages of S. Tomé and Principe, Lungwa Santome, Lunga Ngola and PR. For those interested in the Gulf of Guinea creoles, this is a good practical example which gives a rough idea of the degree of