

Nubi plural formation: how a Creole may become more complex than its lexifier and what it implies for creolisation theory

This paper proposes to deal with plural formation in Nubi, an Arabic-based Creole now spoken in Kenya and Uganda, but which evolved during the 19th century in Southern Egypt and Sudan among enslaved soldiers of the Egyptian army (see Heine 1982; Wellens 2005). Untypically for a creole language, Nubi can be shown to be more complex than its lexifier (Egyptian/Sudanese Arabic) in this domain, as it includes more suppletive forms and more unpredictable word classes. The morphology of plural formation is also more complex in Nubi than it is in most Creoles, as Nubi kept part of Arabic morphology and added its own.

The semantics and pragmatics of plural count noun forms, in contrast, turn out to be very similar to what is found in many creole languages (and quite distinct from what they are in the lexifier): pluralisation is morphologically ‘free’ in the sense that it depends on the count noun’s reference and the cognitive and/or situational relevance for the speaker of expressing that more than one token is at issue, so that count nouns not bearing a plural exponent are not necessarily interpreted as referring to just one token.

Finally, uncreole as Nubi appears in this area of nominal morphosyntax, it is very creole as far as the morphosyntax of the verbal complex is concerned, as the latter typically consists in an invariable verb preceded by an array of TMA markers, the meanings and combinatorics of which are also typical of Creoledom.

This discrepancy is probably related to a rather obvious, albeit rarely pointed out fact, namely that creole languages are globally more alike in VP structure than they are in NP structure. Whereas the former seems to realize some sort of a universal pattern (and is the main buttress of the universalist theory of creolisation as in Bickerton 1981), the former varies widely depending on the particular lexifiers and/or substrates.

Nubi plural formation thus appears critical in order to support a number of points this paper intends to make. First, creolisation as such is indeed a UG-related phenomenon, namely an exceptional recourse to the language faculty in order to repair an unusual breach in transmission following a catastrophe in a precise sense of the term (see Kihm 2000).

Secondly, such recourse is **partial**, affecting the verbal complex *qua* pivot of the predicate and sentence head, but not the inner morphosyntactic structure of the argument NPs. If true as an account – as the observation seems to be correct – this opens interesting avenues into the workings of the human faculty for complex language as a formal object (see Carstairs-McCarthy 1999; Kihm 2007). The fact that the forms’ meanings and proper uses seem always to be forced into nearly the same pattern, in contrast, suggests that universal semantic and pragmatic factors play a paramount role in creolisation as such.

Finally, the complexity of Nubi plural formation – as a special case of the variety of NP structures across creole languages – calls for a **multicausal** theory such that each creole genesis results from many causes of which creolisation as such is only one. Nubi complex plurals, for instance, may be shown to be the outcome of the language’s complicated history, meaning particularly the long period during which it remained an expanded pidgin in regular contact with its lexifier.

To conclude, creolisation as a mental process should be distinguished from creole formation as a historical development. The former accounts for what Creoles have in common, the latter for what makes them different. Creolisation (to the difference of pidginisation or various kinds of contact-induced language change) is a **rare** phenomenon that requires a special catastrophe as its trigger. It may well be that the relevant catastrophe occurred only once in recorded time: what we call the ‘Great Discoveries’ and their aftermath to the present. The label ‘creole’ ought therefore to be limited to the new languages that emerged during and as a sequel of this protracted global historical event.

References

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