Definition: creole from The Columbia Encyclopedia

(creˈōl), Span. criollo (crēˈōlˈyō) [probably from crío=child], term originally applied in West Indies to the native-born descendants of the Spanish conquerors. The term has since been applied to certain descendants in the West Indies and the American continents of French, Portuguese, and Spanish settlers. The creoles were distinguished from the natives, the blacks, and from people born in Europe. A sharp distinction of interest always lay between the creoles, whose chief devotion was to the colony, and the foreign-born officials, whose devotion was to the mother country. Never precise, the term acquired various meanings in different countries. It has biological and cultural connotations. The term was early adopted in the United States in Louisiana, where it is still used to distinguish the descendants of the original French settlers from the Cajuns, who are at least partially descended from the Acadian exiles. The word is also commonly applied to things native to the New World, such as creole cuisine and creole horses. The term is also used in places distant from the Americas, such as the island of Mauritius, but there it has lost much of its original meaning. The picturesque life of the Louisiana creoles has been ably depicted in the works of Lafcadio Hearn, George Washington Cable, and Grace King.


Summary Article: Pidgin/Creole
From Encyclopedia of Identity

Pidgins and creoles are languages. When speakers of different language bases encounter one another, and multilingualism does not predominate, a language woven of intersecting systems develops to accommodate communication. A pidgin has no native speakers for all users, the pidgin is a second language. When pidgin is no longer spoken as a second language, but as a first language, it becomes a creole language. For example, a pidgin becomes creolized or nativized when the children of a society begin learning the pidgin as a first language. The different needs of native users, versus those of second language users, catalyze nativization. During this process, grammar and vocabulary expand to fill what gaps may exist in the pidgin.

Pidgins and creoles range continuums with one or more basilects, first languages, and an acrolect, or target language, at the poles. The features of the basilect are frequently less evident and often dismissed as errors. The mesolect, or mid-range of the creole or pidgin, sound much different when approaching the acrolect and basilect poles. Thus, a creole may be mistaken for a dialect of the contributing languages. The creole may grow to resemble one of its input languages so much that it is decreolized and relabeled a dialect. Without careful linguistic analysis, creoles and pidgins can be difficult to identify.

The word creole also refers to people. The demographic makeup of creole people differs dramatically across the globe. The word has, historically, referred to Europeans born in the Caribbean, mixed-race people of various ethnic makeups across the African and Latin diaspora, indigenous natives, and imported African slaves.

Little ubiquity exists among creoles, pidgins, and extant or honorary creole societies. Nonetheless, the identities of pidgins and creoles and the culture of their language communities and other creole
societies deepen two or more coexisting cultures by uniting them.

**Examples**

Increasingly, creoles and pidgins are recorded and studied. E-mail, text languages, and blogs have opened access to written representations of informal discourse, allowing greater exposure to creoles and pidgins. Features such as spelling, pronunciation, meaning, implication, mood, level, pitch, tone, and frequency of use are considered. Studying a creole or pidgin can uncover clues about geographic expansion.

Hindi and Urdu provide a family of deeply interrelated creoles. At the formal registers, these languages look different, but the creoles merge to form mutually intelligible mesolect mid-ranges. A speaker of one may be functional in many without learning the other creoles. Documented Australian Aboriginal creoles also share mutually intelligible mid-ranges.

The creoles and pidgins of the slave trade have been deeply researched. Including Kiswahili, other existing African trade pidgins, Caribbean creoles, creoles of the American South and South Sea Islands, these creoles and pidgins have long provided a microcosm for viewing language change in pidgins and creoles. African American English, once a distinct creole, decreolized. In form and function, it is now a dialect of Standard American English.

Hawai’i Creole provides significant studies. This language formed the basis for what seminal creolist Derek Bickerton catalogued as the features of creoles. Recent theorists prove, using Hawai’i Creole English, that creoles are far more complicated than Bickerton hypothesized. Cantonese, Portuguese, Japanese, and Filipino pidgin basilects intersected over many generations to form Hawai’i Creole English. The result is an expressive and colorful language. Bickerton offers some examples: “So da guy bin laik daunpeimen bikas i dono mi,” or, “so the guy ant want down payment because he don’t know me.” In Standard American English: “So, the guy wanted a down payment because he didn’t know me.” In another example from Bickerton: “Dis gai hia sed daet hi gon get mai vainil” or “This guy here said that he was going to get my vinyl.”

**Nativization/Creolization**

Full exposure to another language has successfully produced fluent speakers of foreign tongues, and children have even greater potential for language acquisition than adults do. Languages resist pressure from “corruption” quite well. Languages, both formally and informally, protect themselves. Language adaptations, multilingualism, bureaucracies, canonical and popular literatures, language academies, schools, and social pressures all contribute to the preservation of languages. The ability to communicate with others satisfies many profound human needs, so it corresponds that a speaker has deep emotional and psychological associations with his or her native tongue. The speaker will take great pride in his or her language and guard it, fiercely. The vocabulary contains his or her history, and the grammar has ordered his or her thoughts. Speakers are much more likely to integrate or resist a foreign language than to abandon a native one.

Given the natural resistance of languages to erosion, the historical circumstances that produce a vastly shared or long-enduring pidgin or creole must be remarkable. Natural languages generate independent of, or with minimal interference from, other languages. In the case of a pidgin, one language has been dramatically reduced and simplified. At least one other has lost viability for communication. Both collapse under opposing pressures and merge. Pidgins and creoles are languages, but the distinctions

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between these and natural languages reveal profound truths about humanity.

Pidgins do not begin because equally yoked linguists negotiate a common parlance. Intense socio-historical pressures compel a large number of people to acquire new speech. Often, though not always, colonialism generates the context from which pidgins and creoles derive. Although early research on pidgins and creoles examines a broad survey of mother tongues, including other pidgins and creoles, these correspond, frequently, to English, Portuguese, or French target languages. These tongues represent the parlance of power at the genesis of many pidgins.

A pidgin may be a scant jargon or a complicated language. Often, however, reduction and simplification characterize a pidgin in its nascent state. Second-language acquisition need not result in reduction, simplification, or the creation of a pidgin, but it might. The common historical genesis of colonialism for recorded pidgins and creoles spanning Asia, Africa, Australia, the Americas, and islands across the globe, underscores that the target language was often expressed in reduced and simplified forms—jargons, commands, curses, and slang. With only limited exposure to the foreign speech, using intrinsic logic and the patterns of their native language, speakers approximate the target tongue. A comprehensible pidgin emerges.

An emergent pidgin may not allow for full expression, but if sufficient for communication, the pidgin can become the dominant vernacular of a multilingual populous. The pidgin articulates the concepts, attitudes, objects, and actions of a culture of intersection. The words, accents, tones, pronunciations, and phrasings of that emergent tongue contribute to a culturally specific mélange of expression. One society’s pidgin may be more advanced than is the creole of another. Nonetheless, if speakers of the pidgin a second language, by definition cannot employ the pidgin to express an idea, they might use their first languages.

Nativization distinguishes pidgins from creoles. A pidgin may not expand, or need to, during nativization; likewise, it is not prerequisite that a pidgin be standardized before nativizing. A population may be required to shift, parent and child, into a proto-pidgin before it has grammatical patterns, predictable pronunciations, or a fixed vocabulary. However, rearing a child with the pidgin as his or her first language obligates adults and youth to partner, creatively, to name the unnamed. Concepts that would have been expressed in the former mother tongue must be integrated into the pidgin or creole. An intricate and enduring pidgin may never creolize. A pidgin may creolize before it is standardized. The resultant creole is no more a language than the former pidgin; it is, however, unlike the pidgin, the native language of a generation.

Misunderstandings

Deepening understanding in the field of creolistics, the study of pidgins and creoles, corrects many false prejudices about creoles, pidgins, and their speakers. Only recently, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, have linguists conceded that pidgins and creoles are legitimate languages. Labeling a pidgin or creole becomes increasingly difficult as languages evolve.

Languages will borrow, must adapt, and do collide. They change to accommodate full expression and resist external language pressure. Common intuition and multilingual influences blur the distinctions between pidgins, creoles, and the input languages.

Speakers often do not know that their speech patterns constitute a creole language. According to their enduring social reality, they simply failed to acquire the acrolect. The influence of the basilect,
often a marginalized language, will be mistaken for a series of idiosyncratic errors, rather than patterned language choices, and the speaker dismissed as undereducated or unintelligent.

Creole languages and pidgins may be haunted by their function as languages of submission, further hindering their acceptance. Language learners may be encouraged to adopt the mother tongue of oppressed ancestors, royal lineage, or powerful colonialists. Some may argue that the pidgin or creole vocabulary is too limited, or too few outsiders speak the native tongue. In response to scholarly, critical, and political attitudes, the typical language preservation systems, schools, bureaucrats, and writers, among others, correct, mask, deepen, or otherwise legitimize the pidgin or creole.

Pidgins and creoles face the vulnerability of decreolization. Language pressures may, ultimately, encourage speakers to gravitate toward or actively resist the acrolect. A creole may lose the distinctions that give it autonomy as a language.

**Creole People Versus Creole Languages**

Though creole people may or may not speak a creole language, many similarities exist. The term creole, when referring to people, indicates a racial identity, but the demographic referents differ starkly. The creole identity may shift along a continuum; a person may consider himself or herself less creole than others are. Creole people often bear the stigma of colonialist influences, and this history invokes mixed reactions inside and outside the community.

During the exploration of the Americas, the term creole referred to the offspring of Spanish citizens born in the New World. This broadened to encompass all Europeans born there. A noticeable population of biracial slaves emerged in the New World. To differentiate the mixed race slaves from others, the former were dubbed Black creoles. However, not all creole slaves descend from mixed race genealogies. Notably, in the L'Isle de France, as slavery yielded to indentured servitude, native African and locally indigenous slaves were lumped by the term creole to distinguish them from the indentured servants emigrating from India. For many, this definition predominates. Just as creole languages differ vastly, so creole people vary.

Few schools teach creole or pidgin languages. Rarely will societies accept them as standard grammars. As a result, creole language groups splinter into those who master the parlance of power and elevate socially, and those who cannot. The threat of decreolization looms. People of creole cultures must often fight for inclusion and acknowledgement or remain isolated and face extinction. If a creole society defines itself independent of its input cultures, members face charges of snobbery, minstrelsy, and separatism, among others.

Creole or pidgin speakers, creole and pidgin language communities, and creole societies represent the efflorescence of a unique identity. A widely adopted pidgin or creole may become an indispensable resource in nurturing the collective growth of multicultural communities.

**See also**


**Further Readings**


Younge, Jewel Sophia

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