

MICHAEL GIFFIN

## PIDGIN CHICKENS AND CREOLE EGGS



**N**OW AN EMERITUS professor at the University of Hawaii, Derek Bickerton began teaching literature in Ghana; but, finding it difficult overcoming the barriers between British stories and African culture, he returned to Britain in the mid-1960s for re-training. What attracted him to linguistics? In his own words:

For me, the most fascinating things were aspects of my own language that I knew somehow, but knew I had never learned—things that you or I or anyone else wouldn't even know that they knew unless someone pointed them out.

While pursuing this fascination, Bickerton has become involved in a larger debate: nature versus nurture, chicken versus egg, evolution versus intelligent design. His assessment of the primary evidence he's assembled over the decades has allowed him to steer a middle path and avoid becoming hostage to fortune. He's also blazed a few trails and challenged many shibboleths.

By his own admission, Bickerton wasn't suited to desk work and neither was he attracted to stylistics—using linguistics to evaluate literature—since language has too many mysteries that can only be solved through field work. His career has covered two broad research interests that overlap: first, the evolution of creoles, the subject of *Bastard Tongues*; second, the evolution of language itself (the subject of Bickerton's other recent book, *Adam's Tongue*). He's an engaging character with lots of amusing anecdotes. His books are full of infectious enthusiasm, good humour, common sense, candid admissions and sound scholarship.

---

*Bastard Tongues*,  
by Derek Bickerton;  
Hill & Wang, 2009, US\$16.

**C**REOLES ARE NEW languages that spring up, seemingly out of nowhere, whenever people speaking mutually incomprehensible languages are put into contact with one another over long periods. This happened most often when slaves were shipped from Africa to the Caribbean, South America, or islands in the Indian Ocean, where large plantations were established, mostly for sugar cane. In those scenarios, there were language barriers among slaves themselves, as they spoke an unknown number of unrelated West African languages, and there were even greater language barriers between slaves and masters who spoke English, French, Dutch, Portuguese or Spanish. If the plantation system was to work, a way to communicate had to be found.

As immigrants did elsewhere, why didn't slaves learn the ruling language of their new country? Until relatively recently, there was an unfortunate belief that slaves couldn't get their heads or mouths around the intricate subtleties of European languages; linguists should have known better, though, since African languages have as many intricate subtleties as European languages.

Once there were three competing theories about how creoles evolved. *Superstrate theory* regarded creoles as deviant dialects of whichever European language had been dominant in time and place. *Substrate theory* noticed that grammatical structures among creoles didn't look like European languages but did look like West African languages with European words. *Monogenesis theory* suggested the grammar of creoles, which evolved thousands of miles apart, were similar and therefore must be related. As most people, including many linguists, regarded creoles as the blind groping of primitive minds, the sophistication of creoles was long unrecognised. Wherever they were spoken, educators made war on them. Bickerton had to discover what was wrong with traditional assumptions about creoles; some of which he once held himself.

Bickerton's journey into the grammar of creoles, and how they differ from the grammar of English, began with a four-year assignment in Guyana. His first challenge was confronting the broad variety in Guyanese Creole. In an introductory linguistics class he gave twenty students an English phrase beginning with "I was sitting ..." which they translated it into thirteen different sociolects. In a nation of less than one million people, sandwiched into a strip of coastline about two hundred miles long and seldom more than ten miles wide, how could there be so much variation? Assuming creoles after emancipation followed a trajectory of social mobility, he hypothesised that the sociolects further away from English were older and the sociolects closer to English were newer. This hypothesis was so attractive it took him a long time to find out what was wrong with it.

To determine the full range of variation, before sorting it into some kind of meaningful order, Bickerton had to get out of the classroom and into the field with a tape recorder. The more data he gathered, the more he discovered that, while creoles look simple—they use a smaller inventory of items compared with older languages—they have to work harder, and they put more weight on syntactic structures than on words within those structures. Also, his study of the article and tense systems in Guyanese Creole revealed it to be more complex, and more logical, than English, and equally capable of handling scientific or philosophical concepts.

Although Bickerton had a long way to go before he understood the full range of variation in Guyanese Creole, his interests were shifting towards how creoles evolved. Since he didn't accept the superstrate and monogenesis theories, he wanted to explore the substrate theory further, which meant returning to Britain and poring over as many books of African grammar as he could find. At the same time, he also realised that a creolist with one creole is like a bird with one wing. The struggle between his antipathy for desk work and love of field work meant the next stage of his journey wasn't to return to Britain but to search for creoles in Latin America; the one place creoles weren't supposed to exist.

This was because, according to conventional wisdom, race relations had been much healthier in Latin America than elsewhere in the Americas; blacks had been absorbed into the general population; no race distinction meant no linguistic distinction; therefore, it was thought the descendants of African slaves should speak the same kind of Spanish as descendants of free white immigrants from Spain. Bickerton tested this dubious

theory among the Palenqueros, the descendants of slaves in Colombia. He discovered that Palenquero Creole wasn't closer to Spanish, or any European language, and had some unique traits, even among creoles, traceable to some languages in the Congo basin, where many of the original speakers of Palenquero came from.

His study of Palenquero Creole built on his study of Guyanese Creole and gave him confidence as a creolist and a linguist. His research was contradicting the myth that creoles are random jumbles of words. Creoles have grammars that are often stricter and more regular than European languages. Tense or aspect are indicated by a particle that goes in front of the verb, a state of affairs that follows naturally from the process through which

*His study of the article and tense systems in Guyanese Creole revealed it to be more complex, and more logical, than English.*

creoles are born. When speakers of many different languages are brought into contact with one another, communication is reduced to a minimum, anything not essential for communication is stripped off, including inflections that express things like tense, aspect, number (singular versus plural) and person; it's much easier, at first contact, to use invariant pronouns and verbs than try to remember all those bits at the ends of words. People have an inbuilt need to indicate when actions happened, or

might happen, and whether you're talking about something that repeated itself, or was a background condition, or just happened once. All creoles have some kind of system of pre-verbal particles to take the place of end-of-verb inflections.

THE NEXT STAGE of Bickerton's journey was to find a creole that had been out of contact with its dominant language almost since birth, or one formed so recently that traces of its birth pangs were still accessible, or preferably both. After an unhappy sojourn back in Britain, he moved to Hawaii, where there was a linguistic continuum similar to that of Guyana. As in Guyana, there was a creole at one end, which differed radically from English, a dialect at the other end, which differed little from English, and a whole range of intermediate dialects. Also, since a large segment of the population hadn't been born in Hawaii, but had immigrated since the late nineteenth century, mainly as waves of indentured labour for the sugar plantations—from China, Madeira, the Azores, Japan, Korea, Puerto Rico, Norway, Germany, Russia and the Philippines—the pidgin spoken before Hawaiian Creole evolved may also still be there. (To confuse this issue, Bickerton reminds us that Hawaiian Creole is universally but wrongly referred to as a pidgin.)

In Hawaii, Bickerton discovered Hawaiian Creole was like Guyanese Creole in many striking ways. The

further you got from the cities, and the lower you went down the social scale, the more un-English speech became; the deepest Hawaiian Creole was spoken by the working classes in rural areas. It wasn't as deep—as different from English—as Guyanese Creole, but the overall similarities between the two creoles were still striking; for example, in the tense and articles systems, and in the different but equivalent forms of the English verb “to be”: one before nouns, another before locative expressions, and another before adjectives. How to explain these?

When linguists find resemblances, their immediate reaction is to assume some kind of genetic relationship. Sometimes the assumption is true. The Spanish *dos*, French *deux*, Portuguese *duas/does*, Italian *due*, Romanian *doi* have a common ancestry in Latin, one of the primary languages of the Roman empire, and we know Spanish and Portuguese were exported to the colonies. The Tongan *fefine*, Samoan *fafine*, Tahitian *vahine*, and Maori and Hawaiian *wahine* have a common ancestry, and we know the Polynesian Triangle was settled by the same people. Assumptions about migration are now tested by DNA; before DNA, migrations were figured out from language alone. But does the assumption of a genetic relationship apply to creoles?

Before Bickerton's arrival, other linguists had hypothesised that Hawaiian Creole was one of the creoles related to English, transplanted from the Atlantic to the middle of the Pacific. He could see two things wrong with this hypothesis; first, the similarities were based on words rather than grammar, and the grammatical resemblances among these creoles had never been studied; second, there was no plausible means of transmission. Everyone knew how Portuguese got to Brazil, and English got to India, but how could any of the Atlantic creoles have reached Hawaii, since slaves were never transported to Hawaii, and the myth of sailors transmitting a “nautical jargon” around the world had long been discredited. There had to be an alternative explanation, but what was it? The answer would be found through more field work; through formal and informal interviews.

The best field work was accomplished through informal interviews, often with a tape recorder left running for long periods; occasionally the interviewees forgot it was there. In Hawaii, local creole speakers are capable of a wide range of registers, which they slip in and out of, according to their social setting. Bickerton was fascinated to discover how this worked. Once, while he was interviewing five men, he left the room. On listening to the tape later, he heard the creole get deeper as soon as he left the room, and shallower when he returned. From the tape, he could actually measure the amount the creole changed by the percentages of dis-

tinctively non-English forms in the men's speech. Even the types of their grammatical structures were affected. While he was absent, the five men didn't produce a single relative clause, as they talked among themselves, but they produced three relative clauses within five minutes of his return. The mechanism here was pretty obvious to him. You use relative clauses to describe things you don't think the hearer will readily identify. These five men worked together, hunted together, and had been buddies since high school; they didn't need signposts when they talked with one another. They felt Bickerton, the white outsider, did.

**T**HE NEXT STAGE of Bickerton's journey, analysing the relationship between pidgins and creoles, is truly riveting. The conventional wisdom about pidgins held them to be reductions of a dominant language, stripped of its complexities, turned into a means of communication that can be quickly learned to keep society functioning. The formal term for this process was “second-language learning with inadequate input”. Bickerton clung to this wisdom for several years, because it provided a neat contrast with his definition of creolisation as “first-language learning with inadequate input”. His data were telling him a very different story, though, and it took him a long time to piece that story together.

It was becoming clear to him that a pidgin-speaking plantation workforce weren't trying to learn English and failing at it. Most were simply trying to communicate with whatever scraps of whatever language they'd managed to pick up. Their understanding of English was robust and they weren't “reducing” English in order to use it. Intriguingly, too, the older the immigrant, the more Hawaiian words they used, and often these were simplified Hawaiian words that differed from standard Hawaiian words.

The question had to be asked: If native Hawaiians made up only a tiny fraction of the plantation workforce, and if the plantations were owned and controlled by white people, why did the native Hawaiian language provide almost the entire technical vocabulary for the sugar industry? Also, there were other ways in which pidgin in Hawaii wasn't acting as a well-behaved pidgin should. It hadn't stabilised—developed some kind of simple but regular structure—making it harder to see how Hawaiian Creole evolved from it.

Bickerton discovered one of the most intriguing things about the pidgin-creole interface in Hawaii, when he first listened to creole-speaking adults talking to their immigrant parents. To make those parents understand them, they had to re-pidginise their creole. This left him flabbergasted, because it's the exact opposite of what's supposed to happen in the acquisition of language. Under normal circumstances, children are

supposed to learn language from their parents. There's even a special kind of talk, called "motherese", which mothers and fathers and caregivers use when talking to their children—a radically simplified, heavily accented, slowly enunciated, often repetitive version of the mother tongue. Some researchers, but not Bickerton, even claimed that without motherese children couldn't learn language. But here were children talking motherese to their parents; and in some cases the parents seemed to be learning.

To explain this phenomenon, Bickerton gives us a little history. Around 1930, during the Great Depression, the steady waves of contract labour migrating to the sugar plantations came to a halt and immigration on a smaller scale didn't resume until after the Second World War. By that time, most of Hawaii's residents were locally-born creole speakers, so new immigrants acquired the local language, well or badly, just as they would have done anywhere else. But until 1920 or so, creole speakers—the native born—had been a minority, consisting mostly of children and adolescents. It was only after this date that the number of creole-speaking adults really took off; and an interesting correlation emerged here. All the immigrants in Bickerton's sample who had arrived before 1920 spoke a kind of pidgin that was highly variable, mother-tongue influenced, and extremely basic. They couldn't speak anything else, apart from their native tongue. But among those who came after 1920—at a time when they could get ready access to creole speakers of their own age—were some whose pidgin was getting closer to the creole. In other words, when they were fully exposed to creole they began to learn it.

From the fact that locally born adults spoke creole, while their immigrant parents spoke pidgin, it was obvious the creole could only have been created by those adults when they were children. How? Under normal circumstances, children reproduce, with subtle differences, what their parents speak. Children in Hawaii went far beyond their parents' language, taking from their input only a stock of words and ways of pronouncing them, creating a grammar almost from nothing. On top of which, the grammar they created wasn't just any old grammar. It was a grammar that, if not quite identical to the one Bickerton found in Guyana, con-

tained far more similarities than anyone could have expected. Those similarities were not, by any stretch of the imagination, a result of the fact that English was the major supplier of words for both languages. The most striking similarities between Guyanese Creole and Hawaiian Creole were in the things they didn't share with English.

How could grammars so similar, and so different from the grammars of the languages around their birth, come into existence in so many different parts of the world? Until relatively recently, linguists held as an article of faith that children were born *tabulae rasae*; language was a cultural construct learned from scratch. Then Chomsky claimed language formed part of human biology; the fundamental principles of language were latent in the brains of all normal infants; each child must be born with a language acquisition device, a mechanism that enabled children to learn any language they were exposed to.

*How could grammars so similar, and so different from the grammars of the languages around their birth, come into existence in so many different parts of the world?*

Bickerton took a middle path. Language was an interaction of biology and environment. He presented this idea at a creole conference in 1975, whereupon it was rejected by everyone in creole studies; partly because his idea was misunderstood, since he hadn't explained it as well as he should have; partly because it was linked with Chomsky, whose biological claim was, and still is, contested among linguists and creolists.

At this stage, we're still only halfway through Bickerton's journey into the evolution of creoles. The remaining chapters in *Bastard Tongues* complete the story of the creole half of his career. One chapter describes an amazing experiment, which never got off the ground, to bring speakers of six different languages together, on a deserted island, with their children, for several years, to see how they communicated with each other. The other chapters describe his research comparing the grammatical similarities among the creoles of Hawaii, Latin America, South America and the Indian Ocean.

Bickerton ends *Bastard Tongues* by admitting creoles aren't really bastard tongues after all. They're the purest expression we know of the human capacity for language.

*Michael Giffin will discuss Derek Bickerton's latest book, Adam's Tongue, in the November issue.*