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African Diaspora Since 1808
May 13, 2024

Linguistics and Language in the African Diaspora

The African Diaspora is rich and varied, with descendants across the world in different continents and countries. The rich and varied cultures within the diaspora can show both the variations and the continuities that have been created over time as people interacted with one another and evolved socially and intellectually. There are many distinct aspects that one can look at when trying to dissect the culture of the diaspora, including but not limited to art, music, and literature. However, rather than any of these, this essay seeks to explore the African Diaspora through the lens of linguistics and spoken language. This essay seeks to explore how language is connected to culture and identity, and how language has been used as a tool both by colonial powers and the African diaspora in creating those cultures and identities.

A contact language is any language that is created through the contact of two or more existing languages. English itself is a contact language, having been formed as an amalgamation of many different languages over the course of hundreds of years of human history, being affected by things like the Norman invasions and the Renaissance. Over time, it has collected new grammatical features and lexicon from the different languages it interacts with. During the time of European imperialism and conquest, English, as well as the languages of other European empires like French, Spanish, and Portuguese, began to spread around the world, both modifying and expanding the reach of these languages, but also giving birth to many new contact languages.

There are two specific types of contact languages which are often used to classify those languages created during the era of imperialism: pidgins and creole languages. Pidgins are non-

native languages, and their grammar and lexicon are not fully developed, meaning that they only have a limited range of expression. A pidgin is typically a precursor to a fully-fledged creole language, used for the purpose of communication between two groups of people who speak different languages. For example, it was often used by those enslaved peoples brought over to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Not only were enslaved Africans unable to understand their captors, but they often were also unable to understand each other, having been captured and brought together from across many different ethnic groups and regions. When they were immersed into this new society, enslaved Africans had to quickly learn new ways of communication, often without much if any formal instruction. Therefore, the vocabulary and lexicon of the enslavers was learned, but they often retained the grammars of their original African languages. It was only once this first generation began to have their own children who were raised hearing both this Pidgin language and the standard language of the European population that the grammar of the enslaved started to assimilate and become more like the standard, often leading to new developing dialects, such as AAVE in the United States.

While pidgins are typically the step before a fully creolized language, there are some instances where pidgins are spoken regularly. For example, in Nigeria, an extended pidgin language succinctly named “Nigerian Pidgin” containing a primarily English lexicon is widely used as a *lingua franca* and only growing in popularity (Velupillai 21). Most often, like in the case of Nigerian Pidgin, pidgin languages are used out of convenience for the sake of communication, but there are some cases where a pidgin is maintained for specific social and political reasons. One specific case study of this is that of Français Tirailleur, also known as *petit nègre*, a pidgin language that was spoken between Black African soldiers recruited to the French army and their white superior officers. It was a simplified version of French which removed or

reduced much of the grammar rules. In fact, some educationalists and linguists believed that these types of reduced French languages should be taught to all of the “natives” in French colonies, so as to make it easier to teach and spread the language to large swaths of people in a short amount of time (Schmidt-Brucken et al. 105). The origins of Français Tirailleur are often debated. The first of the two most popular views is that the pidgin language came about solely at the hands of native Africans. As stated by Maurice Delafosse, an ethnographer and French Colonial official, “it is truly the Negro – or, more generally speaking, the primitive – who has forged petit-nègre, by adapting French to his state of mind” (Schmidt-Brücken et al. 106). However, a number of sources state that Français Tirailleur was taught purposefully to the African soldiers (Schmidt-Brücken et al. 107). It is likely that the pidgin language came about as a combination between these two opposite views. However, no matter its origin, it still served as a form of control that the French exercised over African soldiers. By only using this specific pidgin language with them, they withheld useful knowledge and limited their methods and circles of communication in Europe. Furthermore, by teaching them a reduced or incomplete form of the French language, they created an excuse to denigrate Africans and think of them as lower or less intelligent. As stated by Brent Hayes Edwards, it was a “simplified, deformed version of French that the military codified and deliberately taught to African soldiers as they came to fight in Europe, as a means both to infantilize them and to control their modes of interaction with their mainly white French commanding officers” (52) In this way, Français Tirailleur was used as a tool to marginalize and control Africans and Black French recruits. Rather than giving them the ability to fully express themselves through language, they forced them to speak only in the limited grammar of this pidgin language.

Creole languages, on the other hand, are fully formed languages which can be used to express and communicate anything. Typically, a creole is created in multicultural societies, with the lexicon being that of the superstrate group or that group which is dominant in the social hierarchy and the grammar being that of the substrate group, those who are lower in the social hierarchy. This is how languages like Krio in Sierra Leone, Palanquero in Colombia, or Haitian creole were created. A specific case study can be found in the Gullah or Geechee language. The Gullah or Geechee language is an English based creole language that originated on rice plantations on the Southeastern coast of the United States, from southern North Carolina to Northern Florida (Oancea 81). It is primarily a mix of English and West African languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Twi, Efik, and Wolof (Oancea 83). Creoles are not only a development of cultural mixing, but they often are important for creating in-groups and can help to retain cultural aspects in a new environment. For example, many speakers of the language are multilingual and also speak English, but they speak Gullah while speaking with others within Gullah communities. In fact, many Gullah people have their own “basket names,” names derived from the Gullah language which are only used among other Gullah people (Campbell 80). Furthermore, many of these “basket names” are also derived from African lexicon as well (Campbell 79). While the language had heavy English influence in its lexicon, there were still many African loanwords, and Africanisms run rampant in the grammar of the language as well.

Sometimes, however, rather than a creole language having the lexicon of the superstrate group and the grammar of the substrate group, the inverse will occur, creating an anti-creole language, like Cupopia, an extremely rare Afro-Brazilian dialect spoken by descendants of two Brazilian-born slaves who inherited their owners’ properties in the 1880s (Lopez & Jon-And, 76). These are much rarer, but still occur. A similar phenomenon occurs with Calunga, an Afro-

Brazilian Creole that is spoken in and around Patrocínio, Minas Gerais. The language was “utilized by Africans and Afro-descendants so that they would not be understood by people with authority over them... Calunga represents an ethnolinguistic speech community that has maintained its Afro Brazilian speech as a form of intragroup cryptolect” (Byrd 103). Outside of this fact, it is not known exactly why the roles of the lexicon and the grammar become inverted in an anti-creole language.

Though touched on briefly in previous sections regarding the specific status of creole and pidgin languages, there is still the fact that language served as a fundamental tool in the age of colonization and the African diaspora. For European colonizers, language served as an aspect which they could control and use to enforce their social norms on enslaved Africans. However, language also became a large part of resistance for those in the African diaspora. It also became an essential part of the reformation and continuity of diasporic cultures.

In the Americas, specifically the United States, language became both a tool of colonization as well as an integral part of Black identity. Of course, being thrust into a new place after a long and brutal trip across the Atlantic was highly traumatic for enslaved Africans. But furthermore, they were then stripped of their language for the sake of their own survival in this new hierarchy, and their culture along with it. Though physical force was an important aspect of chattel slavery, the mental and emotional subordination of Black people was also important to maintain the social order, and language was one of the “most effective means of communicating social and political organization... Language is indispensable to social order” (Gomez 170). The use of the English language and the erasing of enslaved Africans’ native languages in new world societies served to cut them off from their cultural identities and assimilated them into the bottom of the new social order. Of course, African people spoke their own languages whenever

possible. However, because of the need to speak to the white English-speaking slave masters as well as African peoples of many different ethnic origins, English became the go-to language for communication. However, rather than speaking “white folk’s English” (Gomez, 172), they retained some of the grammar from their original African tongues, creating a pidgin language which later evolved into what is now known as the AAVE dialect. This did not only occur in the United States, but in many other New World colonies as well, such that “everywhere European languages were heard spoken through African modulations and tonalities” (Gomez, 172). This specific way of speaking the English language was not only a form of African cultural continuity in the new world, but it was also a way of creating a cultural in-group, which expanded to include not just specific African ethnic groups, but Black people in the new world as a whole. The evolution of language both as a tool of oppression but also as a form of resistance helped to encourage the creation of a new Black identity.

Not only was there the creation of this new dialect which signified members of this new cultural in-group, but there was also the creation of new creole languages. The Gullah or Geechee language on the Southeastern coast of the United States still exists in the modern day and was used as a way for those enslaved peoples working on rice plantations to communicate with each other without the oversight of the white slave masters. Similarly, Haitian creole was instrumental in the Haitian Revolution, being a way for enslaved Haitian people to communicate with each other and across plantations to organize without alerting their French colonizers. As much as language can be used as a tool by Europeans, it can also be used by those Africans in the diaspora as a weapon of resistance and change.

Language has also been used as a tool of neo-colonialism during the modern day in the African continent. After the age of imperialism and colonization, English (and to a lesser extent

French, Spanish, and Portuguese) became global languages, spoken around the globe because of the vast areas around the world that European countries had colonized and controlled. Even after decolonization, European colonization has left scars which are still evident in the economies and societies of colonized nations, and language is no different. Despite countries in the African Continent no longer being subject to colonial rule by European continents, many have adopted the European language of their former colonizers as an official language, used in many important spheres like government and foreign policy, education, science, technology, media, and industry. This is in spite of the fact that many of these European languages are still being spoken by a minority of peoples in African countries. In fact, many African governments have maintained the same language policies that were introduced during colonization, despite the problematic nature of these policies. Maintaining these European languages as official languages in African countries brings about issues like educational underdevelopment (in that only those who speak the European language can become fully educated), language-related ethnic conflict and discrimination, and the possibility of linguistic alienation or cultural decay and death in affected countries. In this way, “African countries are today linguistically dependent on Western Europe from which they declare themselves to be politically independent” (Pütz, 1).

While citizens of many African nations view European languages in a negative light due to their connections with colonialism, there are a few exceptions. South Africa is an interesting case, with the Dutch rather than the English being the first to colonize the nation. English was introduced in the late 18th century, and only became the official language of the region in 1822 (Crystal, 43). Afrikaans, the Afro-Dutch contact language, became a symbol of status and class and was often spoken by most whites, including those who were in power in the apartheid system (Crystal, 45). Meanwhile English, while a minority language, was often used by

'coloreds' and Indian immigrants in South Africa, and an English variety was often spoken by native Africans as well. English also became important for communication across national boundaries and helped to connect diasporic communities in South Africa with other diasporic communities across the world (Crystal 45). Therefore, the languages had inverse social statuses applied to them, as "Afrikaans came to be perceived by the Black majority as the language of authority and repression [and] English was perceived by the Afrikaner government as the language of protest and self-determination" (Crystal 45). Of course, there are still complications with the use of English in South Africa, since English is important as a mode of national communication for white authorities, and different dialects and accents are increasingly being used to discriminate against certain groups rather than the language itself (Crystal 45). Either way, despite its status as a European language, English was still adopted and used as an important symbol of cultural and social status in South Africa, even if it was not a symbol in the same way as it was in other colonized African nations.

To conclude, language is an integral part of the social structure, and it has played a key role as both a tool of colonization and in the creation of Black identities across the diaspora. From the use of pidgin languages to marginalize Black soldiers, to the forced African language speakers into using English as a tactic of cultural assimilation, to the maintenance of European languages as an official language in post-colonial Africa, language has been used throughout history as an oppressive force in the African Diaspora. However, language has also been a major part in the creation of new Diasporic identities, from the use of English in South Africa to the creation and use of new Creoles and Dialects which passed down African cultural identities to new generations across the Atlantic. Language is constantly growing and changing, but it also has a way of retaining information, which can be seen in the many continuities from African

languages which are found in different pidgins, creoles, and dialects across the world. However, language's greatest feat is its ability to connect people and bring them together. Despite the circumstances of the globalization of many European languages, they have also become an essential part of connecting the world, including those peoples in the African diaspora.

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