

Coexpression pattern of existential and possessive predication in creole languages

Bickerton (1981:61ff., 216) states that the polysemy or coexpression pattern of existential and possessive predication in creoles as in examples (1-2) cannot be traced back to the creoles' ancestor languages, but should be understood as an innate structure unfolding during creolization processes, and therefore should apply potentially to *all* creoles. (The (a)-examples express possessive predication, whereas the (b)-examples express existential predication.)

(1) Jamaican (Farqharson 2013)

(a) *Jan gat wah haas.*
John have a horse
'John has a horse.'

(b) *Yu gat som pikni we brok bad.*
2SG have some child REL break bad
'There are some children who are spoilt.'

(2) Cape Verdean Creole of Brava (Baptista 2013)

(a) *Mi'N ten des fidju.*
me.I have ten child
'I have ten children.'

(b) *Ten djent ki ta faze.*
have people who HAB do
'There are people who do it.'

Creole data from *APiCS* (Michaelis et al. 2013) seem to support Bickerton's view: Chapter 78 ("Existential verb and transitive possession verb"; Michaelis & APiCS Consortium 2013) shows that a majority of creoles world-wide, with different lexical bases and different substrate languages, feature the coexpression of a transitive possession verb ('have') and the existential verb construction ('there is X').

Indeed, the European lexifiers do not display such a coexpression pattern (English *she has* vs. *there is*, Portuguese *tem* vs. *há* etc.), except for French *il a* vs. *il y a* (lit. 'it there has') (even though the presence of a locational pronominal element *y* could speak against a coexpression pattern in French; see Creissels 2019).

As for the substrate languages, the picture is much more complex (Creissels 2019; Koch 2012; Stassen 2005/2013). Several important substrates, such as Igbo, Yoruba, Akan, and Wolof show the coexpression between an existential verb and a transitive possession verb 'have', too. Thus, the pattern in Cape Verdean Creole could be attributed to its major substrate language Wolof.

But other important substrates of the Kwa and Bantu group do not show a transitive 'have' possession verb to begin with, and yet the creoles with such a substrate input do show the coexpression pattern with the transitive 'have' verb (e.g. Vincentian Creole, Negerhollands, Mauritian Creole). Bantu substrates (for instance Swahili) feature a predicative possession construction based on a comitative construction: 'She is with a book' = 'She has a book' (cf. *APiCS* Feature 77, Predicative possession). Interestingly, such constructions, too, can coexpress existential predication, as illustrated in example (3):

(3) Swahili (Creissels 2019:7)

Kisima-ni m na maji

cl7.well-loc CL18 with CL16.water

‘There is water in the well.’ (Lit. ‘at-the-well there (is) with water’)

Therefore, even though such substrates do not rely on transitive possession (‘have’) verbs, they nevertheless coexpress possessive and existential predication. Thus, one could argue that creole languages with East Bantu substrates continue their abstract substrate coexpression patterns in the same way as Cape Verdean Creole continues the Wolof pattern, but here with more expressive and transparent ‘have’-constructions (see Heine 1997 and Kuteva et al. 2019 for the grammaticalization/coexpression path from HAVE-POSSESSION > EXISTENTIAL), as a result of their social ecologies of mainly adult second language creators in which extra transparency of the message is key.

References

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