# The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures/The Survey of Pidgin and Creole Languages

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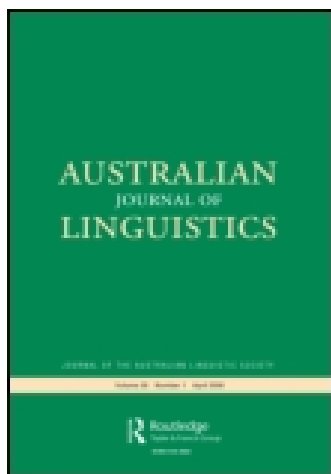
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# The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures/The Survey of Pidgin and Creole Languages

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**The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures**
Susanne Maria Michaelis, Philippe Maurer, Martin Haspelmath, Magnus Huber and Melanie Revis
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xlviii + 522 pp.

**The Survey of Pidgin and Creole Languages**
Susanne Maria Michaelis, Philippe Maurer, Martin Haspelmath, Magnus Huber and Melanie Revis
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, Volume I: xxiii + 299 pp., Volume II: xxii + 285 pp., Volume III: xxi + 176 pp.
Reviewed by Joshua Nash, *University of Adelaide*

Since the late nineteenth century, the main theoretical question in creolistics has been to what extent pidgins and creoles are merely reduced forms of another, usually European, language, due to inadequate exposure, or whether they derive grammatically from other, usually non-European, languages re-lexified with European vocabulary. From around 1930 to 1980 it was generally accepted that creoles necessarily derive from a pidginized form of a European language. More recently there have been other ideas, including that contact languages closely represent the innate human capacity for language. A somewhat related and currently controversial matter is whether creoles are typologically different from other languages. This typological concern is the focus of the *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (*APiCS*) and the *Survey of Pidgin and Creole Languages*.

There have been several recent atlases examining relations between language structures and language geography and history: *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (*WALS*) (Haspelmath *et al.* 2005), Wurm *et al.*'s (1996) *Atlas of Languages of Intercultural Communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas* and now the *APiCS*. This last book provides creolists, typologists, historical linguists and dialectologists interested in pidgins and creoles with large amounts of synchronic data and 130 colour maps of linguistic features.

The *APiCS* examines 130 features in 76 contact languages. The *Survey* includes a grammatical sketch of all 76 languages, while the maps in the *APiCS* show the distribution of different values of the 130 features. What these books do not provide, however, and this is where they suffer, is much of theoretical consequence or contention. Nevertheless, they provide a substantial body of information which those concerned with theories of creolization will not be able to ignore, and they will become the most important publications to date for anyone concerned with how pidgins and creoles came into existence and how they relate to linguistic theories in general. Contact language scholars have been overly ready to make unwarranted theoretical claims and conclusions, often based on inadequate amounts of data. They have typically merely referred to a handful of languages which supported their ideas. The *APiCS* and *Survey* provide a body of data which should minimize these practices in future theoretical work in creolistics.

The theoretical justification for presenting the feature analysis of the selected languages is based on the assumption that the combination of features typical of many pidgins and creoles is rare in other languages. This seems to suggest that pidgins and creoles evolved in ways which differ from other languages, which conflicts with the theoretical position adopted by some of the best-known creolists, such as Chaudenson, DeGraff and Mufwene. Creolists will now have relevant data on far more contact languages than before and can now conduct better-informed research.

The *APiCS* and the language surveys (Volume I: *English-based and Dutch-based Languages,* Volume II: *Portuguese-based, Spanish-based, and French-based Languages,* Volume III: *Contact Languages Based on Languages from Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Americas*) present for the first time a comprehensive cartographic survey and sociohistorical and grammatical summary of the features of the selected contact languages. The languages and features chosen are based in and expand on previous comparative studies in creole syntax, typological surveys (e.g. the *WALS*) and interpretations of well-known and lesser-known pidgins, creoles, mixed languages and minority vernaculars.

The *Survey* chapters are divided into sections, such as an introduction (where the language's historical, political and demographic status and background are presented), 'Sociohistorical background', 'Sociolinguistic situation', 'Noun phrase', 'Verb phrase', 'Phonology' and 'Lexicon'; there is often also a 'Glossed text'. A list of quoted and cited references and other relevant references completes each chapter. For many of the languages this is the first time these references and linguistic data have been made available to the English reader. Each chapter of the *Survey* includes a map along with language biodata (lexifiers, substratum languages, other influencing languages, speaker numbers and official language(s) of the country where the language is spoken); these situate the language geographically and linguistically.

The conceptual background of the work is stated in the *APiCS* (p. xxx):

> To be able to address general questions about the nature and origin of contact languages, a broad comparative perspective is crucial. The languages need to be compared with their source languages (lexifiers, substrates, as well as other languages that have played a role in their history), but they also need to be compared with each other.

This methodology seems to anticipate the outcomes of the project; the 'need' for a comparative method considering 130 features will inevitably lead to some geographical and linguistic patterns and trends relevant to (contact) linguistics, no matter which languages or geographical areas are chosen. The *APiCS* project assumes (1) that the chosen languages in principle are congruous and can be compared *because* they are contact languages, and (2) that linguistic typology is clear on and provides adequate tools for determining and defining what counts as the same language (across time or otherwise). For example, the conclusions arising from comparing synchronic data from minority (contact) languages with few speakers

(e.g. Norf'k with at most 800 speakers) or no full speakers (e.g. Chinese Pidgin Russian) with data from nationalized languages like Haitian Creole (approximately 11 million speakers) and Tok Pisin (between approximately three and five million speakers) without considering the history of these features should be treated with caution.

The insufficient attention to time depth in the *APiCS* and *Survey* results in linguistic descriptions and representations of the selected features based on modern versions of the languages, unless they are no longer spoken. While this is largely unavoidable, because for most of the languages there is little or no data available on their earlier stages, it has serious implications for how historically better-documented languages such as Tok Pisin (*Survey* Volume I, Chapter 21), Bislama (*Survey* Volume I, Chapter 22), Jamaican (*Survey* Volume I, Chapter 8) and Seychelles Creole (*Survey* Volume II, Chapter 26) are and could be typologically assessed across time.

As the editors admit, 'In choosing the languages, we were confronted with the problem that while there is a vibrant field of pidgin and creole language studies, there are no commonly agreed criteria by which the category of creoles and pidgins can be readily delimited' (*APiCS*, p. xxxiii). Until this is clearly established within contact language typology, the results and expected contribution of such large typological projects and data gathering undertakings to linguistic typology in general should be questioned. These projects present large amounts of data, after which further analytical work should arrive at well-established theoretical statements. This is more so when what is presented is maps and abstract structures of languages (i.e. an enormously large data gathering and presentation programme) rather than anything of theoretical import: 'Our main goal with this work (the *Atlas* and the *Survey*) has been to provide a new systematic and solid factual basis on which future work can build, not to engage in theoretical or ideological debates' (*APiCS*, p. xxxv). As Michaelis et al. acknowledge to an extent, no choice of languages, choice of features or approach to linguistics can be value-neutral, nor indeed can any linguist's practice be so; stating the ideological reasoning for the choice of languages and features could (and should) have led to a clearer understanding of why these languages and features were employed.

The *Survey* chapters provide ample information, examples and references, many compiled in such an expansive manner for the first time in English. Good quality brief descriptions of individual pidgins and creoles are extremely rare, and so this information should lead to and encourage more historical research on and empirical analyses of the presented languages. Around 90 of the 130 *APiCS* features appear in the *WALS*, about the same number as in Holm and Patrick's (2007) comparative creole syntax. While features involving word order, nominal categories, nominal syntax, verbal categories, argument marking, clausal syntax, complex sentences, negation, questions, focusing, lexicon and phonology can easily be applied to pidgins and creoles, I would have liked to have seen some less conventional typological features, and more features, chosen to reflect the eclectic nature of pidgins and creoles, e.g. the extent of nominal and adjectival reduplication, vowel length and

elements of contact language spatial grammar. These features could have replaced several peculiar yet supposedly idiosyncratic pidgin and creole lexical features (Section 113 'finger' and 'toe', Section 114 'body hair' and 'feather' and Section 115 'hear' and 'smell').

Several errors are also present in the volumes, two of which I mention here: there is a discrepancy between the number of languages claimed to be analyzed in the *Atlas* (76) and the number listed on its dust cover (75); the authors of the Kriol and Gurundji Kriol chapters claim English is the official language of Australia, which it is not. Mainland Australia does not have an official language. Norf'k and English are both official on Norfolk Island.

The *APiCS* and the *Survey* have created the largest body of data ever assembled on contact languages. I believe that this is their major achievement, which will form the basis for years to come for theoretical and ideological sojourns into pidgin and creole linguistics. However, they do not provide any conclusions or inferences about what this mass of data may mean. It is left up to the reader to anticipate future work based on the features presented in the *APiCS* and the historical information contained in the *Survey* volumes. After all, the *APiCS* is a comparative project, which one might have hoped would have led to some comparative work rather than just comparative presentation. Certain directions and directives in the introduction to the *APiCS* would also have been helpful; an outline of relevant historical and theoretical debates in contact linguistics would have provided the less-informed reader in this subject with a basic understanding of the development of the field up to the present. These would have better placed the impressive body of data within the very field of which it was presenting an empirical summary.

## References

Haspelmath M, M Dryer, D Gil & B Comrie (eds) 2005 *The World Atlas of Linguistic Structures* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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