

The emergence of pronominal systems: the case of the Gulf of Guinea creoles

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The settlement of the Gulf of Guinea islands by populations speaking Portuguese and African languages from the Benue-Congo family, such as Edo and Kongo, in a context of enslavement, led to the formation of a contact language on the island of São Tomé in the late 15th century. Its subsequent diffusion in time and space gave rise to the Gulf of Guinea creoles (GGCs), a young genetic unit comprising Angolar, Fa d'Ambô, Forro, Lung'le (e.g., Bandeira 2017; Ferraz 1979; Hagemeijer 2011).

While the pronominal systems of these languages have been described to some degree (Ferraz 1979; Hagemeijer 2007; Hagemeijer et al. 2020; Maurer 1995, 2009), a systematic comparison is still lacking. This presentation aims to fill this gap, exploring how new pronominal systems emerge and evolve in contact situations between typologically distinct languages (cf. Siegel 2008). The means to this end will be the reconstruction of the pronominal system of the protolanguage using the contemporary languages and the earliest descriptions from the late 19th century (Negreiros 1895; Ribeiro 1888; Schuchardt 1882, 1888, 1889; Vila 1891) as a tool.

Based on the proposed reconstruction, it will be argued that the subject, object, oblique, and independent pronouns for each person and number are derived from a single pronominal form (excluding rare cases of non-cognate forms). These forms are usually Portuguese pronouns (e.g., 1sg */(a)mi/ < Ptg. *(a) mim*; 3sg */eli/ < Ptg. *ele*) but sometimes substrate-related forms (e.g., 3pl */inã/ < Edo [iṣ̣ã]; impersonal/anaphoric */a/ < Edo [a]) and in one case a hybrid pronoun. The results shed new light on unsolved etymologies and historical changes that occurred in the Portuguese pronominal system, in particular regarding the second person (e.g., Lara-Bermejo 2024).

The choice of exclusively strong or free pronominal forms as the etymological foundation of the new system suggests an early stage of a restructured variety shaped in a setting of restricted naturalistic SLA. However, by the time a full-fledged protolanguage from which the four languages branched off had come into existence, the early system had already developed new features, for instance a contrast between clitic/weak forms occurring in argument positions and strong forms that occur elsewhere (e.g., Cardinaletti & Starke 1999), especially for 1sg and 3sg (1). The data comparison also shows intricate, partially language-dependent paths of grammaticalization and specialization on the phonology-syntax interface, which includes a range of processes, in particular cliticization (2), vowel harmony/allomorphy in clitic groups (3), verb stem modification (4), and fusion between functional items (5).

The methodology adopted here thus provides a window into how pronominal systems are forged and develop from the available linguistic resources in a new social and linguistic

ecology, in this case suggesting a founder effect of Edo speakers targeting Portuguese (Hagemeijer 2011). More broadly, it sheds light on the processes and mechanisms involved in the emergence of new linguistic system, which in the case of pronouns the GGCs seem to be well within the boundaries of what we observe in other natural languages.

Examples

- (1) a. *Ami n ga tlabani kampu.* (Forro, own data)
1SG 1SG T/A work LOC field
'As for me, I'm a farmer.'
b. *Êlê ku ê kaza.* (Forro, own data)
3SG and 3SG marry
'They got married' (she and he married)
- (2) a. *M mêsê p'ô fada mu (<pa bô)* (Forro, own data)
1SG want for.2SG tell 1SG
'I want you to tell me.'
- (3) a. [*volô e/*ɛ*] (Forro, Hagemeijer 2007: 40)
to be angry at 3SG
b. [*gɔlb ɛ/*e*] (Forro, Hagemeijer 2007: 40)
search 3SG
- (4) a. *kumpla > kumpaa l* (Fa d'Ambô, Hagemeijer et al. 2020: 91)
buy buy 3SG.OBJ
b. *kubili > kub'êl* (Fa d'Ambô, Hagemeijer et al. 2020: 91)
cover cover 3SG.OBJ
- (5) a. *f'e (<*fa ê)* (Lung'Ie, Maurer 2009: 59)
tell.3SG
b. *ban (<*bo na)* (Fa d'Ambô, Hagemeijer et al. 2020: 31)
2SG.SUBJ.NEG

Selected references

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