On the hybridity of functional categories in Creole emergence:
An empirical and experimental approach

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Languages in contact give rise to a wide range of cross-linguistic influences leading to different outcomes (Thomason, 2001; Winford, 2003; Adamou & Matras, 2020). Among such outcomes, some linguists have hypothesized that cross-linguistic similarities among languages in contact can promote acquisition, whether in the context of second language (L2) acquisition (Hanson & Carlson, 2014; Tolentino & Tokowicz, 2014), simultaneous bilingualism (Bullock & Toribio, 2004; Sánchez, 2006; Luk & Bialystok, 2013; Kroll et al., 2015), third language (L3) acquisition (Berkes & Flynn, 2012; Rothman, 2015), or multilingualism leading to language creation (e.g., Pidgins or Creoles) (Kihm, 1990; Corne, 1999; Mufwene, 2001; Aboh, 2015; Baptista, 2020).

In Baptista (2020), I explored the possible effects of congruence in Creole genesis and provided a survey of hybrid, congruent forms in 20 contact languages across 19 grammatical domains (including negation,Tense, Mood, Aspect markers, complementizers), as they were reported in the scholarly literature (Kihm, 1990; Corne, 1999; Mufwene, 2008; Aboh, 2015). This empirical survey led to the design of a Pattern-Matter-Mapping (PMM) model which rests on the proposal that in the context of Creole formation, the linguistic properties that speakers perceive to be shared (congruent) among the input languages maybe more easily learned and are probabilistically more likely to emerge in a given Creole.

The above studies seem to support linguists' assumption that feature similarity across languages in contact can correspond to facilitation in acquisition and language emergence. However, because feature similarity is often confounded with other variables (e.g., feature frequency, language type, transparency, perceptual salience), it remains unclear whether congruence per se benefits learners. I report here on experiments (Labotka, Sabo, Bonais, Gelman and Baptista, 2023) that abstract away from such variables.

We provide an experimental test of the effects of congruence on acquisition through an artificial language-learning experiment involving English (L1) and two artificial languages (Flugerdu and Zamperese). English-speakers (N=163) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, varying which of the three languages expressed negation with converging forms: all three languages (English, Flugerdu and Zamperese); only Flugerdu and Zamperese; only English and Flugerdu; or none. Our findings show that participants better acquired the negation morpheme when the form converged with negation in English but not when the forms in Zamperese and Flugerdu converged with each other. We likewise found unanticipated spillover effects in which participants better acquired the vocabulary and grammar of the artificial languages when all three languages had converging negation forms.

In the last section of this presentation, I discuss the implications of these findings which provide insight into language acquisition in multilingual environments and into theories of Creole emergence.