Chiara Ardoino

Queen Mary University of London

Discreteness in a Creole-Standard continuum?

A Perceptual and Attitudinal Approach to the 'Named Languages' Debate

Bilingual communities are a well-known site of inter-speaker variation and fluid linguistic practices. When viewed through the prism of speaker-centred third-wave approaches, such inter-speaker variation can be so prominent as to lead scholars to question the very existence of languages as psychological objects (Otheguy, García & Reid, 2015).

One can expect fluidity and inter-speaker variation – and, thus, language 'porousness' – to be particularly rife in minoritised languages that have undergone little to no standardisation. A case in point are Creole-Standard settings, many of which have been described as 'continua' because of the supposed absence of hard boundaries between the Creole and the Standard. Bilingualism and lack of standardisation, however, do not necessarily exclude the psychological reality of *languages* and language boundaries, as even speakers of un(der-)standardised and closely related languages have been shown to consistently detect language switching and mixing in speech (Lipski, 2019, 2020).

To bypass the stalemate between structural approaches, predicated on the notion of language boundaries, and qualitative third-wave approaches that question such boundaries, this paper tests (i) speakers' perception of language boundaries and (ii) whether such perception is likely to be a by-product of standardisation and standard language ideology, as claimed by 'language-sceptical' approaches.

Adopting as a testing ground the French department of Martinique – where French is spoken alongside a still largely unstandardised French-lexicon Creole – I have used a questionnaire to investigate:

(i)   to what extent speakers are sensitive to the crossing of boundaries between French and Creole. Respondents have listened to stimuli in 4 conditions (unmixed French, mixed French, mixed Creole and unmixed Creole) and rated them on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'fully French' to 'fully Creole'. Stimuli were devised in a controlled way to minimise experimental noise. For example, the nominally unmixed stimuli would not feature any grammatical or lexical feature typical of the contact language and the 'distance' between mixed and unmixed stimuli would be as similar as possible for the two languages.

(ii)   Whether reporting of mixedness correlates with the degree of language standardisation, in other words if
   a) it is higher for French – the more standardised of the two languages – than for Creole;
   b) for Creole, it is higher for speakers reporting higher exposure to activist (i.e. more standardised) Creole.

(iii)   Whether reporting of mixedness can be predicted by measures of speakers' purism, collected through Likert-scale statements such as 'When one speaks French/Creole, one should avoid using expressions that are clearly Creole/French'.

Results from 158 respondents paint a mixed picture. On the one hand, French appears to behave as a more neatly bounded code than Creole, with clearer differences between the ratings of nominally mixed and unmixed stimuli and higher inter-speaker agreement. On the other hand, exposure to activist Creole does not predict reporting of mixedness for Creole sentences. This provides evidence to support hypothesis IIa, but not hypothesis IIb. As for the effect of purist attitudes on the perception of language boundaries, purism is higher and a better predictor of reported mixedness for *Creole* than for French. If this partially confirms hypothesis III in that purism appears to (slightly) sharpen perceptions of mixedness, it also challenges the view of purism as a simple consequence/correlate of language standardisation.

Through an innovative research design that combines the investigation of perceptions and attitudes, this paper presents additional evidence on the question of language boundedness in bilingual, Creole-speaking contexts, and whether such perceived boundedness may be the result of standardisation (alone). It shows that even largely unstandardised varieties like Martinican Creole can be perceived as distinct and bounded varieties – albeit with a higher degree of inter-speaker variation. Moreover, it suggests that purism can be even stronger for un(der)standardised than for fully standardised languages – perhaps because the former are perceived as more endangered – contrary to much literature that associates purism with the established work of standardisation actors and language institutions (Walsh, 2016).

References

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