REVIEWS


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As John Victor Singler points out in the “Introduction” (vii-xv) to the volume under review, tense-mood-aspect (TMA) has become “the pre-eminent site for the discussion of the phenomenon of the shared properties of creoles and for the debate about its explanation” (p. viii). This state of affairs is undoubtedly largely due to the work of Derek Bickerton. According to Bickerton, the similarities between the TMA systems of creole languages provide evidence for his “language bioprogram hypothesis”. Bickerton’s prototypical creole TMA system contains three pre-verbal markers for anterior tense, irrealis mood, and nonpunctual aspect, always occurring in that order. Furthermore, “the zero form marks simple past for action verbs and nonpast for state verbs”. Characterizing recent research in creole TMA systems, Singler notes that “comparison with Bickerton’s prototypical creole TMA system is the diagnostic, the starting point from which further analysis proceeds” (p. xi). Accordingly, all papers in the volume make reference to this system, with one exception, William Labov’s paper, which was written in 1970 and thus precedes Bickerton’s work in time.

My own perspective on the work presented in this volume is partly an outsider’s: I am not a creolist but rather a typologist with particular interest in tense and aspect systems. One thing that struck me when reading the book was the extent to which — due to the impact of Bickerton’s work — the study of creole TMA systems has become an autonomous tradition,
with its own terminology and conceptual apparatus, with an ensuing relatively restricted influence of non-creolist TMA studies.¹

Discussion of Bickerton's theses with regard to creole TMA systems has centered on the degree of similarity between those systems. Much less often does one ask the equally relevant question: How different are creole TMA systems from such systems in general, or perhaps rather, from what we could expect on general grounds to find in creole languages?² Recent work on grammaticalization processes (Givón 1979; Lehmann 1982, 1985; Heine and Reh 1984; Bybee and Dahl 1989) suggest that tense-aspect systems, like other systems of grammatical categories, arise via a restricted set of channels or paths of grammaticalization. Furthermore, such systems can be seen as built of language-specific manifestations of a restricted set of what has been called cross-linguistic gram-types (Bybee and Dahl 1989), whose properties are largely predictable from their place in the grammaticalization processes, that is, whether they represent early or advanced stages of grammaticalization. If creoles start "from scratch" in building up their grammars, it is reasonable that most of their grammatical categories will still be weakly grammaticalized. (For a similar point of view, see Sankoff 1990.) From this follows directly one of the properties of Bickerton's prototypical TMA system, viz. that the markers are all non-bound, since bound markers (inflections) tend to show up only in later stages of grammaticalization. Looking at what kinds of markers tend to be non-bound in TMA systems generally, we might arrive at a general prediction of what the semantics of creole TMA markers should be: the most common non-bound gram-types are perfects, progressives, futures, and habituals (Dahl 1985, Bybee and Dahl 1989). Comparing those to Bickerton's categories, we find that many futures have a semantics which does not differ in any essential way from what he calls "irrealis". Bickerton's "non-punctual" should correspond to what other people (including myself) call "imperfective"; this is a gram-type which is more typically expressed morphologically (although there are examples to the contrary, notably among the West African languages which may plausibly have acted as substrates for the Atlantic Creoles). However, as it turns out, many creoles do have progressives and habituals rather than non-punctuals, and Bickerton's own description of "non-punctual" makes it sound more like a progressive in transition to an imperfective (thus, it does not co-occur with statives, he says). Also, the conspicuous absence of perfects from Bickerton's list turns out to be less significant than it looks at first glance — in fact, Bickerton postulates a
fourth category, called "completive", which, essentially, has the semantics of a perfect and which although it is quite common in creoles is supposed to represent a "later development".

The remaining discrepancy between Bickerton's list of categories and the one predicted from grammaticalization studies is the alleged universality of the so-called "anterior tense", a form whose meaning is said to be "very roughly, past-before-past for action verbs and past for stative verbs" (Bickerton 1981: 58). A lot could be said on this issue, but I shall try to be brief. First, it may be noted that the crucial feature here is not the meaning of the "anterior" as such but rather the possibility of interpreting a zero marked action verb as a perfect; given this, the addition of a past morpheme naturally yields a pluperfect interpretation. Second, although "anteriors" are not too common cross-linguistically, they do appear, again notably in West African languages (in Dahl 1985, I noted Karaboro, a Gur language as an example). Third, the material presented in the book under review shows clearly the non-universality of "anteriors" among pidgins and creoles. Singler, in the Introduction, claims that only three languages out the seven ones described exhibit "anteriors" with the semantics indicated by Bickerton. Of the rest, three clearly lack it, and one — Kituba — supposedly has an "anterior", although a deviant one, from the point of view of Bickerton's definition. Let us have a closer look at the latter case.

Singler argues that "anteriors" are relative tenses, either of a "pure" kind, which relate situations vis-à-vis arbitrary reference points, or of a less "pure" kind, where the reference point is itself related to the point of speech. The former would be found in languages like Kituba, the latter would be Bickertonian "anteriors". This echoes an argument in Mufwene's paper, where he claims that Kituba in general has a relative tense system, and that the terms CONCOMITANT and ANTERIOR should be used there instead of PRESENT and PAST. However, the examples he uses to show that the Kituba tenses depend on an arbitrary R(eference time) rather than on the S(speech time) all involve either combinations with the perfect auxiliary me(ne) or occur in reported speech. When the "anterior" marker -a(k)a occurs on its own in main clauses, it simply marks perfective past (p. 98), which makes it very different from a Bickertonian "anterior", and also puts the general characterization of it as a relative tense marker into doubt. This label is in fact dubious also for Bickerton's "anterior": Singler adds the hedge "at least for nonstative verbs", which may indeed be essential, since the stative uses (which correspond to English simple past) do not look like
relative tense. However, there is an unclear point here which appears to go back to Bickerton's own discussion (cf. Bickerton 1981: 91 where the anterior is redefined as "prior to the current focus of discourse") and I won't pursue the argument further.

Let me instead return to the issue of grammaticalization. The Bickertonian paradigm induces a rather different perspective on things than grammaticalization theory; it emphasizes the distinctions that were (assumedly) there from the start, and tends to see later developments as somehow deviations from the ideal, whereas the grammaticalization paradigm rather would suggest that all interesting structures have arisen by language change. Most of the papers in this volume do not highlight grammaticalization as such — still they provide rather ample empirical support for a claim to the effect that tense-aspect markers in creole languages arise from the same sources, i.e. by the same grammaticalization channels, as similar markers in other languages.

It is somewhat curious to find that the paper where grammaticalization is treated most systematically is the oldest one, the paper by William Labov ("On the Adequacy of Natural Languages: I. The Development of Tense", p. 1-58), although the term "grammaticalization" is never used there. As the first half of the title suggests, Labov's primary interest was, like in other parts of his work, the issue of the "differential adequacy" of standard and non-standard forms of languages. This, however, takes him to a discussion of the emergence of grammar in creolization. He discusses in some detail the development of markers such as the Tok Pisin (called here "Neo-Melanesian") future marker *bai* and the Hawaiian Creole *wen*, claimed by Labov to be a past marker. (Hawaiian Creole is one of Bickerton's prime candidates for his prototypical TMA system, but as far as I know he does not discuss the status of *wen*, which at least *prima facie* appears to contradict his model.) In one of the final sections of the paper, Labov discusses in more general terms the function of emerging grammatical categories. He observes that there is no reason to assume that tenses are more adequate for expressing time relations than adverbs of time, and concludes that their function must be stylistic, in that they "can be expanded or contracted to fit in with the prosodic requirements of allegro or lento style". I do not find this conclusion wholly convincing, but maybe it is no worse than most other proposed explanations of grammaticalization.

Let us now have a look at the remaining seven papers in the volume, each of which treats the TMA system of an individual pidgin or creole language.
Roger W. Andersen ("Papiamentu Tense-Aspect: With Special Attention to Discourse", p. 59-96) finds in Papiamentu (a Spanish-based creole spoken in Netherlands Antilles) five basic TMA markers: *ta* 'imperfective', *a* 'perfective', *tabata* 'past imperfective', *sa* 'habitual' and *lo* 'irrealis'. He notes that there are "conflicts between bioprogram predictions and the way Papiamentu maps meaning onto form", but still seems reluctant to take this as counterevidence to Bickerton's theory. One problem that Andersen does not discuss, as far as I can find, is the historical origin of the TMA markers. At least *prima facie* they seem fairly directly related to Spanish morphemes with meanings compatible with attested paths of grammaticalization, such as *a* 'perfective' from the perfect auxiliary *ha* — a state of affairs consistent with the view that creole TMA systems arise by normal grammaticalization processes.

Kikongo-Kituba, treated by Salikoko S. Mufwene ("Time Reference in Kikongo-Kituba", p. 97-117), has a rather different status from the creoles that Bickerton discusses: it arose in Africa as a lingua franca based on Kikongo, a Bantu language. Like the other languages in that family, Kikongo-Kituba has a rather complex TMA system involving among other things remoteness distinctions. I have already discussed one of Mufwene's main claims, viz. that Kikongo-Kituba has relative tenses. Mufwene does not treat very explicitly the relation between his description and Bickerton's theory, and it may be said that given the deviations both in the status of the language and in the system it is far from clear what to make out of it.

Haitian Creole (a French-based creole), for a change, is one of the languages Bickerton claims has a "typical" or "classical" creole TMA system. Arthur K. Spears ("Tense, Mood, and Aspect in the Haitian Creole Preverbal Marker System", p. 119-142) argues that there are significant deviations from Bickerton's scheme, e.g. the much wider use of zero forms, and the use of the same marker for habitualls, progressives, and indicative futures. He assumes, though, that there is an anterior marker, *te*, without discussing its use in detail. This is somewhat puzzling: on p. 121 there are three examples of *te* being used with active verbs, which are all translated as English simple pasts (e.g. *Mwen t al avè l* 'I went with her'). Since in these contexts the anterior should mean 'past before past', either the translations are inexact, or the characterization of *te* is wrong — the latter possibility would of course make Haitian Creole fit the Bickertonian scheme even less well.

Izione S. Silva's paper ("Tense and Aspect in Capeverdean Crioulo", p. 143-168) also looks at data from a bona fide (Portuguese-based) creole,
Capeverdean Crioulo, finding "that it differs in a number of ways from Bickerton's "classic" tense-aspect system", mentioning features such as a suffixal anteriority marker and separate markers of progressive and habitual (with the habitual also indicating futurity). Silva takes a cautious position with regard to the interpretation of these facts, expressing the hope that future research on Portuguese creoles will explain them.

Ian E. Robertson ("The Tense-Mood-Aspect System of Berbice Dutch", p. 169-184) describes a Dutch-based creole with a tense-aspect system which is even further from the "classic" system and which also poses some problems for grammaticalization theory. In particular, there are three markers used with past time reference, -te, wa, and fama. Robertson interprets these as marking perfect, past (mainly remote), and compleactive, respectively. None of them seems to fit Bickerton's anterior too well. -te, would appear to be derived from the Dutch past marker -te. However, if Robertson's claim that -te is a perfect is correct, this is a development that goes in the wrong direction from the point of view of attested processes of grammaticalization. This is apparently another case where one has to hope for help from future research.

The two final papers in the volume, that of Joan M. Fayer ("Nigerian Pidgin English in Old Calabar in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", p. 185-202) and John Victor Singler ("The Impact of Decreolization upon T-M-A: Tenselessness, Mood, and Aspect in Kru Pidgin English", p. 203-230) move the focus to pidgin languages. Singler argues (p. 203) that "not only are the creole models applicable to pidgin varieties, the evidence from pidgin varieties can serve to inform and refine these models". It is fairly clear that if pidgins turn out to conform to the models postulated for creoles, this would appear to weaken the claims made about the latter, since the properties in question would then not be specific to creoles and would not be attributable to the peculiar conditions under which they arise. Singler's line on this issue, if I interpret what he says in the Introduction correctly, is to tone down the bioprogram element of Bickerton's theory and look at it more as a model potentially applicable to a larger set of languages. The language studied by Singler, Kru Pidgin English, has a tradition going back to the 18th century and its situation in many respects resembles that of creoles: hence the relevance of the notion "decreolization" referred to in the title of the paper. Fayer's paper builds largely on written material (diaries and the like) by Efik traders of the 18th and 19th centuries. One difficulty that Fayer does not mention but in passing is how to
distinguish in such materials between true pidgin and what could more properly be regarded as attempts by non-native speakers to write what they think is standard English (cf. a quotation like *I am very glad you come and settle treaty proper and thank you for doing everything right for me yesterday* (p. 197)).

*Pidgin and Creole Tense-Mood-Aspect Systems* is valuable above all by giving systematic descriptions of the TMA systems of a varied set of pidgin and creole languages. One may criticize the somewhat one-sided theoretical orientation, but on the other hand, the authors’ attitude to Bickerton’s theories is far from uncritical, and the systematic application of his model to so many languages displays both its strong and weak points, from the empirical point of view.

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NOTES

1. Except for Comrie (1976), who is quoted by everyone (but Labov, for natural reasons), references to general works on TMA are rather scarce (thus, according to the author index, Hans Reichenbach is mentioned only once — this should be compared to Bickerton, who is referred to on 58 pages of the book). The lack of communication goes in the other direction too. I happen to be reviewing a recent work on theories of tense and aspect, Binnick 1991. A similar check of its index indicates that Bickerton is not mentioned at all on 508 pages of text (Reichenbach gets 40 pages this time).

2. Matthews (1990), comparing the tense-aspect categories of creole languages with the cross-linguistic category types postulated in Dahl (1985), concludes that the distribution of tense-aspect categories in creole languages is consistent with “the lack of inflectional and derivational morphology, attributable to grammatical simplification in the antecedent pidgin”. This can be seen as another way of saying that creoles tend to have categories which are usually found in early stages of grammaticalization.

3. Sankoff (1990) argues that the alleged “anteriors” of creoles are characterized by a low degree of grammaticalization and that their use is accordingly much less systematic than Bickerton claims.
REFERENCES