Review

_Inheritance and innovation in a colonial language: Towards a usage-based account of French Guianese Creole_
William Jennings and Stefan Pfänder (2018)
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William Jennings and Stefan Pfänder, two of the foremost scholars on French Guianese Creole, have produced their first full-length monograph together on the origin of the language. This book attempts to explain how the structure of the language emerged as a function of the people present in the earliest days of the European colonial settlement, and the varieties that they would have plausibly had in their repertoire. Their approach is _usage-based_, that is, looking at the cognitive experience that individuals have with language. The book contains a brief introduction, a chapter on the history of the European colonial settlements of the region with particular reference to the arrivals of European settlers and each of the few slave ships that arrived in Cayenne, a nearly 100-page chapter on the theoretical framework and its application to the language, and a short conclusion. The lengthiest chapter is available for download under the open-access framework. The volume ends with 50 pages of extracts from the French Guianese Creole Corpus, glossed at the clausal level rather than with morphemic interlinear glosses. The book is a welcome addition to the dearth of research on this variety, most of which is unavailable to linguists who do not speak French, though whether it needed to take the form of a book is unclear.

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The introduction emphasizes the importance of history to the emergence of Creole languages. It chides the long-abandoned Bickertonian approach for attempting to explain the origin of Creole language structures through cognitive universals before examining the history of the community to determine whether such explanations are plausible. The chapter emphasizes, as Jennings has repeatedly tried to do from the time of his doctoral thesis (1998) in his other works on the language, that French Guianese Creole has an important role to play in Creole studies because its history is so clearly documented and because the infrequent arrival of slave ships allows for neat divisions in the historical record.

The second chapter is essentially a summary and update of Jennings’s dissertation (1998), covered extensively in Jennings and Pfänder (2015). It situates Creole in the linguistic environment of French Guiana, the French department with the greatest number of langues de France, as well as the region of France with the highest percentage of immigrants (see discussion in Siegel 2014). It explains the origins of the founding population as well as their linguistic abilities. The initial contact between Europeans and the indigenous population resulted in the adoption of European words into the lingua franca of the region, a pidgin of Arawak, and the indigenous Kali’na population maintained longstanding contact for centuries. They assert that Arawak must be considered an important language in the formation of Caribbean Creoles, as there are distinctions shared among those languages and Arawak but not West African languages, such as certain non-copular constructions and gender marking in third-person singular pronouns.

The influence of Africans, the majority of the French Guianese population since the first century of slavery, is the subject of the next section. The authors note that although many West African varieties from the Bight of Benin must have played a role in the development of French Creoles, it is unclear how to classify those varieties – as dialects of a single language, as languages belonging to a single family, as languages belonging to two separate subfamilies, and so on. The authors also discuss the European influence on the language of trade – principally Portuguese and Lingua Franca – on the captive Africans held in the Bight of Benin, the largest early source of Africans brought forcibly to French Guiana, as well as the multilingual profile (including some level of understanding of Yoruba) that those Africans would have already shared before their captivity. The section ends with discussions of the Bight of Biafra, the Gold Coast, Senegambia and Angola and the Congo, all of which supplied at least some enslaved Africans, but either too few in number or too late to exert the influence over French Guianese that people from the Bight of Benin would have had. The
next subsection discusses the fairly well-known linguistic profile of French settlers, who would have come from the northern and western parts of France, where French was not widely spoken as an L1.

The largest part of this chapter is the creation of French Guianese Creole. The authors take Mufwene’s (1996) discussion of the Founder Principle applied to Creole language formation as a given. They also argue, citing Cook (2016) but echoing Chomsky’s earliest assertions about competence, that multilingual speakers cannot be assumed to have the same competence as monolingual speakers of the same language since transfer is not unidirectional, and that the earliest settlers of modern French Guiana – Amerindians, Africans and Europeans (Portuguese and Dutch only) – would have all been accustomed to multilingual environments. They adopt the still-disputed position that enslaved people would not have been motivated to learn the language of their enslavers – Portuguese at first, then later French – because there was a penalty to speaking too well, both in terms of resentment from the Europeans and of complications to their own identities as Africans. They add that in the earliest days of the colony and for a couple of generations thereafter, the enslaved Africans would have been able to communicate in a Gbe language, because of the overwhelming number of Gbe speakers and the mutual intelligibility of the varieties; they contrast this with the origins of other Creole languages in the region. The authors are able to talk about the arrival of each slave ship, because so few arrived. As a port relatively close to West Africa, French Guiana served as an emergency stop for some ships that would then sell off a few captives. They also discuss the process of French replacing Portuguese as the dominant language of the settlement. The flight of the Portuguese settlers after English raids ended the Portuguese contact, but the authors assert that the founder effect can be seen in the retention of basic lexemes from Portuguese. The arrival of non-Gbe Africans resulted in a new hybrid variety, one that allowed this minority to communicate with both native and non-native French speakers, where native-like performance in French was therefore not necessarily the goal, with Gbe speakers supposedly continuing to speak and pass on their variety to younger generations. The authors provide evidence of Africans from different plantations interacting frequently outside the plantation setting, as well as low birth rates and forced intermarriage based on enslaved Africans’ work abilities. By the early 1700s, a Creole distinct from those of the Lesser Antilles was noted by French observers to have emerged.

The third chapter combines the theoretical framework, the methodology, and the findings all into one very long chapter. The authors contend, as the central hypothesis of the chapter, but really of the work as a whole, ‘that most FGC
grammatical features can be modelled as one of Siegel’s four types of transfer from Gbe languages […] and in cases where the transfer model does not work, we hypothesise that constraints such as the basic word order of French are responsible’ (p. 84). They assert that their historical chapter has explored the potential causes of change in language usage, whether contact-induced or community-internal. The theoretical underpinning of this is that it takes grammatical competence to be determined by usage, which goes beyond representations to include frequency and language variation. The experience guides grammatical competence, and given that a multilingual person’s grammars influence each other, that grammatical experience guides the creation of new varieties as well. The authors use this approach to grammar to explain phenomena such as reanalysis, and invoke perceptual salience, context, recency, and similarity to explain contact effects. They give four types of transfer: functionalisation (grammaticalisation of a lexifier’s lexeme to fill a substrate language’s grammatical function), refunctionalisation (a lexifier’s grammatical morpheme’s functions are reduced or expanded), morphosyntactic strategy (introduction of a substrate’s morphosyntactic pattern into a typologically different lexifier), and category transfer (introduction of a grammatical category into a lexifier that previously did not have that distinction grammaticalised).

Based on their corpus collected from most settlements in French Guiana, they discuss the role of transfer in the structure of French Guianese Creole. They give a number of interesting examples of transfer from Portuguese, Ewe, Fon, and of course French, and describe some important structural distinctions between FGC and other French Creoles, including the lack of relevance of the stative/dynamic distinction to TMA marking (p. 121) and the use of the marker té to denote a shift in narrative structure (p. 128). They demonstrate the importance of aspect to the morphosyntax, a feature they conclude represents transfer from Gbe languages, as is predicate doubling and nominal comparison. They conclude that the structural development of FGC follows the predictions of the usage-based framework, and that much of the divergence between FGC and the other French-based creoles can be attributed to the lack of Bantu languages (though interestingly, they do not mention the importance of Portuguese nor of Arawak).

The fourth chapter is a two-page conclusion without any substantive value, and it is followed by excerpts from Pfänder’s corpus. The corpus is of anthropological interest, and is glossed into English without further interlinear glosses.
Evaluation

The book is a valuable contribution to the literature on French Guianese Creole. While work on the origins of this Creole is not new, with Jennings having done the bulk of the historical work (1995, 1999, 2009), this book builds on the recasting of the origins in a usage-based framework developed in Jennings and Pfänder (2015). And given that so much work on the language has been done in French or German, it is good to have a book that is written in English. It is my hope that the existence of a book-length monograph will establish the name of the language in English. Currently there is a large variety of names including: French Guianese Creole in Jennings (2009), Fisher (2015), Migge and Léglise (2010) and Collomb and Renault-Lescure (2014); Guyanais in Holm (1988:380), Winford (2005:325) and Pfänder (2013); Guianese Creole in McWhorter (2000), Collomb and Renault-Lescure (2014) (which also uses French Guianese Creole), and Valdman (2015); Guianese French Creole in Haspelmath and Dryer (2015), Siegel (2014) and Renault-Lescure (2009); Guyanese French Creole in Déprez (2007), Syea (2017) and Fauquenoy (1974); and Cayenne Creole in Jennings (1998) and Degraff (2009). Some scholars even have their own names for them, such as French Guiana Creole (Goodman 1964), and French Guyanais (McWhorter 1995, 2000; 2018:125). The reader can see that even individual scholars change their usage (e.g. McWhorter, Renault-Lescure, and even Jennings and Pfänder themselves), but the existence of such a long book should serve as a point of reference to future scholars. A discussion of the choice to use French Guianese Creole over the other, generally older variants would have been fruitful.

As helpful as having the long monograph to establish the name is, whether it had to be a book remains an open question. The biggest part of the book, the massive Chapter 3, is already given away for free under a Creative Commons license; this accounts for slightly more than half of the book’s pages (excluding the corpus). The next biggest chapter, which itself accounts for almost the entire other half of the book, seems to be something between an expansion of Jennings and Pfänder (2015) and a condensed, updated version of Jennings (1998). Therefore, instead of a book, it seems that the work could have just as easily been a pair of peer reviewed articles without losing any substantive value.

Some claims in the book are puzzling or overstated. For example, on page 96 the authors assert that language contact on the coast is ‘more or less restricted to European languages and Martinique [sic] Creole’, though even in 1995, Haitian immigration to coastal areas such as Cayenne was prominent. On page 108, they
assert that French vôt occasionally replaces zôt as a second-person plural possessive as in A vôt solusyon ‘This is your solution’. This example seems to be a rather straightforward code-switch between the French Guianese a and the French votre solution, with the ubiquitous consonant cluster simplification of spoken French, and not a replacement of zôt in an otherwise Creole sentence. It can be difficult to identify code-switching between French Guianese and French (as I describe in great depth in Siegel [2014]), and in the corpus provided at the end of the book, they have middling success in doing so, but it is a particularly important task when trying to give a usage-based account in which authors assert that understanding multilingual language use is central to their thesis. That they provide this example instead of describing the use of zôt to also mean a third-person plural (as they translate it in the first story of their corpus) is similarly curious. On page 151, to illustrate bimorphemic question words in this Creole, they give ki bagay as the translation of English what, though the more common question words for what are ki bèt, ki sa and ki bagaj, with ki bagay being a shibboleth of Haitian and Antillean Creoles. While bèt and bagaj both appear in their corpus, and ki sa is the usual form of asking ‘what’, (ki) bagay is absent. They claim on page 138 that negative commands tend to include the marker ka in Guianese, but no other negative command in the corpus or the main text includes it. They suggest on page 134 that the etymology of ka might be found in constructions like the French of St-Barthélemy’s il n’est qu’à faire ‘s/he is doing’, without any reference to the etymology already put forward by Schlupp (1997:338) for the French Guianese marker naka which serves a similar function and has a nearly identical etymology, nor do they make reference to the other etymologies already put forward on the subject that Schlupp cites (1997:46). They use their unsourced etymology even though they have cited this work at various times throughout the book. Finally, they say in light of their findings, ‘There are further traditional assumptions of language that need to be challenged: a language is not a comprehensive dictionary that can be transferred, and its grammar is not an integral system’ (p. 167). It is unclear who among traditional linguists could be said to endorse such a view, much less that this is the traditional assumption among linguists today or even of the last century. Citations that illustrated such a view would have been a welcome addition to strengthen their claim, and to provide support for the value of their approach.

Indeed, the value of their approach is quite debatable. The merits that they see in it are clear: it places all changes in the social context, looks at the properties of the languages in use at the time, and appeals to domain-general cognition, rather than looking at language (contact)-specific properties. Given the extensive debates in the literature about whether Creole languages constitute a typological grouping
(based on their shared structural tendencies) or a sociohistorical grouping (based on commonalities of social contexts of emergence), any approach that ignores one of the two positions will ultimately fail to convince the partisans. Moreover, they embrace multiple causation, and are willing to accept that we may never know which single language contributed a certain structure precisely because overlapping patterns in different languages may partially influence the resulting Creole structure. At the same time, they do not make clear how other approaches to looking at the emergence of a Creole language differ meaningfully from their own approach. How their analysis differs from one that would be undertaken by Valdman, McWhorter, Alleyne, Croft, Mufwene or Lefebvre is left to the imagination of the reader. On the other hand, Jennings and Pfänder have written a volume of great usefulness to people already working in the usage-based framework propagated by Langacker (1987) and Bybee (2006), who may want to know more about how this theory can contribute to understanding creolization processes.

The authors rely heavily on putative motives for the assertion that the non-Gbe slaves would not want to use French as spoken by the French. On page 29, they discuss outcomes of various types of interactions between Europeans and enslaved Africans, without clearly citing where such information would come from. They also do not seriously engage with Chaudenson’s (1992) arguments as to why learning French well might have been advantageous, merely listing a few sources that disagree with such points without presenting the evidence from those sources that they see as important. On page 50, they speculate about how the older slaves would have communicated with children (e.g. recounting stories about Africa, speaking to them in a Gbe language), again without any evidence. This shows the difficulty of working in a usage-based framework without any access to the usage itself.

The corpus takes occasional liberties in its English translations, beyond those mentioned above. For example, they quote a speaker as saying ‘Madanm-an ki adan kaz, famm-an ki adan kaz maman’ and translate it as ‘The woman who is in the house; the woman, who was in my mother’s house’ (p. 198) without any indication in the source language of a tense shift. In another example, on page 185, the speaker describes thinking that a teacher didn’t understand Creole ‘piské a fransé’, which the authors render as ‘because she spoke French’ but which is actually ‘since she was French’, an important distinction in this multilingual territory where people from mainland France are not always welcomed. Given that the authors explicitly state that the ‘subjects should prove of interest to cultural anthropologists’ (p. 181), it is important that these cultural details be rendered accurately.
There are a number of editing problems. For example, the discussion of the noun phrase is structured such that the French Guianese pattern is first, followed by relevant African (principally Gbe) and French patterns. In the following section on the verb phrase, the French Guianese patterns are discussed in isolation until the very end, without any detailed comparisons to VPs in relevant West African or European languages. The section on sentence structure returns to the layout adopted in the discussion of the noun phrase. This change in narrative structure is jarring and even if it does not outright weaken their case, the claims about the verb phrase do not seem as strong because the linguistic evidence is not presented as copiously or as well. This weakening is compounded by the authors’ declaration that ‘this section has demonstrated clear links between the FGC verb phrase and that of the aspectually oriented Gbe systems’ (p. 131), when the links are merely asserted, rather than shown to be true. There are smaller editing problems too, such as inconsistent numbering (e.g. equivalent structures in French Guianese and Ewe numbered separately on p. 131 and together on p. 132), font changes and spelling errors on page 148 (the Ewe word *kplé* is spelled two different ways), formatting errors for foreign words and in-text glosses on page 157, and unglossed reduplication on page 133.

Despite its flaws – some big, most small – the book that Jennings and Pfänder have produced is a valuable contribution to Creole linguistics and to sociolinguistics. They demonstrate the value of using detailed historical records whenever available, as well as the importance of close, in-depth comparison between the relevant languages in creolization scenarios. Applying their methods within a usage-based framework should pave the way for future researchers in that paradigm to explore the emergence of contact languages, and perhaps come up with a model that successfully accounts for various scenarios of language emergence in a way that is consistent with language behaviour in other sociolinguistic conditions. They have also managed to shine a spotlight on one of the most neglected French-based Creoles, to the benefit of the people of French Guiana.

**References**


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