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**Los criollos de base ibérica
ACBLPE 2003**



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THE POLITICS OF CAPE VERDEAN CREOLE

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1. The interest for Creole languages began to emerge in the linguistic circles of Europe in the late 1800s. Addison Van Name comparative study (1869-70) of the creoles found in the Caribbean (French, Spanish, Dutch and English) is considered by some as the beginning of the scientific study of Creole languages (Holm, 2000: 24). In Portugal, Francisco Adolfo Coelho published his studies of Cape Verdean Creole in the *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa* (Bulletin of the Geographical Society of Lisbon), titled “Os Dialectos Românicos ou Neo-Latinos na África, Ásia e América” (“The Roman or New-Latin Dialects in Africa, Asia and America”), between 1880 and 1886 (Morais-Barbosa, 1967: xiii).

The pioneering scholars who reflected on Cape Verdean Creole understood it as a sort of broken Portuguese (Coelho, 1880, 1882, 1886; Brito, 1887; Lopes, 1941; Silva, 1957; Almada, 1961), a view that passed on to the Cape Verdean colonial elite and which served their agenda of ‘assimilation’ on to the metropolitan culture. They saw Cape Verdean Creole as the result of the incapacity of the African Negroes to speak properly Portuguese, which was seen as much too complex a language to be spoken by ‘uncivilized’ and ‘uncultured’ peoples. However, they forgot that the creole language was the language not only of Negro slaves but of everybody else, including the erstwhile white elite. This may be true for creoles in general:

There is considerable evidence that at the time of the creoles’ early development Europeans often spoke them more fluently than has generally been assumed. (Holm, 2000: 70)

Being dominated by an assimilationist view of colonization the Cape Verdean colonial elite viewed the Cape Verdean culture and language as mostly determined by the Portuguese cultural contribution, which they saw as prevailing over everything else:

In Cape Verde, the Portuguese language had to struggle fiercely with the Negroes’ languages. The Portuguese language came out as a winner from that struggle, but not

unhurt. The blows it suffered left it with so many scars that it lost its shape. (Silva, 1984[1957]: 11, translation mine)

The African Negroes' contribute was seen as having been 'pathological' and deleterious to the language formation in Cape Verde:

The Creoles (Negro-European languages) correspond to the miscegenation of human types. We know that the Portuguese brought the vocabulary and grammar, which the Afro-Negro simplified. It was to him the pathological modification of the Portuguese that led to the creation of the Creole language. (Silva, 1936: 5, translation mine)

This somehow refusal of the African cultural and linguistic contribution to the formation of colonial societies is understandable in light of the enculturation context of the colonial Creole subjects. As Frantz Fanon points out:

To speak (...) means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation (...). Every colonized people –in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality– finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation, that is, with the culture of the mother country. (1968: 17-18)

Or in the words of Murdoch:

The ordeal of being forbidden to speak Creole at school –and, among the burgeoning middle classes, even at home– on pain of punishment creates a situation in which the colonial subject is forced to develop a psycholinguistic 'double consciousness', in which he or she adopts a language determined by the social context or even, in some cases, by the interlocutor. (2001: 21)

2. Despite the overall view being that Creoles were broken dialects resulting from the mixture of Portuguese and African languages, some of the analysts had insights that matched the most modern 'theories' about creole languages, as in the case of some of the remarks made by Rodrigo de Sá Nogueira in the prologue to Silva's grammar of Cape Verdean Creole published in 1957.

In the quotation below a 'substratist' stance is implicitly assumed by admitting that the African languages supplied the rules to creole language:

Those Negroes did not learn Portuguese under the rule of school. In order to speak Portuguese *they guided themselves by the rules of the languages of their own*. (Silva, 1984[1957]: 12, translation and emphasis mine)

Sometimes, as we can see from the words of Sá Nogueira in the prologue to Silva's grammar of Cape Verdean Creole, analysts thought that it was the Por-

tuguese language which influenced the African languages, assuming thus a ‘superstratist’ stance:

There is in the scientific study of the African languages, among others, some value which many scholars do not recognise. By this I mean *the influence exerted by the European languages over the African languages* ever since the Europeans began to establish themselves in Africa. (Silva, 1984[1957]: 9, translation and emphasis mine)

The general ‘pre-scientific’ view on creole languages is well summarised in Holm’s words:

What earlier generations thought of pidgin and creole languages is all too clear from their very names: *broken English, bastard Portuguese, nigger French, kombuis-taaltje* (‘cookhouse lingo’), *isikula* (‘coolie language’). This contempt often stemmed in part from the feeling that pidgins and creoles were corruptions of ‘higher’, usually European languages, and in part from attitudes toward the speakers of such languages who were often perceived as semi-savages whose partial acquisition of civilized habits was somehow an affront. (Holm, 2000: 1)

3. Sometimes the Cape Verdean Creole was compared to the dialectical forms of the Portuguese in the archipelagos of Azores and Madeira, pointing out that the great difference was that in these archipelagos there had been no African influence. So, African influence was seen as the corruptor of the metropolitan Portuguese, and the African natives were seen as incapable of learning the ‘complex’ structure of Portuguese language, as we can see from the following quotations:

In the Azores the Portuguese is the same as in the metropolis, only with minor scratches. In Cape Verde, the Portuguese is deeply wounded in its phonetics, morphology, semantics and syntax. (...) The language spoken in the Azores is properly called Portuguese, while in Cape Verde is called Creole. (Silva, 1984[1957]: 11, translation mine)

Judging from the Cape Verdean speaking, the Creoles in that archipelago are nothing but the Portuguese profoundly changed in the mouth of the Negroes, either in its phonetics, morphology, semantics or syntax. (Silva, 1984[1957]: 12, translation mine)

It was the morphological part which suffered the most of the mutilations, particularly in terms of verbal morphology, which was reduced almost exclusively to the infinitive. *The morphological structure of Portuguese must have looked too complex to the dominated people.* (Almada, 1961: 18, translation and emphasis mine)

The culture of the peoples dominated by the Portuguese had not yet led them to the creation of certain words since the concepts those words represented were unknown to them. (...) If we look into the child's language we will see that she only plays with words that express the meaning of concrete objects or which are related to them. *The child in this case represents the mentality of the dominated peoples.* (Almada, 1961: 23, translation and emphasis mine)

4. The standpoints of Silva, Nogueira and other contemporaries of the first half of the twentieth century represented an advance in relation to the traditional nineteenth-century view on creole languages quite well expressed by Lima:

[European teachers] who may pronounce correctly Portuguese without the corruption of the African Creole (*ridiculous slang, monstrously assembled from the antique Portuguese and the languages of Guinea*, which the people prizes so dearly and the white imitate pleasantly). (Lima, 1844–46:81, quoted in Silva, 1984[1957]: 13, translation and emphasis mine)

Nogueira assumes a critical standpoint towards this sort of remarks excusing Lima for his lacking proper scientific and linguistic knowledge of Creole:

If we consider the Creoles ridiculous and monstrous just because they represent an adulteration of the metropolitan Portuguese, then we should also consider ridiculous and monstrous the varieties of the Portuguese spoken in the Azores, Madeira and Brazil. Furthermore, we should then consider the Portuguese itself and all the other roman languages as nothing else than adulterated forms of Latin. (Nogueira's prologue to Silva, 1984[1957]: 16, translation mine)

Silva shows some division between his allegiance to the Portuguese cultural 'origin' of Cape Verdean Creole and the necessity of affirming CV Creole as an independent language capable of representing the Cape Verdean 'culture' as a world of its own. Rodrigo de Sá Nogueira clearly states that the Creole languages have a grammar of their own and are not gibberish talk without rules (prologue to Silva, 1984[1957]: 18).

Silva says that the Creole of Guinea-Bissau is derived from the Cape Verdean Creole due to the Cape Verdean cultural influence in that colony:

I think that the Creole spoken in Guinea did not emerge from the indigenous contact with the Portuguese but was instead derived from the Cape Verdean Creole brought in by the numerous Cape Verdeans used as colonisers. (Silva, 1984[1957]: 31, translation mine)

This reflects the fact that the Cape Verdean intellectual and political elite always looked down upon the Guineans, who they saw as more African-like and

as culturally inferior and less capable of being assimilated into the Portuguese culture. They also see themselves as the spearhead of Portuguese culture in Guinea-Bissau.

5. Silva considers the existence of two main Creole dialectal variants in Cape Verde (1984[1957]: 35-36): the windward and the leeward variants. Then, he considers subvariants within each variant. In the windward there are the subvariants of Santo Antão and São Vicente, and that of São Nicolau. In the leeward there are the subvariants of Santiago, Maio and Fogo, and that of Brava. This means that instead of a 'national' Cape Verdean language there are a number of dialects, which equate differences in the way the people of the different islands construct their identities vis-à-vis each other. Silva uses phonological and lexical linguistic arguments in order to base his claims about dialectal variance in Cape Verde.

Veiga (1996: 12) retakes the idea of two different realizations for the Cape Verdean creole: one to the windward group and another to the leeward. He considers that the Santiago variant is the mother to all the others and that the variant of São Vicente though more recently developed is social and politically important. He clearly puts the creole of Santiago before any other and uses the argument that other scholars from São Vicente have themselves admitted that the variant of Santiago is the one that should be considered when it comes to the patterning of the Cape Verdean Creole (Veiga, 1996: 12).

This division in terms of the analysis of the Cape Verdean Creole reflects the way the Cape Verdeans represent themselves in terms of regional identities. The fact the Cape Verdean population is a mixture of Europeans and Africans, mostly, creates a divide between being 'European' and 'African'. Some islands are seen as more 'European' while others more 'African', but overall Cape Verde is viewed as undoubtedly 'European' in culture.

I do not know in the Cape Verdean Creole any form which does not derive its origin from the Portuguese. (Silva, 1984[1957]: 38, translation mine)

While Silva admits some African influence in the leeward part of the archipelago, he denies it in relation to the windward part (where his home island is situated).

He thinks that the Cape Verdean Creole is grammatically simpler than the Portuguese, in the same way that the Portuguese and the other roman languages are simpler versions of the Latin. He thinks that in the archipelago the metropolitan Portuguese has been easily 'contaminated' by the African languages of the slaves. There is a certain notion of 'impurity' and 'contamination' of the European cultural and linguistic elements by the African culture.

6. Modern-day views on creole languages represent a different stance from those held by mid-twentieth-century Cape Verdean linguists like Silva (1984[1957]) and Almada (1961), as well as by the colonial and postcolonial elites in power. But they are relatively recent as Holm points out:

It is only comparatively recently that linguists have realized that pidgins and creoles are not wrong versions of other languages but rather *new* languages. (...) Their systems are so different, in fact, that can hardly be considered even dialects of their base language. They are new languages, shaped by many of the same linguistic forces that shaped English and other ‘proper’ languages. (Holm, 2000: 1)

The more traditional nineteenth- and early twentieth-century views, which expressed the asymmetry between Europeans and natives in terms of differences in ‘civilization’, were later replaced during the second half of the twentieth century by explanations based on the ‘power asymmetry’ between coloniser and colonised. Creoles are no longer the languages of ‘inferior’ peoples but of ‘oppressed’ ones. Past theories stated that the natives were not capable of learning the superior languages of their masters because of their innate incapacity to learn complex languages. Today’s theories say that the natives did not learn the language of the Europeans because they have not been enough exposed to it. As linguists technically say the natives or slaves received a poor input, in terms of quantity and variety, of ‘superstrate’ languages (DeGraff, 1999: 5). So, the emergence of creole languages is not a question of capacity but one of opportunity.

Also, while past theories saw pidgins and creoles as imperfect realisations of the superior superstrate languages, today’s theories view creoles as language realisations in their own and revealing in themselves the essential structural characteristics that may show up in any language system. This is clearly expressed by Trudgill:

The scientific study of language has convinced scholars that *all* languages, and correspondingly *all* dialects, are equally ‘good’ as linguistic systems. All varieties of a language are structured, complex, rule-governed systems which are wholly adequate for the needs of their speakers. (1974: 8)

The emergence and growth of the ‘scientific’ study of creoles was made possible by the political turnover that led to the independence of the European colonies in the Caribbean:

The early growth of creole linguistics [in the early 1950s and 60s] was probably related to the movement toward independence in the British West Indies, which helped shift the perspective on language from that of the colonizer to that of the colonized. (Holm, 2000: 44)

7. Despite modern linguist ‘theories’ pointing out that creole languages are not inferior versions of former European languages, most of the postcolonial Cape Verdean elite still think that Creole is not serious enough to be the sole official language. At the present, Portuguese is the official state language in Cape Verde, which means it is used in schools, administration, and every formal domain of Cape Verdean society, while Creole, despite being spoken by everyone, is viewed as the language of informal contexts and is still waiting to be implemented as national language side by side with Portuguese. Although the postcolonial political elite has vowed to make Creole the national language, in practice little has been done so far. So, it seems that the postcolonial elite are still held hostage of the old prejudices about Creole speaking emerged during centuries of colonialism.

The local political and intellectual elites use the existing regional divides within the archipelago as an excuse not to take seriously the adoption of Creole as the sole national language in Cape Verde. The regional identity divide between *badiu* and *sampadjudo* (or even more detailed varieties according to each island’s natives) creoles seriously hampers any attempt to introduce a standard writing for Cape Verdean Creole and to make it the official language. In the 1970s, when the first bilingual programs were introduced in the Boston area, in the U.S., among Cape Verdean immigrants, families from the islands of Brava and Fogo refused to accept their children be taught the creole variant of Santiago, which they see as an African stronghold. Regional and racial divides within the Cape Verdean society, both within and without the archipelago, hamper the acceptance of Creole as the real national language of the country.

For the local elites the use of Portuguese as the state and official language gives them an edge over the masses who are speakers of Creole and illiterates of Portuguese. The elites use Portuguese as the contact language between Cape Verde and Portugal, which represents its most important trade and political partner and which host the largest Cape Verdean immigrant community in Europe. The fact that the Portuguese is also the schooling language gives an advantage to the elite’s children who use it as a lever to enter Portuguese universities.

So despite a quarter of a century past independence, Cape Verde and its political and intellectual elites are still being shadowed by old colonial identity representations. The country remains essentially diglossic, a situation that is still common among the many of ex-colonies. As Sebba points out:

It is those who have power within a society who are able, by and large, to define what is ‘standard’ and what is ‘inferior’. During colonial times, the colonial masters –expatriates and the locally born elite– where able to define the standard language of the colonising country as the norm, with local languages, including pidgins and creoles, as inferior or substandard. Independence has swept away the expatriate elites in many countries since about 1960 –but the status of pidgins and creoles in many pla-

ces is unchanged. Even where there have been positive changes in status for developing languages, often there has been little practical improvement. This may be due to power being held by an elite who can comfortably use the official standard or lexifier language. (1997: 236-237)

Manuel Veiga, who is likely the only official voice seriously in favour of Creole (he is a linguistic and politician at the same time), argues that the Cape Verdean creole should be taught as first language and the Portuguese as second. Neither of the two should be taken to the exclusion of the other. If Cape Verde really wants to be a bilingual country it must promote the formal teaching of Creole while at the same time keeps Portuguese as a foreign second language.

Finally, the strongest argument against making Creole the schooling and official language is one of budget. It would require a significant amount of money to set out all the necessary requisites for replacing Portuguese with Creole in schools (books written in Creole, teachers capable of teaching it, and so forth). Therefore, it seems that Cape Verde will have to wait a few more years until serious thoughts are given to the adoption of Creole as the de facto national and official language. As Sebba (1997: 237) acknowledges, the fact that the postcolonial elites have a vested interest in keeping political control over the masses works against the rising of Creole to a national language.

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