

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT  
OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE:  
THE PIDGIN CREOLE HYPOTHESIS  
BY

ERNIE A. SMITH PH.D.

The most publicized and by a 1979 federal court decree vested with a veneer of being a cogent and authentic theory, on the origin and historical development of African American speech, is the Pidgin/Creole Hypothesis. The linguists and social scientists who hold this view are commonly called Creolists. In their view, writes William Stewart (1971:351)

"The American Negro dialects probably derived from a creolized form of English once spoken on American plantations by Negro slaves and seemingly related to Creolized forms of English, which are still spoken by Negroes in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean..."

The Pidgin/Creolists contend that, by systematically comparing, contrasting, and tracing certain similarities in the phonological, morpho-syntactical, and semanto-lexemic features (sound, word formation and word meanings) in existing Creole dialects in West Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, one can observe a quite evident high degree of commonality in the speech patterns of these communities. According to the Pidgin/Creolists, the similarity and commonality in these dialects is evidence of a "genetic kinship" that exists in their underlying deep structures. They posit that, although it is obscured by certain surface modifications, the deep structure of contemporary African American speech is akin to and can be traced to the English language continuum. (see Bailey, 1969; Dalby, 1972; DeCamp, 1969; Dillard 1972; Key, 1973; Taylor, 1969.)

The Pidgin/Creolists contend that with the exception of a few vocabulary items, here and there, there are no African elements in Black American speech at all. In their view, from the very inception of the colonial era contacts made between the Niger-

Congo African and the European people the hybrid vernaculars which emerged, for trading and other transactions between them, were the unique linguistic inventions and creations of the Europeans.

The Pidgin/Creolists posit that, when European and West African languages first converged, what developed initially on the West Coast of Africa was a mixed or hybrid contact vernacular called "pidgin"(1). In Pidgin/Creole linguistics it is held that, by

1 Pidgin: "refers to a language which has no native speakers. It thus exists only as a lingua franca. When the pidgin becomes the only language of a speech community, it then becomes a creole. (Dillard, 1972:303)

virtue of the fact that all pidgin dialects emerged as contact vernaculars, expressly to facilitate communication, as primarily a trading or transactional hybrid vernacular, these mixed African and European pidgin dialects were essentially lingua francas(2). As Robert Hall states, (1962:152)

"A pidgin normally owes its origin to relatively casual, short-term contact between groups which do not have a language in common...a pidgin can arise on occasion, even in the space of only a few hours - whenever an emergency situation calls for communication on a minimal level of comprehension" (see DeCamp p. 20 in Dell Hymes 1977)

In pidgin/creole linguistic theory, actually any language that facilitates communication, between two people who cannot speak each others native language, is a lingua franca. On this basis the Pidgin/Creolists posit that all "pidgins" are lingua francas. They caution however that, while all pidgins are lingua francas, not all lingua francas are pidgins. This is because, as is often the case, a third completely autonomous language that is shared or spoken in common can be utilized for such purposes. All Pidgin/Creolists view the worlds pidgin and creole dialects as being European

2 Lingua Franca: "..a language used for purposes of wider communication, especially in a group when the native language of no member of the group will suffice. If a Puerto Rican, a German,

Israeli, and an Icelander speak to each other in English, then English is being used as a lingua franca. The Mediterranean lingua franca known as Sabir was an outstanding example of such a language. A lingua franca which has no native speakers (like Sabir, but unlike English) is a PIDGIN (q.v.) (Dillard 1972:302) inventions. However, on the issue of origins and kinship, i.e., the genesis and familial affinity of pidgin and creole dialects, Pidgin/Creolists are divided into two camps, those who posit a "polygenetic" view, and those who posit a "monogenetic" view.

The Pidgin/Creolists who posit the polygenetic view are those who view the world's pidgin and creole dialects as having been created by the European colonials who settled in the African, Asian, Caribbean and Latin American diaspora wherein each pidgin emerged. Their contention is that, in the beginning, as primarily a lingua franca, used for trading interactions, in the Portuguese colonies there emerged a Portuguese Pidgin. In the Spanish colonies there emerged a Spanish Pidgin, and in the Dutch, French and English colonies a Dutch, French, and English Pidgin emerged, respectively.

The polygenesisists contend that, as time passed and the slave trade flourished on the West coast of Africa, in the Caribbean, and in the colonial North and South American diaspora, many slave descendants were born on plantations, and in other colonial European social environments, in which these transactional lingua francas or plantation pidgin dialects were acquired as their native languages or mother tongues. The Pidgin/Creolists posit that, over time, in the new world colonies or diaspora, the pidgin vernaculars that were initially created on the West coast of Africa for trading and other transactions, became the principle vehicle for communication between the captive Africans and their European slave-masters.

According to the polygenesisists, being born in captivity and exposed only to a plantation pidgin dialect, when African slaves acquired these hybrid contact vernaculars, as their primary language or mother tongues, the slaves and the hybrid dialects they acquired were distinguished as being Creoles(3). Thus, in the Portuguese colonies, Portuguese Pidgin became Portuguese Creole. In Spanish colonies, Spanish Pidgin became Spanish

Creole. In Dutch, French and English colonies, Dutch Pidgin, French Pidgin and English Pidgin became Dutch Creole, French Creole and English Creole, respectively. As stated above, not all Pidgin/Creolists subscribe

3 Creole: The term creole (from the Portuguese crioulo, via Spanish and French) originally meant a white man of European descent born and raised in a tropical or semi-tropical colony. Only later was the meaning extended to include indigenous natives and others of non-European origin, e.g. African slaves...Most creoles, like most pidgins, are European based, i.e., each has derived most of its vocabulary from one or more European languages (DeCamp, 1977:15) "In linguistic usage, refers to a language which was a PIDGIN (q.v.) at an earlier historical stage, but which became the only (or principal) language of a speech community. The best known creoles are Haitian (French) Creole and Sranan Tongo of Surinam. There are related creole languages in West Africa and in the Pacific. (Dillard, 1972:300)

to the theory that each of the new world "pidgin", "creole" dialects were the language specific creations of each colonial European speech community wherein they emerged. Emphasizing the tremendous similarities that exists among the Caribbean creoles and the parallel features that exists in the creoles of the South Pacific and the Far East, many Pidgin/Creolists reject the "polygenetic" theory given above. They contend that European and non-Indo-European linguistic convergence and hybridization did not begin in the colonial era. The historical fact is there were Indo-European contacts with non Indo-European people at a much earlier period. In light of this historical fact these Pidgin/Creolists contend that linguistic hybridization had to have occurred when the earlier or first sustained contact was made between European and non-European people. Therefore, instead of a "poly-genesis" they posit a "monogenesis" or single language origin of all pidgin and creole dialects.

Basically the proponents of the monogenetic view contend that all pidgin/creoles have a common ancestor from which all pidgin and creole dialects have been formed. But then, not all proponents of the monogenetic view agree on the issue of which Indo-European

language the proto-pidgin dialect was based. According to David DeCamp (1977:22)

"During the 1950's several scholars became increasingly dissatisfied with the polygenetic theories. In 1951 Navarro Tomas argued that Papiamentu was not an indigenous Caribbean blend of Portuguese and/or Spanish with African elements, but rather had its origin in the Portuguese used as a trade jargon in West Africa during the slave trade. He was by no means the first to point to the key importance of Portuguese in the history of pidgin-creole. Schuchardt had stressed the role of Portuguese, and Hesselings had seen it as the origin of Afrikaans and Negerhollands".

As shown here, some of the supporters of the monogenetic view posit a Portuguese based pidgin as being the "proto" or first colonial trade lingua franca. They argue that the historical record verifies that, before the colonial era, the Portuguese were the first to engage in international trade along the West and East coasts of Africa and on into India and China. On this basis they contend that, the European language upon which all pidgins are based is Portuguese. Still others, Whinnom for example, (1965:553-7) posited Sabir, a much earlier developed lingua franca of the Mediterranean, as being the proto-pidgin upon which all new world or colonial pidgin/creoles are based.

The Pidgin/Creolists who are proponents of the view that Sabir is the proto-pidgin from which all new world European pidgin/creoles are derived base their contention on the fact that, as a lingua franca, Sabir can be traced as far back as the Crusades. They contend that, contrary to the widely held belief that Sabir was a dead language, or dying out, by the time of the later European colonization of Africa, India and Asia, in fact, as recent as 1909 Hugo Schuchardt found Sabir to be still very much alive (See "Die Lingua franca" Zeitschrift fur romanische Philologie 33:441-61). In the pidgin/creolist literature one of the first things that one will discern is that, unlike the comparative linguists who study Indo-European languages and use continuity in the deep structure or rules of grammar (phonology, morphology and morpho-syntax) as their criteria for positing genetic kinship, most Pidgin/Creolists

seem to be completely oblivious to or have an aversion to this criteria when classifying the languages with which they deal. As opposed to continuity in the rules of phonology, morphology and morpho-syntax, (grammar) most Pidgin/Creolists use as their criteria or basis for positing genetic kinship, the etymology of the dominant lexicon.

Although not a majority there are however, some Pidgin/Creolists who very strictly adhere to the criteria of continuity in the deep structure or underlying rules of grammar as their basis for positing genetic kinship. In the case of African American speech, these "structuralists" Pidgin/Creolists contend that, there is no provable African content in the underlying deep structure or grammar of African American speech. The structuralists contend that English is not only the parent of the dominant lexicon in African American speech, the grammar rules that underlie the deep phonology, morphology and syntax of Black American speech are likewise English based. The structuralists Pidgin/Creolists contend that the grammar of Black English is a survival of archaic Indo-European linguistic forms, i.e., old English, Middle English and Early Modern English grammar. They contend that if there are any African elements in the speech of African Americans, they are not linguistic retentions made by any Africans. They are "borrowings" made by Europeans from the African tongues, and introduced into the pidgin dialects the Europeans invented and taught to the African slaves.

In contrast to the structuralists who deny the existence of a non Indo-European phonology, morphology and syntax in the substratum of pidgin/creole dialects throughout the world, there are those Pidgin/Creolists who do not use grammar as their criteria (see Romaine 1994). These Pidgin/Creolists are basically "etymologist". Their focus being the origin and root meanings of words, it is the etymologists who are honest enough to admit to the existence of a non Indo-European phonology, morphology and syntax in the substratum of the worlds pidgin and creole dialects. The essential difference is that, in the case of African American speech, the etymologists Pidgin/Creolists use as their criteria for positing familial kinship, the base or etymology of the dominant lexicon. The etymologist contend that the empirical

evidence is irrefutable. Etymologically, the dominant lexicon in African American speech is English and based on this criteria, the language family to which African American speech belongs and is a dialect of - is English.

This use of continuity in the rules of grammar when classifying Indo-European languages (even those known to be hybrids) but the etymology of the dominant lexicon, when classifying languages that are European and African hybrids, is clearly not consistent. If Indo-European languages are classified genetically according to their rules of grammar, but when classifying Indo-European and African language, pidgins and creoles the criteria for positing genetic kinship changes to the family or etymology of the dominant lexifier, this prompts the question, why is the same criteria not used? For, it is one thing to deny that there is any provable African content in the deep structure or grammar rules of African American speech, it is another to use a totally different criteria as a basis for positing genetic kinship and then making such an allegation.

When we critically examine the pidgin/creolists literature the answer to the question of why a different criteria is used for positing genetic kinship in pidgin/creole languages, as opposed to Indo-European languages, is made very clear. The short answer is, to reify the myth of "white supremacy". That is, all Pidgin/Creolists essentially believe that, globally, whenever and wherever there has been contact between European and non-European people, in the linguistic blending or assimilation of European and non-European languages, the entire hybridization or pidginization process was solely a function of the European's linguistic acumen. This being the case, all of the world's pidgin and creole dialects are European language based. The inference is that, being innately superior to the Africans and all people of color, the Europeans and their languages were, in all respects, dominant.

In the pidgin/creolists literature we find that, because of their essentially white supremacist bent, there are no Pidgin/Creolists who posit African American speech as being the linguistic continuity of Africa in Black America. Instead, what we find is a uniform depiction of the antebellum contacts between Europeans and

African people as being contacts in which, Africans were primitive and docile savages who, not having the capacity for fully human thoughts, had not developed a fully human language or communication system of their own. The impression is given that Africans had only the rudiments of a language to start with. Therefore, the "scant baggage" of feral grunts that the Africans possessed most certainly could not have been the grammatical or the lexical base upon which the pidgin dialects were developed.

When Pidgin/Creolists are asked to describe the process by which the pidgin English dialect was invented and the method by which it was taught to the African slaves, the most popular description put forth is the "baby talk" theory. The essence of this theory is that, initially, the African slaves had no competence in the European languages to which they were exposed, what so ever. This being the case, in order to communicate with their African vassals it was incumbent upon the European slave-masters to devise a communication system. The Pidgin/Creolists contend that this was done by Europeans having "mutilated" or greatly "simplified" their speech. This, mutilated speech is depicted as being a form of speech comparable to that used by adults when they talk to "babies". It is this, "baby talk", a simplified, corrupt or mutilated form of English, that was taught to the African slaves, who then adopted it and made it their native tongue. This is the view that was held and explicitly put forth by Professor George Phillip Krapp of Columbia University. Even though he conceded that, there was no evidence to support his "baby talk" hypothesis Krapp was one of the first to posit the condition of dominance and subordination as being very significant in the creation of the English based plantation pidgin/creole dialects. Inferring that Africans were docile tabula rasa or "blank slates" upon which the Europeans imprinted their infantile like linguistic creations, in his work "The English of the Negro" (1924) Krapp describes the assimilation process as follows:

The assimilation of the language of the Negroes to the whites did not take place all at once. Though the historical evidence is not as full as might be wished, the stages can be followed with some certainty. When the Negroes were first brought to America they could have known no English. Their usefulness as servants

however, required that some kind of communication between master and slave be developed. There is little likelihood that any of the masters exerted themselves to understand the native language of the Negroes in order to communicate with them. On the contrary, from the beginning the white overlords addressed themselves in English to their Black vassals. It is not difficult to imagine what kind of English this would be. It would be a very much simplified English - the kind of English some people employ when they talk to babies".

Although, the postulation that the pidginization process occurred as a function of "master to slave 'baby-talk'" is a theory that has widespread acceptance, the view that the European based pidgin/creoles were the result of "baby-talk" is not accepted as valid by all pidgin/creolists. For example, David DeCamp writes; (1977:19)

"The baby-talk theory is easily refuted. First, all the early accounts (dating from the eighteenth century in Jamaica, for example) report that the white planters and their families were learning the creole from the slaves, not vice versa (Cassidy 1961:21-3). Furthermore, if each European had indeed improvised his own variety of baby-talk to communicate with his servants and slaves, how could one explain the fact that all dialects of creole French, including those in the Indian Ocean, are mutually intelligible?"

As shown here the "baby-talk" thesis is refuted on two grounds. First, by the fact that contrary to the claim that it was the Europeans who invented and taught their pidgin dialects to the slaves, the historical record reveals that it was actually the slaves who taught their plantation hybrid dialects to the Europeans. Second, and what is even more incongruent in the "baby talk" thesis, is the unanswered to this day question. How is it that, in the mutilation of their autochthonous or superstrate European languages to invent a pidgin, all antebellum planters improvised by making the very same mutilations or deviations?

While the description of the hybridization or pidginization

process via "baby talk", given above, is at least crudely rational, the depiction provided by others are not nearly as ambitious. In the minds of all white supremacists, Africa is a land of wild beasts and untamed savages. Therefore, in the main, the view held and put forth by most Pidgin/Creolists is that, during the era of colonialism and antebellum slavery, Niger-Congo Africans had not yet evolved linguistically beyond a primitive signaling system of primal grunts, to convey messages associated with the environment, such as danger, feeding, nesting, and flocking, etc. and a few more complex babblings to stake out territory and attract mates".

This view is typified by the writings of Ambrose E. Gonzales. While he did not explicitly characterize Africans as being savages or feral beasts, clearly a Latino of the white supremacists ilk, in his work "Black Border" Gonzales belittles Africans as being biophysically unequipped to speak European languages. He states; (1922:10)

"Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullahs seized upon the peasant English used by some of the early settlers and by the white servants of the wealthier colonists, wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as well as they could, and, enriched with certain expressive African words, it issued through their flat noses and thick lips as so workable a form of speech that it was gradually adopted by the other slaves and became in time the accepted Negro speech of the lower districts of South Carolina and Georgia. The words are of course not African, for the African brought over or retained only a few words of his jungle tongue, and even these few are by no means authenticated as part of the original scant baggage of the Negro slaves".

Actually Gonzales's view that the physiogamy or oropharyngeal anatomy of African people is not suited for speaking European languages merely apes a similar slur made earlier by another white supremacists Latino, the French writer, Rene Payen-Bellisle. In his work *Sons et Formes du Creoles dans les Antilles* Payen-Bellisle writes; (1894:22)

"In order to understand the absence in French Creole

dialects of the front rounded vowels of French, one merely had to look at the lips of the Negro".

Here, in the quote given just above, we have an example of the profound scholarship that undergirds the pidgin/creole theory. While the differences in Black and White American speech are, overtly, attributed to innate biophysical differences in the oropharyngeal anatomy of the two races, it should be understood that the perception of Niger-Congo African people as savages who did not have fully human languages is subtly contained in the work of all Pidgin/Creolists. The only difference is that, whereas the overt white supremacists contend that, Africans were biophysically underdeveloped and had no languages in the first place (other than a vast array of primal grunts and semi-savage babblings) the covert white supremacists are a bit more rational and humane. The covert white supremacists do not denigrate the oropharyngeal anatomy of the African race. What they do is concede that African people did have the cortical capacity for language (at least enough capacity to conspire to rebel) but then, in their description of the hybridization or pidginization process, Africans are depicted as being a mentally docile people. As such, under conditions on antebellum plantations in which they were segregated linguistically from others who spoke their African dialects, being primarily exposed to poor European language models, Africans were systematically stripped of their African tongues. Typical of those who posited this view the late John Bennett, who states (1926:25)

"The Africans, plastic as they are by nature, quickly lost their own language, and acquired imperfectly the dialects of the british peasantry among whom they worked, and by whom very generally they were directed. The main reason was, perhaps, that, at the height of the, trade owing to the danger of conspiracy, large groups of Negroes upon great plantations and in any considerable establishments, were generally made up, by preference, of Negroes of different tribes, speaking different languages and dialects unknown to one another".

Thus, even the Pidgin/Creolists who acknowledge that, prior to

having come into contact with European languages Africans did have fully developed languages of their own, very subtly infer that it was only the Europeans who had the higher cortical functioning and capacity for creating language and inventing new forms of speech. The impression is given that the very genesis of "human" language for African people was when European traders, planters and overseer's mutilated or "simplified" their European languages and created a language for the African ancestors of African American people. In other words, in the pidginization process, the Africans did not invent or purposefully contribute anything.

And so, whether they support the polygenetic or monogenetic view, on the origin of pidgin and creole dialects and whether they adhere to the criteria of continuity in the rules of phonology, morphology and morpho-syntax (grammar) or the etymology of the dominant lexicon, for positing genetic kinship, in the final analysis all Pidgin/Creolists view African American speech as being English language based.

Of course it can be argued that the writings cited as the position of the Pidgin/Creolists are dated, i.e., all of the works which have been cited as examples are at least sixty to seventy years old. Hence, a criticism of the pidgin/creolist theory on the basis of works as antiquated as those cited above is ridiculous. While there may well be some contemporary Pidgin/Creolists who view African people the way they were viewed at the turn of the century, the fact is, it is the more recent research and writings of Pidgin/Creolists that reflects their contemporary thinking.

With regards to the dates of the pidgin/creolists writings cited, this observation is true. As to whether this negates the criticism I have made I do not think so. Consider for example the work of Mary R. Key, - "The History of Black English" (1973). Here we have a Pidgin/Creolist's article of a more recent vintage. In this work Key puts forth a description of the hybridization process that seems to be very rational and plausible. In her view the adoption and transmission of African features into English occurred via what she submits was a "reinforcement value of features" and the objective condition of "proportional population ratios". In essence, Key's "reinforcement value of features"

thesis is that, when the African and European languages converged, it was the prior existing features which both language systems possessed that were the easiest to utilize. Key posits that, this being the case, the features that both languages possessed, prior to any contact, tended to be the features that were retained and used in the restructuring and hybridization process.

In Key's view, naturally, the already existing features that were different presented the most difficulty. Hence, she posits that, in the hybridization process, the features that were different or unlike, prior to any contact, were not utilized. In fact, Key posits that, it was the features that were not already possessed in common that were jettisoned or discarded by both.

This process of linguistic "hybridization" and assimilation, via the utilization and reinforcement of prior existing features that both languages had in common and the rejection of uncommon or unlike features, is seen by Key as being a very systematic method by which the speakers of Early Modern English (EModE) invented what is currently called "Black English" (BE). Key argues that two critical factors support her position: (1) The evidence that much of what is considered to be uniquely different about Black American speech can, in fact, be traced to EModE. (2) In the colonial diaspora the proportional population ratios of Europeans to Africans made the influence of English dominant.

When considered in the light of some very basic science principles, Key's thesis is prima facie valid. That is, Key's basic contention is that, structural linguistic fusion or hybridization is not a random or haphazard process. It is a very systematic synthesis that adheres to rule governed principles. In fact, when carefully considered, Key's view of linguistic convergence and the hybridization or linguistic blending that occurs, is very much analogous to a fusion or bonding principle that occurs in the science of chemistry.

In chemistry, it is known that "all atoms seek to have a stable eight, or two, ELECTRONS in their outside shell (the OCTET rule). To achieve a stable OCTET when ATOMS of LOW IONIZATION ENERGY encounter atoms of HIGH ELECTRONEGATIVITY, ATOMS that have LOW

IONIZATION ENERGIES lose their ELECTRONS. Or rather, it is easiest to give them up. In losing their ELECTRONS these ATOMS end up with more PROTONS than ELECTRONS and take a POSITIVE CHARGE. On the other hand, ATOMS that have HIGH IONIZATION ENERGIES that is, ATOMS that have MORE ELECTRONS than PROTONS have a NEGATIVE CHARGE. Although these ATOMS have HIGH ELECTRONEGATIVITY, in satisfying the OCTET rule, these atoms still need or want more electrons. When ATOMS of LOW IONIZATION ENERGY (those wanting to get rid of an electron) ENCOUNTER atoms of HIGH ELECTRONEGATIVITY (those wanting more electrons) there is a TRANSFER of ELECTRONS from ONE to the OTHER. This forms both a POSITIVE ION and a NEGATIVE ION. The ATTRACTIVE FORCE of these OPPOSITE CHARGES holds the atoms together in an IONIC BOND" (4).

When two ATOMS with the same electron AFFINITY encounter each other there CAN'T BE a TRANSFER of ELECTRONS since BOTH atoms WANT them with EQUAL force". (Study Guide Intro to Chemistry 110; Chaffey College). When this occurs a bond is formed between ATOMS by the SHARING of one or more electrons. (Websters Dictionary 1993:267) More precisely, two ATOMS with the same electron AFFINITY are sharing the same outside or valance electrons. Known, in chemistry as "covalent" bonding, as such each ATOM "thinks" that it is surrounded by eight electrons. Unlike "ionic" bonding" in which "likes repel and unalikes attract", in covalent bonding "likes 4 Ionic Bond: a chemical bond formed between oppositely charged species because of their mutual electrostatic attraction. Websters Collegiate Dictionary Tenth Edition (1993:618)

appear to attract and unalikes appear to repel". But, what really occurs is that two "alikes" are attracted to the same "un-alike". Because neither can completely possess the electron they both share it.

It is this principle of "covalent" bonding around an atom shared in common to which the notion of language blending, by the sharing of features already held in common, is analogous. The analogy is that, in the blending process each language system bonds around

the features that it "thinks" belongs to it. That is, as in chemical covalent bonding the blending or hybridization process that occurs to form a hybrid dialect, is via a "likes attract and unalikes repel" fusion or covalent bonding around "like" elements.

In terms of the extent to which the proportional population ratios, of Whites to Blacks, influenced the hybridization process, there is also a very rational behavioral science principle that undergirds Key's view. Known in reinforcement learning theory as the "law of exercise", there is a principle which holds that; the more an act is repeated the more an act is reinforced and hence, - the act gets learned. The "law of exercise" holds that, conversely, the less an act is repeated the less it gets reinforced and hence the less it is learned.

The "law of exercise" holds that, in fact, acts frequently repeated tend to extinguish acts that are performed infrequently. In essence the "law of exercise" operates on a principle of reinforcement called "operant conditioning". "Operant" being; that which operates to produce effects, i.e., a response or behavior elicited by an environment rather than a specific stimulus. Conditioning being; a process by which "the desired behavior or increasingly closer approximations to it are followed by a rewarding or reinforcing stimulus" (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Tenth edition 1993:814). As viewed by Key then, "Black English" or "Black Vernacular English" (BEV) was invented by English speaking Europeans and taught to Africans through a stimulus response conditioning process.

Although what Key puts forth is a very coherent and cogent thesis, Key's view does not square with certain countervailing historical facts. For example, while the principle that "the more an act is repeated the more it gets learned" is a valid learning theory, it is well known, among reinforcement theorist, that the "law of exercise" is only valid in conjunction with another "conditioning" principle that explains why certain acts tend to get repeated and certain acts do not. In learning theory this principle is known as the "law of effect".

As a principle posited as an explanation for why certain acts tend to get repeated while others do not, the "law of effect" holds that, it is not repetition, in and of itself, that causes an act

to get repeated. It is "positive reinforcement". That is, as a rule, the acts that tend to get repeated are acts that gratify a basic want or need. Acts that are not gratifying, or that are not gratified, tend not to get repeated and therefore do not get learned.

Clearly, pivotal to the validity of Key's "reinforcement value of features" and her "proportional population ratios" theory, is whether or not there was "positive reinforcement". There is ample evidence that OWNING, EXPLOITING and DEHUMANIZING African slaves was a very lucrative and positive experience for the colonial European slave-masters. However, the critics of Key's view take strong exception to her inference that being enslaved, misused, degraded and dehumanized was in any sense a positive experience for the slaves.

Critics of Key's view contend that two critical factors contradict her thesis. Firstly, they posit, Key's claim that Europeans outnumbered African slaves on the plantations does not square with the account given by historians who report that there were far more African slaves on plantations than Europeans. (see; Elkins (1971), Franklin (1980), Lynd (1967). Clearly, if there were more African slaves than Europeans on the plantations then (as in the case of modern penal institutions) the numerically dominant language would not have been that of the Europeans.

Secondly, contend Key's critics, the view that Key has of what the social and linguistic conditions were, on the antebellum plantations, likewise does not square with the accounts given by many historians and literary scholars of what the social and linguistic conditions were. The critic's argument here is that, in order for the slaves to have been taught a European language based pidgin dialect, the "conditioning" interactions or contacts between the Europeans and the African's would have to have been contacts in which there was "positive reinforcement".

According to Key's critics human slavery is not normal and plantation systems were not normal societies. The empirical evidence is that, for the slaves, conditions were very harsh, cruel and inhuman. In particular, in their attempts to reduce the

slaves to the level of mute brutes, the Europeans used a host of measures to prevent any and all language use, development and learning among the slaves. As proof of this, the critics of Key's thesis cite the well documented fact that, very often, as a measure to prevent conspiracies and insurrections, the slaves were segregated linguistically. They point out that even Pidgin/Creolists themselves cite this practice as being, among others, the very means by which the slaves were "driven" to the use of the European invented pidgin vernaculars.

The critics of Key's thesis contend that if, as the Pidgin/Creolist themselves argue, in order to prevent conspiracies, African slaves were segregated linguistically and it was via this linguistic segregation that the slaves were "driven" to the use of a common "pidgin" dialect, then the bitter irony is that, the linguistic segregation of the slaves did not prevent conspiracies or revolts. For, by their own admission the linguistic segregation of slaves, in fact, facilitated more effective communications between the slaves. Now, if a common pidgin dialect facilitated more effective communications between the slaves, then this common pidgin dialect, in fact, facilitated the slave's conspiracies and if this common pidgin dialect facilitated the slave's conspiracies it, in fact, aided and abetted the slave's revolts.

The fact of the matter is, the historians report that it was mainly on the slave ships that, as a means of circumventing communication and organized revolts, the slaves were separated ethnically and linguistically. According to the historians, the records of activities at the slave auction and on the plantations reveal that, as a rule, the planters did not follow this practice. In fact, in his book *Black English* Joseph Dillard (1973:74) states that among the planters, just as people prefer certain breeds of cows, horses and dogs, the more common practice was that the planters preferred and selected Africans from the same tribes or ethnic backgrounds.

Another fact that Key's critics cite, in their refutation of Key's theory, is that under conditions which were more designed to impede normal language from emerging among the African slaves and

preventing any normal communication from developing between them, rather than being conducive to normal language acquisition and second language learning, there were far more measures employed by the colonial planters to prevent the learning of the European languages, than there were to teach them.

First, and most notably, there was a denial of formal European language and literacy instruction to slaves via anti-literacy laws. Second, there was the use of a harness or mouthpiece called a "bit" (see picture in appendix). In fact, in a PBS televised interview, Pulitzer Prize winning author, Toni Morrison, describes how, as a means of punishing slaves who verbally "back sassed" or acted "uppity" towards ole massa, many slaves were compelled to wear a "bit" in their mouths. Although many white supremacists posit, as a ludicrous explanation for this heinous practice, that it was to prevent the slaves from eating up the crop, the record reveals that the "bit" was used primarily to prevent two way oral communication and hence conspiracies among the rebellious slaves. (Morrison (1990).

Key's critics also point out that, just as the "bit" prevented conversations and conspiracies between the slaves it also prevented two-way oral communication between the slave-master and the slaves compelled to wear them. Therefore, the ole English speaking slave master did not purposefully teach an African slave a damn thing linguistically. Thirdly, there is the fact that, besides the "bit" as a another means of circumventing slave rebellions, rather than physically mutilate and permanently maim their recalcitrant slaves many planters found it much more profitable to just sell them off to other plantations.

But then, not all slaves who behaved belligerently were compelled to wear a "bit" or sold off. The historians report that to terrorize and instill fear in the slave masses, many unruly slaves were publicly whipped and beaten to death.

Thus, Key's thesis that the "reinforcement of common linguistic features" and the "proportional population ratios" governed the hybridization process is countered by the empirical evidence that, rather than encouraging two way communications and reinforcing

language development among the slaves, the actual social practice was more that of prohibiting slaves from talking period. This being the case, Key's view of African American speech being, in essence, an English vernacular formed in a base of an archaic EModE just does not square with the documented historical facts.

For, as measures employed to prevent language use and communication among the slaves, i.e., (1) the linguistic segregation of slaves, (2) the use of anti-literacy laws, (3) the fitting of "uppity" slaves with "bits", (4) the practice of selling "belligerent" slaves off or (5) whipping them to death, these and a host of other measures, all raise doubt as to whether any extensive oral interaction between the slaves and their English speaking slave-masters, even occurred. That is, conditions necessary for any European based pidgin vernacular to have emerged among the slaves simply did not exist.

When Pidgin/Creolists are confronted with the empirical evidence that African slaves actually outnumbered Europeans on the antebellum plantations, unable to sustain their claim of numerical dominance, the Pidgin/Creolists then attempt to negate the influence of numerical dominance by contending that, it was not so much the dominant numerical ratios but the dominant social role of the Europeans over the Africans that determined the base upon which the hybrid pidgin dialects were formed.

When they are confronted with the fact that their social dominance thesis is refuted by the empirical evidence of a lack of any sustained master and slave contacts that would have been positive reinforcement, for language acquisition, the Pidgin/Creolists resort to their ultimate white supremacist stance, i.e., the profoundly diffuse linguistic state of Africans in the colonial era. What the Pidgin/Creolists contend here is that, the language diversity of Africa was so vast that, in any given African system, only a handful of Africans could even be found that could communicate with each other. They contend that, this profound linguistic diversity combined with the practice by plantation owners of segregating slaves who spoke the same languages, "drove" the African slaves to the use of the European invented plantation pidgin vernaculars.

There is however, another incongruence in Keys' thesis. Like all Pidgin/Creolists, Key posits the underlying substratum of African American speech to be English. Yet, she traces many Black English features to a non-English base. By this is meant, Key cites the fact that the Scottish colonials owned many slaves and that, on many plantations owned by English speaking planters, the Scots were the principle drivers or foremen. Key infers that (as they are so prevalent as policemen and military servicemen today) the Scottish and Irish overseers, had more contact with slaves than the English speaking owners of the plantations. Thus, Key posits, those features in the grammar of Black English that cannot be traced to Old, Middle or EModE, are very likely traceable to the Old Irish and Old Ulster Scots dialects. She writes (ibid 1973:3,4)

"There are some indications the Scots dialect might have had a greater influence on the development of BE than has been previously recognized. The immigration of the Ulster Scots as well as the other Scottish pioneers parallel the entrance of the Black people to the United States. History books tell of their close contact. Such as Scots foremen to slave workers...The possible close relationship of the Scots dialect and the development of BE is further hinted at by the frequent use of Scots or Gaelic names by Black people who had to adopt a surname for identification among English speakers"

The incongruence in citing the plantation labor relationships and influence of the Scottish and Irish dialects is that, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh are Celtic languages. As such, the extent to which African slaves had more contact with the Scottish and Irish people, than with the English, would mean that many elements in the underlying morphology and morpho-syntax of Black American speech would more likely be traced to the Celtic language continuum than to the English. In which case, based on morpho-syntactical criteria, what Key calls "Black English" would more accurately be called "Black Irish", "Black Scots" or "Black Welsh".

The critics of the Pidgin/Creolists theory contend that, this

attempt to posit the non-English grammatical features in Afro-American speech as being borrowings from another non-English Indo-European grammar, as opposed to being retentions traceable to the African linguistic continuum, is yet another example of how the Pidgin/Creolists refuse to acknowledge the humanity of African people. That is, other than acknowledging the African origins of African-American people, the fact of the matter is, the Pidgin/Creolists act as if the body literature on African language structures does not even exist. There is an inference that, where African American speech is concerned, the literature on African language structures is totally irrelevant.

The critics of the Pidgin/Creolists theory contend that, in using common origin and morpho-syntactical continuity as their criteria for genetic classification of Indo-European languages but, the etymology of the dominant lexicon, when classifying the language of African Americans, the Pigin/Creolists make languages traced to totally different morpho-syntactical continua genetically the same. When this is very critically considered, what is revealed is that in positing African American speech to be a dialect of English actually the Pidgin/Creolists theory is not a theory on the historical development of African American language at all. For, as Mervyn Alleyne states; (1971:125,126)

"The "pidgin" notion seems to beg the question of genesis. Or if it deals with the question, it implies there was linguistic discontinuity as far as the transmission of African linguistic forms is concerned. [p.126]..the way in which the genesis of Creole languages has been presented in much of the current work implies a break in any linguistic continuity with Africa. The implication is that Africans and African slaves gave up the African languages, that is, broke with the African linguistic tradition and accepted a pidgin i.e. primarily a European invention, a simplified version of the European language. To relate non-Standard dialects of Black American urban communities to a pidgin would lead to the inference that there has been discontinuity, as far as the transmission of an African cultural item is concerned, and would in fact support

the deficiency hypothesis".

It is then, not whether contemporary African American speech is derived from a colonial or antebellum "hybrid" lingua franca that is contested, by critics of the Pidgin/Creole theory. Nor, is there a question as to whether, in the creation of the hybrid dialects spoken by the Europeans and the African slaves, borrowings were made. What is questioned is, whether the deep structure, i.e., the morpho-syntactical base upon which the "hybrid" dialect of the African slaves and their descendants was formed is, English (Germanic), Scots/Irish (Celtic) or Wolof, Yoruba, Hausa etc. (African).

The critics of the pidgin/Creolist's theory contend that, it is virtually certain that when the African and European languages converged, as native speakers of European languages if, the Europeans invented any hybrid dialects, as a lingua franca, the colonial Europeans had to utilize their own grammatical systems as the base for the hybrid dialects they spoke. It follows logically that, compelled to use their own European grammars, as the base for the hybrid dialects they invented, any African words or Africanisms that exist in the Euro-American's hybrid English today had to have been "adopted" or "borrowed" into English. On the other hand, African words already existed in the Niger-Congo African languages before there was any contact with English speaking people. Therefore, African words and Africanisms have not been "borrowed" into the descendants of African slave's speech. In an African's speech, African words and Africanisms have been retained.

The critics of the pidgin/creole theory contend that, the essential and fundamental incongruence that makes the pidgin/creole theory completely untenable is the fact that, in its underlying deep structure African American speech does not follow the grammar rules of English or any other European language. That is, if African American speech is in fact a dialect of English, then the major difference one would expect to find in the speech of Afro-American and Euro-American people, would be in their vocabularies or semanto lexemic features. But, contend the critics, this is not the case.

When an empirical analysis is made of the grammars of the so-called pidgin and creole dialects in the African diaspora, not one of the vernaculars that are supposedly formed on a Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch and English language base, contains a European grammar with African vocabularies superimposed. In fact, contend the critics, when compared with the autochthonous or superstrate European languages upon which they are supposed to be based and genetically akin, the empirical evidence is that, while these so-called pidgin and creole languages have extensively borrowed or adopted European words, the underlying phonology and morpho-syntax of these dialects follow the rules of African grammar.

The critics of the pidgin/creole theory contend that, it is a confusion of the European language based pidgin/creole dialects (if any were invented) and the co-existing African language based hybrid vernaculars as being one and the same, that has led to a great deal of confusion in the literature regarding the familial affinity of African American speech. For, despite the fact that they have not produced a single pidgin or creole vernacular in the African diaspora that has been formed on a European phonology and morphosyntax (grammar) with a non-European lexicon (vocabulary) all Pidgin/Creolists, put forth the view that Black American speech is a European and not an African based linguistic system. The fact is, when we critically examine the phonetic, phonology, morphology and syntax of the speech of the descendants of Niger-Congo African slaves in the colonial diaspora, the empirical evidence refutes the the pidgin creole thesis.

In order to clarify the distinction that has been made here between a European based pidgin as opposed to a hybrid dialect that is African language based, a formula using the symbol E (to represent the European languages) and the symbol A (to represent the African languages), provides a method by which the white supremacists view of the pidginization process can be stated via an equation:

$$E + A = Ea$$

In essence, what this equation states is that, in their initial contacts and transactions with autochthonous Africans, as native speakers of European languages, the colonial Europeans, (E) did

indeed, learn and adopt some of the African (A) language's elements or features (words). However, although greatly simplified, the basic structure of the European languages remained unchanged. That is, the hybrid language which was invented and used by the Europeans to communicate with the Africans was basically the European's language (E) with only a few adopted African (A) features.

In order to symbolize this hybrid as being a European based pidgin dialect, an uppercase "E" and a lowercase "a" is used. This symbolization using "Ea" attempts to make concrete the fact that, in consonance with the comparative linguistics principle that genetic kinship in languages is based on a criterion of continuity in the rules of grammar, the symbols uppercase "E" and lowercase "a" implies that the hybrid vernacular does not contain an equal amount of both languages. The use of an upper case "E" and a lowercase "a" symbolizes the fact that in terms of its underlying phonology and morpho-syntax, it is the European language (uppercase "E") and not the African language (lowercase "a") that is dominant and hence genetically continued.

In figure 1. below this same hypothesis is presented using a model in which two language systems in contact are placed in a diglossic or hierarchical relationship. Analogous to the numerator and the denominator in mathematics, divided by a line, one language is placed above the line (the numerator). The other language is placed below the line (the denominator). The language placed above the line is the surface structure of the pidgin. The language placed below the line is the deep structure, i.e., the retained underlying morpho-syntactical structure.

Fig 1

African

European; Portuguese, English, French etc.

The first stage of the hybridization process is course the "pidgin" stage. This is the stage in which, with many borrowed African words, the English based hybrid dialect served as a lingua

franca. According to the Pidgin-Creole theorists, the borrowing of African words and adopting them into English was actually done by the Europeans. They contend that, had it not been for the Europeans having borrowed from the unlettered African savage's gibberish the few arguably authentic African features they did, these would not have been preserved in African American speech today.

As it expressly applies to African American speech and the English language, a formula for the model above would be written as follows;

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{African} & = & \text{A} \\ & & \text{English} \quad \quad \quad \text{E} \end{array}$$

The second stage is the "creole" stage. This is the stage in which African slaves, in the colonial diaspora, acquired the pidgin European dialect as their mother tongue. It is in the "creole" stage that more and more European elements, i.e., vocabulary and grammar are introduced into the surface structure of African American speech. Fig. 2 below is a model of the "creole" stage.

Fig 2.

African + European

European; Portuguese, English, French etc.

As expressly applied to African American speech and the English language, the formula for the second stage would be written as follows;

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{African + English} & = & \text{E + a} \\ & & \text{English} \quad \quad \quad \text{E} \end{array}$$

Pidgin/Creolists contend that, contemporary "Black English" has undergone a third stage and become a full fledged social dialect of English. This third stage is described in the pidgin/creolist literature as a process called de-creolization. In theory the de-creolized stage is when a complete assimilation occurs. It is in the third stage that African American speech is depicted as having become so completely Anglicized and assimilated that, it is now "de-creolized" and a mere non-standard social dialect of English.

As stated earlier the critics of the pidgin/creole theory contend that, although there is no question that African American speech evolves from an antebellum African and European mixed or hybrid speech, and there is no question that borrowings were made, the critics, of the Pidgin/Creolist theory contend that, the view that as native speakers of African languages the African slaves communicated with Europeans in an underlying grammatical system that Africans had no knowledge of, is absurd. The critics of the pidgin/creole theory contend that, based on a criteria of morphological and syntactical continuity, the view that the base of pidgin/creole dialects is European is not correct.

The critics contend that in the hybridization process, it was the Niger-Congo African languages that were grammatically dominant. Therefore, a more accurate model to describe what did in fact occur would be one which places European words or features above the line (as the numerator) with an African thought process or grammar below the line (as the denominator). Figure 3 below is a model that illustrates this view.

Fig 3

European; Portuguese, English, French etc.

African

What this model implies is that, the bulk of the lexicon, i.e., the surface structure, of the hybrid or pidgin dialect can be traced to the European language continuum. But, in the deep structure (the phonetic, phonological and morpho-syntactical system) the preponderance of the features found makes the hybrid more akin to the African language system.

Thus, contend the critics of the pidgin/creole theory, the contemporary Pidgin/Creolists are just as white supremacist as their predecessors. The only difference is, whereas earlier Pidgin/Creolists were very overt in their denigration of people of African descent, contemporary Pidgin/Creolists are much more subtle or covert. It is for this reason that the critics of the

pidgin/creole theory contend that, the pidgin/creole theory is no more than a pseudo-liberal version of the white supremacists "deficit hypothesis" masked with an egalitarian facade. For, whether it is presented in the pseudo-scientific invective of mean spirited eugenicists or packaged in the more palatable reasoning's of phony egalitarians, the pollution is the same.

Because of their deep seated Euro-centrism and essentially white supremacists beliefs, all Pidgin/Creolists view the worlds pidgin and creole dialects as being European language based and African American speech as being a dialect of English. But then, not all linguists who view Black American speech as being a dialect of English support the Pidgin/Creolist's theory. My reference here is to the Generative Transformational Grammarians.

The Generative Grammarians are linguists who believe that all human languages emanate from a common or universal base and are therefore related in their deep structures. In their view it is only in their "particular grammars" that human languages differ. The Generative Grammarians contend that based on their analysis of its underlying rules of grammar, Black American speech, is merely a Non-Standard dialect of English. Unlike Pidgin/Creolists the Transformationalists reject the contention that African-American speech has emerged through a three "staged evolution" from an earlier form of "mixed" or "hybrid" pidgin, into a creole and then into a de-creolized Non-Standard English. The Generative grammarians contend that, West and Niger-Congo African slaves abruptly divested themselves of their "particular" West and Niger-Congo African grammars and adopted the "particular" grammar of English as their primary language.

The Generative Grammarians are neither descriptive or comparative linguist. Like Pidgin/Creolists their focus is primarily on the analysis of Indo-European languages. Like the Pidgin/Creolists, even though the Generative Grammarians assert that their linguistic studies trace the genesis of Afro-American and Euro-American speech to two divergent linguistic continua (one to Africa the other to Europe) as if the existing structural differences in Afro-American and Euro-American speech do not emanate from a separate linguistic base, the Generative

Grammarians also posit Afro-American and Euro-American dialects as being "genetically" from the same linguistic continuum, i.e., just different dialects of English.

In other words, like the Pidgin/Creolists, Generative Grammarians, have never deemed African languages as being worthy of any serious scholastic or academic study. Hence, the only difference in Pidgin/Creole theory and the Transformationalist's view is the degree or level they are willing to place Africans on the evolutionary scale. Whereas the Generative Grammarians at least regard the captive African ancestors of African American people as having had a language, i.e., an original African "particular grammar" of their own and a cortical capacity to have internalized the "particular grammars" of the European languages to which they were exposed (with mimicry slightly above the level of the lower primates, - the chimpanzees and gorillas etc.) the Pidgin/Creolists view is that since all Africans had as a language in Africa was an array of signals comparable to the calls and songs of birds, at best the African's ability to grasp and emulate real human speech has been no more than that of a mynah bird or parrot.

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