Chapter 2 — Creoles

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A creole is a language with a jargon or a pidgin in its history. A creole is spoken as a native language by an entire speech community, often in the situation where people are displaced geographically. They have no longer ties to the languages that their ancestors brought into the pidgin.

The best-known examples happened in 17th, 18th and 19th century. People of the African continent were enslaved and taken on ships to South, North and Central America by European companies.

The people who were displaced in this way didn't have many languages in common. The Europeans arranged this on purpose. After all, people who can't communicate with each other, can't organise themselves against their oppressor. They can't rebel.

The speakers of Ashanti, Yoruba, Congo, Igbo, and so on, can communicate with each other, and with their captors, through pidgin language. The main ingredient, the **lexifiers**, were European languages: Spanish, Portuguese, English and Dutch.

The children of the displaced, born in the Americas, spoke these pidgins much better than the parents' original language. They grew up in a chaotic linguistic situation but managed to make this pidgin a native language. This very complex process is called **nativisation**.

What happens when you take a new-born child and isolate it from the other people? What will it end up speaking? All sorts of cruel men, from Egyptian pharaohs to English kings, have actually done this experiment. They believed that their own language was so superior, that any human had an in-born ability to speak it. Of course, the poor grew up without language at all. A child needs another human to acquire a language. Not only to copy some words or sounds, but also to acquire the rules of language, to construct it.

Up to the middle of the 19th century it was assumed that creoles were a defective version of European languages. But today there is plenty of evidence that creoles are new languages. They developed at an enormous speed, during a period with great linguistic crisis. One of the first creole theorists, described it like this:

> The changes which creoles have passed through are not essentially different in kind, and hardly greater in extent than those, for instance, which separate the French from the Latin, but from the greater violence of the forces at work they have been far more rapid... here two or three generations have sufficed for a complete transformation.
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> Addison van Name (1869)

Linguistic evolution is traditionally pictured as a language tree. Languages grow from a root, they branch off, they die a natural death. But the study of creoles changed that idea. If language is in fact a phenomenon disordered, the scientists need to study the language of the children, of speaker learner, of mentally affected people, of those in pluralingual communities. In fact, the study of creoles has set in motion a linguistic revolution.