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Formal issues in Afro-Hispanic morphosyntax: The Afro-Bolivian Spanish case

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Abstract

This study provides a formal analysis of certain aspects of Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS) morphosyntax that are relevant to both hypotheses on the origins of the Afro-Hispanic languages of the Americas (i.e., the Decreolization Hypothesis, [Granda, 1968 et seq](#)) and theoretical proposals on the nature of cross-linguistic variation (i.e., Null Subject Parameter, NSP, [Rizzi, 1982](#)). Results suggest that the grammatical features under investigation can be conceived as the by-product of advanced second language acquisition processes, and do not necessarily imply any previous (de)creolization phase for ABS. In addition, the nature of our ABS data calls into question the validity of the NSP's universal predictions. For this reason, we account for the phenomena under study by adopting a theoretical framework that revisits the traditional notion of "parameter" in favor of a less rigid, minimalist model ([Eguren et al., 2016](#)), in which the locus of language variation is ascribed to lexical items and their clusters of features ([Borer, 1984; Chomsky, 2001](#)).

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1. Introduction

This paper builds on recent formal analyses of Afro-Hispanic grammars ([Sessarego, 2013a, 2014, 2017a; Gutiérrez-Rexach and Sessarego, 2014; Sessarego and Gutiérrez-Rexach, 2017](#)) to cast light on the nature of certain morphosyntactic phenomena in Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS) and their implications for current debates on the origin of the Afro-Hispanic Languages of the Americas (AHLAs) ([Schwegler, 1991, 2014; Lipski, 2005; Sessarego, 2013b, 2017b; Guy, 2017](#)). In particular, we will explore how certain ABS grammatical traits, which have also been ascribed to a potential creole origin for a number of other Afro-Hispanic and Afro-Lusophone varieties ([Otheguy, 1973; Baxter, 1997; Perl and Schwegler, 1998](#)), can actually be analyzed as interface-driven, advanced second language acquisition strategies (SLA), which do not imply any previous creole stage for ABS (or for any other contact variety presenting such grammatical traits) (cf. [Sessarego, 2013c](#)).

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ABS is an Afro-Hispanic vernacular spoken in Los Yungas, Department of La Paz (Bolivia) by the descendants of the African slaves taken to this region to work on *haciendas* during the colonial period. Since Lipski's (2006, 2008) early works on ABS, more studies have been published on this language (cf. Sessarego, 2011a,b, 2013d, 2014, 2015) and different hypotheses have been proposed for the origins and development of its grammar. While on the one hand Lipski (2006, 2008) and Sessarego (2015) maintain that, given its linguistic features, ABS may be seen as the result of a (de) creolization process, Sessarego (2011b, 2013d, 2014) claims that, given the historical context in which ABS formed, advanced SLA processes may better explain its evolution (see also Sessarego, 2016; Perez et al., 2017 for further debates on this issue). Far from solving this issue here, the present study will focus on three specific ABS morphosyntactic phenomena that have also been reported in the literature to constitute evidence for a potential creole origin for several other Afro-Latin varieties. In particular, we will provide a formal analysis for the presence in ABS of: (a) variable subject-verb agreement; (b) non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects; (c) presence of constructions presenting the wh-subject-verb order in questions.

These data are not only relevant to current debates on the origin of the AHLAs, they also suggest that ABS does not conform to the universalist predictions of the Null Subject Parameter (NSP) (Chomsky, 1981; Rizzi, 1982). ABS, in fact, in line with certain other Romance varieties (i.e., Toribio, 2000; Martínez-Sanz, 2011; Barbosa et al., 2005; Camacho, 2008 for Dominican Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese), does not clearly fit into either the Null Subject Language (NSL) or the Non-Null Subject Language (NNSL) groups. Given the peculiar nature of ABS in this respect, the present paper will reflect on the status of this dialect as a “semi-NSL” or a “partial pro-drop” variety and its implications for current formal theories of cross-linguistic variation.

2. Contrasting views on the origins of the AHLAs

During the past few decades, the study of the origins of the AHLAs has received much attention and several hypotheses have been proposed to cast light on the genesis and evolution of these contact varieties. McWhorter (2000) and Sessarego (2015, 2017c, 2018) have claimed—on the basis of different and contrasting hypotheses—that the vast majority of the AHLAs do not have a creole root and that, therefore, their current form is not the end-result of decreolization. On the other hand, several other researchers (Granda, 1968; Otheguy, 1973; Schwegler, 1991; Guy, 2017; etc.) have suggested that a considerable number of these contact varieties must have descended from a pre-existing creole language.

Indeed, given certain morphosyntactic features shared by these varieties, it has been postulated that all of them would have derived from a single root (Monogenetic Hypothesis), and that in a second phase—due to contact with standard Spanish—they would have approximated to the norm, leaving behind most of their “creole-like” features (Decreolization Hypothesis). The first scholar to propose what could be called the Monogenetic-Decreolization Hypothesis was Granda (1968, 1970, 1978, etc.), who claimed a monogenetic connection among these varieties and the Portuguese-based creoles spoken in Africa.

According to Granda (1978:313), and contrary to what has been suggested by some historians (i.e., Tannenbaum, 1947; Klein, 1967; Hoetink, 1967), slavery in Spanish America was not significantly different from the forced-labor systems implemented by other European powers overseas, so that Spanish creoles probably existed and would have subsequently decreolized. He provides four general working hypotheses, which would represent the foundational principles of his Afro-Hispanic research project (1978:335):

- a) Given the parallel social structures found in the Hispanic and non-Hispanic colonies, there is no reason to believe that Spanish creoles did not develop in Spanish America.
- b) Spanish America must have had several Spanish creoles, which developed from a common Afro-Portuguese root.
- c) The majority of the Spanish creoles must have disappeared due to contact with standard Spanish in more recent times, after the abolition of slavery.
- d) This decreolization process was not complete, so that some traces of such creole languages are left in the speech of black communities across the Americas.

In this article, we will not address the sociohistorical assumptions on which Granda's Monogenetic-Decreolization Hypothesis is based (points a–c); however, the interested reader may consult Author (present volume and references therein) to see counterarguments to the aforementioned claims. In this paper, we will focus exclusively on Granda's point d, and show that the grammatical elements that have been claimed to represent traces of a pre-existing creole language can be explained by other means that require no such appeal to a creole predecessor. In particular, we will concentrate on a subset of these “creole-like” features, which have been repeatedly reported for a variety of Afro-Latin varieties in relation to their supposed creole origin, and that, we believe, have interesting implications for microvariationist syntactic studies on dialects that do not align with the predictions of the NSP (Toribio, 2000; Camacho, 2008, 2013; etc.).

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