

BLACK INTERPRETERS IN THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND THE CARIBBEAN

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Although interest in pidgin and creole languages is not new, it is only since the 1950's that pidgin and creole studies have been recognized as an academic field. Since that time, an increasing number of books and journals on the subject has been published and college courses and seminars offered. Some of this research focuses on the grammatical influence of African languages on the pidgins and creoles, but until recently the influence of African languages on the pidgins and creoles that developed as a result of the Atlantic slave trade and the Caribbean plantations system did not receive sufficient attention.

Sylvaine (1936) stresses the African influence on Haitian Creole. Alleyne (1971:75) finds that similarities found in cultures which imported West African slaves can be explained by the "basic cultural uniformities of West Africa." In his book *Comparative Afro-American* (1980) Alleyne analyzes the African influence on the English-based Caribbean creoles. An article by Baudet (1981) discusses the African grammatical base in Caribbean creoles. However, more research is still needed to give a clearer understanding of the type and extent of the influence that West African languages had on the early pidgins used in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as on the creoles that are now found in the Caribbean.

Another area of investigation in pidgin and creole studies analyzes the way pidgin languages begin in early contact situations. Some descriptions suggest that as soon as two groups of people that do not share a mutually intelligible language come together, a pidgin begins. Cassidy (1971:213) expands on this by saying, "there would initially be a good deal of gesture

accompanying speech; this would be reduced, though probably never eliminated, as the pidgin took shape." This may be true; evidence from primary source materials supports it; but the data also indicate that the linguistic picture of many contact situations was more complex. One aspect of early stages of pidginization that has been overlooked is the role played by West African interpreters or linguists—as they were often called—both free and slave, in the creole languages and societies that developed in the Caribbean. The existing records from the early days of Portuguese exploration of West Africa as well as the descriptions of slavery in the Caribbean note the importance and skills of African interpreters. Thus, gestures and pidgin were not always the only means of communication in contact situations in which there was no shared language. Very often interpreters were available to facilitate communication. This means that it was possible to communicate more than just a few simple ideas. Full conversations could be held with the help of the interpreters. This does not mean that gestures were not used and that pidgins did not develop. Obviously pidgins did begin, and some of these expanded and became creoles. At the same time that the pidgin was beginning, however, at least some of the participants in the contact situation could communicate in much less restricted ways. Before, during, and after the pidginization process began, interpreters were present. The following discussion explains the way these black linguists were obtained and how they functioned in West Africa, the middle passage, and the Caribbean.

The Portuguese in the 15th century not only used interpreters but also developed an effective technique for obtaining and training the black interpreters adopted by many of the countries that later began West African exploration and trade. The Portuguese began what was to become an important feature of the Atlantic slave trade. Cadamosta (Crone 1937: 55) describes one method the Portuguese used to obtain and train their interpreters, or linguists.

Each of our ships had negro interpreters on board brought from Portugal who had been sold by the lords of Senegal to the first Portuguese to discover this land of the blacks. These slaves had been made Christians in Portugal and knew Spanish [sic] well; we

had them from their owners on the understanding that for the hire and pay of each we will give one slave to be chosen from all our captives. Each interpreter, also, who secured four slaves for his master was to be given his freedom.

There were certainly enough African slaves in Portugal to insure an adequate supply of interpreters: by 1522, Negro slaves made up one-tenth of the population of Lisbon (Alvarez Nazario 1961:25).

As the Portuguese explorations continued down the African coasts, slaves were captured from the new areas to train as interpreters. In 1461 near Cape Mesurado the De Sintra expedition kidnapped a fisherman.

In obedience to his Majesty the King, who had enjoined them that, from the furthest land they reached, if it chanced that the people were unable to understand the interpreters, they were to contrive to bring away a negro, by force or persuasion, so that he might be interrogated by the many negro interpreters to be found in Portugal or in the course of time might learn to speak the Portuguese language (Crone 1937:84).

Naro (1979:319), citing a 1494 source, says that the king kept "negroes of different colors" at court who would try to speak to the newly captured slaves.

So important were these blacks interpreters that one expedition in 1444 was "chiefly to procure an interpreter" (Hair 1966:12). Cadamosta turned back on reaching the Río Grande in the Río Jeba estuary-Bissagos Island area because his interpreter could not speak to the people they encountered.

The Portuguese system was used at least to some degree by the English. An expedition to the Gold Coast in 1550 took Africans back to England so they could learn to speak English. They were then taken on future voyages as interpreters (Blake 1492:383). But the language learning was purely practical, and one-sided. According to Hair (1966:20) "during a century of contact between Europeans and their West African interpreters, both in Africa and in Europe, there is no evidence of either a humanist or a scientific interest developing in African languages." It was the Africans who learned European languages.

As trading with West Africa for slaves and goods increased, the need for interpreters increased accordingly, both on the coast and on the ships. Africans as well as Europeans employed these linguists. John Matthews (1778:143-144) in describing a voyage to the Sierra Leone Rivers says, "When the country people come down themselves to trade with whites, they are obliged to apply to the inhabitants of the villages where the factories are kept, to serve as brokers and interpreters."

So professional did these interpreters become that, at a later period, they had "books" or letters of reference which they presented to ship captains. These references were so important that "least they should get wet or injured in any manner... it is not uncommon to see a krooman with a half a dozen or more 'books' closely secured in a small tin box, which he always has with him in his canoe, and presents to the captain on going alongside any vessel" (Carnes 1969:312).

It seems that some of the African chiefs also had their own interpreters. Snelgrave (1734:22-24) tells of the messenger from the king of Dahome who served this function. He "spoke very good English, having learnt it when a Boy in the English Factory at Whidaw... I had as capable an Interpreter as I could desire."

Interpreters continued to be used for several centuries. King Bowarre, the ruler of Benin in the last part of the 18th century, apparently used to assign one of his to important visitors. Captain John Adams (1822:31) says that a royal functionary accompanied him to the capital "to act as my linguist".

Interpreters were also important on the ships that carried the slaves from West Africa to the Caribbean. They served many functions. They translated the commands of the captain and any communication that was necessary between the slaves and the crew of the ship. They served to calm the newly purchased slaves. The danger of insurrection was always present. If one should break out, the lives of all the Europeans on the ship often depended on the interpreter.

Snelgrave (1734:162-163) tells how he kept order among the slaves on his ship. His interpreter played a key role.

When we purchase grown People, I acquaint them by the interpreter, that now they are become my property. I think fit to let them know what they are bought for, that they may be easy in their Minds: (For these poor people are generally under terrible Apprehensions upon their being bought by white Men, many being afraid that we design to eat them; which, I have been told, is a story much credited by the island Negroes;) Soon after informing them, That they are bought to till the Ground in our Country, with several other Matters; I then acquaint them, how they are to behave themselves on board, towards the white Men; that if any one abuses them, they are to complain to the Linguist, who is to inform me of it, and I will do them Justice; But if they make a Disturbance, or offer to strike a white Man, they must expect to be severely punished.

Some of the West Africans who were linguists on the slave ships were free men hired to work just in this capacity. Wood (1974:174) says that these interpreters "became common features aboard English vessels where they translated orders and conveyed information." He cites the example of the snow *Rainbow* which was taking slaves from Benin to St. Thomas in 1758. The interpreter on this voyage turned out to be "of great Consequence to the Interest of the Voyage".

When ships did not have official interpreters on board, the new slaves might be calmed by the slaves that were already on board the ship. Butterworth (p. 85) says that this is what happened on the ship *Hudibras* when it was in Old Calabar waiting for the necessary number of slaves. There were 150 slaves from 14 different tribes. Several of these slaves spoke

to the purchased slave, but in a language she did not understand. At length, some of her own nation addressed her; and she listened with delight to a tongue as that spoken by her friends and relations, now a long way off, and perhaps severed from her for ever.

If there was an insurrection among the slaves on board the ship, the linguists would be called on to talk to the slaves and quiet them. Snelgrave (1734:170-172) describes such an occasion in his account.

After we had secured these People, I called the linguists, and ordered them to bid the Men-Negroes between Decks to be quiet; (for there was a great noise amongst them). On their being silent, I asked, "What had induced them to mutiny?" They answered, "I

was a great Rogue to buy them, in order to carry them away from their own Country; and that they resolved to regain their Liberty if possible." However, a few days after this, we discovered they were plotting again, and preparing to mutiny. For some of the Ringleaders proposed to one of our Linguists, If he could procure them an Ax, they would cut the Cables the ship rid by in the night... This Linguist was so honest as to acquaint me with what had been proposed to him:... these Linguists are Natives and Freemen of the Country, whom we hire on account of their speaking good English, during the time we remain on the Coast; and they are likewise Brokers between us and the black Merchants.

When an insurrection began on another ship, there was no official interpreter on board. The ship was carrying 360 slaves from 14 different tribes. The leaders of the insurrection were "Eboes and Koromantyns." Butterworth (1831:109-110) describes the way the insurrection was suppressed. The crew of the ship learned of the plans from a young slave named Bristol, who was not confined with the other slaves because he was the personal property of one of the men on board.

He was made interpreter between our captain and the slaves, and was employed to persuade them to come upon deck, two at a time, which he had great difficulty in effecting. ... (He) told them that the captain thought well of many of them; that he was sorry to find so many had been misled; but that he was sure they were not all bad men, or wished to kill white people.

After the suppression of this revolt, Bristol learned another was to take place. The slaves were kept in three parts of the ship, the women and girls in the aft, the adult males in the fore, and the boys in the middle division. The women were to take part in this second attempt. So they would not have to shout details of the plot to the men, messages were sent through the boys. Bristol learned the details of the plan, including which men had knives, and told the captain (Butterworth 1831:120-121). For all his service, the interpreter was not given his freedom but was eventually sold in the Caribbean.

When the new slaves arrived in the Caribbean, established slaves were called upon when interpreters were needed. In an account of slave Olaudah Equiano, captured in

Nigeria in the 18th century, there is the following description of his arrival in Barbados:

At last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and soon to go on land where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us so much and sure enough, soon after we landed, there came to us Africans of all languages (Curtin 1967:97).

The established slaves served not only as interpreters. Often they became the teachers of the newly arrived Africans. On the Pinney Plantation on Nevis a woman was given this job. "Some of the plantation slaves were known to be good tutors for the new negroes. There was, in particular, 'Old Mary,' who was so excellent that she could be trusted with the negroes to season" (Pares, 1950:349).

Genovese (1976:370) says that the established slaves taught the recently arrived slaves "the rudiments of farm work, as well as special skills, and during the early period of the regime, they taught the incoming Africans to speak English." He continues that from the beginning of the plantation system in the New World, the earlier slaves taught those who came after them. It was not the whites, but the blacks who took prime responsibility for the instruction of the new West African slaves.

Jones (1969:17-18), writing in 1846 about the religious instruction of the slaves, suggests that some slaves be educated in both language and religion so that they can teach the others. He does not consider the possibility that the clergy might learn the languages of the slaves.

...they are utter strangers to our language and we to theirs; and the gift of tongues being now ceased, there is no means left of instructing them in the doctrines of the Christian religion ...many of the Negroes who are grown persons when they come over, do of themselves attain so much of our language as enables them to understand and to be understood, in things which concern the ordinary business of life; and they who can go so far, of their own accord, might doubtless be carried and more serious than the rest, might be easily instructed both in our language and religion, and then be made use of to convey instruction to the rest in their own language.

West Africans, both slave and free, made many contributions to the languages and the cultures that developed in the Caribbean. It is time to give more recognition to them as well as to the role of West Africans in the early stages of pidginization. It can no longer be assumed that as soon as the West Africans left the coast they no longer heard their native languages. The ship captains and plantation owners used the linguistic skills of the other West Africans to communicate with them and to instruct them. Contact situations were linguistically complex. It is only by analyzing the complexity that we can hope to understand the conditions, linguistic as well as cultural, that existed in the early stages of pidginization and as a result have a clearer understanding of the pidginization process itself.

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