

## Pidgins and Creoles

### Pidgin

Pidgins and creoles are spoken by about ten million people around the world.

Pidgin is known as the language used by groups of people, originally speaking different languages, when they come in contact. A pidgin is a **contact language**, which means that it is acquired and not learned natively. In addition, it implies an unequal relationship between speakers. In this case, we have one language spoken by the dominant group and one language spoken by the “weaker” group. The two languages are completely different from one another, so a pidgin emerges because the members of the two groups have to communicate if they want to “survive” in everyday situations.

When a pidgin is created the dominant language provides the lexicon, the “weaker” language provides basic syntactic structures. Usually, it is said that a pidgin is based on the dominant language (e.g.: Tok Pisin is the pidgin spoken in New Guinea where there are over 500 mutually unintelligible languages. English is the dominant language, then it is said that Tok Pisin is an English-based pidgin).

### Creole

Pidgins can develop to become **creole languages**. This requires the pidgin to be learned as mother tongue by children, who then generalize the features of the pidgin into a fully-formed, stabilized grammar. This is however not always the case: pidgins can die or become obsolete.

The term creole come from the French *créole* (indigenous) that was borrowed from Spanish *criollo* (native). It is commonly known as a former pidgin which has become the mother tongue of a community.

The pidgin must of course undergo a number of improvements before it can be considered as a creole or a full language. Some of the changes occur before it is acquired as first language whereas others are created by the new native speakers.

Most creole languages emerged in plantations that used slaves drawn from different language communities. Hawaiian Creole English, the Caribbean creoles, Torres Straits creole (and Tok Pisin, in the case of a pidgin) are examples of languages that seem to have emerged in this way.

When a pidgin becomes the native speech of a community it is “depidginised” into a creole. If/when a creole merges gradually with the standard (dominant) language it is lexically based on, it becomes “decreolised” or enters into a **post-creole continuum** (that is: a range of speech varieties which vary from the more or less pure European language to the more or less pure creole, with all kinds of intermediate varieties), and the boundary between the two becomes gradual, or a continuum.

A complete decreolization implies that the grammar of the original pidgin becomes more or less integrated into the grammar of the European language, whereas the pure creole disappears and its remains acquires features reminding those of the European language’s dialects.

A decreolisation is thus a mere shift from a fully formed language to another.

### **Examples of English-based pidgins and creoles**

The following is a short list of some cases of English-based pidgins and creoles which emerged as a result of a contact situation between English colonizers and local populations.

- ***Hawaiian pidgin/creole***: it presents influences from Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Portuguese and Filipino. It is spoken by nearly 500.000 people.
- ***Gullah***: a creole spoken on the USA south-eastern coast. It counts 250.000 speakers and includes influences from western African languages.
- ***Fanagalò***: pidgin with influences from the Zulu languages spoken in the mines of Johannesburg (South Africa), in Namibia and in Zimbabwe.
- ***Caribbean creoles***: there are nearly 30 creoles spoken in the Caribbean area, such as the Jamaican creole and the creole spoken in Trinidad and Tobago.
- ***Pochismo***: anglo-spanish pidgin spoken in certain areas of Arizona (USA) and southern California (USA).

### ***References***

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