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Morphological boundaries in Creole languages

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Workshop description:

Early research on Creole languages, often influenced by theories of pidginization and rapid language formation, generally emphasized syntactic and phonological features, while morphological structures were perceived as minimal or even absent in many Creoles. As a result, the idea that Creoles lack inflectional structure remains widespread in Creole studies (e.g., McWhorter 1998, 2005; Parkvall 2008; Daval-Markussen 2013; Siegel et al. 2014; Velupillai 2015).

However, recent scholarship has begun to challenge this oversimplified narrative, revealing a richer and more diverse morphological landscape in Creoles than previously acknowledged (Kihm 2003; Plag 2003, 2008; Luís 2015, 2018). Evidence indicates that Creole morphology arises through a wide range of processes, including the reanalysis of lexifier structures, grammaticalization, borrowing from substrates, and convergence with the source languages (Bakker, in press; Baptista 2020, Kouwenberg 2015). Rather than undergoing wholesale reduction, Creole languages have been shaped by more intricate processes of retention, restructuring and innovation.

These findings highlight the need to reassess how morphological boundaries in Creoles are identified and understood. A central challenge in this reassessment lies in addressing the fluidity of morphological boundaries. Grammatical markers often shift along a continuum between free forms, clitics, and affixes, influenced by a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Moreover, inconsistencies in orthographic conventions can obscure morphological integration, particularly when relying solely on written records. The lack of comprehensive oral corpora and high-quality transcriptions has further hindered efforts to accurately capture these dynamics. As such, consistent and evidence-based criteria, informed by phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic tests, are essential for an accurate understanding of morphological boundaries.

Recent research has also emphasized the importance of accounting for lexifier and substrate biases in comparative studies of Creole languages (Michaelis 2020). When

genealogical and areal biases are carefully controlled, and the spectrum of Creole languages is broadened beyond the traditionally studied varieties, researchers can more accurately analyze morphological boundaries. Comparative methods, which rely on systematic comparisons across languages, involving multiple Creoles or Creole-lexifier pairs, are particularly useful in this context as they help avoid overgeneralizations.

Against this background, the workshop seeks to explore the boundaries of Creole morphology, bringing together researchers to investigate how morphological structures in genealogically diverse Creole languages emerge, evolve, and interact with lexifier and substrate languages. The workshop will foster discussions that reassess the distinction between free forms and bound forms in Creole morphology, exploring the complexities of morphological evolution and language change in these contact settings.

Topics of interest include, but are not limited to:

- Free forms and bound forms in Creole morphology and the distinction between words, affixes and clitics;
- Criteria for identifying morphological boundaries based on spoken corpora;
- Reanalysis and innovation in Creole morphology;
- Synchrony and diachrony in Creole morphology, including processes of grammaticalization;
- The impact of language contact on Creole morphology in multilingual contexts;
- Comparative studies involving multiple Creoles as well as comparisons between Creoles and their contributing lexifiers or substrates;
- The role of corpora in Creole studies: building, sharing, and utilizing spoken data for morphological analysis;
- Best practices for transcribing and annotating Creoles to capture the nuances of the spoken language.

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