

So what is Creole?

And what I'd like to do is to look at, say, what happens in the history of learning French by adults and by children.

We saw examples of that before.

But what we find there, and this is actually a very robust fact, which is that when you have people learning French, often-- so in the case of, say, object pronouns, they do produce structures of that sort.

This doesn't have to be in the Creole environment.

It happens in Marseilles, it happens in all kinds of varieties where you have second-language learning.

So the idea is that often, as you learn the language, you might see a particular order, like subject, verb, object.

If that order is the dominant order, often you take that order and you apply it to all the elements that might fit it.

You overgeneralize.

Children do that all the time.

When children say things like, I have one foot and you have two foots.

Saying "foot" and "foots" instead of saying "foot" and "feet." It's missing that-- almost every child will get to do in the path of learning English.

Because what do they do?

They are real scientists.

They have an hypothesis about, say, plurals.

S marks the plural.

So why should you bother to say "feet" if you have a well-behaved plural like S.

If you say, I don't know, if you say "table," "tables." If you say "pen," "pens." Why would you say "foot," "feet"?

[INAUDIBLE] And children do that.

And the same here.

If you know that your language has verb object order, you say, frapp** la balle, hit the ball.

Why would you say, when you have a pronoun, why would you put it before the verb?

It seems to be a natural hypothesis, if you're a learner, to assume that a pronoun like a full noun will come after the verb.

And that's what you see.

The contrast is between standard French, where you get the pronoun before the verb, and this is as to if.

This is a learner's French, an adult learner's French, where you get the pronoun after the verb.

Not to make a long story short-- go ahead Nick.

NICK: I don't know.

Maybe it's just off topic.

If it's the most natural thing to assume that the object follows the verb, how did French ever develop this weird--

MICHEL DEGRAFF: That's a good question.

It means that as you learn the language there are other factors in that learning.

Although the learning might have a natural tendency to do that, but since, in the case of French, there are norms.

There are books, there is TV.

So eventually, the learner will move towards a different set of patterns.

But then, languages do change.

And in language change, often there is a path towards more general-- Take for example, so Steven Pinker, a very good linguist who was at MIT and at Harvard, he has a whole book on how the patterns of regular verbs change in English.

Things like go, went or shine, shown.

So many of these over time become regular.

So you go from shine, shown to shine, shined.

Well, it hasn't happened yet.

But what he said, over time there's a movement of verbs going from being irregular to being regular.

And one could explain that because of the fact that there's a tendency to make all these verbs fit the same pattern, the regular pattern.

Whereas in time, there's also prescriptive norms.

There is a prestige language.

There's a linguist called Tony [? Krock, ?] who actually argued that very often, changes occur in a different direction because why?

Because people use language to show that they are fancy, they are sophisticated.

So they will use the irregular pattern to show off.

It's like the who, whom case.

So how many of you hear people saying, "whom" in all the wrong places, because-- [LAUGHTER] --because whom, when you say "whom" or when you say "John and I," it might sound fancier than "John and me." But what you find is that often people will say "John and I" or "Mary and I" in the wrong place.

They will say, I just had a good talk with "Mary and-- no-- my dad went to see "Mary and I." But "Mary and I" in that particular context is not correct.

It should be "Mary and me" because it's the object.

Why would you say "Mary and I" in object position?

Maybe because "Mary and I" sounds sincere people would tend to use it.

Or the "whom" thing.

We saw earlier that there are cases where people say "whom," which grammatically is not correct.

But because it sounds fancy, so "whom" should I say is calling?

I hear that all the time.

People say "whom" calls you?

"Whom" calls you?

It should be "who" called you?

Because, according to the grammar of the language in that particular environment, it's a subject.

So you don't expect to get "whom" because "whom" is for "who," technically, in terms of grammar, like "him" is for "he," or like "her" is for "she." This is basically the function of the m on whom.

It makes it an accusative form.

But yet, people now use "whom" even when it's a subject.

Why?

Because it sounds fancy.

In fact, there's a linguist that calls it a various, a grammar various.

You get infected because you want to sound fancy.

In fact, we talked about identity, that's one place where identity might play a role in language change because by using those forms you want to project yourself as being superior, as being sophisticated.

And then you would use-- it's like in Creole, in Haitian Creole, people use often the rounded vowels from French to show that they know French.

They use the rounded vowels, like "euh" instead of "ee" where it doesn't belong.

And they produce all kinds of weird sentences, where you get all these "euhs" where, even in French you have "ee." Because they perceive that the "euh" is a mockery of French not Creole.

And therefore they want to use it all over the place.

And it's called hyper correction.

You're hyper correcting yourself.

But as you hyper correct you sound stupid really.

And then there are all these jokes about it, actually, because people are aware that people who use all these

"euhs" is because that we know where to use the "ee." It's a pressure of society on speaking in a particular way that actually creates all kinds of weird patterns that eventually can become part of the language.

That's one driving force in language change is this desire to sound better than you or I.

It's like people who vote for Trump.

They might vote for Trump not because they believe in Trump but because it might mean something for their identity.

So language has this power of establishing status.

STUDENT 5: So when you struggle with your identity, are we prone to grammar viruses?

[LAUGHTER] MICHEL DEGRAFF: Yeah, yeah.

That's one way to put it, actually.

Yeah.

The next part that I was going to talk about had to do with why does language learning by adults have this effect on, say, verb order, on conjugation.

And the point could be made very quickly, which is that this is something which is universal.

That we know, in many contexts of English learning, that adults do have this effect [INAUDIBLE] If you are going to learn, say, Italian, or any other languages that have lots of markers on a verb for conjugation, often in the first stages of learning, you don't have these.

You drop these because you're trying to speak the language.

And these are to be memorized.

And at first, you may not memorize them properly.

So it seems that it's a general phenomenon.

And the point here is that-- the key paragraph here is this one.

That maybe the way to understand language change, which in my view, includes Creole formation, is to consider the effects of both language learning by adults and by children.

And if that's the case, then that's what is going to drive all kinds of language change, not just what you see in the case of Creole formation.

So this is under the part of the conclusion.

Just to recapitulate that, basically, so to those of you who were asking, So what's my theory of Creole formation?

I don't need one.

You see, I don't need one because Creole formation is just language change.

So whatever linguists understand about the way languages change, to me it applies to Creole formation.

I have one paper that came out earlier this year with Enoch Aboh, my colleague from Benin from West Africa.

And the paper is called "A New Theory of [INAUDIBLE]." It's new in the sense that it should be the default theory that Creole are like other languages.

So therefore, you don't need to have a special theory for them.

So it should be, the new, like what is this?

That Creoles don't need a theory.

Whatever theory applies to French or English should apply to Creole.