LETTERS TO *LANGUAGE*

Language accepts letters from readers that briefly and succinctly respond to or comment upon either material published previously in the journal or issues deemed of importance to the field. The editor reserves the right to edit letters as needed. Brief replies from relevant parties are included as warranted.

Language in the 21st century

November 29, 2005

To the Editor:

Language is a fine journal with an enviable reputation, blessed with a dedicated and energetic editor and board, and I am proud to have published in its exclusive pages. But in some ways it represents an anachronistic approach to publishing, one which seems out of tune with the pace of developments both inside the discipline and more widely in academia. It would seem to be time for a debate about whether the journal should come into the 21st century.

Current trends are for journals to reflect the vibrancy of their fields, the increasing bodies of accessible data, the growing diversity of professional associations, and the rapidity of scientific developments. Compare, for example, the American Psychology Association (with 49 journals), or the American Anthropological Association (with 24 journals), publishing thousands of articles a year with online supporting data, and serving their (admittedly larger) memberships with highly ranked outlets for a large portion of their work.

In contrast, *Language* publishes only about 20 articles a year, restricts concurrent multiple submissions by the same authors, has no online supporting data, and spends many of its precious pages on book notices and reviews. Its very thorough but cumbersome editorial process averages some 6 months—and in some instances can take several months longer—to recommend acceptance or (inevitably, in most cases, of course) rejection. This policy has the following consequences:

(a) The low number of articles means that very few scholars get a chance to publish in *Language,* and they will tend to be the well-established authors rather than the youthful talent with really new ideas.

(b) The policy (see http://www.lsadc.org/info/pubs-lang-notes.cfm) that authors may not submit while they have another paper anywhere in the pipeline, while intended to spread the honors, can do a real disservice to a dynamic field (especially as multiple authorship is increasingly the rule): *Language* should publish the best, without constraints.

(c) The slow response time makes it a high-risk strategy for younger scholars, with a need for publications, to submit to *Language.*

(d) The lack of online supporting material makes papers longer than necessary, but, despite that, not open to easy reanalysis of data; in general, it undermines the scientific status of the discipline (or at least, of its flagship journal).

(e) In the context of the constraints on papers, the amount of space spent on book notices and reviews is indefensible; this kind of information used to be essential, but is now at everyone's fingertips through Google, LinguistList, or the like. (Review articles are another matter, of course.)

The end result is that the field, through its flagship publication, presents itself as a traditional humanities discipline, where exclusive publication privileges are handed out in rationed portions, where established scholarship is more valuable than brave new discoveries, where internal insight is more valuable than reanalyzable data, and where the modern affordances of online publishing are hardly activated. Every discipline is, whether we like it or not, in competition with its neighbors—for students, academic positions, research grants, and for public interest and awareness. At the moment, we are not in the race at all—we've hobbled our best horse.

The only plausible defense of the present policy is that it is better, in an age of information overflow, to have 20 pearls of wisdom per annum than 100 different papers. But having been shown by colleagues quite a few excellent papers that have been rejected by *Language,* I have not the slightest doubt that the door could not be opened a lot wider while still maintaining the very highest quality. Meanwhile, by excluding these papers from *Language,* the publication of the world's premier linguistic association, we are putting them into the domain of commercial publishing, where the profession ends up providing free labor (writing, peer review, editing) for corporations driven by profit motive, which inevitably runs counter to scientific dissemination. The stranglehold of these corporations has now become a serious matter, with university libraries spending millions on journal access. The only counter is for the profession to undercut this

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extortion by providing the widest dissemination at the lowest possible cost.

What should be done? There are a number of models. One would be simply to radically increase the issues per year, with word-limited papers supplemented with online data, and with book notices available only online. This would obviously require streamlining the editorial decision making—most journals manage responses within 3 months on a much bigger volume, often using highly efficient online reviewing systems which allow all parties to track progress (as with e.g. *Cognitive Science*). A second model would be, like the American Anthropology Association, to keep the exclusive flagship journal, but supplement it with more specialized journals (cf. *Nature Neuroscience*): e.g. *Language (Sound Systems)*, *Language (Syntax)*, *Language (Meaning and Use)*. In either case, the Linguistic Society of America should make extensive use of the new technology of the internet, it should provide room for young scholars to publish rapidly in top journals, it should allow the best work to be published without artificial constraints, and it should respond to the trend to make more and more data available online so that cumulative science and not just sparks of insight can occur.

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Editor's reply: These comments are well taken and deserve careful consideration. Please see my Editor's Department in this issue for some reactions to the points raised here.

On the language bioprogram hypothesis

January 25, 2006

To the Editor:

Derek Bickerton's LANGUAGE BIOPROGRAM HYPOTHESIS (LBH)[1] about the origins of creole languages is often cited as evidence of the existence of an innate human faculty for language.[2] It is remarkable, however, as recent articles in this journal show, that while most creolists (those who study creole languages) do not accept the validity of the LBH (see e.g. M. DeGraff 'Against Creole exceptionalism (redux)', *Lg.* 80.4.834–39, 2004, p. 835), other linguists continue to refer to it uncritically (e.g. M. Aronoff, I. Meir, & W. Sandler, 'The paradox of sign language morphology', *Lg.* 81.2.301–44, 2005, pp. 302, 307).

Here I'd like to outline some of the evidence that has led creolists to reject the four basic tenets of the LBH. I concentrate on Hawai'i Creole, which has been pivotal to the hypothesis.

The first tenet is that creoles were created rapidly in one generation by children of imported plantation laborers or slaves who were exposed to the existing medium of interethnic communication on the plantations, a highly variable and undeveloped incipient origin. This rudimentary pidgin provided the input for their first language acquisition, rather than their parents' languages or the lexifier (the language that supplied most of the vocabulary for the pidgin).

However, in a series of articles on the demographic and sociolinguistic conditions surrounding the emergence of Hawai'i Creole between 1890 and 1920, Sarah J. Roberts demonstrates that the majority of the first locally born generation acquired their parents' languages—at that time primarily Cantonese and Portuguese.[3] In fact, Bickerton himself has recently moved to this position, saying: 'Most of the first creole generation simultaneously acquired one or more of their ancestral languages' (1999a:55).

Roberts also shows that the original generation of immigrants (G1) learned each others' languages and/or Hawaiian for intergroup communication, rather than depending on the rudimentary pidgin. It was the first locally born generation (G2) who started using the pidgin more widely from the mid-1980s because of a large influx of immigrant workers speaking other languages, including Japanese, Korean, and Spanish. With this wider use, the pidgin stabilized and expanded to become Hawai'i Pidgin English (HPE).

From the early 1900s, many in the G2 shifted to the expanded HPE as their primary language, and their children acquired this as their first language. Thus it was the children in the second locally born generation (G3), not the G2, who were the original speakers of the creole. In other words, Roberts's findings show that the emergence of Hawai'i Creole took place over two generations.

The second tenet of the LBH is that since the primary linguistic data (PLD) children were exposed to on the plantations lacked the features of a fully developed language, the children had to go beyond the input and fall back on their innate linguistic capacity (the language 'bioprogram') to fill in the gaps. Bickerton (1981:9–42) argues that the bioprogram features found in the creole must have been innovations of the children because these features were absent from the rudimentary pidgin spoken by Japanese and Filipino immigrants who came to Hawai'i in the beginning of the 20th century.

But, as shown above, it was not the rudimen-

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tary pidgin spoken by this foreign-born generation (G1) that became nativized to form Hawai'i Creole, but rather the more stable and developed version of HPE that was spoken by the first locally born generation (G2). It is this expanded pidgin, rather than the rudimentary immigrant pidgin, that Bickerton should have compared the creole to, and this pidgin had many of the features attributed to the bioprogram (Roberts 2000). Thus the first speakers of the creole did have a model in their PLD for a significant number of the purported bioprogram features because they were already found in the existing expanded pidgin (see also Siegel 2000, 'Substrate influence in Hawai'i Creole English', *Lg. in Soc.* 29.197–236; and Siegel 2004a, 'Morphological elaboration', *J. Pidgin & Creole Lgs.* 19.333–62).

The third tenet of the LBH is that widely distributed creole languages are virtually identical in particular grammatical devices and semantic characteristics, such as the tense, modality, and aspect (TMA) system, adjectives as a subclass of verbs, the copula, and sentential complementation. The similarity among creole features is explained by universal characteristic of human linguistic endowment. Hawai'i Creole was especially important in Bickerton's hypothesis because it is geographically distant from other creoles in the Atlantic and Caribbean regions.

However, recent analyses of Hawai'i Creole have shown that it does not actually conform to the set of bioprogram features.[4] Indeed, many studies have pointed out similar findings for other creoles.[5]

Bickerton himself (1977, 1981) admits that the features found in his Hawai'i data do not always match the predictions of the bioprogram but explains that these features have been contaminated by the process of decreolization, or influence from standard English. Historical evidence from the period when Hawai'i Creole first emerged, however, shows that the language never did conform to the bioprogram prototype with regard to these features.[6]

The fourth tenet of the LBH is that creole features did not come from the ancestral languages of its speakers (the substrate languages), and therefore they must have been created by children according to their inborn linguistic knowledge. Again, Hawai'i Creole is important since it contrasts with the majority of other creoles which have African substrate languages. Bickerton's arguments (1981, 1984) against substrate influence in Hawai'i Creole are based mainly on comparisons with Japanese and Filipino languages. But speakers of these languages arrived comparatively late on the scene, as pointed out by M. Goodman (review of Bickerton 1981, *Int. J. Amer. Ling.* 51.109–37, 1985), J. Holm ('Substrate diffusion', *Substrata versus universals in creole genesis*, ed. by P. Muysken & N. Smith, 259–78, Benjamins, 1986), and Roberts (2000). It was speakers of Hawaiian, Cantonese, and Portuguese in the first locally born generation (G2) who were numerically dominant when Hawai'i Creole emerged among their children. Since they were the ones who learned and used HPE as a second language, and who were responsible for its grammatical expansion, it was likely that transfer of features from their languages was one source of the expansion (Siegel 2003, 'Substrate influence in creoles and the role of transfer in second language acquisition', *Stud. Sec. Lg. Acq.* 25.185–209; Siegel 2004a). Indeed, a detailed comparison between the creole and these languages (Siegel 2000) demonstrates that they could have provided models for many of the features that Bickerton attributes to the bioprogram. Therefore, there is no need to invoke innate knowledge to explain their origins.

The LBH has certainly stimulated the study of creoles, but these languages do not provide evidence for universal grammar or any other kind of innate specific linguistic knowledge.

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Notes

[1] As put forth in Bickerton 1977 (*Change and variation in Hawaiian English, vol. 2: Creole syntax*, Social Sci. and Ling. Inst., Univ. of Hawaii), Bickerton 1981 (*Roots of language*, Karoma), Bickerton 1984 ('The language bioprogram hypothesis', *Behav. and Brain Sci.* 7.173–221), Bickerton 1988 ('Creole languages and the bioprogram', *Linguistics: The Cambridge survey, vol. 2: Linguistic theory*, ed. by F. J. Newmeyer, 268–84, Cambridge), Bickerton 1999a ('How to acquire language without positive evidence: What acquisitionists can learn from creoles', *Language creation and language change*, ed. by M. DeGraff, 49–74, MIT), and Bickerton 1999b ('Creole languages, the language bioprogram hypothesis, and language acquisition', *Handbook of child language acquisition*, ed. by W. C. Ritchie & T. K. Bhatia, 195–220, Academic Press).

[2] For example, S. Pinker, 1994:33–35 (*The language instinct*, Harper Perennial); D. W. Lightfoot, 1999:148–49 (*The development of language*, Blackwell); R. Jackendoff, 2002:99–100 (*Foundations of language*, Oxford); S. R. Anderson & D. W. Lightfoot, 2002:203 (*The language organ*, Cambridge).

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[3] Roberts 1998 ('The role of diffusion in the genesis of Hawaiian creole', *Lg.* 74.1–39), Roberts 1999 ('The TMA system of Hawaiian Creole and diffusion', *Creole genesis, attitudes and discourse*, ed. by J. R. Rickford & S. Romaine, 45–70, Benjamins), Roberts, 2000 ('Nativization and genesis of Hawaiian creole', *Language change and language contact in pidgins and creoles*, ed. by J. H. McWhorter, 257–300, Benjamins).

[4] Siegel 2000; V. Velupillai, 2003 (*Hawai'i Creole English*, Palgrave McMillan); K. Sakoda & J. Siegel, 2004 ('Hawai'i Creole: Morphology and syntax', *A handbook of varieties of English, vol. 2: Morphology & syntax*, ed. by B. Kortmann & E. W. Schneider, with K. Burridge, R. Mesthrie & C. Upton, 742–69, Mouton de Gruyter).

[5] For example, P. Muysken, 1981 ('Creole tense/mood/aspect systems: The unmarked case?', *Generative studies on creole languages*, ed. by P. Muysken, 181–99, Foris); various chapters in J. V. Singler (ed.), 1990 (*Pidgin and creole tense-mood-aspect systems*, Benjamins); and D. Winford, 1993 (*Predication in Caribbean English creoles*, Benjamins); for a more detailed list, see T. Veenstra, to appear, 2006 ('Creole genesis: The impact of the language bioprogram hypothesis', *The handbook of pidgins and creoles*, ed. by J. V. Singler & S. Kouwenberg, Blackwell).

[6] As I discussed in a paper (Siegel 2004b) presented at the Westminster Creolistics Workshop in London, April 2004, 'Historical evidence of variability in early Hawai'i Creole.'

Editor's reply: These points are very interesting, and no doubt more discussion will ensue. For me, though, one particularly intriguing aspect here is what this example shows about the borrowing of ideas across disciplines or even across sub-disciplines within a larger field. It can be an exercise fraught with difficulty, as advances in one area may not become widely known to nonspecialists for some time, so that the nonspecialist ends up relying on the received wisdom of the past. I am reminded, for instance, of how reference to 'transformations' in syntax persisted in many applied linguistics textbooks well after the point at which those engaged in syntactic theorizing had long abandoned the 'transformation' as a theoretical construct, at least in the early generative syntax sense.

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