IRISH IN THE WEST INDIES: IRISH INFLUENCE ON THE FORMATION OF ENGLISH-BASED CREOLES[*]

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0. Introduction

This article deals with the problem of the early stages of creole formation. The significant structural and material similarities between the aspectual systems of the verb in Hiberno-English and in the West Indies English-based creoles are demonstrated. Suggestions are made about the possible impact of the Irish language on the formation of the English-based creoles in the early stages of creolisation. The historical evidence which proves the possibility of language contact between Irish, English and West African languages in the Caribbean in the past is provided.

1. Statement of the problem

One of the main processes in creole formation is the restructuring of grammar. Typically, the grammatical system of a source language (a lexifier) undergoes significant changes, with the vocabulary generally being preserved. Although both content and functional words usually have clear etymologies which can be traced back to the lexifier, they express other grammatical meanings. A characteristic feature of the English-based creoles of the Caribbean is the predominant expression of aspect or taxis, rather than tense, in the verbal system.

Grammatical meanings in these languages are expressed by a system of prepositioned verbal particles which etymologically go back to English auxiliary verbs, constituents of analytical verb forms.

The majority of the West Indies English-based creoles overtly express the following aspectual meanings: progressive, perfective, habitual and durative/frequentative (Holm 2000: 174-97). While the progressive and perfective can be traced back to English, the expression of habitual and durative/frequentative aspects is characteristic neither of English nor of other European languages. The overt formal distinction between habitual and durative (or habitual and frequentative) is rather rare cross-linguistically, the typical aspectual opposition in the languages of the world being the opposition

imperfective/perfective (Comrie 1976). Habitual meanings are usually expressed together with durative. They may constitute a durative/habitual/generic aspectual cluster (as in the languages of West Africa), or may be realized as particular values of the broad imperfective aspectual cluster (as in Slavonic languages) (Plungian 2011: 402-6).

These aspectual forms have the following meanings in most of the English-based creoles of the West Indies and other regions of the New World, where creoles emerged due to plantation slaves:[1]

> 1) Durative/frequentative aspect indicates that an action occurs over some extended period of time (more extended than the period of time expressed by the progressive aspect) and reoccurs periodically;

> 2) Habitual aspect indicates a common occurrence that often happens.

Durative/frequentative aspect is expressed by the marker *does*/*iz*/*z* (phonetic variants) that precedes the verb:

> (1) *But I **does go** to see people when they sick* (Rickford 1986: 270).
> (2) *Well Sunday you say you **does busy*** (Rickford 1986: 272).

Habitual aspect is expressed by the markers *bee* or *does bee*.

> (3) *I'll miss C, cause she **does be** here and write letter for me sometimes* (Rickford 1986: 270).
> (4) *They **iz be** in the ocean* (Holm 2000: 187).
> (5) *These days the sun **bee** down fast* (Rickford 1986: 273).

The overtly marked habitual aspect is also a characteristic of African-American English (or Ebonics) which may be classified as a result of decreolisation. One of the important distinctive characteristics of this English variety is its aspectual system, which includes habitualis/frequentative. Lisa Green (2013: 151) presents the following examples:

> a. *Sue be singing* (Event)
> 'Sue usually sings.'
> b. *Sue be knowing the answer.* (Mental state)
> 'Sue often does something to show that she knows the answer.'
> c. *Sue be at the grocery store.* (Location)
> 'Sue is often at the grocery store.'

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[1] See the corresponding maps in *The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (Michaelis *et al*. 2013).

Green (2013: 151) also notes:

> All sentences have habitual reading in which the eventuality expressed by the predicate occurs or holds from time to time. Given the property of be, the marker can apply to activities as well as states that range from temporary (e.g. ready) to more permanent (e.g. know).[2]

The emergence of new structures which express specific grammatical meanings in a group of closely related languages may be explained in different ways. The following possible explanations may be suggested:

1. It is a natural change, a development of the aspect-temporal system of English. This assumption seems to be supported by the fact that both markers clearly go back to forms of the English auxiliary verbs *to be* and *to do*. In this case, one has to postulate that a system with the primary expression of tense (English) has undergone a change to a primarily aspectual verbal system. It is true that in all languages of the world the temporal and aspectual meanings are expressed cumulatively. Often, however, one of these categories is primary and the other implicit: in most European languages (Whorfian SAE type) the primary category is grammatical tense, while for the languages of West Africa it is aspect. This consideration makes the idea of a "natural" evolution of the English verbal system rather unconvincing.

2. It is a result of language contact. One has to keep in mind the principle expressed by Givón, that explanations of new phenomena in a language by reference to language contact are more valid in cases where a l e s s - u n i v e r s a l l y   f r e q u e n t change takes place (Givón 2012). In this connection, it is doubtful that a shift from tense to aspect would be more universal than vice versa. The question is: what is a more usual trend of language change: tense → aspect or aspect → tense? It seems that at least in the Indo-European languages the permanent shift from the overt marking of aspect to tense-marking is attested. However, the change in the opposite direction is observed in the case of Caribbean English-based creoles. Therefore, one may suppose that these changes were due to contacts with languages that had a developed aspectual system.

2. Language contacts

2.1. The first candidates for the languages which could have influenced the emerging creole aspectual system are the languages of West Africa; they were the main languages of the substrate of all the Caribbean creoles. Typically, these languages have verbal systems which express mainly aspectual meanings; this is true for almost all languages of the Mande, Kru, Kwa, Akan

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[2] It is worth noting that example (c) given by Green represent frequentative rather than Habitual aspect. It is difficult to make a clear distinction without a wider context.

groups. It is known that a number of African languages express habitual aspect. John Holm gives an example of Bambara (Mande), which uses copula *be* to express the habitual meaning (Holm 2000: 176).

However, the grammatical influence of African languages on the formation of pidgins and creoles in the Atlantic is controversial. The languages of West Africa do not form a homogeneous group; they belong to several not related or very distantly related groups, and the example of one language cannot be a proof of supposed language interference. Moreover, speakers of Bambara were not the main group of slaves in the West Indies. It is usually supposed that Yoruba, Ewe or Fon (Fongbe) played a more significant role than Bambara (see, for example, Lefebvre 1999).

There are significant differences between aspectual system of Caribbean English-based creoles and the languages of the West Africa. In some African languages the habitual meanings are expressed by the same marker as the progressive, durative or irrealis; for example, in Mwan (< South Mande < Mande < Niger-Congo) the verb form with the middle tone (tonal morpheme) expresses habitual, frequentative and generic meanings:

(6) *Lē*   *mū*   *bāā.*
woman   pl   dress.up
'Women dress/used to dress up (often, always or as usual)'; 'Dressing up is in women's character'.

There are no cases of aspectual systems in West African languages which make a formal distinction between habitual and frequentative.

2.2 The distinction between durative-frequentative and the habitual, however, is a characteristic feature of Hiberno-English. Frequentative and habitual are expressed overtly by the markers *does be* and *bee*. Standard English uses indefinite tense to indicate these actions: *she goes*, or *she often goes,* or *she used to go* (if the action took place in the past).

(7) *Tis **humbuggin'** me they **do be*** 'They frequently make a fool of me' (Wagner 1959: 114)
(8) ***I do be** at my lessons every morning* 'I am at my lessons every morning' (Wagner 1959: 114)
(9) *At night while **I bees reading**, my wife **bees knitting*** 'At night while I read, my wife usually knits' (Wagner 1959: 114)

P. L. Henry in his detailed description of the English dialect spoken in North Roscommon (which he labelled "Anglo-Irish") analysed the following markers coding aspectual values: 1) Iterative-durative: the verb *to be* acquires the form *bees,* other verbs use the construction *be* + gerund; 2) Frequentative: the

marker *do (does) be*; 3) Frequentative durative: *do be + gerund*; 4) Iterative punctual present: the marker *do* + infinitive (Henry 1957: 171).

According to Wagner (1959), Hiberno-English has the following aspect structure:

No aspect	*I go*
Punctual or durative	*I am going*
Iterative or durative	*I bees going*
Frequentative	*I does go*
Frequentative durative	*I does be going*

According to John Harris, Hiberno-English *do be* and *does be* are just variants of the *be* and *bes* markers. All these constructions express the habitual aspect (Harris 1986: 17).

The emergence of the aspectual system in Hiberno-English is clearly due to contact with Irish Gaelic,[3] which has the overtly expressed category of habitual aspect formed with the help of the specialized habitual form of the auxiliary *tá* → *bíonn*:

Factative	*Glanann sé*
Progressive	*Tá sé ag glanadh*
Habitual	*Bíonn sé ag glanadh*

In fact, Hiberno-English seems to distinguish more aspects than Irish.[4]

The similarity between the aspectual systems of Hiberno-English, on the one hand, and the Caribbean English-based creoles, on the other, is obvious. "Hiberno-English, in common with some New World Black English (NWBE) varieties, however, also employs special aspect markers to code habitual aspect" (Ronan 2000: 106). John Harris was one of the first linguists who argued for the possible influence of an Irish substrate on Atlantic creoles (Harris 1986). It is nonetheless possible to postulate two scenarios for the emergence of the creole structures. They could be influenced by:

i) Hiberno-English
ii) Irish Gaelic

The second scenario presupposes that the similar structures in Hiberno-English and Caribbean creoles appeared in parallel as a result of the influence of the same language. Using the metaphor of a family, it may be said that, in the first

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[3] For the discussion of whether the Habitual in Hiberno-English is due to the Irish substratum see (Filppula 1999: 22-9).
[4] This is a spectacular example of the fact that language-contact does not always result in the simplification of language-structure as it is sometimes claimed (see Thomason 2008).

scenario, Hiberno-English and Caribbean creoles are linked roughly as "mother-daughter", while, in the second scenario, they are more like "sister-sister".

An explanation of language change through language contact is often not enthusiastically welcomed by linguists. This is especially true for "substrate influence"-explanations, in which the contact between the languages took place in the remote past and the languages of the substrate are almost unknown. Such statements can neither be proved nor disproved. There must be good reasons for putting forward a contact explanation for the change in grammar. There should be 1) structural (and optionally material) similarity between the constructions of the two languages; 2) historical evidence of the contact between the speakers of the corresponding languages.

In the case of the possible influence of Hiberno-English or Irish Gaelic on the formation of the aspectual system of the Caribbean English-based creoles these two conditions are met. The structural similarity was demonstrated above. The material similarity seems to suggest Hiberno-English as a source of the creole structures. Less obvious is the m a t e r i a l similarity with the Irish Gaelic habitual *bíonn*. The creole marker *bee* may go back to English *to be, been*, but also to Irish *bíonn*. This may be an example of a double etymology resulting from the "bargain" process typical in situations of language contact (Thomason 2001: 159-61).

Structural and material similarities are, however, not enough to prove the contact explanation of a grammatical change. There must be serious historical evidence for the possibility of this contact.

3. Historical background

The Caribbean English-based creoles are spread throughout the islands of the Caribbean Sea and adjacent territories. These are the islands of Jamaica, the archipelago Turks and Caicos, Barbados, the Virgin Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, the Lesser Antilles (Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, Anguilla, St. Kitts and Nevis) and some other territories.

I will limit myself to a discussion of the historical background for possible early Irish-Creole contacts in three places: the islands of Barbados, Jamaica and Montserrat.

3.1 Barbados

As was shown by J.F. Hancock (1980), Barbados played an important role in the formation of Caribbean creoles. Barbados was the oldest English marine outpost in the Caribbean and the main transit point for Africans who were then moving to other English colonies. So, it was in Barbados that the African newcomers learned an English-based pidgin which later became the basis for the formation of future English-based creoles.

The island was "discovered" by the Spanish in the early 17th century. It was proclaimed a British possession in 1624 and already in 1627 the first settlers had arrived to start a colony. The migration was probably not completely voluntary, as Scots and Gypsies formed the majority of the population in the middle of the 17th century (Hancock 1980: 22). The islanders soon started a tobacco planting industry and therefore needed labourers. The survivors of Oliver Cromwell's campaigns in Ireland were therefore sent to Barbados. Between 1649 and 1655 it received approximately 12,000 prisoners of war; the majority of them were Irish and in particular southern Irish. In 1650 Irish settlers constituted more than a half of the entire population of the island and outnumbered the English (Rickford 1986: 251).

Not all the Irish who arrived in Barbados had knowledge of English. It is essential that the Irish appeared there b e f o r e the majority of African slaves. Moreover, the Irish were probably not real slaves; they were referred to as servants, indicating that their status was higher than that of the Africans, but much lower than the status of their English masters. When Barbados turned to sugar cultivation, the importation of African slaves became inevitable. Sugar plantations needed workers. By the end of the 17th century Africans already outnumbered Europeans by two to one.

African slaves most likely had to deal with Irish servants and not with their English masters. This explains the influence of Irish Gaelic or Hiberno-English on the formation of creole. The Barbados creole therefore incorporated many features of the "Irish speech". As Barbados was a main transit point for African slaves, they acquired the basics of the creole on Barbados and spread it to other territories.

The question remains as to which of the languages influenced the Barbados creole: Irish Gaelic or Hiberno-English. Not all the Irish who arrived in Barbados had knowledge of English, as this language was not widespread in Ireland in the 17th century. It was only after Cromwell's conquest that the process of language shift began in Ireland. Modern Hiberno-English could not therefore be used as it did not exist. There is a possibility that the Irish servants spoke Irish Gaelic between themselves and with the Africans but we have no indications that this situation actually took place. This would have resulted in the formation of a Gaelic-based pidgin or creole, the existence of which is not confirmed by written sources.

3.2 Jamaica[5]

Jamaica was colonized by Britain later than Barbados, after 1654 when the expedition sent by Cromwell attacked Jamaica and took it from the Spanish. There were probably some Irish among the 8,000 British military men. Later

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[5] For an overview of Jamaican Creole grammar, see Farquharson 2013.

Cromwell planned to transport 2,000 Irish boys and 1,000 girls to raise the population of the island but this plan was never carried out. Otherwise a Gaelic-based creole would probably have developed.

The Irish past is still present in Jamaican place names:

> I found *Irish Town* and *Dublin Castle* in the cool hills of St. Andrew; *Irish Pen* and *Sligoville* in St. Catherine; *Athenry* and *Bangor Ridge* in Portland; *Clonmel* and *Kildare* in St. Mary; *Belfast* and *Middleton* in St. Thomas; *Ulster Spring* in Trelawny, and *Hibernia* in Christiana. I travelled *Leinster Road*, *Leitrim Road*, *Longford Road, Killarney Avenue, Sackville Road* and *Kinsale Avenue* all in Kingston and St. Andrew (Mullally 2003: 1).

Many Jamaicans have Irish surnames: *Collins, Lynch, Murphy, Mulling, McCarthy, McCormack, McDermott, McDonnough, McGann, McLaughlin, O'Brien, O'Connor, O'Reilly, O'Hara*, etc.

The black population of Jamaica increased enormously during the 17th century; Africans outnumbered white servants many times over. Le Page noted that "in this slow growth of the English speaking community in Jamaica compared with the rapid growth of the slave population, is to be found one of the major factors which has differentiated the Creole dialect of this island from that of Barbados" (Le Page 1960: 18).

Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh cite the following description:

> The "Salt-Water" Negro picked up what he could of his master's English but learned most of his speech from the white bond servants — the first field hands — hence the I r i s h   b r o g u e so prevalent in the West Indies today (Bridenbaugh 1972: 352).

3.3 Montserrat

Montserrat is a small island in the Lesser Antilles (16 x 11 km). It was one of the main points of forced Irish immigration. The island fell under British control in 1632 and soon received its pioneers. These were the Irish settlers of Nevis and St. Kitts (two small islands in the same archipelago) who left having suffered anti-Catholic violence there. Many of them were previously unwillingly sent to the West Indies from Ireland. A little later the Irish population of the island was replenished with the prisoners of Cromwell's war.

> The victims of Cromwellian transportation ranged from political and military prisoners to anyone who might burden the public purse: orphans, widows and the unemployed (Race and History 2002).

Montserrat became the most "Irish populated" island in the Caribbean. According to the "Race and History" website, the census of 1678 showed, that seven of every 10 whites were Irish on Montserrat (compare with 26% Irish on

Antigua, 22% on Nevis and 10% on St. Christopher). In addition, this island was also ruled by the Irishmen: six of the island's 17th century governors were Irish; this fact seems unprecedented. Today Montserrat is one of the two places in the world that officially celebrates St. Patrick's Day, the other being Ireland. It has been claimed that Montserrat is the "Emerald Isle of the Caribbean" (Wauer 1996: 142).

The economy of Montserrat was based on sugar and cotton, so that the island soon turned into a "neo-feudal Irish empire".

> In fact, in the fifty years before emancipation (that is, roughly, the last two decades of the eighteenth century and the first three of the nineteenth), the Irish became, increasingly and unmistakeably, the dominant economic group on Montserrat and the big slave owners (Akenson 1997: 162).

Irish influence is still present in the island. *Cork Hill,* Delvin's, *Duberry Hill, Fogerty, Galway's Estate, Irish Ghaut, Katy Hill, Killiecronkie Spring, Kinsale, Riley's Estate,* and *St. Patrick's* are found on a map of Montserrat. Local people, mainly descendants from Africa, very often have Irish names: the telephone directory contains 132 families of *Allens*, 91 *Ryans*, 81 *Daleys*, 68 *Tuitts*, 57 *Farrells*, 42 *Rileys*, 38 *Skerretts*, 35 *Sweeneys*, 28 *Brownes*, 26 *Roches*, 19 *Lynches*, 16 *Cartys* and 12 *Kirwans*. In addition, "a carved Irish shamrock still adorns the gable at Government House. The island's flag and crest show a lady with a cross and a harp. The lady is Erin of the Irish legend" (Fergus 1984: 64-5).[6]

Montserrat creole was also described as "an Irish brogue". This is a typical description of the idiom in question:

> Montserrat had Irish colonists for its early settlers, and the negroes to this day have the Connaught brogue curiously and ludicrously engrafted on the African jargon. It is said that a Connaught man, on arriving at Montserrat, was, to his astonishment, hailed in vernacular Irish by a negro from one of the first boats that came alongside – 'Thunder and turf,' exclaimed Pat, 'how long have you been here?' – 'Three months,' answered Quashy, 'Three months! and so black already!! Hanum a jowl,' says Pat, thinking Quashy a ci-devant countryman, 'I'll not stay among ye;' and in a few hours the Connaught man was on his return, with a white skin, to the emerald isle (Montgomery 1834: 352).

Other evidence of this kind shows that any local speech with "an Irish tincture" was typically referred to as "an Irish brogue", but it is never clear whether a local form of English or an English-based creole with "an Irish accent" or a corrupted form of Irish Gaelic is meant.

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[6] See also a film on http://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1378-radharc/355633-the-black-irish/.

4. Conclusions

Irish immigration to the Caribbean had declined by the end of the 18th century, North America becoming the main destination for Irish emigrants. The flow of immigrants from Ireland to the United States, huge as it was, did not much influence Afro-American vernacular, as these communities were hostile to one another. In spite of the amount of Irish immigrants to America in 19th century, their language could not have had any effect on Afro-American vernacular, as had happened in the 17th century in the case of Caribbean creoles. It clearly demonstrates that neither the size of an immigrant group nor its present percentage in the population is decisive as far as the possible influence on the formation of local languages is concerned. The Irish influence was due to the following factors:

1) *The order of arrival:* The most important factor was that Irish workers appeared in the Caribbean b e f o r e the majority of African slaves, just at the time of the formation of early English-based pidgin. It is necessary to take into account that the relative order in which an immigrant population settles in a new area is extremely significant. Le Page showed that Twi-speaking slaves influenced the lexicon of Jamaican creole significantly not because they were in the majority (they were not), but because they came first (Le Page 1960: 18). Those who came later had to acquire a pidgin that had already formed in the plantations.

2) *Intermediate position of the Irish:* The Irish were not really slaves (they were always referred to as servants); they were white. Their relative status, therefore, was higher that the status of African slaves but lower than the status of English masters. The Irish were closer to Africans than the English; they worked alongside African slaves. They were also more similar to them than any other white group in terms of social standing. Of all white servants the Catholic Irish were the least favoured by their Protestant English masters.

3) *The Irish had a higher status than slaves:* Typically, in the contact situation the language of a group with higher status becomes a language of interethnic communication.

These are the three factors that made Irish language influence on an emerging creole almost inevitable.

The question of a theoretical Gaelic-based creole (or pidgin) in the West Indies is controversial. It would have been an interesting case both for historians and linguists, but we have absolutely no reliable evidence that it had ever existed. Be that as it may, Irish Gaelic still influenced the grammatical structure of English-based Caribbean creoles indirectly through Hiberno-English or, most probably, through another variant of English formed in the West Indies under Irish influence.

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