

# DECREOLIZATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW\*

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Abstract: This study looks at the often invoked but frequently vague notion of *decreolization* in studies of creole languages and language contact. Departing from the notion that scientific terms should have clearly bounded definitions and unique denotata, the notion of decreolization is examined in terms of its target, internal coherence, and difference with other linguistic processes. I conclude with a proposal to abandon the term *decreolization* in favor of terms applicable to all languages such as *debasilectalization*.

*Decreolization remains an insecure notion: insufficiently distinguished from ordinary change processes, possibly conceptually incoherent, and certainly not adequately supported by diachronic investigations to date. It will not be utilized in this investigation, nor will it be linked through definition to any of the key concepts; and this can be recommended as a general rule.*

Patrick (1999: 19)

*The concepts of depidginization and decreolization remain insufficiently studied or understood.*

Kaye and Tosco (2001: 94)

*It has not been rigorously defined what structural process is inverted or what structural properties are removed by this de-creolization process.*

DeGraff (2005: 553)

## 1. Introduction

The notion of *decreolization* is one that is both widely invoked and at the same time often misunderstood. On the one hand, it seems that one can see its effects in a large number of creoles in contact with their lexifiers, but on the other hand it can be difficult to tell what exactly decreolization is and how it differs from other processes of language change, both within and outside of creoles. This essay then endeavors to explore *decreolization* not from the perspective of its results, but rather from its use and its definition.

A scientific term should have a number of characteristics. The first is that it should not be a loose definition, one capable of meaning a wide variety of vaguely similar objects, concepts, or phenomena without clearly established boundaries about what does and does not belong in the set of things denoted by term X. This is crucial for scientific discovery, because real knowledge does not advance when scientists talk past each other, using the same words without the same understanding. This does not mean that all those using the term have to

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agree on what is a member of the set at the margins, or that there will not be things in the world that challenge the general understanding of the boundaries of the term; rather, it means that scientists know, upon seeing a term in different sources, that the word means the same thing in all the sources, that core membership in the set unless otherwise specified.

Another important aspect of scientific terminology is that a unique term should represent a unique phenomenon, concept, or thing. The need for precision in everyday language is often downgraded in favor of expediency, ambiguity resolved by context or left ambiguous without major impediment to conversation. In science—and indeed in other fields such as law—, where members of the community share a common goal of discovering the truth or the facts of the matter at hand, precision is indispensable for clear argumentation as well as internal and external consistency. Being unique does not mean that the term will not be hyponymic to a larger concept nor hyperonymic to sub-concepts. A *foot* represents a certain level of suprasegmental phonology; that feet can be *iambic*, *trochaic*, *degenerate*, *unbounded*, etc., does not mean that *foot* fails to identify a unique concept, though. It is ‘unique’ in that there are not other terms (e.g. *syllable group*) that identify the same concept or thing as *foot*. Synonymy in scientific discussion is superfluous and invites increased probability that normal semantic drift will reduce that actual semantic proximity and reduce the precision of using the terms interchangeably.

To be clear, I am not saying that scientific terms do not undergo the same kinds of semantic evolution as other words; advances in knowledge and theory are responsible for changing how we understand basic scientific terms like *atom* and *phoneme*, both of which were once thought to be indivisible and are now widely recognized as being made up of smaller parts (protons, neutrons and electrons for the former and distinctive features for the latter), such that an *atom* and a *phoneme* no longer mean quite the same thing now as they did at their coinage, even if they denote the same set of items. Semantic evolution is unavoidable, but conceding this fact is not equivalent to inviting an anything-goes attitude. Being descriptivists of language does not obligate linguists to eschew all prescriptivism. At the level of discourse, we certainly embrace prescriptivism in the publishing process, discussing what constitutes acceptable discursive structure, adhering to style guides, and the like. To be able to get at a fuller understanding of the nature, functions, and realities of language, we can also embrace the same level of prescriptivism among ourselves concerning terminology.

A number of problems come up when considering the scientific term *decreolization*. The first and perhaps most obvious is the unclear target of decreolization. What decreolizes: the lexicon, a grammatical domain, a sociolect, the language, the speech community, or any and all of the above? An obvious follow-up question would be to what extent would a combination of the above possibilities represent a ‘unique’ process? Another question that comes into play is, What makes the language less creole? If a researcher is claiming that a creole language is not simply evolving but decreolizing, then s/he has a responsibility to demonstrate that it is specifically creole features that are being lost. A related point is that definitions of decreolization (described more completely in the following section) frequently specify that movement is towards and caused by the lexifier. If decreolization cannot occur in the direction of another language, then there should be some clear linguistic or social differences between those changes (or their outcomes) and the former. Indeed, this begs the question of what makes decreolization a distinct process of language change. This issue has two parts: what makes decreolization different from other language change; in other words, is it a specific type of change with results or processes that are qualitatively different from other types

of contact-induced language change, results or processes that can be attributed to the lexifier/creole relationship? Another problem addressed here is the relationship of decreolization to the creole continuum, specifically, does one necessarily beget the other? Lastly, do non-creole languages undergo the same types of changes as decreolizing languages?

## 2. Definitions

There are many different definitions of decreolization given, some more precise than others. The most common definition is a variant of the following, found in Trask (1997)'s *A Student's Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*: "The process in which a creole changes so as to become more similar to the natural language from which it was originally derived[...]" or this one from Matthews (2005: 93)'s *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics* "Historical process by which a \*creole is progressively assimilated to a standard language: the assimilation of English creoles in the West Indies to standard English[...]" Kaye and Tosco (2001: 94) say, "Basically, [...the creoles] become more like the (standard) superstratum language since... creoles normally coexist alongside it". Holm (1988: 53) describes it as "progressively dropping its nonstandard features and adding standard ones." Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 98) define it as when "the language of a substrate creole-speaking population gradually changes through structural and lexical borrowing from the superstrate vocabulary-base language." Rickford (1987: 16) says it is "movement away from creole norms and toward the norms of lexically related standard languages." Mufwene (2005: 79) says that decreolization "consiste en la perte des traits structurels associés au basilecte" ('consists of the loss of structural traits associated with the basilect'). Winford (2003: 314) limits it to "contact-induced change in a more radical creole due to continuing contact with its lexifier." However, the most important definition, the one that seemed to set the study of decreolization in motion, has come from Bickerton (1980: 109-110): "In decreolization, speakers progressively change the basilectal grammar so that its output gradually comes to resemble the output of an acrolectal grammar... Decreolization then consists in the creole abandoning, one after another, those features which distinguish it from the superstrate, and immediately replacing each abandoned feature by its superstrate equivalent."

If we wanted to construct a prototype of decreolization according to these definitions, we see that its principal defining features are the following. It involves at least a creole language as a basilect, and generally the lexifier as the acrolectal target variety, though various definitions allow for other acrolectal varieties (e.g. the mesolect closest to the standard lexifier), an important point of disagreement. There is loss of basilectal features and replacement of those features by acrolectal ones. For some it is purely grammatical, and for others there is the possibility of lexical decreolization. Bickerton's definition is useful in that it makes it clear that for him the term covers both the individual and community grammars. For the purposes of this article, *decreolization* will be defined broadly as "change in a creole in the direction of the lexifier-base language due to contact with some variety of the latter." Using this definition is a descriptive exercise and should not be interpreted *a priori* as an acceptance of this definition as one that is scientifically adequate; indeed, it is a 'loose' definition to be refined later.

### 3. What decreolizes?

The exact target of decreolization is unclear. Some researchers appear to use it to mean that there is a large amount of lexical borrowing by the creole from the lexifier language. This is the case for Valdman (1986) and especially Zéphir (1993). Indeed, the latter's main evidence for the decreolization of Haitian Creole comes from the lexical expansion that has occurred using French borrowings such as “*reform agraire la*” (‘the agricultural reform’) and “*relations interpersonnelles*” (‘interpersonal relation(ship)s’) (200). Aitchison (2001: 218) adds, “Massive vocabulary borrowing is the most superficially noticeable aspect of decreolization in Tok Pisin.” Nevertheless, it seems that lexical borrowing, while likely a catalyst, is surely not on its own an example of decreolization, especially in the case of Haitian Creole, where creole features are not being lost. Fouse (2003) suggests that if we were to use this definition, we might have to cite the relexification of the Portuguese-based creoles by Spanish as examples of decreolization, as the two languages are so close that it can be difficult to distinguish a great number of words as being from one rather than the other. With such great lexical and phonological overlap, it is at least conceivable that the non-Iberians speaking the language in its early days did not distinguish Spanish from Portuguese (i.e. if they did not think they were more than differing dialects of the same language), and therefore the former could simply have been considered the local variety of the latter by those speaking Papiamentu<sup>1</sup>. We could also ask if for any two closely related varieties, such as Sudanese Arabic and Classical Arabic for Juba Arabic Creole, if one dialect (e.g. Classical Arabic) came to replace the other (Sudanese Arabic) as the acrolect to which the creole assimilated at the level of the lexicon only, would this relexification count as decreolization? A clear scientific definition of decreolization should be able to answer this question. The loose definition that we have adopted would accept this relexification, but it is unclear whether these great dialectal differences would constitute different varieties for many of the above researchers.

Another possible target of decreolization is the grammar or one of its domains, such as phonology or morphosyntax. Akers (1981) and Winford (1978) apply the term to phonology presumably in the context of broader decreolization in the language, and various other studies (including DeCamp 1971; Escure 1981; Greene 1999; Mühlhäusler 1997) include phonology as an important part of the decreolization situation. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a movement toward the lexifier-base language that completely ignored phonology. The vast majority of studies, however, include mostly morphosyntactic changes as the main area of decreolization. These include Bickerton (1975, 1980), DeCamp (1971), Mühlhäusler (1997), Rickford (1986), Schwegler (2001), Washabaugh (1977), and Wood (1971). Given that this is traditionally thought to be the hardest part of a language to borrow (see Thomason and Kaufman 1988: Chapter 1), it should not be surprising that it would also be the most significant change to the creole. In general, those studies that discuss the decreolization of the creole's morphosyntax also either assert or imply that the language as a whole is decreoliz-

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous reviewer points out that any scholar of the Iberian languages would not consider Spanish and Portuguese to be the same lexifier language because the differences between the two are so numerous. Be that as it may, there are respected linguists such as Trudgill (1986) that put the two on a dialect continuum. Such continua, as seen below, are a vexing problem for linguists, and while the poles at the time of decreolization may have been different enough that we could call them different languages, it is not clear that the acrolectal varieties in creole-speaking areas were in fact the polar varieties for which we could talk about *linguistic* rather than *dialectal* differences. For this reason, I have attenuated the language from an earlier draft to reflect that this would be a conceivable instance of decreolization rather than an actual one.

ing, rather than simply that one domain. That morphosyntactic change or phonological change is an example of decreolization is seemingly uncontroversial among scholars.

The last logical possibility, explored by Rickford (1986) and endorsed by Aitchison (2001), does not exclude morphosyntax from its purview, but adds the speech community to the concept of decreolization. According to him, decreolization could result from the addition of new lects filling in the creole continuum between the basilect creole, an intermediate mesolect, and the acrolect lexifier. Then, as more lects became available, the original basilect would simply disappear in a manner akin to language death, with fewer and fewer speakers using it. He refers to this as “quantitative” decreolization, distinguished from “qualitative” decreolization, in which the creole is retransmitted from generation to generation but with an increasing number of acrolectal features. Aitchison’s discussion of decreolization focuses on quantitative decreolization, coming in her section on language death, not on pidgins and creoles, and is preceded by the heading “language suicide.” This gives a sense of agency and intentionality to the decreolization process that is absent from other descriptions of it. After all, not all cases of language or dialect shift are fully intentional; sometimes it is just a case of bilinguals who do not separate their languages as completely as possible, bringing about death by borrowing. Mufwene (1994) warns against the conflation of qualitative and quantitative decreolization, as neither one logically implies the other. In this respect, decreolization subsumes two very different processes: structural change and community abandonment. This in itself is not a reason to consider *decreolization* to be neither unique nor internally consistent. However, it is enough to say that decreolization, subsuming these two processes, is a description of a *result*, rather than a process.

#### 4. What makes the language less creole?

The postulation that a language is de-creolizing indicates that it is becoming less creole. This notion of course presupposes that there is some linguistic definition of a creole feature that can be lost. However, *pace* McWhorter (1998), who postulates a clustering of three features (roughly, semantically transparent derivation, little use of tone, lack of inflectional morphology) as the defining linguistic features of creoles, there is no widely accepted definition of creole without reference to sociohistorical emergence<sup>2</sup>. This point should not be overlooked. With other processes of linguistic change such as *grammaticalization* or *apocope*, we need no other information about languages beyond what they looked like at each relevant stage. With the sufficient, relevant, linguistic data—which need not be recorded at testations but may also consist of historical reconstruction—we can identify these other linguistic changes or rule them out. Even with the same amount of relevant linguistic data, we can identify decreolization if and only if we have sociohistorical information about the emergence of the language. This calls into question whether decreolization is in fact unique, for if we see similar processes or outcomes to decreolization occurring in languages that are in a lexifier/creole relationship long in the past with no sociohistorical documentation, we would wrongly conclude that something other than decreolization is taking place.

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<sup>2</sup> An anonymous reviewer points out that one way to define a creole linguistically is against its lexifier, in that the former will be morphologically simpler than the latter. This still seems to assume sociohistorical knowledge. How would we distinguish between sister languages descended from the same source language where one has become significantly more analytic than the other (and possibly undergone other simplifications) and lexifier/creole languages where the creolization took place so far in the past that there are no records of it?

Mufwene (1999; 2005) says that decreolization is actually debasilectalization, that is, the removal of basilectal features from the creole. Thus, considering Greene (1999), decreolization includes the adoption of interdental fricatives where English has them but Belizean Creole has alveolar [t] and [d]. Obviously [t] and [d] are not uniquely creole; rather it is their status as being basilectal that makes their elimination a form of decreolization. This makes sense as the retention of basilectal features while mesolectal elements got eliminated would not result in the disappearance of the creole, but rather of the continuum. One possible problem with the use of decreolization, as signaled by researchers such as Alleyne (1971), DeGraff (2005), and Mufwene (2005), is that the so-called decreolized varieties of the languages in question likely existed from the earliest stages of creole development, at the very least for certain creoles. DeGraff (2005: 554) points out, “Such a scenario makes decreolization simultaneous with creolization, and language death virtually coincidental with language birth!” On this point, DeGraff misses the mark (though Mufwene (1988) rightly emphasizes this): this is not a problem with the *notion* of decreolization, but rather the *use*. It is certainly wrong to say that such a variety at the onset has decreolized because no creole features have been lost, but if the creole has basilectalized and then debasilectalized, it is not inappropriate to say that the language has decreolized. Unfortunately, many researchers fail to provide the diachronic evidence for claims of decreolization, even in the form of references, choosing instead to rely on synchronic evidence (Mufwene 1988, 1999). For example, Greene (1999) assumes that since other creoles do not use inflection to do comparative constructions but that Belizean Creole does, the construction must be due to decreolization. Yet there is no way for the reader to know if a variety or element has decreolized or simply never moved to a basilectal form, or even to evaluate the claim, absent any evidence.

Here we could ask if decreolization is a synchronic or diachronic phenomenon. It seems that all definitions from section 2 agree that it is diachronic, and indeed, as Winford (2003:254, citing Mufwene with no particular article mentioned) has pointed out, variation in creoles is often used as evidence of change in progress, though there is no reason to assume that there exists no stable variation in creoles. Winford also points out that “we need to distinguish variation due to style shifting across systems from variation that may be inherent in the creole grammar itself. And we need to ask whether the latter type of variation, if present, has always been part of the system, or is due to change, i.e., influence from other systems.” (2003: 256). In other words, there is careful work to be done by any researcher claiming decreolization, whether attempting to use only synchronic data or using diachronic data.

In any case, it should be clear that decreolization is principally the loss of basilectal features. The addition of mesolectal features where they previously did not exist presents a difficult question. Is such an addition a change in the direction of the lexifier language, as stated above in the loose, working definition of the term at the end of section 2? I would argue that here we need to make reference to Rickford’s notion of *qualitative* and *quantitative decreolization*. It is surely an example of quantitative decreolization; if people are using the mesolect more and more at the expense of the basilect and not the acrolect, then it seems that we could assume that this would lead to decreolization. As for qualitative decreolization, it seems less clear, as there is not a finite number of features that can be transmitted from generation to generation; the addition of mesolectal features does not logically imply the loss of any basilectal or acrolectal features.

Another question is whether the loss of mesolectal features is an example of decreolization. The only case that I can think of in which decreolization would apply to the loss of

putatively mesolectal forms occurs when basilectal features are lost, rendering the mesolectal forms basilectal as there are no more features below them, which really is the loss of synchronically basilectal features that were historically mesolectal; this is a hypothetical case, but could possibly . Moreover, if the acrolect has acquired creole features due to contact with the basilect, a creole cannot fully decreolize, for there will remain creolisms even after all the lects have fallen by the wayside. This point will be addressed further below.

### 5. Why the lexifier?

In his introduction to pidgins and creoles, Mühlhäusler (1997: 211-212) states that some researchers argue that decreolization can occur in situations where a creole is in contact with a nonlexifier language, but counters, “I believe that there are good reasons for keeping such processes separate.” He does not enumerate any of these reasons, however. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why two identical processes should be separated terminologically, and if the processes are not identical, then someone should show qualitative or quantitative evidence to show that they are unique processes. To my knowledge, nobody has endeavored to do so; this might be why so many of the definitions above did not include the lexifier as a necessary component in the decreolization scenario. In essence, there must be an explanation as to why in the following continuum, the top half is the result of one process and the bottom is the result of some different process:

San Andrés EC

Standard English: *I don't know what is going on here on the islands nowadays.*

Acrolect: *I don't know what going on here on the islands actually.*

Mesolect: *I don't know we gwain on ya pan the islands right ya now.*

Basilect: *Me no know we gwain on pan di islands right ya now.*

Creole: *Me no know we de go on dong ya pan fi we islands.*

Basilenguaje: *Me no know que pasar wi di people aquí now.*

Mesolenguaje: *Me no know que pasar con la gente aquí now.*

Acrolenguaje: *Me no know que pasar con la gente aquí ahora.*

Spanish: *No se [sic] qué es lo que está pasando con la gente aquí ahora.*

(Forbes, 1987: 14–15, cited in Bartens, 2002: 274)

While this particular continuum has been called into doubt by Bartens (2002), it is not inconceivable that such a continuum could arise, given that thirteen of the twenty-four Caribbean creoles are in contact with languages other than their lexifiers (Snow, 2000). Indeed, Snow cites at least five studies of these situations in which continua arise, and as we have seen earlier, decreolization and continua are linked (see section 7 for more).

Special mention deserves to be made of Garrett (2000). He describes the contact on St. Lucia between the standard, official language English and the French-lexified creole Kwéyòl, specifically with regards to the formation of a new register “High Kwéyòl,” which contains many anglicisms, lexical and structural alike. Garrett clearly believes that there is a creole continuum on the island, approvingly citing Isaac (1986)’s division of speech varieties on the island into “St. Lucian Creole”, “St. Lucian Basilect”, “St. Lucian Creolized English”, and “St. Lucian Standard English” (Garrett, 2000:67). He then goes on to describe a continuum-type model in his own terms, reproduced in its entirety below.

<i>Continuum-type diagram showing relations between St. Lucian language varieties</i>	
<b>St. Lucian Standard English</b>	Comparable to other national standards, e.g. Australian, American; distinguishable from these others by relatively minor differences of lexicon, phonetics, prosody, and phrase construction.
<b>Mesolectal Vernacular English of St. Lucia (VESL)</b>	Mostly English lexicon with a few Kwéyòl items; some calquing on Kwéyòl constructions; some standard English morphology and use of auxiliary verbs.
<b>Basilectal Vernacular English of St. Lucia (VESL)</b>	Primarily English lexicon supplemented with some Kwéyòl items; grammatically quite similar to Kwéyòl, with many constructions calqued directly on Kwéyòl constructions.
-----“soft” lexical boundary-----	
<b>“High” Kwéyòl</b>	Frequent use of verb phrase anglicisms (calques on standard English phrases); use of verb + satellite anglicisms; occasional “kwéyòlization” of English verbs and other parts of speech; use of neologisms and “false” Kwéyòl words based on English or (less often) French words; use of “authentic” but semi-archaic forms such as the intensifier <i>twé</i> and plural marker <i>lé</i> ; frequent use of passive constructions (as in formal standard English); avoidance of characteristically creole emphatic and focusing processes such as reduplication, left-dislocation, and predicate clefting; application of standard/literate English stylistic and generic norms; avoidance of the many assimilated English nouns and function words commonly used in “ordinary” anglicized Kwéyòl[...].
<b>“Ordinary” anglicized Kwéyòl</b>	Contains many fully assimilated English lexical items, as well as frequent English borrowings and code-switches; many calques on English/VESL phrases; frequent use of certain English verbs, adverbials, grammatical morphemes and other fully assimilated English items, often to the exclusion of their Kwéyòl equivalents.
<b>Kwéyòl as spoken in past generations</b>	or as spoken today in elderly monolingual rural St. Lucians.

Table 1. St. Lucian continuum (Garrett, 2000: 74)

Through this continuum, Garrett says that Kwéyòl is decreolizing.

“Most of high Kwéyòl’s developers and speakers seem to be almost wholly unaware of these subtler changes, and it is partly for this reason that they are interesting and important. Collectively, these changes are bringing about a significant transformation of the language. Broadly speaking, Kwéyòl is being anglicized and, in the process, decreolized. Or perhaps it would be better to say ‘de-kwéyòlized,’ since Kwéyòl is not decreolizing in the usual sense: it is changing in the direction of standard English rather than in the direction of its main lexifier, French (which is no longer spoken at all in St. Lucia).” (70)

Garrett clearly believes that the situation is not qualitatively different from traditional scenarios of decreolization, and it is hard to see what the difference would be. So the question to those like Mühlhäusler who would maintain that decreolization is only in the direction of the lexifier becomes, what are the specific mechanisms or outputs that distinguish decreolization from contact-induced change between a creole and a standard language that is not its lexifier?

## 6. Why is decreolization different?

In order to talk about decreolization as a type of language change, it must be made clear what about decreolization makes it a unique process rather than a code name for another process that exists for all languages with a particular instantiation in a creole language. Looking at some evidence, it seems that decreolization is simply structural borrowing. Trying to illustrate why decreolization is a different process, Bickerton (1981: 193, cited in Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 99) states that “decreolization proceeds first by acquiring new forms and new functions later,” but Thomason and Kaufman have their doubts that this is the only way that decreolization can proceed since in other languages the borrowing of structure can occur without the borrowing of lexical items that accompany it. Thus “since decreolization certainly involves some borrowing interference, **the burden of proof should lie on anyone who claims that it is wholly different in this aspect from other types of borrowing**, and a few examples of ‘new forms first’ borrowing should not shift this burden of proof” (*ibid.*, emphasis added). Indeed, this is consistent with the criteria proposed to evaluate scientific definitions laid out in the introduction, since many processes can be subsumed under larger principles, as Croft (2000) endeavors to show.

There are other problems with using the ‘new forms first’ formula. Mufwene (1988) points out that the adoption of a new form with the same meaning is hardly more than lexical borrowing, but Bickerton would likely counter that the subsequent change is decreolization and the borrowing is simply the first step. The more troublesome point is again in Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 344), where they point out that not all decreolization can occur with the “new forms first,” because this would mean that either a creole could never fully merge with its lexifier (since there would always be some shared forms) or “that a creole in continuum has always shared all its functions and meanings with its lexifier.” Nonetheless, this distinction is perhaps the only aspect of decreolization that is clearly stated in the literature that differentiates it from other forms of language change.

Another possibility is that decreolization is just a certain form of dialect borrowing or the creation of a dialect continuum (Escure 1997). It is not unreasonable to say that the poles of a dialect continuum are dialects of one larger system, even though they constitute autonomous systems when compared to one another. Thus we could explore the possibility that decreolization is a creolistics-specific term for dialect borrowing or continuum creation. Starting with the former, Thomason and Kaufman (1988) leave open the possibility that decreolization is distinct from dialect borrowing, but do not draw a conclusion. Holm (1988) counters that dialect borrowing is certainly not in operation because what we have is not two dialects but two languages. However, Holm overstates the typological differences precisely because he overlooks role of the creole continuum in the borrowing process<sup>3</sup>. While it is true that the two polar sociolects are typologically distinct to a far greater degree than two geographical dialects tend to be, the typological differences ought to be neutralized through the trickle-down effect of the continuum. Thus the forms are not (at least in theory) necessarily borrowed directly from the lexifier, but maybe be filtered down through the typologically comparable mesolects to the basilect. In fact, in light of the implicational scale provided by DeCamp (1971), in which the presence of certain variants of one variable implies the presence of other unrelated variants of wholly different variables, it seems that features are at

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<sup>3</sup> This is surprising given that he often conflates decreolization with the continuum and has just spent several pages (1988: 52-55) discussing the continuum.

least as likely to trickle down as to get borrowed directly from the acrolect to the basilect. As a result, either through several stages of dialect borrowing or borrowing directly from a mesolect, a basilect can acquire an acrolectal feature. Therefore it is not clear if decreolization is even distinct from dialect borrowing.

The other aspect of this argument concerns the singular nature of decreolization. At the onset it looks like a collection of four processes: lexical borrowing, structural borrowing, language continua, and language shift/death.<sup>4</sup> Because we have mentioned each of these in section 3, we can simply restate that each of these is implicated either as the means (lexicon), the target (structure, language) or the indirectly affected party (speech community) of the decreolization process. How then can we say that decreolization is a singular process? One way is to say that decreolization is a conspiracy of the four processes, in the same way that Newmeyer (1998) states that *grammaticalization* is comprised of semantic bleaching, phonetic reduction, and downgrading. This would be helpful except that we would have to maintain that qualitative and quantitative decreolization have different targets (the language and the speech community respectively), which is not a problem in itself, but a unifying definition of the two is still lacking in that case. Moreover, the two pairs of processes that make up qualitative and quantitative decreolization—namely unidirectional lexical and structural borrowing on one hand and language continua and shift/death on the other—hardly set them apart as a unique processes among languages.

Another way to distinguish decreolization is to use Mufwene's (2005) concept of debasilectalization in place of decreolization. Debasilectalization implies a systematic avoidance of the lowest prestige variants, whether they are phonemes, structures, or lects. The term avoids the pitfall of decreolization in that it does not imply that specifically creole features (in the typological sense) are lost, nor does it imply that the process is unique to creoles, thereby forging a possible link between creolistics and mainstream socio- and historical linguistics. It also provides a unitary operating principle ("avoid the basilect") that a variety of scholars, including Rickford (1986) and Washabaugh (1977) have cited as being just as important in decreolization as a desire to specifically acquire features of a higher lect. Moreover, it subsumes each of the four processes as integral parts of the process, rather than as incidents of it, which seems more in line with what most scholars mean when they use decreolization. Therefore, it would seem preferable to adopt Mufwene's term over decreolization as a unique scientific term with clear boundaries.

## 7. Why link decreolization and the creole continuum?

Most of the articles and books that describe decreolization either include the continuum in the discussions or even conflate the two. For example, in the index of Holm (1988), the largest entry on decreolization (pp. 52-55) is a subsection headed 'The creole continuum,' in which decreolization is barely mentioned and the continuum is discussed at length. Aceto (1999) dedicates an entire article to the overuse of decreolization and the creole continuum as a means of explaining changes in creoles. While I do not believe that decreolization excludes the continuum—and the possibility is certainly allowed by all the definitions in section 2—, to make them inextricable from one another is equally a limiting move. After all, the creole

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<sup>4</sup> We might add code-switching to this, as one reviewer points out, since this could feasibly lead to the lects that are seen for example in the San Andrés CE continua cited above. Given the close relationship between code-switching and nonce borrowing of lexical items, code-switching is another potential mechanism.

continuum is said to emerge only under certain conditions: the lexifier must be the dominant official language of the community and there must be (the perception of) sufficient upward mobility in the society for the basilectal speakers to start using more prestigious forms; if these conditions are met, the continuum will emerge and an implicational scale should come about along with it (DeCamp, 1971). Winford (1997: 260ff) makes a number of important points about this claim. First, DeCamp and his followers have never produced comprehensive quantitative evidence to back up claims of an implicational scale, which gives it the scientific validity of a good hunch. It needs to be established empirically that these lects actually correspond to the speech of a certain group or certain situations. Moreover, it is not clear why any of the features of the scale imply any of the others. Winford agrees that certain features must be linked in the various lects, but a scale should have a discernable logic in order to consider it *implicational*; it should not simply note that certain forms are the markers of certain lects.

In addition, predictions such as DeCamp's are too general. For instance, Wood (1972) demonstrates a variety of approximations of acrolectal Papiamentu to its lexifier Spanish, both lexical and morphosyntactic, including the development of a passive voice (with Spanish *ser* or Dutch *wòrdu* as its auxiliary verb), and the development of a present participle ending in *-ndo* (*papyando* vs. Spanish *hablando*). Curiously, the official language of the islands where Papiamentu is spoken (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao) is not Spanish but Dutch. The chances of a continuum emerging with Spanish as the acrolect are slim to none for the very reason that Spanish is not the language of the community—violating DeCamp's condition that the lexifier be the dominant language<sup>5</sup>—though the degree of prestige that Spanish has as a literary language and as an important language of the region (especially with regards to tourism; Fouse 2003:217-225) gives it some modest influence over Papiamentu. However, urban/acrolectal Papiamentu enjoys a great deal of prestige, so a continuum could feasibly emerge with a form of Papiamentu at the top, but this is not what would be predicted by the DeCamp (1971) model, since there is no lexifier at the top and even if for argument's sake we put Spanish at the top, it still does not occupy the place that the model predicts. Nonetheless, what we have undeniably is contact-induced change in the creole towards the lexifier, which is the definition of decreolization that was put forth earlier. This suggests that decreolization could take place even without the continuum and its infinite number of intermediate lects.

There is also an idea that the creole continuum results from contact between the basilect and the acrolect, i.e. is a post-creole continuum (DeCamp, 1971, much of Rickford, 1986). This notion is questionable as well. As cited above, we know that many continua existed from the earliest days of the creoles. Assuming that creole continua are the result of decreolization is a bad idea, though not wholly unfounded, as some continua may surely have arisen if the creolization event was abrupt. On the other hand, as de Rooij (1995) points out, there is a twofold danger in assuming that continua are not recent innovations. The first is that present-day varieties may not be identical to early ones, and secondly that the number of mesolectal speakers likely increased as the society became less rigidly stratified. So decreolization may result in continua, or it may not. It may result if continua are present, or it may

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed it is difficult to imagine a continuum developing with a language that almost no one speaks. Taking Croft (2000)'s evolutionary model as just one way of explaining the improbability of such a result, without few to no utterances in Spanish in the speech community, there is nothing to carry the Spanish linguemes (roughly, 'features') into the linguistic repertoire of the community.

not. Linking decreolization with the creole continuum may certainly prove useful at times, but the two are separate concepts that should not be viewed as inextricable processes.

#### 8. Other problems with decreolization

Another major problem with decreolization studies is that they assume that the process is unidirectional, i.e. where we find decreolization, we do not find influence of the creole on the local variety of the lexifier. Some, such as Bickerton (1980), come right out and baldly state that this is so. However, this is clearly false. Holm (1988: 53) makes this point when he mentions that decreolization is “an areal contact phenomenon,” and that as such the features go both ways, rendering the importance of doing reasonably complete historical research before claiming decreolization all the greater. He signals such research as the only way to show that Jamaican is an English creole whereas the Cayman Islands have a variety of English with creole features. Mufwene (2005: 80), citing Calvet and Chaudenson (1998: 107), refers to a *français créolisé* in French-speaking territories, which indicates that the local variety of French would have just a few features that it has gotten from the local creole. With the creole being the preferred language of contact for many people, especially in the less privileged classes (Rooij, 1995), we should not be surprised that some basilectal creole features persist even if other parts of it disappear, since the desire to mark a Creole identity may be stronger in some people than in others.

The process may also be thought to occur “wherever a creole language is in direct contact with its associated superstrate language” (Bickerton, 1980: 109). A counterexample using a Spanish-lexified creole is that of Palenquero. Schwegler (2001) says that Palenquero meets all the criteria that should engender a creole continuum and decreolization: strong bilingualism, social mobility, and the lexifier as a highly prestigious language. Yet as Schwegler demonstrates, there is neither synchronic nor diachronic evidence to suggest any decreolization or continua happening over the last 100 years. Since, as DeGraff (2005) points out, decreolization and creole continua are the norm, then they should arise here. However, neither one does. The same can be said for many of the French-based creoles where, despite French serving as a regional prestige language, there has been no decreolization (language shift has been attested, however).

Lastly, decreolization may not be limited to creole languages. Carton (1981) describes a continuum of sorts between Picard and Standard French, two sister *langues d’oïl*. He puts a patois (basilectal Picard) at the bottom of the continuum, then dialectal French (Picard with some Gallicisms), then regional French (French with some Picardisms), and finally general (standard) French at the top. Like many researchers, e.g. Pooley (2000: and references therein), Carton uses morphology as a defining characteristic of identifying the variety; if the morphology is identical to French, then it must be a variety of French (17). This begs the question of what to do about languages without inflectional morphology, like most creoles, but that is beyond the scope of Carton’s investigation. Carton also invokes intonation patterns as a possible identifying factor, saying that Regional French might only become salient if an odd intonation catches a speaker’s attention. However, Picard—the basilect—is slowly dying out. With the loss of basilectal features and the presence of a continuum, it is hard to see what the difference between “depicardization” and decreolization is supposed to be. It is exactly this type of situation that leads Mufwene (2005) to propose “debasilectalization” as a broader term to be applied to creole and non-creole languages alike.

A possible objection to this is that raised by Holm (1988) mentioned earlier, that these situations are ones of dialect contact rather than language contact. But let us consider Auger and Villeneuve (2008), in which the authors look at rates of and constraints on *ne*-deletion in Picard and Vimeu French. Citing the work of Auger (2003), they mention that Picard writers frequently utilize something akin to accent divergence, in the words of Trudgill (1986), choosing forms that distance themselves from the standard to achieve greater linguistic separation for political purposes. However the paper focuses on spoken data from speakers who presumably do not code-switch between Picard and Vimeu French (at least in the data analyzed). One important result is that *ne*-deletion is twice as common in French (79%) than in Picard (39%). Furthermore, they find that different linguistic factors govern the deletion of *ne* in the two languages. In French, the subject type (e.g. single vs. doubled NP), subject person, and placement of another negative element (i.e. before or after where *ne* would be) all play a highly significant role in *ne*-deletion. In Picard, it is the negative particle (e.g. *pas*, *point*) and the presence of a third negative element that seem to govern it. Both have high frequency forms such as *je + savoir/savoèr* that play a highly significant role. They use this data in combination with other differences that Auger has found in earlier studies to conclude that Picard is truly a separate language. This undermines Holm's contention about decreolization being fundamentally different from these types of dialectal contact situations. From Auger and Villeneuve's conclusions, one could state that the difference between "depicardization" (which they discuss) and decreolization (which they do not) is not one of type, but of degree. Even if we agree that Picard is considerably closer to French than, say, Haitian Creole, the way that decreolization is said to proceed—systematically losing basilectal features—implies that over time, the difference between the poles of the continuum will get increasingly smaller, to the point where the difference between a creole (whose eventual basilect would look something like today's mesolect) and its lexifier would not be considerably greater than today's difference between Picard and French. A responsible scholar would have to say that the changes in the creole at that point are either no longer decreolization yet proceed in the same fashion or were always part of the same, more general process.

## 9. Conclusion

As signaled in the epigraphs to this article, *decreolization* remains a widely used but scientifically inadequate term. It does not refer to a unique concept, phenomenon, or thing, even when we attempt to give it more precision by adding the modifiers *quantitative* and *qualitative*. The processes that make it up are found to occur in languages known not to be creoles, and we cannot use it to describe the exact same processes in two languages unless we have extra-linguistic evidence that the two languages are in a lexifier/creole relationship. I would argue that debasilectalization is a more accurate and more appropriate description of the decreolization process because it is more generally applicable to languages regardless of typology and because it provides a single operating principle ("avoid stigmatized forms") with a number of different means such as language shift or structural borrowings that allow us to describe the debasilectalization of speech communities or languages. In this way, we can sidestep the issue of whether or not the creoles must be spoken alongside the lexifier languages to claim decreolization. However, if we continue to use decreolization as a descriptive term—which I stress, I do not believe we should continue to do—it seems that it must include situations where the acrolect is not the lexifier language, for there is no purely lin-

guistic or even sociolinguistic means of distinguishing the two processes. If the creole is disappearing through absorption into another language, then it does not matter into what language it disappears; again following Thomason and Kaufman (1988), anyone who claims otherwise should demonstrate some kind of proof that the mechanics of the processes are different. Furthermore, the creole continuum and decreolization should no longer be conflated (echoing Mufwene, 1988). While the two are certainly important to one another, creoles can get closer to their prestige languages without having recourse to a continuum, and continua do not necessarily produce decreolization. Lastly, there are too many counterexamples to claim that decreolization is inevitable or unidirectional.

In the end, Lefebvre (2000) is right to say that too often, creolists invent their own terminology or take terminology already existent in the linguistics literature and customize it to suit our own needs, obscuring pidgin and creole studies and rendering it less accessible to scholars of other language groups or types. Just because we study isolating languages does not mean we should be isolating linguists. By adopting a more generalist approach and abandoning terms like *decreolization*—without discarding the concepts underneath them—we can reinforce the assertion that creoles are natural languages like any other and operate according to the same principles, rather than implying creole exceptionalism where none exists.

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