The Development of Syllable Structure in Papiamentu: What is the Role of Typological Constraints in Creolization?

Yolanda Rivera-Castillo
University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras

This presentation deals with the issue of determining specific stages of syllable structure development in the case of Creole languages from conducting a synchronic analysis of their typological affiliation. In the case of Creoles, these emerged from different lexical sources with different typological affiliations. We deal specifically with the role of typological constraints in the emergence of consonant clusters in Papiamentu (PA).

Syllable structure in PA exhibits a significant number of syllable types, with most studies placing it in the Marked III type with six combinations (Klein 2011:182, Maurer 1998): V, CV, CVC, VC, CCV, and CCVC. We have identified in our research with spontaneous speech data the presence of sC clusters and clusters of voiceless obstruents, from the Marked IV type: escoge (Spanish), 'choose' skohe Iberian: día jueves (Spanish), "Thursday" diaweps.

As shown, these clusters are not necessarily attested in the lexical sources, which supports Jacobson's (1962) claim that lexical borrowing is not sufficient to produce phonological transfer. Moreover, PA has a large number of diphthongs, twenty-three, according to Maurer (1998: 148), which indicates that nuclear components are very diverse as well. Given the definition of syllable types proposed by Levelt and van der Vijver (2004), the PA system matches most features from the Marked IV type. However, PA has specific constraints on consonant clusters that do not match those found in languages from the Marked IV type, like Dutch, which has been in contact with PA as an official language in the Netherland Antilles.

This presentation proposes that the resulting combinations constitute innovations because the features of consonant clusters in PA do not match those in the hypothesized lexical or typological sources. Drawing from synchronic evidence and historical data beginning in the 18th century, we demonstrate that PA syllable structure, emerged from convergence but did not result in a "hybrid" set of features from different grammars but rather in a reinterpreted set that combines features from two syllable types, or phonological systems (Croft 2003). Moreover, we propose that the synchronic data provide evidence that a specific typological restriction on obstruent voicing determined the set of resulting combinations in the language. The set of consonant clusters in Papiamentu provides evidence that change is not teleological but determined by typological constraints. We propose the following stages for the emergence of these clusters, which would apply depending on the lexical item and which exhibit similarities to Grimm's laws for IE languages: vowel loss > voicing assimilation > fortition. Finally, we conclude that a synchronic typological classification of PA provides the tools to identify the constraints that played a key role in language development.