



HAL
open science

Chaudenson, Robert, Creolization of Language and Culture (revised in collaboration with Salikoko S. Mufwene), London: Routledge, 2001, xiii + 340 pp. 0 415 14593 7

Jim Walker

► **To cite this version:**

Jim Walker. Chaudenson, Robert, Creolization of Language and Culture (revised in collaboration with Salikoko S. Mufwene), London: Routledge, 2001, xiii + 340 pp. 0 415 14593 7. Journal of French Language Studies, 2002, 12 (1), pp.95-121. 10.1017/S0959269502230161 . hal-04759703

HAL Id: hal-04759703

<https://hal.univ-lyon2.fr/hal-04759703v1>

Submitted on 30 Oct 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Chaudenson, Robert, Creolization of Language and Culture (revised in collaboration with Salikoko S. Mufwene), London: Routledge, 2001, xiii + 340 pp. 0 415 14593 7

This book is both a translation of, and an improvement upon, Chaudenson's classic Des îles, des hommes, des langues (1992), which will be familiar to many readers of this review. It has been revised by the original author in conjunction with Chicago-based creolist Salikoko Mufwene.

Chaudenson concentrates his analysis here on French lexifier creoles, both in the Antilles and more particularly in the Indian Ocean, where his experience in the field is unrivalled. The hypotheses and theories sketched out here, however, are intended to be generalisable to many of the other creoles which arose in the wake of European colonisation. The author, however, is at great pains to stress that the process of creolisation followed different trajectories in different localities and at different times.

In order to illustrate this, Chaudenson draws upon an extraordinary amount of primary sources, including census reports, contemporary accounts from travellers to the islands, journals and so on, as well as a vast amount of secondary literature, to back up his central argument. Chaudenson refutes a great deal of what has gone before him in creole studies, and puts forward an analysis in which

creolisation is not so much to be understood as a purely linguistic structural process as an all-encompassing social process. Creole languages cannot be defined on the basis of any form of structural criteria that might be peculiar to them, as other scholars have suggested, but rather with reference only to the peculiar socio-historical conditions in which they arose. The same is true of pidgins, defined by Chaudenson in purely functional terms as trade languages used for specific purposes, alongside a mother tongue used for more everyday activities.

Chaudenson uses this stance to convincingly reject monogenesis, as well as what might be seen as the classic view that creoles developed as a 'naturalisation' of earlier pidgins. He prefers to see creoles as 'approximations of approximations'. In other words, the very early social conditions in the slave colonies gave rise not to pidgins, but to approximations of French, or rather of the dialect of French spoken at the time by the settlers, and modern creoles are a result of approximations to this initial approximation. A parallel is also drawn between creolisation and first language acquisition, and once again, Chaudenson's scholarship is extraordinary in its breadth of coverage.

In the detailed historical account that is Chaudenson's, the arguments put forward are indeed compelling, particularly the attention paid to the sociological conditions prevalent during the

creation of the slave colonies, but there is a sense in which Chaudenson is arguing towards a conclusion he has already drawn. Because for him pidgins are, a priori, defined as a trade language, the author is able to claim that it is impossible for them to have given rise to creoles. It would have been helpful, perhaps, to have awarded the "pidgin becomes creole by structural change" argument a little more attention, rather than rejecting it, in part, on the basis of pre-established definitions.

However, the enormous strength of Chaudenson's position on this matter is that it enables him to extrapolate from linguistic creolisation to other more cultural aspects of the creolisation process, hence the English title of the book. Individual chapters are devoted to the subjects of Creole music and dance, cuisine, magic, medicine and oral literature. The author is not merely presenting a colourful depiction of life in the Indian Ocean, and nor does he simply attempt to loosely apply his theories of linguistic Creole development to these other domains - this is two-way traffic. Questions are asked about what the study of the creolisation of cultural domains can tell us about the development of creole vernaculars. Few other authors have attempted to tackle so wide a scope, and the result is nothing short of impressive.

In a translation/readaptation of this kind, the role of the translators is crucial, and in general, the standard is excellent. There

are little more than a handful of gallicisms, such as a recurrent purely and simply, and the occasional sentence such as 'Therefore it seems useless to privilege the role of children, as Bickerton does' (p. 163), which sounds more French than English. It would be grossly unfair, however, to labour points such as these, since generally speaking, the translation and editing are impeccable.

For those unfamiliar with Chaudenson's original work, which, as is all too often the case with French linguistic work, is under-read by non-Hexagonal scholars, this is an extremely useful introduction to the thinking of one of the major creolist scholars.

Jim Walker

Département d'Anglais

Université Lumière Lyon II

86 rue Pasteur

69365 LYON Cedex 07

France

Jim.Walker@univ-lyon2.fr