

Continuum*

(Quelques définitions du continuum)

An assessment of the term 'continuum' is offered by Bickerton in an article¹ in 1973 in which he analysed some earlier articles, notably those of Alleyne,² B. Bailey,³ De Camp,⁴ and Le Page and De Camp⁵ who had all used the term before him, and concluded by presenting an analysis of the situation in British Guyana through newly redefined concepts. Without clarifying their theoretical position in relation to Bickerton, Chaudenson and Carayol⁶ reused these various concepts but did not explicitly offer any new definition, merely applying the concepts in question to the situation in Réunion.

A continuum is made up of the set of variables attested in a linguistic community and this definition holds true without any additional preliminary need to question whether these variables have been taken from one or several languages, related or otherwise. These variables are organised in subsets, for example pronouns, verbs, and so on, and a lect (Bickerton first spoke of isolect) formed from retained variants can be determined at each point on the continuum. If the first person subject pronoun variable (v) has two variants *an* (v1) and *moin* (v2), lect L1 will be accurately characterised as having retained one of the two variants in use while lect L2 would be characterised by its selection of the other variant. Bickerton is insistent that no variable should be envisaged in simple binary terms, which at the extreme for example would be 'presence' and 'absence', but that several variants are possible. If the number of variables is large and the number of variants for each variable is also not inconsiderable, any continuum that takes into account all the variation can be highly complex as a result. From this perspective, lects must be organised on a scale, with one end labelled the 'acrolect' and the other labelled the 'basilect' while the whole intermediate zone is called the 'mesolect'. As Bickerton points out in a note in his 1973 article, to be absolutely correct, one should speak of 'mesolects' in the plural because there is actually a set of lects between the two poles, however 'mesolect' is often used in the singular as a simplification although it is a misuse of language in a way. When this proliferation of lects becomes very unwieldy, the notion of implication comes into its own as a way of avoiding having to talk about a new lect every time a new variant appears. A lect is actually characterised, in a way, as a 'bundle' of variants which have implicational relations between them whereby the establishment of the presence of one particular variant also supposes the presence of another which is the product of another variable or even of a variable from another

¹ D. Bickerton, 'On the Nature of a Creole Continuum', *Language*, 49 (1973), 640-69. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

² M. Alleyne, 'Communication and Politics in Jamaica', *Caribbean Studies*, 3, no. 2 (1963), 22-61.

³ B. Bailey, *Jamaican Creole Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

⁴ David De Camp, 'Towards a generative analysis of a post-creole speech continuum', in *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, ed. by Dell Hymes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 349-70.

⁵ R. B. Le Page and David De Camp, *Jamaican Creole* (London: Macmillan, 1960).

⁶ Robert Chaudenson and Michel Carayol, 'Essai d'analyse implicationnelle d'un continuum linguistique', in *Plurilinguisme, normes, situations, stratégies*, ed. by P. Wald and G. Manessy (Paris: Harmattan, 1979), pp. 129-72 and Michel Carayol and Robert Chaudenson, 'Diglossie et continuum linguistique à la Réunion', in *Les français devant la norme*, ed. by Nicole Gueunier, Emile Genouvrier, and Khomsi (Abdelhamid) (Paris: Champion, 1978), pp. 175-90. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

subsystem. Although these analyses can seem complicated, the underlying idea, also quoted by Bickerton, is actually that while variation is central to the theory, it is also necessary to establish that this variation is rule-governed and the linguist's role is to extricate these rules which must make clear for a speaker the relative probability of rule *x* or *y* being realised in any given context or situation (i.e. the probability that one or other variant of a particular variable will appear).

While the theoretical outline is attractive because it introduces variation into the heart of linguistic description, the inevitable proliferation of lects is difficult to manage and the implication rules, specifying that if a particular variable appears then another is also present, are the only solution to reducing the disadvantages linked to the description of variation. Each lect thus takes on a less random dimension.

The continuum described by Bickerton and the majority of authors after him is a continuum with two diglossic languages or dialectal varieties as its poles. In Bickerton's study, 'deep Guyanese Creole' (p. 647) was the basilect at one pole and 'Standard Guyanese English' (p. 647) was the acrolect at the other. It is this outline that was taken up by Carayol and Chaudenson for Réunion who were conscious of the existence not just of a simple diglossia but of a 'continuum running from the basilect to the acrolect through a series of intermediate degrees which constitutes the mesolect' (p. 182). Their justification for the recourse to the concept of the continuum is their wish to integrate variation into theory and to no longer merely speak of 'free variation' as 'simply an accident that is impossible to explain' (p. 182).

A continuum is characterised then by the presence of a bipolar diasystem ranging from an acrolect, characterised by socially prestigious forms, to a basilect, corresponding to the language state that is socially low-status. Of course, the acrolect and basilect have a considerable number of linguistic traits in common and are only differentiated by a limited number of elements which allows a relative mutual intelligibility between the two poles of the continuum (Carayol and Chaudenson, p.182).

* Note

The sections in Bradley Hand ITC font have been introduced to give a deeper understanding of certain concepts.

