

# Testing the Creole Prototype Hypothesis: evidence from Australian Kriol

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**Background** Kriol is an English-lexified creole language spoken by Aboriginal populations in Northern Australia: estimates have suggested upwards of 30,000 speakers of Kriol variants. The result of fragmentation and sedentarization of a rich and diverse pre-contact language ecology, Kriol fits the ‘sociohistorical profile’ of a creole language as described in by an expanding literature that has largely neglected it (e.g. Bickerton 1981, Chaudenson 2001, DeGraff 2005, McWhorter 2005).

This paper represents forms part of a broader attempt to situate North Australian Kriol within the general discourse of pidgin and creole studies and provides insights into the question of whether creole languages can be ‘defined [typologically] without allusion to their histories’ (cf. Mufwene 1987). To the extent that ‘broken transmission’ is seen as a determining factor in creating the sociological conditions for the creation of a creole, models for creole genesis have generally focussed on either the influence of substrate grammars (e.g. Siegel 2008) or the influence of a class of ‘linguistic primitives’. While there is strong evidence in favour of both ‘schools’, this paper will focus on one particular model: John McWhorter’s controversial ‘Creole Prototype Hypothesis’ (CPH) (e.g. 1998, 2001, 2011) with several references to some attested structures which appear to provide evidence of ‘transfer’. Given that the bulk of the data which is used to support the CPH is taken from creole languages with African substrata, Kriol offers new insights into the mechanics of the CPH and can also provide fascinating evidence of transfer effects and transfer phenomena.

In an attempt to formally describe a ‘typological class’, McWhorter defines three broad criteria, the simultaneous absence of which is supposedly attested in all creole languages but in no “older” natural language. While it has been roundly criticised, these criteria form a highly cogent definition of creole language typology with deep implications for diachronic linguistics more broadly.

**Inflectional Affixation** : advocates of the ‘typological creole’ have frequently observed the lack of inflectional morphology across creole languages. There is an overwhelming tendency, and one that formed a central component of Ian Bickerton’s discredited language bioprogram hypothesis (1981, 1984) for tense, modality and aspectual (TMA) marking on the VP to be expressed through a closed class of auxiliaries. Kriol satisfies the minimal TMA marking hypothesised by Bickerton. There is evidence also evidence of further grammaticalisation that nuances various aspectual meanings, including by means of the ostensibly ongoing copularisation of *jidan/jandap* ‘sit down, stand up’, a crosslinguistically attested diachronic process (Bybee & Dahl 1989).

**Syntactic/lexical tone** : is considered to be a result of diachronic processes (tonogenesis). Absent from both lexifier and substrate, there is little that would motivate toneme distinctions in Kriol. Tone is unsurprisingly absent from Kriol.

**Derivational noncompositionality** : To the extent that derivational morphology is present in Kriol, it appears to conform with with the requirement of ‘compositionality.’ There are highly productive and semantically transparent morphemes that derive attributive NPs and valence-changing devices. There are also interesting derivational paradigms which may be evidence of substrate transfer, e.g. (1) below (Alawa translations from Sharpe 2001:57): *-bek* < ‘back’ appears to have been recruited and may reflect the meaning of a particular derivational prefix in the substrate (i.e *jurd-* in Alawa). The verbs derived from this process are entirely compositional (cf. the less compositional use of English *re-*, not productive in Kriol).

