

# UCLA

## UCLA Previously Published Works

### Title

Review of Linguistic Complexity

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1zf997g7>

### Authors

Operstein, Natalie

Clontz, Amber

### Publication Date

2024-06-30

Peer reviewed

REVIEWERS: Natalie Operstein and Amber Clontz  
EDITORS: Bernd Kortmann and Benedikt Szmrecsanyi  
TITLE: Linguistic Complexity  
SUBTITLE: Second Language Acquisition, Indigenization, Contact  
SERIES TITLE: *linguae & litterae*, vol. 13  
PUBLISHER: De Gruyter  
YEAR: 2012

## SUMMARY

This volume brings together papers from a workshop on “Linguistic complexity in interlanguage varieties, L2 varieties, and contact languages” held at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in May of 2009. The volume contributes further to our understanding of the notion of linguistic complexity, which has enjoyed a surge of interest in recent years (cf. especially Kusters 2003, Dahl 2004, McWhorter 2007, Miestamo et al. 2008, Sampson et al. 2009, and Trudgill 2011). The focus is on contact varieties of English, including second-language, indigenized (nativized) and creolized varieties. The broad aim of the volume is to explore intra-linguistic complexity, as it pertains to English, as a preliminary to approaching the more formidable task of evaluating complexity cross-linguistically. An additional aim is to assemble definitions of complexity specific to the three fields -- second language acquisition (SLA), creolistics and indigenization/nativization studies -- with the goal of arriving at a language-, field- and theory-neutral definition.

The volume consists of ten papers and a preface by Diane Larsen-Freeman, which emphasizes the necessity for critical reflection on the multifaceted issue of linguistic complexity. The introductory chapter by Benedikt Szmrecsanyi and Bernd Kortmann, “Introduction: Linguistic Complexity. Second Language Acquisition, Indigenization, Contact” (pp. 6-34), briefly surveys literature on linguistic complexity, beginning with the well-known 2001 special issue of “Linguistic Typology” devoted to this topic, outlines complexity-related research in progress at FRIAS and summarizes the volume’s contributions. The introductory chapter also outlines the volume’s objectives and provides a summary of how the three fields’ interests in linguistic complexity intersect.

In the following summary, the individual papers are grouped by the category of language variety they address -- creole, L2 or indigenized English -- rather than the order of their appearance in the volume.

There are three papers devoted to English-lexifier creoles. Jeff Siegel (“Accounting for Analyticity in Creoles,” pp. 35-61) focuses on morphological complexity in expanded pidgins and creoles and provides a detailed discussion of the notion of complexity, which he divides into componential (defined by a high number of components) and structural (difficulty for analysis). He suggests that the former may be measured by the amount of grammatical morphology and the latter by reference to the degree of grammaticalization of the functional markers. The main body of the paper is devoted to a discussion of analyticity in pidgin-creoles, which is derived in part from reductive simplification by speakers of the lexifier, but mostly from developmental simplicity (in other words, lack of development) in adult speakers of the substrate languages.

Siegel examines, and ultimately rejects, the hypothesis that the analytic grammatical markers in pidgin-creoles, such as their tense, mood and aspect (TMA) systems, result from L1 transfer during “normal” adult SLA. The alternative explanation he proposes draws on the notion of interlanguage expansion in the absence of a target L2, which in the case of pidgin-creole genesis springs from unavailability of the lexifier. In the conditions of functional expansion without targeting L2, speakers draw on the grammatical structures of their L1s.

In “The Complexity of the Personal and Possessive Pronoun System of Norf’k” (pp. 101-126), Peter Mühlhäusler provides a detailed account of the pronominal system of Pitkern Norf’k, an English-based creole of the Pacific. A major finding of the paper is that the pronominal system of Norf’k is vastly more complex than those of its source languages, including English, which leads Mühlhäusler to challenge the notion that creoles are more analytic than their lexifiers. A related observation is that Norf’k pronouns express the complexity of the society in which they are used, leading the author to suggest that the notion of complexity is meaningless unless it takes into account languages’ ecologies.

In “Complexity Hotspot: The Copula in Saramaccan and its Implications” (pp. 243-264), John McWhorter outlines his understanding of the complexity metric, which combines the notions of overspecification (the degree to which grammars “overtly and obligatorily mark semantic distinctions”, p. 244), structural elaboration (“the number of rules (in phonology and syntax) required to generate grammatical forms”, p. 245) and irregularity (the degree to which grammars exhibit irregularity and suppletion). After demonstrating each type of complexity in copula constructions in the Surinamese creole Saramaccan, McWhorter argues that this complexity arose from language-internal rather than contact-induced processes.

Three papers address simplification in indigenized varieties of English (“Outer Circle Englishes”). “Deletions, Antideletions and Complexity Theory, with Special Reference to Black South African and Singaporean Englishes” by Rajend Mesthrie (pp. 90-100) compares the notion of simplification as it is instantiated in two very different indigenized varieties of English. According to Mesthrie, Black South African English has the tendency to explicitly include elements that are omitted in Standard English. Among the processes which conspire to produce this effect are insertion and “undeletion,” the latter as in “It was something that I hope *it* will not happen again.” In this respect, Black South African English contrasts with Singaporean English, which tends in the opposite direction by deleting elements which are obligatorily present in Standard English, as in “He not yet eat lunch”. Mesthrie shows that although both these L2 varieties are simplified by comparison with the target, they do so in opposing ways, offering food for thought in the context of intra-linguistic complexity. His own explanation for the divergent behavior of the two varieties invokes the influence of differing substrata, ranging from those which “disfavor deletion” (p. 100) to those which are highly elliptical and analytic.

In “Complexity as a Function of Iconicity: The Case of Complement Clause Constructions in New Englishes” (pp. 156-191), Maria Steger and Edgar W. Schneider hypothesize that New Englishes are expected to be simpler than Standard British English in the extent of their iconicity, or tendency toward isomorphism between function and form. This study sets out to investigate the levels of iconicity in complement clause constructions of verbs which usually take to-complements in Standard British English, as in “John wanted/expected/persuaded Mary

to come”. These verbs and the syntactic constructions in which they are used are investigated in International Corpus of English corpora for East African English, Hong Kong English, Indian English and Singapore English. The Standard British English corpus is then used for quantitative comparisons. Although the quantitative details do not always conform to their predictions, the authors identify a number of alternative constructions to *to*-complements in the New Englishes, such as the use of finite clauses (“we allow that everyone will pass one”) and impersonal *it*-paraphrases (“It’s believed over three hundred shells hit the city”), which appear motivated by the tendency towards greater iconicity in the varieties examined.

In “Syntactic and Variational Complexity in British and Ghanaian English: Relative Clause Formation in the Written Parts of the International Corpus of English” (pp. 218-242), Magnus Huber focuses on nativization of British English relative clauses in Ghanaian English. His study is based on an analysis of selected types of written texts from the International Corpus of English. The major finding is that, while comparable in general outline, the two varieties use the relativizers *who*, *which*, *that* and zero with differing frequencies, pointing to a reinterpretation and subtle reorganization of the input system, currently underway in the indigenized variety. The suggested reason for this reorganization is the tendency, on the part of Ghanaian English, toward a typologically unmarked system with regard to relative pronouns.

Finally, three papers address the issue of complexity in English interlanguages. In “Nothing Will Come of Nothing” (pp. 62-89), Terence Odlin investigates preposition and article usage in written English of Finnish and Swedish L1 learners. The article finds that native speakers of Finnish have greater difficulties with both these categories due to a greater typological distance between their L1 and the target language with respect to how the notions of definiteness and spatial reference are expressed. The working definition of complexity adopted in this paper relies on the notion of descriptive complexity, broadly defined as the length of the shortest description of the language module being acquired.

Lourdes Ortega (“Interlanguage Complexity: A Construct in Search of Theoretical Renewal”, pp. 127-155), surveys existing methods for evaluating interlanguage complexity in the field of SLA. Two complexity measures stand out in frequency: the average number of words per sentence (or a comparable unit of analysis, which varies with the individual researcher) and the average number of finite clauses per sentence (or a comparable unit). After evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of these metrics, Ortega calls for a renewal of the theoretical construct of interlanguage complexity and a thorough review of the current measurement techniques.

In “Acquisitional Complexity: What Defies Complete Acquisition in Second Language Acquisition” (pp. 192-217), ZhaoHong Han and Wai Man Lew take the view that it is necessary to distinguish different types of complexity in SLA research. Two such types are discussed in the paper: developmental complexity, commonly measured via production of progressively more complex syntactic patterns, and acquisitional complexity, here understood as the possible presence of non-acquirable aspects of language (“what is ultimately non-acquirable”, p. 197). The paper suggests that while developmental complexity can give researchers access to information about processes and attainable products of L2 acquisition, acquisitional complexity is idiosyncratic and ultimately depends on the individual. The bulk of the paper is devoted to a discussion of acquisitional complexity with evidence drawn from fossilizable structures, or

structures which cease to evolve in learners' grammars despite continuing exposure to input and opportunity for communicative practice. The explanation for acquisitional difficulty offered in the paper essentially centers on the cognitive aspects of transfer from the learners' L1 onto their L2 ("L1 thinking for L2 speaking", p. 207).

## EVALUATION

This volume is a welcome addition to the growing body of work on linguistic complexity, especially as it pertains to morphosyntactic complexity in contact varieties of English. The editors have attempted to focus the discussion by inviting the authors to address one or more of the following questions in their contributions: how to assess complexity in the respective variety, which type of complexity -- relative or absolute -- is of greater interest in the author's area of research, and the impact of adult language learning on morphosyntactic simplification. As a result, the collection is more coherent than it might otherwise have been, with many of the contributions including explicit statements about what constitutes complexity in the respective field of study and proposals relating to how it may be measured. By assembling together these different views from three areas that have been frequently discussed in complexity-related research -- creolistics, SLA and indigenization studies -- the volume highlights the diversity of approaches to linguistic complexity and the current lack of consensus about what constitutes this notion. Most papers in the volume also succeed in highlighting the theoretical relevance of SLA research, not only to the relatively recent research program in intra- and inter-linguistic complexity but also to creolistics and language evolution more generally. The lack of a common approach to complexity does not detract from the readability of the individual studies, but, on the contrary, serves as an invitation to future syntheses. The volume will be of interest to all those interested in the notion of linguistic complexity and in how it interacts with the relevant areas of inquiry.

## REFERENCES

Dahl, Östen. 2004. *The Growth and Maintenance of Linguistic Complexity*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Kusters, Wouter. 2003. *Linguistic Complexity: The Influence of Social Change on Verbal Inflection*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.

McWhorter, John. 2007. *Language Interrupted: Signs of Non-Native Acquisition in Standard Language Grammars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miestamo, Matti, Kaius Sinnemäki and Fred Karlsson, eds. 2008. *Language Complexity: Typology, Contact, Change*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Sampson, Geoffrey, David Gil and Peter Trudgill, eds. 2009. *Language Complexity as an Evolving Variable*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trudgill, Peter. 2011. *Sociolinguistic Typology: Social Determinants of Linguistic Complexity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.