

THE QUESTION OF THE LINGUA FRANCA CREEK

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0. Introduction. In response to increasing European encroachments, various American Indian communities and groups of colonial Georgia and Alabama joined forces with the Muskogee Indians in the so-called Creek Confederacy as early as perhaps the middle of the 17th century. Lasting into the first decades of the 19th century, this political and military alliance included peoples of diverse linguistic backgrounds; they spoke mutually unintelligible and often unrelated languages, and must have lived in complex sociolinguistic circumstances. In order to communicate with each other, member groups of this multitribal and multilingual association learned a form of Creek (Muskogee), and at times spoke it even in their own communities at the expense of their mother tongues.

The questions addressed here concern the nature of Creek as such a second language. How precisely did the Muskogee Indians and their associates communicate with each other as well as with their neighbors, Indian and non-Indian alike, in colonial times? Did there exist a lingua franca based on Creek, functioning as an intertribal, interethnic, and possibly even international medium?

These questions have arisen out of my interest in the applicability of theoretical concepts, developed in the study of pidgin and creole languages, in American Indian linguistics. My curiosity about a lingua franca Creek specifically relates to my continuing archival research on Mobilian Jargon or the Chickasaw-Choctaw trade language of greater Louisiana, a genuine American Indian pidgin comparable to Chinook Jargon of northwestern North America (Crawford 1978, Drechsel 1979). Not only has this project generated interest in other American Indian contact languages of southeastern North America including one possibly based on Creek; but in determining the eastern extent of Mobilian Jargon, there also arose the inevitable issue of whether the Creek and their associates or confederates were part of that same contact speech community or whether they communicated in a medium of their own, whatever its linguistic form.

My paper explores the question of a lingua franca Creek and its relationship to Mobilian Jargon in building upon the preliminary observations that Mary Haas (1945:69), James M. Crawford (1978:6-7), and Michael Silverstein (1973 MS:17, 39) have already made. The discussion below analyzes some of the information that

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I have collected in my recent and continuing research;¹ but its results, too, remain provisional, and actually raise more questions than can be answered at this time--with the deliberate intent of also stimulating more interest in, and further research on, American Indian contact languages.

Reasons for these tentative conclusions can be found in the nature of the linguistic and extralinguistic evidence that we deal with here. By the standards of modern linguistic methods, the data for a lingua franca Creek and other possible American Indian contact languages are less than satisfactory. Whereas Creek proper or Muskogee is still spoken today, there is--to the best of my knowledge--no indication for a Creek-based contact language to have survived into the present time.² We must therefore look for evidence of a lingua franca Creek in historical documents--an undertaking that has often resembled the search for a needle in a haystack.³

1. The Evidence. Aside from the lack of modern data, there have been no documents found so far that deal exclusively with any such phenomenon as a lingua franca Creek (in the form of a grammar, etc.). Yet there exist incidental references to it in a variety of documents relating to the Creek Indians and their neighbors; and the information that we have found in these historical materials could hardly be described as being better than anecdotal. Nevertheless, some of the more detailed passages on what we could interpret as a Creek-based contact language are worth being quoted in full to illustrate the nature of the evidence.

In the early 18th century, Francis Le Jau, a French-born Anglican missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), made the following observations in his work in then greater Carolina:

The Crick Indians Language, Nations that border near Florida is also understood in the Southern parts; I have a promise of some Specimens of both Languages [including 'Saonock'; see below (EJD)], with many observations which I hope will afford some Satisfaction; (Le Jau 1956:69)

Later, Le Jau added:

The Crick Indians Language is understood by many Nations namely the Yamousees; and I am still Confirm'd that the Savanock Language is understood as far as Canada. These two General Languages have no manner of Affinity and each Nation has a Peculiar not only Dialect but Language, and yet the two Languages of the

North and South called Crick & Saonock are understood by the respective Inhabitants the most part and most sensible of them. I'll send to You the Specimens in the manner You desire, and do all diligence to get them. I have desired the best of our Traders to help me, who Promise to do it. (Le Jau 1956:87)

Elsewhere, Le Jau drew an analogy between so-called 'Saonock' on the one hand and Latin and Arabic, the 'transcendent' languages of Europe and Africa, on the other (Le Jau 1956:19). If, in the latter case, Le Jau meant the original *Lingua Franca*, also known as Sabir, of the Mediterranean area, he most likely applied the term 'Saonock' to refer to a contact language based on Shawnee (Drechsel 1979:42-44). By implication, Le Jau's comparison between 'Saonock' and the Mediterranean *lingua franca* Sabir could then have extended to 'Crick' as well; but any information that would confirm this inference just as the promised specimen of 'Crick' remain to be found.

In 1734, James Oglethorpe, founder of the British colony Georgia, described the sociolinguistic situation of the Creek Indians in terms similar to those by Le Jau:

As for their Language they have two kinds, One which is a vulgar Dialect, different in each Town, the other a general Language common to the Creek Nations the Chactaws and the Blew Mouths, which if thoroughly searched into would (I believe) be found to be the radical Language of all America. In this Language are the Songs which contain their History and sacred Ceremonies...

I had the Lord's Prayer translated into their general Language of which I send you a Copy. The New England Bible is in the Dialect of a particular Nation that lived where Boston now is and of no use but to that particular Nation. (Jones 1966:515)

In considering Creek as the 'radical' (i.e. ancestral?) language, Oglethorpe overestimated the importance and influence of the Creek Indians, or--more likely--underestimated the extent of the North American continent. But he may already have had a grasp of its great linguistic diversity. It is all the more unfortunate that apparently Oglethorpe did not provide any additional information. For, as in the case of Le Jau's sample of 'Creek,' the specimen that Oglethorpe promised to send has not been found to survive either in manuscript or in print, if his order was ever followed in fact.

In the second half of the 18th century, James Adair, a prominent Carolina trader among such groups as the Cherokee and Chick-

asaw, could not add any new information:

I am assured by a gentleman of character, who traded a long time near the late Alebahma garrison, that within six miles of it, live the remains of seven Indian nations, who usually conversed with each other in their own different dialects, though they understood the Muskogee Language; but being naturalized, they were bound to observe the laws and customs of the main original body [i.e. the Creek Confederacy; EJD]. (Adair 1968: 267)

More observant than Le Jau, Oglethorpe, and Adair was the scholar William Bartram, who--although not a linguist--was a poly-mathic naturalist and reported the following about the intertribal medium among the Creek and their associates in 1791:

The Muscolgulge language is spoken throughout the confederacy (although consisting of many nations, who have a speech peculiar to themselves) as also by their friends and allies, the Natches. The Chicasaw and Chactaw the Muscogulges say is a dialect of theirs.

This language is very agreeable to the ear, courteous, gentle and musical: the letter R is not sounded in one word of their language: the women in particular speak so fine and musical, as to represent the singing of birds; and when heard and not seen, one might imagine it to be the prattling of young children: the men's speech is indeed more strong and sonorous, but not harsh, and in no instance guttural, and I believe the letter R is not used to express any word, in any language of the confederacy. (Bartram 1958:330)

Bartram's claim of the r-less nature of this intertribal medium would be eminently reasonable as r-like sounds were rare in American Indian languages of southeastern North America, did not occur in Muskogean languages including Creek (cf. Sherzer 1976:209), and would likely not have been part of the sound system of a Creek-based contact language either.

In the 1810s, George Stiggins, an Indian agent of part Natchez and Scottish ancestry among the Creek, confirmed the reports by the earlier observers cited above:

In all national concerns and public assemblies their [the Alabama Indians'] head men have the Standing and Voice that the Chiefs of the other tribe [the Choctaw?] have while in the assemblies they use the Creek tongue, but in their local concerns they use their own tongue

or Language, they are tenacious of their private self government seldom associating with any other Indians, the tongue they speak is similar to and can be understood by the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Hitcheties, and Cowasadas, which five bodies in time may have been one nation, detached by some circumstance and separated finally. (Stiggins n.d. MS:66.3; cf. Nunez 1958:21).

Stiggins' comments ought to be all the more valid as he spoke some form of Creek in addition to English and Natchez and would thus have had a better understanding of the sociolinguistic situation among the Creek, their associates, and their neighbors than the other observers.

Yet the most convincing evidence for a lingua franca Creek would consist of actual linguistic data. A number of 18th and 19th century sources provide a few words, most of which are etymologically Creek or Muskogee, but do not include any phrases, sentences, or even grammatical rules. Without syntactic information, lexical evidence for a possible contact language remains problematical, if not worthless. Should there exist any typological syntactic differences between Creek proper and a contact language based on it (as we would expect--with the latter most likely being more analytic), these grammatical differences would not be reflected in single words. Unless identified expressis verbis as belonging to the contact language and contrasted with the lexicon of the base language, individual words could thus represent either Creek proper or a lingua franca based on it.⁴

The customary conclusion in such a lamentable research situation is of course that only additional archival studies could bring solid linguistic data of a supposed lingua franca Creek to light and might eventually advance our understanding of the topic in question. Still, there remains sociolinguistic and historical evidence to be taken into consideration at this point.

On the basis of the documents cited above and others (cf. Drechsel 1979:45-46), Creek in whatever form served as a second language for members of the following groups:

- a. the Hitchiti, the Mikasuki, the Apalachi, the Alabama, the Koasati, the Choctaw, and the Chickasaw, all speaking--like the Creek proper--Muskogean languages, which however were mutually unintelligible;
- b. the few remaining Natchez, whose language has been classified with Proto-Muskogean and others as part of the Gulf stock;
- c. an Algonquian minority of Shawnee;
- d. the Yuchi, conversing in a tongue now considered a linguistic isolate;
- e. several groups such as the Abeka, the Blew Mouth, the Yamasi, and probably also Stinkards (i.e. various Indian people of low

social status), about whose languages and linguistic affiliations we have little or no information available;

- f. Europeans and White Americans with English, German, and probably also Spanish and French as their native tongues; and
- g. Africans and Black Americans, speaking different African or European languages or creoles.

In terms of its functions, Creek as a second language appears to have been associated primarily with the so-called Creek Confederacy, a loose political alliance in the 18th century, that included most of the aforementioned Indian groups and came about in response to increasing encroachments by European and American settlers and their colonial governments (Sturtevant 1971:92-105). The Creek and their confederates or associates, speaking several mutually unintelligible languages, thus used a form of Creek as an interlingual medium in assemblies of concern to the entire confederacy and in other 'international' dealings. If Oglethorpe was correct, a variety of Creek even served as the ceremonial language for the Creek and their associates (cf. Jones 1966:515). Creek was also adopted in one form or another by Europeans and Africans in their functions as traders, translators, Indian agents, or missionaries as they came in contact with the Creek and their allies. In short, a lingua franca based on Creek would have reflected the sociopolitical importance of the Creek Indians among their confederates as well as their Indian and non-Indian neighbors in colonial times.

2. Interpretation of the Evidence. These limited historical and sociolinguistic data raise the following questions of interpretation:

- (1) Did the speakers of languages other than Creek acquire Creek as a second language individually? In other words: Was the acquisition of Creek as a foreign language the matter of a few single bilinguals or multilinguals? Or did a form of Creek exist as a true and widespread lingua franca with a grammar and functions that differed in part from those of Creek proper or Muskogee?
- (2) If the evidence supported a positive answer to the second question, did such an established Creek-based contact language grow originally out of a bilingual situation and was it eventually adopted also by other people not conversant in Creek? Or did the lingua franca Creek result from pidginization, i.e. a linguistic compromise evolving out of a truly multilingual situation that included at least three, but more likely additional, mutually unintelligible and often unrelated languages?
- (3) Did the speakers of the Creek-based contact language form a contact speech community of their own? Or was it part of a still larger contact speech community, in particular that of

Mobilian Jargon?

The apparent lack of a substantial amount of substantive linguistic-historical information for a Creek-based contact language should make us cautious about assuming its existence, especially as there are comparatively more and better data available for another interlingual medium, namely the aforementioned Mobilian Jargon.

With the evidence presumably missing, we could draw the extreme conclusion that the idea of a lingua franca Creek merely was the product of our imagination, if not in the mind of a few colonial chroniclers. Alternatively and more reasonably, we might maintain that there existed no institutionalized form of Creek as a second language; in other words: those speakers of languages other than Creek who learned it as a foreign language did so individually, in approaching the model progressively along a continuum of second language acquisition.

Either position would already contain implicit answers to the other questions raised above, and in fact would hardly make any further discussion necessary, if it were not for some other, related evidence.

Throughout the 19th century and into the first half of the 20th, Seminole Indians--former Creek separatists or 'runaways'⁵--were said to speak a Creek-based jargon among each other, especially with members who did not speak Muskogee such as the Hitchiti and Mikasuki, as well as with their Black associates and with White traders or settlers. Judged on the basis of various and quite reliable historical documents, this so-called Seminole jargon was not a temporary linguistic compromise between two individuals on some rare occasion, but was a true contact language with its own grammatical rules, however variable. By all indications, this Creek-based jargon of the Seminole Indians also was a true pidgin, incorporating Spanish and English elements among others. An Anglicized variety of this contact language appears to have developed into the Seminole Pidgin English, which ultimately creolized to become known as Afro-Seminole Creole⁶ (Drechsel 1979: 47-50; cf. Bateman 1982 NS; Dillard 1972:150-155; Hancock 1975, 1977).

In view of our earlier discussion, the use of such a Creek-based contact language by the Seminole and their neighbors suggests that this custom of theirs was not a new one; instead, the Seminole probably continued a long-standing linguistic tradition of resorting--in bilingual or multilingual situations--to a lingua franca Creek whose existence the aforementioned documents imply for the Creek in the 18th century. The historical references to a Creek-based Seminole jargon thus strengthen the case for an

earlier Creek-based contact language; the medium that the Seminole and their neighbors used would thus have been merely a closely related variety of the original lingua franca Creek.

If sociolinguistic diversity in a contact speech community was any indication for past pidginization, we could conclude that the lingua franca Creek also was a true pidgin that had incorporated linguistic elements of various Indian languages other than Creek proper and perhaps European and African elements as well. For the multilingual Creek Confederacy was sociolinguistically more complex than the community of the Seminole and their associates or neighbors; many of the native languages spoken by the member groups of the Creek alliance had become extinct by the beginning of the 19th century, and there were few, if any, additional languages spoken among the Seminole and their associates. The greater variety of heterogeneous native and foreign languages that the Creek and their neighbors used in comparison to the Seminole (including their Black associates) would then lead us to believe that the lingua franca Creek had evolved as the result of pidginization of many different languages.

It is not just the documentation of a Seminole pidgin south of the Creek that supports the notion of the lingua franca Creek and the likelihood of it having been a true pidgin; there is yet historical evidence for these hypotheses provided by the Creek Indians' former neighbors to the west.

Most, possibly all, of the western groups in the Creek Confederacy--namely the Alabama, the Apalachi, the Chickasaw, the Choctaw, the Koasati, and the Natchez who were members--have been reported to speak not only the lingua franca Creek, but also Mobilian Jargon or the Chickasaw-Choctaw trade language, a genuine Muskogean-based pidgin of the lower Mississippi valley and its adjacent areas. That the Western Muskogean such as the Choctaw and Chickasaw or their neighbors did so, is not surprising. We might only raise the question of why Mobilian Jargon did not extend farther east; why is there apparently no evidence that the other members of the Creek Confederacy, especially the other Muskogean such as the Muskogee, the Hitchiti, and the Mikasuki adopted Mobilian Jargon as their interlingual medium? In view of the fact that Mobilian Jargon extended in historical times into eastern Texas and as far north as southern Illinois and was spoken by peoples of such diverse linguistic affiliations as Siouan, Caddoan, and apparently even Algonquian and Athapaskan, these questions are quite reasonable (cf. Drechsel 1979:117-135).

There is an answer that immediately enters one's mind: Mobilian Jargon did not spread any farther east because, as a competing interlingual medium, the lingua franca Creek formed a linguistic obstacle for any other contact language. We might in fact

interpret the apparently limited spread of Mobilian Jargon eastwards as an additional, although hardly solid, argument in support of the proposed Creek-based contact language.

So far, the discussion has followed the premise that the lingua franca Creek and Mobilian Jargon were two separate linguistic entities; we have assumed that they coexisted side by side and, in some instances, within the same communities, as it apparently was the case in groups of the Creek Confederacy on its western border.

Yet some historical observations contradict the suggestion of the two contact languages being entirely distinct. Just as the name 'Muskogee' does not always appear to refer to Creek proper, but to the contact language based on it, 'Chickasaw' and 'Choctaw' often designated Mobilian Jargon in historical documents (Drechsel 1979:120-128, 136; cf. footnote 4 below). If we read 'Chickasaw' and 'Choctaw' in Bartram's quote above as Mobilian Jargon, the Creek Indians would have suggested to him that Mobilian Jargon was merely a 'dialect' or a variety of the lingua franca Creek.

Bartram's information at best offers weak evidence, and must not be considered without more reliable data. Such actually occur in Stiggins' letters, in which he described the two Eastern Muskogean languages Alabama and Hitchiti as linguistic 'mongrels' without a grammatical rule and as 'mixed' or 'adulterated' with Choctaw and Chickasaw, two Western Muskogean languages (Stiggins n.d. MS:66.2, 3, 13; cf. Nunez 1958:20, 30). In these cases, Stiggins did not speak of Alabama and Hitchiti proper; but he clearly referred to a variety of the lingua franca Creek influenced by Western Muskogean languages or--conversely--to a dialect of Mobilian Jargon incorporating Eastern Muskogean elements.

Similarly, in 1858, a resident of Louisiana by the name of Thomas Woodward described Mobilian Jargon, spoken by Indians in neighboring Texas as 'a mixture of Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Netches, and Apelash' (Woodward 1939:79). We might interpret 'Creek' here as any Eastern Muskogean group such as the prominent Alabama and associated Koasati who have lived in eastern Texas. But small Creek communities existed in the area as well--a little-known historical fact that renders Woodward's observation quite likely. Woodward also cited single Muskogee words and a probable example of Mobilian Jargon; i.e. the word for 'horse' in the Indians' as well as Whites' pronunciation: 'Echo Tlocko' and 'Chelocko' respectively (Woodward 1939:21). This word in its variable pronunciations can be reconstituted as lɔ̄ ləkko 'deer big' and ɛ̄(ə)loko, which indeed derive etymologically from Creek (Karen Booker, personal communication; cf. Silverstein 1973 MS: 39). In listing Creek first among the languages whose historical input was reflected in Mobilian Jargon and in offering a likely Creek-based example of it, Woodward thus made a case for a varie-

ty of the Chickasaw-Choctaw trade language with a significant foundation in Creek.

Likewise, a glance at the vocabulary of Mobilian Jargon, consisting of both reconstituted and recently recorded entries, reveals that its items were not all or exclusively Choctaw or Chickasaw in origin. Still, some of those that were could also have been intelligible to speakers of Creek and closely related languages. However, Mobilian Jargon incorporated many non-Western Muskogean elements; among them were such that derived from Alabama, Koasati, and other Eastern Muskogean tongues and that occurred even in the Mobilian Jargon speech of Choctaw Indians (cf. Crawford 1978:81-97; Drechsel 1979:240-347).

In short, the historical and linguistic evidence cited above concurs with the hypothesis that the lingua franca Creek and Mobilian Jargon were part of a larger contact language system (rather than separate lingue franche), and further supports the notion that the lingua franca Creek--as part of this extensive linguistic system and like Mobilian Jargon--was originally pidginized. To suggest that the speakers of these two contact languages formed one and the same overall contact speech community is not necessarily to imply that they always understood each other. For the speakers of both lingue franche must have exhibited considerable linguistic variation, which--quite natural in pidgins--resulted from the wide geographic spread of the lingua franca Creek and Mobilian Jargon and from the great diversity of their speakers' first languages. The Creek-based contact language and the Chickasaw-Choctaw trade language are thus assumed to have been interrelated via an extensive dialect continuum, including at least Eastern and Western Muskogean varieties as well as intermediate ones.⁷

3. Conclusions. The discussion above suggests the following hypotheses: The lingua franca Creek was:

- (1) a true and established contact language, which was based on Muskogee, but differed from it in some aspects of its grammar, lexicon, functions, etc. yet to be determined;
- (2) a true pidgin, if judged on the basis of such sociolinguistic indications as the great variety and heterogeneity of its speakers' first languages and its relationships to neighboring contact languages;
- (3) related closely to the Creek-based jargon of the Seminole Indians and their associates and indirectly to Seminole Pidgin in English and Afro-Seminole Creole; and
- (4) interrelated with Mobilian Jargon in a larger contact speech community via a dialect continuum.

The need for additional research on these hypotheses and sim-

ilar questions does not have to be emphasized again. Obviously, further studies of the lingua franca Creek will help unravel the sociolinguistic complexities of colonial southeastern North America and add a better historical and ethnographic understanding of the Creek Indians and their associates, the internal functioning of the Creek Confederacy and its sociopolitical relationships to other Indian, European and African neighbors. Continuing research on the lingua franca Creek will also contribute to the comparative study of American Indian contact languages with its limited data base.

NOTES

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²In unlike manner, Mobilian Jargon was spoken in certain isolated areas of Louisiana into the 1940s and possibly later, still permitting memory linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork in addition to archival studies.

³Should the reader be aware of other historical sources for information of what could be interpreted as a lingua franca Creek, I would certainly appreciate to learn of it, and can be reached at: Anthropology Department, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019. Such help will of course be acknowledged in any future writings on this or a related topic.

⁴The problem of identifying a contact medium as opposed to its lexically related base language on the ground of lexical evidence is a real one, and occurred in Crawford's and my research on Mobilian Jargon on more than one occasion. In one significant instance, we could determine on the basis of syntactic and sociolinguistic data that a large vocabulary of Mobilian Jargon by a 19th century anonymous author indeed represented the Chickasaw-Choctaw trade language, and not Choctaw proper as was thought earlier (Crawford 1978:57-58; Drechsel 1979:20).

⁵Cf. English 'Seminole' < Creek 'simańó:li' < 'simaló:ni' < Spanish 'cimarrón', meaning 'wild, runaway'.

⁶The lingua franca Creek clearly served as one of the historical sources for Seminole Pidgin English and its creolized 'descendant'. Afro-Seminole Creole appears to be one of the few creolized languages of North America in whose history American Indian languages could have significantly contributed--via the lingua franca Creek and Seminole Pidgin English. Little evidence is currently available to prove this hypothesis, and the study of the precise linguistic and historical relationship between the lingua franca Creek on the one hand and Seminole Pidgin English and Afro-Seminole Creole on the other remains to be undertaken.

⁷There are yet references to what appears to be an Apalachi-based contact language, which, too, could have been part of the contact language system proposed here, but about which even less is known than about the lingua franca Creek (cf. Drechsel 1979: 50-51, 132-135).

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