Negation and its bearing on creole genesis

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Abstract

For the past 20 years, the question of a ‘creole prototype’ has been at the center of heated debates. Among features that are claimed to be typical of creole formation is the placement of negation, which usually appears preceding tense, aspect and mood markers (e.g. McWhorter, 2018). In this paper, I examine diachronic data, in particular, French compound tenses and show that the position of negation in at least French-related creoles is nothing but the result of regular grammaticalization given input. As such the expression of negation typically exemplifies coalescence of the already grammaticalized negator pas into an inflectional exponent in the creoles.

1 Introduction

Creolistics has been punctuated by heated debates regarding the typological and genetic status of creoles (and pidgins) since their inception, and more so, in the past 20 years with the revival of the pidgin-creole life cycle, which describes these languages as unnatural language formations starting anew following ‘a break in transmission’ (Bickerton, 1981; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; McWhorter, 1998, 2001; McWhorter & Parkvall, 2002; McWhorter, 2018; Bakker et al., 2011; Bakker, 2015, among others). According to this theory, creole languages are ‘exceptional’ insofar as they exhibit prototypical features not found in other languages e.g. copula omission, generalization of the infinitive, absence of case distinctions and preverbal negation, signaling a process of pidginization (McWhorter, 2018, Chapter 1). McWhorter proceeds to explain that since the European sources from which the creoles derive, have their negative marker appear after the verb, they cannot have contributed to the structural distribution illustrated in the following examples (§1.2.4).

(1)  

(a) Mwen pa konnen. (Haitian Kréyol)  
\texttt{1SG.WK NEG know.LF}  
‘I don’t know.’

(b) Mi no sabi. (Sranan)  
\texttt{1SG NEG know}  
‘I don’t know.’

(c) Mie no weet (Negerhollands)  
\texttt{1SG NEG know}  
‘I don’t know.’

(Holm, 1988, 171)\(^1\)

This grammar-internal change “submits more gracefully to an analysis as results of

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\(^1\)Initially cited in Diggelen (1978).
the failure to acquire the lexifier negation strategy, and its replacement by a strategy
typical of pidgins ( . . . )” (p.13).

This kind of analysis shows a blatant misunderstanding, even dismissal, of the
input data since as previously demonstrated (Henri, 2018), negation always precede
nonfinite main verbs in the lexifier languages e.g. English (2-a) and French (2-b)-
(2-d); granted though that in the case of French, negation follows finite forms. No-
tice however that compound tenses (passé composé and periphrastic future) counts
among the mostly used tenses in French next to the present indicative. This means
that together they make a big proportion of constructions where negation precede
the main verb.

(2) a. I don’t know.
b. T’as pas connu cet homme
   2SG.WK’AUX.2SG.PRS NEG know.PPART this man
   ‘You did not know this man.’
c. T’as pas mangé.
   2SG.WK’avoir.2SG.PRS NEG eat.PPART
   ‘You didn’t eat.’
d. Tu vas pas venir.
   2SG.WK aller.2SG.PRS NEG come.INF
   ‘You won’t come.’

In fact, Dryer (1988) argues that cross-linguistically, negation mostly appears pre-
verbally; a position that is claimed within creole exceptionalism to be typical of
only creoles and pidgins.

Based on observations from diachronic data from Mauritian Kreol2, I argue that
negation evolved from an already grammaticalized lexeme in French to a purely
inflectional marker in the French offsprings. In addition, I review the distribution
of negation in so-called French compound tenses (temps composés et surcomposés)
and show that the position and status of negation in French-related creoles naturally
follows from their initial distribution within these constructions.

2 Synchronic distribution of negation in French-related creoles

While French-related creoles usually feature a preverbal negator as exemplified
for Haitian Kréyol (1-a), they may also show different instances of post-verbal
negation morphologically and/or semantically conditioned. In Louisiana Creole,
long verb forms expressing either a past tense3 have a preverbal negator compared
to the short form encoding the present indicative where negation is postponed to the

2 Henceforth Mauritian.
3 Similar to French, the long form also encodes the 2PL or 2SG.F present imperative and the short
form, the 2SG present imperative.
verb. In the presence of TAM markers, negation is also attracted to the preverbal position (Henri & Klingler, 2014).

(3) Louisiana Creole

\[
\text{TNS} \rightarrow \text{MOOD} \rightarrow \text{NEG} \rightarrow \text{ASP} \rightarrow V_{LF} \text{ or } V_{SF} \rightarrow \text{NEG}
\]

a. Mo te pe e fe aryen.
   1SG PST NEG PROG do.LF nothing
   ‘I wasn’t doing anything.’ (Klingler, 2003)

b. Jan lav pa son figi.
   John wash.SF NEG 3SG.Poss face
   ‘John doesn’t wash his face.’

In Mauritian, negation may appear in a postverbal position with neg-raising verbs (Henri, 2022). In this position and similar to Louisiana Creole, the short form of the verb is selected, showing that structurally speaking, negation behaves as complements as is the case in French (Abeillé & Godard, 1997).

(4) Mauritian

a. Nou pa ti ava pe diskit lor saki nou pe diskite.
   1PL NEG PST IND.IRR PROG discuss on what 1PL PROG discuss.LF.
   ‘We would not be discussing what we’re discussing.’

b. Mo pans pa zot ti pe asiz enn met distans.
   1SG think.SF NEG 2/3PL PST PROG sit.SF one meter distance
   I don’t think they were sitting 1 meter apart.

c. Mo pa ti panse zot pe asiz enn met distans.

d. *Mo ti pans pa zot pe asiz enn met distans.

The difference between Louisiana Creole, on the one hand and, Mauritian and Haitian, on the other is the fact the past tense marker te/ti appear postposed to negation in the former and preposed in the latter languages. Such distinction is customarily explained in terms of creolization. Compared to Mauritian and Haitian, Louisiana Creole is described as a semi-creole due to the inflectional vestiges it retained from French (Rottet, 1992).

The kind of peculiar process suggested to occur in the case of these contact languages seem unwarranted if we adopt a view of language change as a complex adaptive system (Mufwene et al., 2017), whereby the outcome is determined by input and the context in which it emerges; both of which may differ according to the variety of input and the languages in contact in the learning environment. To better understand the grammaticalization of the negative marker in the creoles, we first examine the case of periphrastic and compound tenses in French and its (regional) varieties that shaped the creoles at hand.
3 French periphrases

French has a series of inflectional and verbal periphrases which substitute to synthetic verb forms in French, most of which are constructed with the auxiliary *avoir* ‘have’ e.g. the present perfect tense (passé composé) for the simple past (Abeillé & Godard, 2021, Chapter III-2). In fact, in many varieties of French, the auxiliary *avoir* seems to have been extended to the small class of verbs initially selecting the auxiliary *être* ‘be’ (5-a). Note that among possible past tenses in French — passé simple, imparfait and passé composé — the passé composé (present perfect) is the first acquired and most widely used in both speech and writing Levesque (2010). In addition, the use of the auxiliary *avoir* in some cases influences the choice of the main verb as in (5-b), where the main verb *être* replaces the verb *aller* ‘go’. Note that in (5-b), the verb in the past participle is followed by a predicative phrase, here a prepositional phrase.

(5) Abeillé & Godard (2021, p.278)

a. (…) j’ai descendu dans le tunnel.

1SG.WK’AVOIR.1SG.PRS descend.PPART in the tunnel

‘I went down the tunnel’

b. J’ai été à la piscine hier

1SG.WK’AVOIR.1SG.PRS ÉTRE.PPART to the pool yesterday

‘I went to the pool yesterday.’

These inflectional periphrases may serve as basis for compound tenses (passé sur-composé) which appears around the XVth century to refer to an anterior past (Ayres-Bennett & Carruthers, 1992; Borel, 2018). These constructions, also characteristic of many regional varieties of French combine two auxiliaries, the first *avoir* followed by *être* (7) or *avoir* (6-b) and the past participle (Abeillé & Godard, 2021).

(6) Abeillé & Godard (2021, p.279)

a. Lorsqu’il a été parti, elle

when’3SG.M.WK avoir.3SG.PRS être.PPART go.PPART, 3SG.F.WK

s’est sentie soulagée

3SG.REFL’be.3SG.PRS feel.F.PPART relieve.F.PPART

‘When he had left, she felt relieved.’

b. Quand il a eu fini son

when 3SG.M.WK avoir.3SG.PRS ãvoir.PPART finish.PPART his

travail, il s’est endormi

work, he fell asleep

‘When he had done working, he fell asleep.’

As Alleyne (1996) observes⁴, the tense marker *te/ti* stems from a form the verb to

⁴See also Chaudenson (2003) and DeGraff (2005)
‘be’, either the PST.IPFV (étai/étai/étai) or the PPART (été) [ete].

(7) DeGraff (2005, p.321)
   a. Il était malade.
      3SG.M be.3SG.PST.IPFV sick
      ‘He was sick.’
   b. Il a été malade.
      3SG.M avoir.3SG.PRS.be.PPART sick
      ‘He has been sick.’

The passé composé of the verb to ‘be’ with predicative complements (5-b), (7-b) bears a striking resemblance with the double compound selecting a main verb in (7). The present perfect (7-b), (5-b), the imperfect (7-a) and compound tenses in French all encode an event that occurred in the past, with present relevance for the former as opposed to the latter tenses, which are interpreted as distant pasts. Transposed within the French-lexified creoles, [ete] → [ti/te] takes on the past anterior meaning while the perfect is encoded by the perfect/completive (fjinn in languages like Mauritian (8-b)-(8-c)).

(8) a. An té mété pima adan sa. (Guadeloupean Kréyòl)
   1SG.WK PST put.LF pepper in it
   ‘I had put pepper in it.’ (Henri et al., 2020)
   b. Mo ti dormi. (Mauritian)
   1SG.WK PST sleep.LF
   ‘I slept.’
   c. Mo ti’nn dormi.
   1SG.WK PST’PRF sleep.LF
   ‘I had slept.’

With negation, Chaudenson (2003, p.181) observes that pas, would appear following the first auxiliary (9) and DeGraff (2005) further hypothesize that the following reanalysis by the language learner may be posited (10):

(9) a. je (ne) suis pas après faire,
   b. je (ne) suis pas à faire,
   c. j(e n’)ai pas fini de faire,
   d. je (ne) suis pas pour faire.

(10) Fr. n’a(s) pas / n’es(t) pas → Early Creole (na) pa⁵ → Modern Creole pa

Combining these observations, one may clearly see how negation has surfaced to scope over the tense marker; the inflectional and verbal periphrases serving as partial template to the TAM system of many French-related creoles.

(11) a. NEG > TNS > MOOD > ASP

⁵I would rather suggest that [napa] lexicalizes to a single morpheme and further reduces to [pa] in Mauritian at least.
b. Il (n’)a pas été à la piscine hier.
3SG.WK NE’.avoir.3SG.PRS NEG be.PPART to the pool yesterday
‘He didn’t go to the pool yesterday.’

In addition, French has a number of verbal periphrases exhibiting a number of patterns. The first member of the construction is a verb that expresses aspect e.g. the periphrastic future (12-a) which has almost taken over the synthetic future (Abouda & Skrovec, 2017) or finir de ‘finish to’ for the completive (12-b).

(12) a. Il va venir bientôt.
3SG.M.WK aller.3SG.PRS come.INF soon
‘He will come soon.’
b. Jean a fini de travailler.
John avoir.3SG.PRS finish PREP work.INF.
‘John has finished working.’

Next to (12-a)-(12-b), are also the well documented varieties of verbal periphrases used in Northern America (Louisiana and Quebec), which served as input to the TAM system that emerged in the French-related creoles (Chaudenson, 2003, p.178).

(13) a. être après (à) INF
b. être pour INF

(14) Abeillé & Godard (2021, Chapter XI-3)

a. (…) mes parents sont après me maganer.
my parents être.3PL.PRS after 1SG.OBJ use.INF
‘my parents are using me.’
b. (…) qu’elle était pour avoir un petit bébé?
COMP’3SG.F.WK être.1PFV for have.INF a little baby
‘(…) that she will have a baby?’

To confirm this grammaticalization path, we next investigate diachronic data for Mauritian.

3.1 Diachronic data

While diachronic data is usually scarce for creole languages and would not provide good bases for statistical analyses, the small inventory available still provide enlightening data to uncover the processes of language change from French to creole. (Baker et al., 2007) compiled 60 texts of around 100 000 words. These consist of travel notes, court proceedings, folk tales, poems, newspaper, sirandanes, songs, proverbs and were written between 1721 and 1929. Described as Mauritian texts, many of these are in fact speech from white settlers on the island.

(15) 1769 Bernardin de St Pierre, Voyage à l’Ile de France
(published in 1773)
Le patron me dit dans son mauvais patois :
The presence of negation within compound tenses are pretty notable. Like Haitian Creole, Mauritian negation [pa] is the reduced form of [napa], composed initially of N’aux + PAS.

(16)  a. Pardonne moy, Monsieur, moy n’apa été batté ça Blanc là. (1777, Affaire La Douceur )
    b. Mon licaire dire moi qui mo na pas été sivré son Commandement (1828_Lambert)
    c. N’a pas té bisoin dire cinois dix fois ( . . . ) (1925_Soulsobontemps)
    d. ( . . . ) n’a rien sautres pretes na pas été instruire sautres, nous vivres comme bête (1816_Le Brun)

In these creoles, N’aux disappears perhaps due to its bleached meaning and weak tense marking, the anterior being expressed by the second auxiliary [ete].

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Type freq.</th>
<th>Token freq.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>napa</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Data extracted from Baker et al. (2007)

Other French-lexified creoles seem to have followed a similar grammaticalization path leading to the pre-TAM negation. In other words, these creoles have inherited and further grammaticalized the major constructions used to express tense, mood and aspect in their respective linguistic ecologies. This of course doesn’t exclude any novel formation or inheritance from the substrates.

4 The morphological status of pa

French-lexified creoles further grammaticalize the French negator pas, itself grammaticalized from the noun ‘step’ as a result of cyclic weakening and strengthening of negative expressions à la Jespersen (1922).

6The boss told me in his bad patois: “This is not good, Sir”. I asked him if there was any danger, he replied: “If were are not struck by bad luck, it’s good.”

7The term patois first appeared in 1285 and was used to described ‘unintelligible’ and regional language varieties spoken in France.
Like the inflectional *ne* in French, *pa* exhibit clitic properties in all the creoles. They exhibit phonological or prosodic dependence on a host and can never stand alone e.g. as an answer to a question (18-d).

In some creoles, the alternating position of the negative marker has an effect on the verb stem. As previously mentioned, postverbal negation selects a short verb form while preverbal negation select the long form and this irrespective of mode in the absence of TAM markers.
This is similar to Mauritian with negation scoping over so-called neg-raising verb e.g. panse ‘think’, espere ‘hope’, krvar ‘believe’, ve ‘want’ and modals like bizin ‘need’ (20-b), kapav ‘can’, oredi ‘should’, devout ‘maybe/perhaps’ (Henri, 2018). In the presence of TAM marking (20-d), negation obligatorily appears in pre-TAM position.

(20) Mauritian
a. Mo pa panse li pou vini.
   1SG.WK NEG think.LF 3SG IND.FUT come.LF
   ‘I don’t think he will come.’
b. Mo bizin pa vini.
   1SG.WK need NEG come.LF
   ‘I need to not come.’
c. Mo pans pa li pou vini.
   1SG.WK think.SF NEG 3SG IND.FUT come.LF
   ‘I don’t think he will come.’
d. Mo pa ti pans li pou vini.
   1SG.WK NEG PST think.LF 3SG IND.FUT come.LF
   ‘I don’t think he will come.’

With Reunionese Creole, stem selection is slightly more complex. The future is usually expressed periphrastically except in the presence of negation where the future is encoded synthetically.

(21) Reunionese Creole (Chaudenson, 2003)

a. Ma/mi sa manzé.
   1SG.FUT/1SG FUT eat.LF
   ‘I will eat’
b. Mi manzra pa.
   1SG eat.FUT
   ‘I will not eat’

The ambi-clitic positioning of negation in combination with the strict ordering of TAM markers signal that all these markers exhibit affix properties with respect to the lexical head rather than purely syntactic properties.

(22) a. Mo pa tj’ava’n donn li mo kas si mo
   1SG NEG PST’IND.IRR’PRF give.SF 3SG 1SG.POSS money if 1SG
ti kon. (Mauritian)
PST know
   ‘I wouldn’t have given him my money if I knew.’
Although compared to affixes, negation can scope over conjuncts and is not selective of its hosts.

(23) Mauritian
   a. Zan pa [kwi manze ni/ou bwar rom].
      John NEG cook, SF food not/or drink rhum
      ‘John doesn’t eat food or drink rhum.’
   b. Zan pa [manze bwar].
      John NEG eat, LF drink, LF
      ‘John doesn’t eat or drink.

In particular, it can be separated from the verb by a small class of adverbs e.g. ankò ‘yet’. In Gualoupean Kréyol not only is there elision of a vowel but one can also observe the harmonization of the vowels [pa ūkɔ] → [pɔkɔ] → [pɔɔ]. A similar process is witnessed in Louisiana Creole.

(24) a. An pòò te mangè lè i rivé. (Guadeloupean Kréyol)
      1SG.WF NEG.YET PST eat, LF when SG arrive
      ‘I hadn’t eaten when he arrived.’
   b. Li pe e dormi. (Louisiana Creole)
      3SG NEG PROG sleep, LF
      ‘He’s not sleeping’

5 A constraint-based account of negation

Given the properties described above, negation is analyzed on a par with TAM markers. There are different alternatives to modeling the peculiar morphotactics seen in French-related creoles. While we focus only on Mauritian in this section, a similar approach can be adopted for the other languages. A first option would be to adopt an information-based approach to realisational morphology à la Cristmann & Bonami (2016) to account for the variable position of negation. Since these clitics are less selective of their host, we allow for the stem to be either verbal or adverbal. Strict ordering is easily handled by position classes. In this implementation, we may impose that the verb form be short or long depending on the position class of negation: -4 in preverbal position and 1 in postverbal position.

For this paper, we follow Henri (2022) in assuming that negation and TAM markers are functors Van Eynde (1998) that modify a predicative head. This can be of different categories since like TAM, negation can select non-verbal predicates.
The functor analysis has the advantage of providing a convenient account of the
VP internal morphosyntactic constraints and linearization previously described.

![Flat VP structure](image)

Amendments to the traditional head-functor phrase allow for more than one
functor to select a single head. As already noted, we allow for the head to be
predicative for all the markers but for some to allow for selection of adverbs (e.g.
tense and irrealis markers).

The SELECTOR PRINCIPLE, applicable to the locally-headed head-functor phrase,
constrains the SELECT feature to have a value that is identical to the SYNSEM value
head daughter to the effect of imposing restrictions on both syntactic and semantic
properties of the head (Van Eynde 2006: 165). In addition, the MARKING PRINCI-
PLE requires the MARKING feature of the functor daughters to be transferred to the
mother (Pollard & Sag, 1994; Van Eynde, 2006). In other words, the selection of
a head by a functor or functors has the effect of marking the construction with its
value. MARKING values are further associated with other features like for instance,
TAM and POLARITY.
We define a linear precedence rule (28) to account for the strict linear order of the markers\(^8\) and define the entry for [pa] as follows:

\[
\text{(28) Linear precedence rule : } \text{POL} < \text{TNS} < \text{ASP} < \text{MOOD} < \text{V}
\]

\[
\text{(29)}
\]

\[
[\text{pa}, \begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD} \\
\text{CAT} \\
\text{MARKING} \\
\text{LEX} + \\
\text{CONT} \{\text{\textit{NO}\textsubscript{0}}\} \\
\text{STORE} \{\text{\textit{}}\}
\end{bmatrix}]
\]

\(Pa^{9}\) marks the head it selects as \text{POL}+ and because it participates in the formation of polyadic quantification, it is a propositional operator rather than a variable binding operator\(^{10}\).

Finally note that the lexical entry for modifier pa specifies a feature \text{LEX}+ in preverbal position. Adverbs allowed to either precede or follow the verb are underspecified for the feature \text{LEX} (Hassamal, 2017). This means that when \([\text{pa}]\) is in postverbal position, it is specified as \text{LEX}-. Thus postverbal negation is analyzed as a complement, as proposed for English and French (Abeillé & Godard, 1997; Kim & Sag, 2002). The argument is supported by the fact that postverbal [pa] is restricted to appear with a small class of verb and obligatorily triggers the short form, like phrasal complements usually do (33). For these verbs, [pa] marked as \text{LEX}- may appear as their first element on their \text{COMPS} list. For those epistemic verbs selecting an extraposed clausal complement, rules (30), (32) stipulate that they appear as \text{SF} if they have negation on their \text{COMPS} list.

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\(^8\)Another alternative is proposed in Henri (2010) where a type-hierarchy constrains the markers to their respective position.

\(^9\)Or \textit{nepli} ‘no more’.

\(^{10}\)See Henri (2022) for more details on Negative Concord in Mauritian.
Figure 3: Tree for *pa kone* ‘don’t know’

(30) \[
\text{HEAD [VFORM short]} \Rightarrow \text{VAL [COMPS nelist]}
\]

(31) Li ve pa manze. (Mauritian) 3SG want.SF NEG eat.LF  ‘He doesn’t want to eat.’

(32) \[
\text{HEAD [verb]} \Rightarrow \text{COMPS [adv SEL \text{\& LEX -} \text{\&}]}\]
6 Conclusion: On creole genesis

The scenario presented in the previous sections casts serious doubts on the idea that creoles (and pidgins) do not inherit grammatical structure from their lexifier language(s). Notwithstanding other languages’ grammatical contributions or innovations, French-lexified contact languages do continue processes of language change originating in the lexifier language. French syntactic periphrases are in the creoles fully grammaticalized to the extent that markers don’t retain their lexical content contrary to French, where auxiliaries are also used as main verbs (Henri & Kihm, 2015). These markers behave more like affixes rather than syntactically independent words in showing fusional properties. The same is true of negation, where one could argue that we’ve come full cycle according to Jespersen’s development of negation with a preverbal pa in the creole offsprings. These observations contradict the claim that contact languages start anew and have historically no single parent (e.g. Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Thomason, 2001; McWhorter, 2001; Bakker, 2015). In the case of French-related creoles, both vocabulary and morphosyntactic properties expressed on verbs are definitely traceable to the lexifier based on identification of cognates in comparative historical linguistics.

On the other hand, this development submits nicely to the idea that creoles (and pidgins) are linguistically mixed, inheriting from the different languages that came into play during their emergence and beyond in contrast with intertwined languages, which are usually described as exhibiting a clear split between two language contributors. The overwhelmingly preverbal, even preTAM position of negation within the French-lexified creoles is nothing but an evolution of its distribution in colloquial French in conjunction with the verbal system, itself heavily analytic. While negation is postverbal in the present tense, it appears before non-finite verbs e.g. in the passé composé, a tense which with the present tense counts the two most frequent tenses. The past participle [ete] the form that gave rise to the anterior marker in these creoles participates in such constructions and could have served as template for the peculiar position of negation in many French-lexified creoles. This means that patterns of alternation, including TAM constructions and...

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11From so-called substrate or adstrate languages.
12Except for the long and short verb distinction in the Indian Ocean creoles which have exapted new functions due to Bantu and Malagasy influence.
13See also (Mufwene, 2001; Aboh, 2016; Baptista, 2020, among others) for comparable viewpoints.
negation, which are salient in terms of frequency and/or predictability will be more likely to persist/survive through language change. The variation within these constructions across French-lexified creoles correlates with their respective singular ecology. For instance, the marker of the progressive in Lesser Antilles and French Guyana creoles is ka from qu’à, probably from the restrictive ne...qu(e) expression (34-a) (Hazaël-Massieux, 2005, 2008) compared to Haitian or Mauritian progressive ape.\(^\text{14}\)

(34) a. Tu n’as qu’à manger. (French)
   2SG.WF NE’avoir.2SG.PRS qu’INF eat.INF
   ‘You just eat.’

   b. Ou ka mangé (Guadeloupean Kréyol)
   2SG PROG eat
   ‘You eat/are eating.’

It would seem then that rather than having no single parent, contact languages have more than one single parent compared to other languages traditionally assumed to proceed from one proto-language. Such a hypothesis seem certainly less eccentric than the received idea that pidgins and creoles are genetically and structurally disconnected from their contributing languages by virtue of a simplification process (pidginization).

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\(^{14}\)Other scholars have suggested a substrate inheritance.
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