EVIDENCE AGAINST AN ANTERIOR TENSE SYSTEM

IN GUYANESE AND JAMAICAN CREOLES

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Bickerton, in his paper 'Creolization, Linguistic Universals, Natural Semantax and the Brain' (1975a), and more recently in his book Roots of Language (1981), sets up a [+ Anterior] tense system for all pidgin and creole languages. The Anterior tense is based on his analysis of Guyanese Creole as exemplified in Dynamics of a Creole System (1975b). There are problems, however, concerning the criteria and data Bickerton has put forward for Anterior tense in Guyanese, and there are data from Guyanese and Jamaican to suggest that an Anterior system is inadequate.

To describe the tense system of Guyanese, Bickerton, following Voorhoeve (1957), first makes the distinction 'realis' versus 'irrealis' (factual versus non-factual). Bickerton's tense system, [+ Anterior], covers only the realis on the grounds that the irrealis is less structured. There are two basilect variants sa~gu, which function as future tense markers as well as conditional modals. The fact that the forms simultaneously indicate futurity and modality is held to render them 'performance features' - they are in the flux of change and therefore cannot fit into the grammar. The Anterior marker bin is much more stable since its only function is to mark anteriority. (See Bickerton 1975b).

Is the fact that a form simultaneously has two functions a good enough reason for excluding it from a grammar? According to Lyons (1968:310), in some languages, the forms that are used in referring to the future can also have modal implications. This, he says, may be regarded as a 'natural' consequence of the fact that statements made about future occurrences are necessarily based upon the speaker's beliefs, predictions and intentions, rather than upon knowledge of fact. In a description of a language we may choose either one or the other label.

Although Bickerton states that sa~go cannot be in the grammar because of simultaneous functions, in Roots of Language (1981:93-95) he posits go as a marker of modality:

'/112/GC: mi go tel am if mi sii am
           I'll tell him if I see him' or 'I would
           him if I saw him'. (p.93).

He also posits the variant fi as a modal:

'/120/mi fi go
           I should/ought to go'.   (p. 95)

pointing out that _fi_ can also function as a complementizer. If because of simultaneous functions we cannot have a future tense category, on what grounds can we have a modal category?

Bickerton claims it is possible to have a tense system with _bin_ since its only function is to mark anteriority. But in Guyanese and Jamaican (where _ben_ is the tense form), both forms can function as:

(a)   a noun copula

1. shi (bin) tiicha
            (ben)
        She was a teacher (GC and JC)

(b)   a locational copula

2. hau laang yu _bin_ hee
    How long have you been here? (GC)

    win _ben_ inna mi eez
    Wind was in my ear (JC)

(c)   a directional copula (only in Guyanese)

3. a _bin_ esiikwiboo
    I went to the Essequibo (GC)

Thus, according to Bickerton's criteria, GC and JC should not have a past tense category since the forms have simultaneous functions and are therefore 'performance features'. We must then have serious doubts about the criteria for Anterior tense, not only in Guyanese, but in all pidgins and creoles.

In his article 'The status of _bin_ in Atlantic Creoles' (1979) Bickerton claims that in creoles (unlike Indo-European languages) time is measured without reference to 'now' or to the speaker. He goes on (p.311):

'...the states and action that form the subject of discourse can themselves serve as a reference points, and their posi- tions in time RELATIVE TO ONE ANOTHER, rather than relative to a single fixed point, can determine the way in which they will be marked for tense.'

The claim that time can be measured without reference to 'now' or to the speaker is not quite correct. For example, if I am in a room with a book which falls to the ground, in referring to the book (as long as I am in the room), it is only possible for me to say:

4. di buk faal dong
    The book has fallen

I cannot say:

5. di buk <u>bin</u> faal dong

But it is possible for me to say the latter if I subsequently leave the room. Thus the use or non-use of <u>bin</u> is tied to 'my presence'. I can also say example (4) if I subsequently leave the room.

It is possible to say example (5) while I am in the room, but then the book must have been picked up. If the two actions are spoken about I may say:

6. di buk <u>bin</u> faal dong an mi pik it op

This example supports Bickerton's position that tense is marked relative to an action. But it is also possible to say:

7. di buk <u>bin</u> faal dong an mi <u>bin</u> pik it op
8. di buk faal dong an mi <u>bin</u> pik it op
9. di buk faal dong an mi <u>pik</u> it op

Examples (4-9) indicate that tense is not categorically marked relative to an action, and that there is a relationship between a speaker and events. In <u>Roots of Language</u> (1981:91) anteriority is defined as 'prior to the correct focus of discourse'. This definition seems to imply that tense is relative to the speaker.

Bickerton posits that the Anterior tense system is dependent on the stative – non-stative distinction. For stative verbs, [-anterior] would mean 'now', that is, the state of liking, knowing, wanting etc., though it may have commenced in the past, would still be in existence at the present moment. For the same verbs [+anterior] would mean 'not now', 'no longer', i.e. a terminated state. These are the meanings of ϕ and <u>bin</u> with statives. (See Bickerton 1975b:46). We can support this claim by the examples below:

10. yu doz sliip wen yu <u>de</u> pon sii
     You usually sleep when you are at sea (GC)

11. mi no <u>hav</u> di monii
     I do not have the money (JC)

12. mii an wan bai <u>bin laik</u> waak leet
     A boy and I liked to walk late (at nights) GC

13. dem <u>ben waant</u> di badii fi kom op hee
     They wanted the corpse to come up here (JC)

But, stative verbs uninflected by <u>bin</u> can also be [+anterior]:

14. dem <u>waan</u> tuu maan fu stitch bag
     They wanted two men to stitch bags (GC)

15. mi nu <u>noo</u> granmuma, bot mi <u>noo</u> granpa charlii
     I did not know grandmother, but I knew grandfather
     Charlie (JC)

Uninflected stative verbs having present and past meanings can be
further supported by adverbial combinability. This class of verbs
can combine with adverbs which are semantically −Past and +Past:

16. at prezent/mi <u>noo</u> di aansa
     At present/I know the answer

17. in dem deez/mi <u>riimemba</u> di aansa
     In those days/I remembered the answer

Stative verbs inflected by <u>bin</u> can indeed only have past meaning,
and this can also be supported by co-occurrence with −Past and
+Past adverbs:

18. *az yet/mi <u>bin</u> <u>noo</u> di aansa
     As yet/ I knew the answer

19. wans biifoor/mi <u>bin</u> <u>riimemba</u> di aansa
     Once before/I remembered the answer

Thus we can see that Bickerton's claim is only partially correct.

Non-stative verbs, on the other hand, are aspectually
[± punctual]; [+punctual], unmarked non-statives, implies a single
action; [−punctual], non-statives inflected by the continuative/
iterative <u>a</u>, as in example (20) below:

20. shi <u>a sing</u>
     She is singing/she usually sings

represents an extended or repeated action.

Bickerton (1975b:46) explains:

> 'If we speak about a single, non-extended action, it can
> hardly be taking place in the immediate present (unless
> we are giving a running commentary, a rather unusual type
> of speech event!). However, it does not follow that be-
> cause an action is [+past] it must therefore be [+anterior]
> provided that our point of reference is <u>another action or
> actions</u> rather than <u>the present moment</u>. A [+past] action
> can then be [−anterior] in that the past action was the
> last to occur, or the last of its kind to occur, or the
> second of two in which the speaker is interested. Likewise
> a [+anterior] action does not have to be a 'past-before-
> past', since it could be regarded as both related and
> prior to a state of affairs at present in existence.'

Bickerton claims that a [+past] action can be [-anterior] in that the past action was the last to occur. If this is the case how does he account for example (21) from Guyanese where the second action, and not the first, is marked for tense?

21. shi kom an shi matii kuulii bina trai wid shi
     She came and her fellow Indians were trying with her

Or, example (22) from Jamaican where all three actions are marked for past tense.

22. 'wan taim some dupii bena kiip miitin. an wan man ben
     ron a di hous said, an wan ben ron a di hous batam'
     (Irvine 1982:26)

     On one occasion some ghost were keeping a meeting.
     And one man ran to the side of the house, and another
     ran under the house.

Or even example (23) where both actions are unmarked.

23. di buk faal dong an mi pik it op
     The book fell and I picked it up

Bickerton further postulates that [+anterior] does not have to be 'past-before-past' since it could be regarded as both related and prior to a state of affairs at present in existence. This explanation, he says, accounts for the examples quoted below.

'2.53 dis fut bin swel he si di tu a saiz (185/b6/236)
      'This foot has swelled up, compare the size of the
      two'.

2.54 wen mi bin smaal laik a dem pikni dis den mi bin faal
     a trensh (198/2/262)

     'When I was as small as these children, I fell in a
     canal'. (1975b:36)

2.91 hau awi dis bina wok dem na eebl fi wok bikaz dem
     gro saaf (188/3/246)

     'They can't work like we worked because they've grown
     soft'. (1975b:47)

But in his 1979 paper he contradicts the above by saying:

'...if [+punctual] actions are always past as well as
usually [-anterior], then bin with non-statives will
indicate a past-before-past whether or not the English
pluperfect would also apply'. (p.311).

In order to accommodate what appears to be deviant data in Seychelles creole, Bickerton (1981:91) finds it necessary to 'refine' the concept of anterior, which he defines provisionally as 'prior to the correct focus of discourse'. Current focus, he

states, may be explicit - where the tense of an earlier and later event are directly contrasted; or implicit - where the relationship between the earlier and later event is simply assumed;or there may be nothing prior to current focus. He illustrates this refinement by contrasting English and Guyanese Creole:

'/103/Current focus, nothing prior

Eng.: Bill has come/came to see you

GC: Bil (don) kom fi sii yu

/104/ Prior event, current focus implicit

Eng.: Bill came/*has/*had come to see you yesterday, too

GC: Bil bin kom/*don kom/*kom fi sii yu yestide an aal

/105/ Prior event, current focus explicit

Eng.: When I got here, Bill had come/*has come/*came already

GC: Wen mi riich, bil bin kom/*don kom/*kom aredi

In /104/ current focus is on the present, second visit of Bill implied by too; this, English can handle by one of the means available for /103/, but the anterior system of GC cannot. Example /104/ has to be treated exactly like /105/ in GC;/105/must be treated differently from /104/ in English'. (1981:91-2)

I have no objections to example /103/ but I should add that the use of aspectual _don_ emphasizes that Bill is there waiting to see you. With respect to example /104/ it is possible to say not only 'Bil bin kom fi sii yu yestide an aal', but also 'Bil kom fi sii yu yestide an aal'. If the speaker chooses to emphasize the pastness of the situation, the speaker will use the tense form bin. Aspectual _don_ cannot be used, possibly due to semantic incompatibility between the aspectual and the adverb 'too'. The use of 'too' implies not only that 'Bill came to see you yester-day, but that he is also here at the time of utterance'. _don_ is a punctual aspect marker, thus referring to a situation that is not conceived of as lasting in time. Since _don_ has a restrictive meaning, and 'too' implies repetitiveness, the two forms are semantically incompatible. _don_ would have been possible without an aal 'too', as you will then be saying that 'Bill came to see you yesterday, but at the time of utterance he is not here'. With regard to example /105/it is possible to say any of the following:

wen mi riich, bil kom aredi

wen mi riich, bil _don_ kom aredi

wen mi riich, bil _bin_ kom aredi

wen mi riich, bil _bin_ _don_ kom aredi

If the speaker chooses to emphasize the pastness or the aspectual nature of the situation, he will use <u>bin</u> or <u>don</u> respectively. If he chooses to emphasize both the pastness and aspectual nature of the situation, he will use both forms.

On the basis of the above, it is obvious that Bickerton's tense system is lacking in observational, descriptive and explanatory adequacy. The system is inadequate for Guyanese, and Jamaican, and therefore cannot have universal applicability. Alternative tense systems for Guyanese and Jamaican are proposed in Gibson (1982) and Gibson and Levy (forthcoming) respectively.

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