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African Interpreters in the Atlantic Slave Trade

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Abstract. African linguists, both free and slave, had important functions in the Atlantic slave trade and on Caribbean plantations. They facilitated exploration and trading. On the slave ships they communicated orders and information and helped to suppress slave insurrections. On plantations they served as teachers for the newly arrived slaves. The use of African interpreters provides evidence that African languages were used in these contact situations not only before the genesis of a pidgin language, but also during and after the development of a pidgin.

From the earliest days of the European exploration of the West Coast of Africa the difficulties of communication between the groups of people who shared no mutual languages became apparent. This communication problem continued during the Atlantic slave trade and on Caribbean plantations. Sign language made simple messages possible, but was not always clearly understood. Pidgin and creole languages did develop, but communication was necessary before this occurred. However, gestures and pidgins were not always the only means of communication. Often interpreters were available, making it possible to communicate more than just a few simple ideas; full conversations could be held with the help of interpreters. This does not mean that gestures did not continue and that pidgins did not develop. They did, but so did the use of African interpreters, which enabled Europeans and Africans to communicate in these contact situations and creole communities.

The surviving sources from the early days of Portuguese exploration of West Africa as well as the descriptions of the slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean note the importance and skills of the African interpreters. In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese not only used interpreters, but also developed an effective method for obtaining and training interpreters that was adopted by many of the countries that later began West African exploration and trade. Aloyisius Cadamosta, who explored the African coast in 1455 and 1456, described one way the Portuguese obtained and trained their interpreters.

Each of our ships had negro interpreters on board brought from Portugal who had been sold by the lords of Senegal to the first Portuguese to discover this land of the blacks. These slaves had been made Christians in Portugal and knew Spanish [sic] well; we had them from their owners on the understanding that for the hire and pay of each we will give one slave to be chosen from all our captives. Each interpreter, also, who secured four slaves for his master was to be given his freedom. [Crone 1937:55]
There were enough African slaves in Portugal to ensure an adequate supply of interpreters. By 1522, black slaves were one-tenth of the population in Lisbon (Alvarez Nazario 1961:25). Among these were interpreters who were kept at court. Hicronimus Münzer wrote in 1494 that the king of Portugal kept a group of "Negroes of different colors" who could speak Portuguese and who would try to speak to the newly captured slaves (Naro 1978:319). These interpreters would also be used "when distinguished visitors from Guinea were received. In the 1480s, King João II personally interrogated, through interpreters, both an envoy from the Oba of Benin, and a Jolof prince who had been deposed and sought Portuguese support" (Hair 1966:8).

As the Portuguese explorations continued down the African coast, slaves were captured from the new areas. In 1461, near Cape Mesurado, the de Sintra expedition kidnapped a fisherman

in obedience to His Majesty the King, who had enjoined them that, from the farthest land they reached, if it chanced that the people were unable to understand their interpreters, they were to contrive to bring away a negro, by force or persuasion, so that he might be interrogated by the many negro interpreters to be found in Portugal, or in the course of time might learn to speak, so that he might give an account of his country. [Crone 1937:84]

So important were these African interpreters that one expedition in 1444 was "chiefly to procure an interpreter from this people, from whom we can gain some knowledge of the land" (Hair 1966:12).

If the interpreters on board could not communicate, it might be necessary to return to Portugal. This was the reason that Cadamosta turned back on reaching Rio Grande in the Bissagos Islands area in 1456 when his interpreters could not communicate with the new people he encountered. He wrote that the interpreters could not

understand what was said, nor could those on the other caravels. ... Reflecting that we were come to a new country of which we could not learn anything, we decided that to continue further would be useless, for we judged that we should be continually encountering new languages. [Hair 1966:14]

Although obtaining interpreters either by force or persuasion and ensuring that there were interpreters for all the African languages needed could present problems, the use of interpreters nevertheless allowed more effective communication than did sign language. Data from the journals of explorers, traders, travelers, missionaries, and plantation owners described sign language and the occasions when it was successfully and not successfully used. Carnes wrote, in 1852, of the type of sign language used on the "Tooth Coast" (Ivory Coast?):

If a vessel coming on this coast should anchor opposite some of the little towns on the sea-shore, and should not happen to have any kroomen or interpreter on board, the natives on bringing off their articles of traffic generally in such cases
place them on the deck, and the business is conducted by signs between the parties, in the same manner that two persons deaf and dumb would act in trading with each other. Every thing is done by signs and gestures of the hands and fingers, and by placing a quantity of goods belonging to the vessel, opposite the ivory or any other articles the natives have to dispose of. [Carnes 1969:210]

An example of sign language that was not successful is found in the account of Gomez Pirez, whom Prince Henry the Navigator commissioned to explore the Guinea coast in 1456. He stated that he

sought to show that he desired to go among them on peaceful terms, and so placed upon the shore a cake and a mirror and a sheet of paper on which he drew a cross. And the natives when they came there and found these things, broke up the cake and threw it far away, and with their spears they cast at the mirror till they had smashed it, and the paper they tore. [Hair 1966:11]

The meaning of the symbols and objects were not familiar to the West Africans, but nevertheless Gomez Pirez ordered them to be shot at with arrows so “that they may at least learn that we can hurt those who will not be our friends!” (Hair 1966:11).

Although nonverbal communication was not always effective, it had to be resorted to, if, for some reason, an interpreter was not available. During a voyage described by Azurara in 1445, when the interpreter escaped, the Portuguese captain had to use sign language. These signs are described by Azurara as head and arm motions and gestures (Naro 1978:319). Just how effective this nonverbal communication was is not mentioned.

Sign language continued to be used when the slaves reached the Caribbean. Describing a slave auction in Berbice, Dr. George Pinckard wrote of a male slave who wanted a woman to be sold to the same master. The slave,

looking at the woman, made signs expressive of great distress. Next he pointed to her, and then to the chair, evidently imitating that he desired to have her placed at his side. . . . He looked again at the woman,—again pointed to the chair,—held up two fingers to the auctioneer, and implored the multitude in anxious suppliant gestures. [Pinckard 1806, 2:328–29]

Pierson, in discussing the language difficulties African slaves had with language in the eighteenth century, cited examples of gestures and signs that were not always clearly understood. One such example is of Caesar Wilcox, a newly arrived slave “who struggled to inform his Connecticut mistress of her husband’s death from a fall in the barn. It was said, only after ‘a long time with the help of signs’ that he succeeded in importing his unfortunate message” (Pierson 1988:39). Messages that would not be commonly signed, such as this, are difficult to comprehend.

Nonverbal communication was one way to communicate in contact situations and continued during the genesis of the pidgins, but since there was no
generalized system of signing, messages were limited and easily misunderstood. A more effective way to communicate was through the use of interpreters, both African slaves and free Africans, who made it possible to have extended conversations that could be more accurately understood.

The Portuguese system of obtaining interpreters was used at least to some degree by the other European explorers who followed. A British expedition to the Gold Coast in 1550 took Africans back so they could learn to speak English, and they were then taken on future voyages as interpreters (Blake 1942:393).

Just how extensive the use of African interpreters was among the other explorers and slave traders that followed cannot be determined with certainty. Not all surviving sources mention interpreters. However, since the existing sources indicate that the Europeans did not speak African languages, and exploration and slave trade continued to flourish, it would seem that the cited references to African interpreters reflect the general pattern.¹

From the time of the initial exploration of the West African coast to the period of extensive slave trade, there were more opportunities to gain language skills needed in interpreting. The European slave-trading forts established in West Africa in the beginning of the seventeenth century made prolonged contact with English and other languages possible. Forts such as the one established in Cormantin by the English in 1632 “served as depots for trade between African and European traders arriving by sea; they were staffed by contingents of White soldiers aided by large corps of captured Africans who served as castle slaves rather than being transported overseas” (McWhorter 1997:72–73).

The use of pawns to guarantee credit advances to African merchants in Old Calabar and other ports in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was another opportunity for Africans to acquire language needed for interpreting. The pawns, who could be relatives of the African traders, were held on British ships and forts until the required number of slaves were delivered (Lovejoy and Richardson 1999).

Some children of African traders in Old Calabar who were taken to Britain for schooling also served as pawns. A document to the Committee of the House of Lords in 1788 states:

> It has always been the practice of merchants and commanders of the ships to Africa, to encourage the natives to send their children to England; as it not only conciliates their friendship, and softens their manners, but adds greatly to the security of the traders. . . . [Crow 1970:300]

As trading in West Africa for both slaves and goods increased, there was more need for interpreters on the coast as well as on the ships. Some of these African interpreters became so professional that they had “books,” or letters of recommendation, that they presented to ship captains. These references were so important to the interpreters that they took care not to let them become wet or damaged. Carnes found that “it is not uncommon to see a krooman with a half a
dozen or more 'books,' closely secured in a small tin box, which he always has with him in his canoe, and presents to the captain on going alongside of any vessel" (1699:312).

The use of "books" was not the practice in all areas. William Chancellor, from 1749 to 1751 a surgeon on a slaving ship that sailed from New York to the Gold Coast, wrote in his journal:

they call their Linguisters Gold takers because they attend you and see that you take none that is bad, they have no books here as they have to windward, for if they are ever detected in defrauding you of one penny they are made slaves of for Life. [Wax 1965:478]

Interpreters—or "linguisters," as they were also called, as in the quotation above—were used not only by the Europeans, but also by the Africans. Matthews, in describing a voyage to the Sierra Leone River, reported: "When the country people come down themselves to trade with whites, they are obliged to apply to the inhabitants of the villages where factories are kept, to serve as brokers and interpreters" (1788:143–44).

Some African chiefs had their own interpreters. Snelgrave wrote in the first part of the eighteenth century of a messenger of the king of Dahome who had this function, and described the way the messenger got his English proficiency:

His Majesty having heard there was an English Ship arrived in the Road of Whidaw, he had ordered him to go there and invite the captain to come up to his Camp: . . . [the interpreter] spoke very good English having learnt it when a Boy in the English Factory at Whidaw: He belonged to Mr. Lambe, and was with him at the time he was taken Prisoner by the King of Ardra. They both fell into the King of Dahome's Power, . . . where he learnt the Country Language; and in this respect I had as capable an Interpreter as I could desire. [Snelgrave 1971: 22–24]

References to interpreters in the service of African rulers are found as early as the mid-seventeenth century. In addition to serving in business transactions, the interpreters also served to dispel myths about Europeans. When the Danes took over the Dutch fort at Accra in 1661 on the Gold Coast, King Firempong was made protector of the new fort. He had never seen white people and believed as did others that since they came in large ships they were a kind of sea monster. The Danes sent a bookkeeper, Nicolas Kamp, to the king in order to disprove this belief. When Kamp took off his hat and bowed,

King Firempong, thinking he was a wild animal about to spring, fell flat on this face and yelled for the assistance of his wives. When the interpreter had explained that Kamp's queue was not a tail growing from his neck, Firempong, still dissatisfied, demanded that Kamp strip naked. [Pope-Hennessy 1968:33]
The stripping, later done in private, convinced the king that Kamp might be human, but even so, the king described him as “too white, like a devil” (Pope-Hennessy 1968:33).

Adams, in his account of ten voyages to Africa between 1786 and 1800, mentions that King Bowarre, the ruler of Benin, also had an interpreter, who accompanied him from the town to the capital (Adams 1822:31). It cannot be determined just how common interpreters were in the courts of African kings nor just how far back in time their presence extends. Nevertheless, references cited above indicate that they were present in the early period of the European-African slave trade and that African rulers had interpreters in their service.

Some of the interpreters were sent to Europe in the service of their kings. In 1727, the king of Dahomey sent his interpreter, Tomo, to England in the company of Captain Bullfinch Lambe, an English factor who had been captured in Jaquin. Tomo was to determine if all that the king had heard about that country was true. Tomo was to return to Africa to report his findings, but he was taken to Barbados as a slave and then sold to a Maryland slave owner (Pope-Hennessy 1968:91).

Interpreters were also important on the ships that carried the slaves from West Africa. They served many functions—calming the newly purchased slaves, giving information and commands from the captain and crew, and preventing and suppressing insurrections. Snelgrave in the early eighteenth century recounted how he kept order among the slaves, with the interpreter on his ship playing a key role:

> When we purchase grown people, I acquaint them by the interpreter, “That now they are become my property, I think fit to let them know what they are bought for, that they may be easy in their Minds: (For these poor people are generally under terrible Apprehensions upon their being bought by White Men, many being afraid that we design to eat them, which, I have been told, is a story much credited by the island Negroes;) Soon after informing them, that they are bought to till the Ground in our Country, with several other Matters; I then acquaint them, how they are to behave themselves on board, towards the white Men; that if any one abuses them, they are to complain to the Linguist, who is to inform me of it, and I will do them Justice; But if they make a Disturbance, or offer to strike a white Man, they must expect to be severely punished. [Snelgrave 1971:162–63]

Some of the African interpreters were free men who were hired to work just in that capacity. Snelgrave said “these Linguists are Natives and Freemen of the Country, whom we hire on account of their speaking good English, during the time we remain on the Coast; and they are likewise Brokers between us and the black Merchants” (1971:172).

As the slave trade grew, black interpreters became common aboard English vessels, where they translated orders and conveyed information. A mate aboard the Rainbow, which carried slaves from Benin to Saint Thomas in 1758, testified
before the Vice Admiralty Court at Charlestown that "Capt" Harrison at Benin, hired One Dick, a free Negro Man as a Linguist between him and the Slaves to proceed on the said Voyage. It was acknowledged under oath that his being onboard the Said Snow was of great Consequence to the Interest of the Voyage" (Wood 1974:174).

New slaves might be calmed by other slaves. According to Butterworth (1831:85), who wrote of his adventures that had occurred more than thirty years before, this was what happened on the Hudibras, when it was in Old Calabar waiting for the necessary number of slaves.

If there was an insurrection among the slaves on the ship, the linguists would be called to talk to the slaves and quiet them. Snelgrave noted such an occasion.

After we had secured these People, I called the linguists, and ordered them to bid the Men-Negroes between Decks to be quiet; (for there was great noise amongst them). On their being silent, I asked, "What had induced them to mutiny?" They answered, "I was a great Rogue to buy them, in order to carry them away from their own Country; and that they resolved to regain their Liberty if possible." . . . However, a few days after this, we discovered they were plotting again, and preparing to mutiny. For some of the Ringleaders proposed to one of our Linguists, If he could procure them an Ax, they would cut the Cables the ship rid by in the night; . . . This Linguist was so honest as to acquaint me with what had been proposed to him; . . . [1971:170–73]

On a ship that had no official interpreter in the beginning of the eighteenth century, one of the slaves helped to suppress the insurrection that began among the "Eboes and Koromantys." This young slave was not confined with the others.

He was the property of Mr. Jolly, and was coming to England, as a present to that gentleman's mother: as she resided in Bristol, the name of that city was given to the boy. He was made interpreter between our captain and the other slaves, and was employed to persuade them to come upon deck, two at a time, which he found great difficulty in effecting. . . . Bristol told them that the captain thought well of them; that he was sorry to find so many of them had been misled; but he was sure that they were not all bad men or wished to kill the white people. [Butterworth 1831:109–10]

After suppressing this insurrection, Bristol learned that another was to take place. The slaves were kept in three parts of the ship—the women and girls in the ait, the adult males in the fore, and the boys in the middle division. The women were to take part in the second attempt, and in order not to have to shout the details of the plot to the men, messages were sent through the boys. Bristol learned the details of the plan, including which men had knives, and told the captain. For all this service, Bristol does not seem to have gained his freedom, but was eventually sold in the Caribbean.³

The interpreters did not just translate orders and messages from the crew to
the slaves and provide information about insurrections, they also were called on
to translate other types of communication among the slaves aboard ship. In
Bonny, a surgeon on an eighteenth-century slave ship, when listening to the
songs that the Africans were singing, asked the interpreter what the songs were
about. The interpreter said that “they were lamenting the loss of their country
and friends” (Patterson 1969:253–54).

Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp, a Moravian missionary in the Danish
Virgin Islands from 1767 to 1769, described how interpreters could be trained
when there were no official interpreters on board the ship carrying slaves, and
the special privileges they were given to insure their loyalty:

several slaves are at the very outset instructed in the language of their masters.
Since they usually have very good memories, they can learn enough within a
short time to serve as interpreters and overseers of their fellow slaves. In order
to encourage their loyalty, they are granted certain privileges. They are not
bound with fetters and they eat their meals with sailors. [Bossard 1987:215–16]

When there was no interpreter who could communicate with the slaves, if
any slave on board spoke the language that was needed, he would be used to
communicate with the other slaves. This was the case, in the following example:

Amongst the 150 slaves who were now on board, we had some fourteen different
tribes of nations; several of whom spoke to the last purchased slave, but in a
language she did not understand. At length, some of her own nation addressed
her; and she listened with delight to a tongue as that spoken by her friends and
relations, now a long way off and perhaps severed from her for ever. [Butter-
worth 1831:85]

Almost all of the references found were to male interpreters. However, there
was a woman who served as an interpreter for Dr. Thomas Trotter, who was a
surgeon on the Brookes in 1783. One evening after the slaves were put in the
hold of the ship, there was “an howling melancholy noise, expressive of extreme
anguish.” Dr. Trotter asked the interpreter to determine the cause and “she
discovered it to be owing to their having dreamt they were in their own country,
and finding themselves when awake, in the hold of a slave ship” (Mannix and

In another account, women may have been interpreters, but they also had
some very different functions. In 1748, when John Newton was engaged in the
slave trade on the Guinea Coast, it was usually six to nine months from the time
trading began in West Africa to arrival of the ship in America. “Sometimes
‘ladies of colour’ were given such duties as interpreter, which brought them the
privilege of living temporarily with the officers or crew, instead of in the crowded
quarters where their countrywomen were penned” (Martin 1950:87).

With the exception of these two examples of female interpreters and one
example of a female slave in Nevis who trained newly arrived Africans, in all the
references that have been located the interpreters were men and the interpreting was for males. In Africa the interpreting was done for commercial purposes or in the service of the African rulers—not activities that engaged many women then. African women could not participate in these activities because of the limited opportunities they had to learn European languages and the status of women at that time. Therefore, it was usually men who were the interpreters in Africa, on the slave ships, and on Caribbean plantations.

When slaves arrived in the Caribbean, interpreters were also used. In the account of Olaudah Equiano, an eighteenth-century slave captured in what is now Nigeria, there is the following description of his arrival in Barbados in 1756:

At last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and soon to go on land where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much; and sure enough, soon after we landed, there came to us Africans of all languages. [Gates 1987: 37]

Nonverbal communication could be used for brief messages or to supplement oral communication that was not understood. An example of this is found in a description of a slave auction. One of the slaves, through pidgin English and signs, communicated that another slave

was afraid he was going to be sold to white men to be eaten; . . . I soon eased the boy’s mind by taking him into the yard, where there were some carpenters at work, and putting a hammer into his hand, made him to understand that he was to learn to build houses and work with the carpenters. [Bolingbroke 1807: 212–13]

The use of Africans as interpreters did not stop with the arrival of slaves in the Caribbean; their functions not only continued but expanded. Often they became the teachers of the newly arrived slaves. According to Genovese, established slaves taught the new slaves “the rudiments of farm work, as well as special skills, and during the early period of the regime, they taught the incoming Africans to speak English” (1976:370). He adds that from the beginning of the plantation system in the New World, the slaves taught those who came after them.

J. Graham Cruickshank, in interviews with ex-slaves in British Guiana at the beginning of the twentieth century, provided evidence of the informal way this teaching occurred. He asked a former slave who was born in Africa if he knew any English when he arrived.

“Engreesh! Whi’side me go l’arn um?”
“You know no English at all when you come to Bakra country?”
“‘T all ‘t all!”
“Who teach you when you come?”
In this case, as in others, the African learned from other slaves not in Africa but in the Caribbean.

In some situations, it was a particular slave that was given the responsibility of teaching both verbal and manual skills to the newly arrived Africans. For example, on the Pinney Plantation in Nevis in 1748, one of these was mentioned by name. "Some of the plantation slaves were known to be good tutors. There was, in particular, 'Old Mary,' who was so excellent that she could be trusted with two new negroes to season" (Pares 1950:349).

Slaves were also utilized in religious education. In 1816, a minister in Jamaica who had twenty-six thousand slaves in his parish wrote that "their knowledge of the English language is so very limited that they can derive little or no advantage from their attendance at church." He suggested letting

the young Creole slaves be taught to speak and read, and at the same time be instructed in the first principles of the Christian religion, in public schools established in different parts of the parish; and let them communicate what instruction they have received in their own way to their African brethren, to whom it is impossible for white people to make themselves understood. [Stewart 1952:93]

Interpreters were not always successful in communicating. Bryan Edwards wrote about one such occasion in his account of the Koromantyn slaves who were arrested for a bloody rebellion on his relative's plantation in Jamaica in 1760. After several of the captured slaves were brutally punished and killed, it became known that one of the captured slaves

wished to communicate an important secret to his master, my near relation; who being in St. Mary's parish, the commanding officer sent for me. I endeavoured, by means of an interpreter, to let him know I was present; but I could not understand what he said in return. I remember that he and his fellow sufferer laughed immoderately at something that occurred—I know not what. [Abrahams and Szwed 1983:67]

Both men died and the secret was never known, nor was the cause of the laughter. It may have been defiance or gallows humor. However that may be, this example indicates that one cannot assume that interpreters were always able to make communication possible. Then, as today, communication often breaks down when a mutually intelligible language is not available and an interpreter cannot understand the speaker, or, as in this case, the speaker cannot understand the interpreter. It is also possible that the captured slaves wanted to conceal information.

According to Holm, a pidgin develops when communication is needed when there is "extended contact between groups of people with no language in common" and "no group learns the language of the other group for social reasons" (1988:5). While this is the general description of the development of a pidgin, it
is also important to consider the presence of interpreters during the European exploration of the coast of Africa, in the Atlantic slave trade, and on Caribbean plantations who made communication possible not just before, but also during and after the genesis of a pidgin. The documented presence of these interpreters has implications for several areas of pidgin and creole research.

The first of these is the substrate influences of African languages on the pidgins and creoles that developed in the Caribbean. The interpreters made possible the continued use of West African languages in the Caribbean. Ship captains as well as plantation owners and overseers used the linguistic skills of Africans to communicate with other Africans. As long as slaves were brought to the Caribbean, there were new speakers of African languages, and until these slaves acquired some use of the pidgin interpreters would be required. Although the full use of African languages did not survive, these languages had influences on the pidgins and creoles that developed. The effects of substrate languages on Caribbean creoles have been discussed by Sylvain (1936), Hall (1968), Taylor (1977), and Alleyne (1980), among others, but in the Language Bioprogram Hypothesis for creole genesis as proposed by Bickerton (1984, 1988, 1991) the influence of the substrate is said to be minimal or nonexistent. The continuing use of African languages would contradict Bickerton’s assertion. When analyzing the substrate influences on pidgins and creoles that developed, the extent of the use of African languages by interpreters should be considered as a factor.

Another consideration of the effect of interpreters is on the process of creolization. Bickerton has stated that creoles are formed rapidly. In defining his use of the term creole, he said a creole is a language that “arose out of a prior pidgin which had not existed for more than a generation” (1981:4). Later he modified the time to one or two generations (Bickerton 1988:268), but the historical sources that describe the importance of African interpreters and the multiple functions they served provide evidence that African languages were used for extended periods of time in the Caribbean; thus, at least for some Africans, communication was possible in African languages and the learning of the pidgin and the creole would not have been rapid.

The presence of interpreters speaking African languages lends support to the gradualist hypothesis of creolization. Singler (1990, 1992), in discussing this view, argues against the “big bang” theory of nativization-creolization and for differences in substrate and superstrate influences in various communities. The necessity of using interpreters indicates the continued presence of African language speakers in the Caribbean and this has implications for the contributions of these languages to the pidgins and creoles that developed.

The use of interpreters in the African slave trade also provides evidence against the afo genesis of English-based Atlantic creoles. The earlier proponents of this theory were, among others, Stewart (1971), Hancock (1969, 1986, 1987), and Alleyne (1971); it has received new support from McWhorter (1995, 1997), who argues on the basis of six grammatical features shared by English-based
creoles in the Caribbean for the African origin of Atlantic-English-based creoles. However, this theory does not consider the use of interpreters in the African slave trade. If, indeed, as proposed by McWhorter, these creoles did have their origins in a single English-based pidgin in Africa, how can the extensive use of interpreters be accounted for? Bickerton points out that "if any kind of contact English had been spoken on the Slave Coast, English speakers would not have had to rely on interpreters" (1976:370). The genesis of English-based Atlantic creoles is another aspect of pidgin and creole studies to which the roles of interpreters are relevant.

With the exception of the account written by Equiano, all of the data in the discussion above are from the writings of Europeans and Americans. Many of the West African languages at the time of the Atlantic slave trade had limited writing systems or none at all. Slaves that could write were usually noted as exceptions, especially in the early plantation period. Historical accounts by Africans would provide new perspectives, but not necessarily contradictory evidence. However, if such accounts had been written and survived, they would no doubt give more emphasis to the linguistic skills of the interpreters and the brutal treatment they received. What the available accounts indicate is that members of the groups with the power, the Europeans and Americans, did not feel obliged to learn the languages of the people they believed to be inferior. However, these "inferior" people had important language skills. Although the history of these contact situations is not from the African perspective, the European and American writers have provided evidence of the language skills of the Africans, both slave and free, and the many roles they played in making communication possible in the exploration of West Africa, in the slave trade, and in Caribbean creole communities.

Notes

1. Most of the data that form the basis of this study are from British expeditions and slave trading. Examining sources in French, Dutch, and other languages is a task for future research.

2. Carnes published the account of his voyage to West Africa in 1852 but did not state the exact time it took place, merely stating that he left Boston in "18—" (1969:1).

3. No evidence has been found to indicate that the interpreters joined in the insurrections or sided with the African slaves. There may have been instances when they did, but this was not known to the Europeans who wrote the accounts of the period. If the surviving accounts were written by the African slaves, a different perspective would be available.

4. In at least one community, Old Calabar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Efik women were not given opportunities to learn the pidgin English used there because it was not considered appropriate. Since the women could not learn the pidgin, they could not engage in business activities with the British. Women were excluded from this activity as they were from many others at that time (Fayer 1982:35–37).
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