The Texas Symposium on Classifying Contact Varieties

January 15–16, 2026
The University of Texas at Austin
Harry Ransom Center, Tom Lea Room (HRC 3.206)

Organizing Committee: Hans C. Boas (chair), Lars Hinrichs, Marc Pierce

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1. Background

Over the past few years, Hans C. Boas and Marc Pierce have been presenting papers comparing the structural features of Texas German with those of Unserdeutsch ("Rabaul Creole German"). Both German contact varieties developed in different parts of the world during the second half of the 19th century, but under radically different socio-historical circumstances. Despite these differences, Boas and Pierce find a significant number of structural parallels between the two contact varieties, including: (1) elimination of marked sounds, (2) simplification of consonant clusters, (3) loss of gender and case distinctions, and (4) absence of copula verbs.

The comparison of the structural features of Texas German and Unserdeutsch led Boas and Pierce (2024) to delve deeper into the literature on creoles, especially with respect to how different colleagues classify contact varieties in different ways. For example, Markey (1982:199) arrives at a list of features "that is merely an inventory of salient syntactic and morpho-syntactic surface realizations (…)." His list includes 11 features to determine the creole status of Afrikaans, including lack of nominal gender, SVO order, lack of inflectional passives, and three tense–aspect markers. In contrast, Bickerton (1984) proposes a list of 12 features as "diagnostics" for an ideal creole, including movement of constituents and use/distribution of adjectives, questions, negation, and definite articles.

Other proposals such as the Anti-Exceptionalist Position (DeGraff 2001), the Feature Pool Hypothesis (Mufwene 2001), the Creole Prototype Theory (McWhorter 2005), and Trudgill's (2011) sociolinguistic typology consider different types of classification criteria. While Bickerton and McWhorter argue for creoles as a distinct typological class with identifiable structural features (with the exact list of features under debate), Mufwene and DeGraff argue that creoles are products of normal language contact and change processes, with no features that uniquely define them as exceptional. Trudgill (2011) considers a mix of synchronic and diachronic criteria for classifying contact varieties.

There is little agreement about which exact types and numbers of structural features should be used to classify a contact variety as a creole rather than another type of contact variety. If one looked at structural features alone, one could perhaps be led to argue that Texas German is creole-like because it has so many structural features in common with Unserdeutsch, even though the socio-historical backgrounds of the two varieties are drastically different.

2. Goals of the symposium

This symposium is intended to spark a scholarly discussion between colleagues about the different ways of classifying contact varieties. Each presentation should ideally present a set of data from a contact variety (or multiple contact varieties) and discuss how that contact variety should be classified and why. Ideally, the data to be discussed should be accessible in digital (online) format or distributed as a handout, preferably before the symposium as a PDF to be sent to all participants. If the presenter thinks that there are multiple ways of classifying the contact variety under discussion, then the pros and cons of the different classification approaches should be mentioned.

Each presentation should, if possible, address the following questions in some (short or long) form:

1. Given the broad variety of language contact situations around the world, how could one develop a system for classifying contact varieties?

2. In developing such a system, how do we establish an empirical methodology for identifying relevant structural features that can be used to classify contact varieties as more or less creole-like?

3. How many structural features do we need for such a classification system, and why?

4. Are some structural features (e.g. from phonology or morphology) more relevant or important than others (e.g. syntax)?

5. Given the growing number of online corpora of contact varieties, how can digital corpus data be employed for a systematic analysis and comparison of different contact varieties, thereby leading to some answers to the four questions above?

6. What role should non-structural aspects play in the classification of contact varieties?

3. Organization

The symposium begins in the Harry Ransom Center on the UT campus in the afternoon of Thursday, January 15, 2026, with a session of three presentations and a roundtable discussion, followed by dinner. On Friday, January 16, we will start in the morning, have four presentations and several roundtable discussions throughout the day (with a lunch break), and a dinner. Each presentation is 30 minutes long, followed by 15 minutes of Q&A.

4. Confirmed participants

- **Hans C. Boas** (The University of Texas at Austin)
- **Glenn Gilbert** (Southern Illinois University Carbondale)
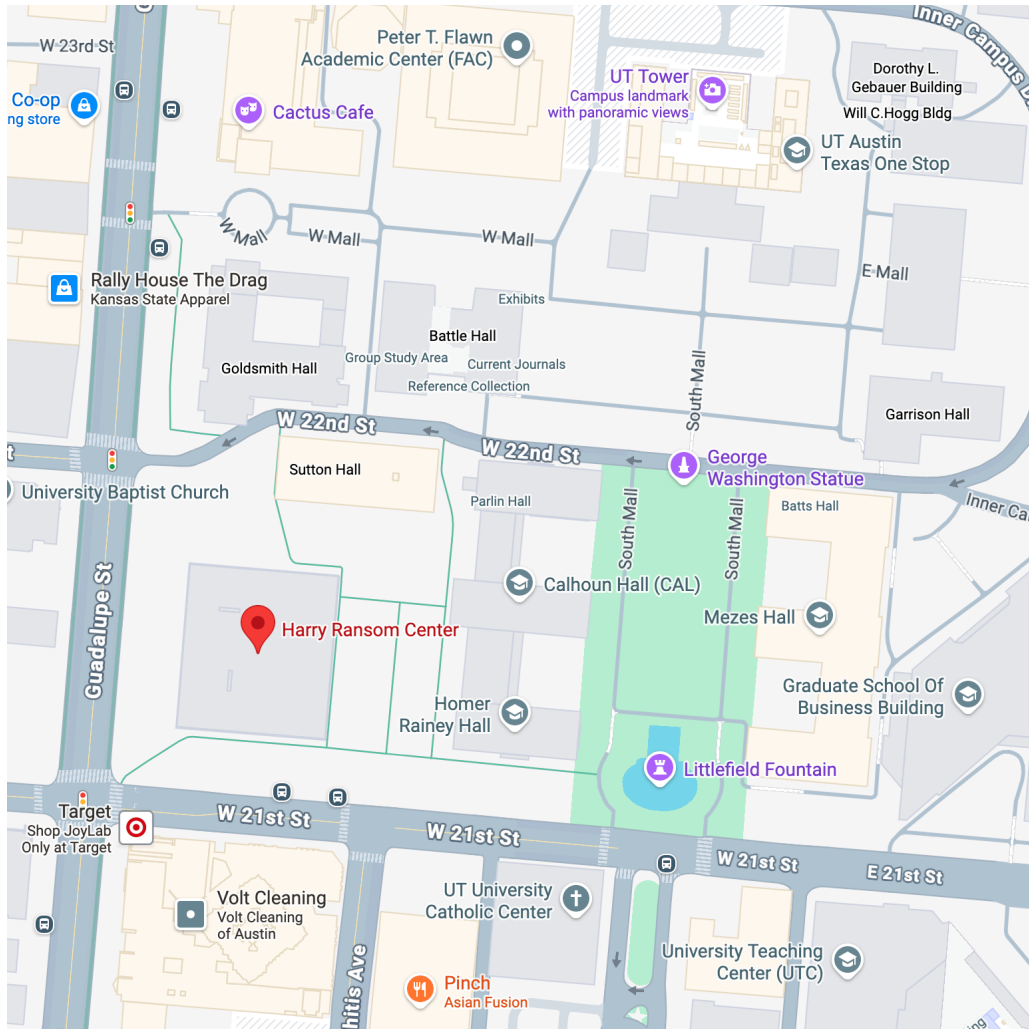- **Ian Hancock** (The University of Texas at Austin)

- **Lars Hinrichs** (The University of Texas at Austin)

- **Siegwalt Lindenfelser** (Leibniz Institute for the German Language, Mannheim)

- **John McWhorter** (Columbia University)

- **Marc Pierce** (The University of Texas at Austin)

- **Paul T. Roberge** (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

References

Bickerton, D. 1984. The language bioprogram hypothesis. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 7:173–188.

Boas, H. C., & M. Pierce. 2024. Evaluating the (Possible) Creole Status of Texas German. Presentation at the Fourth AMC Symposium: Contact and Language Change, University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

DeGraff, M. 2001. Morphology in creole genesis: Linguistics and ideology. In M. Kenstowicz (ed.), *Ken Hale: A life in language*, 53–121. MIT Press.

Markey, T. L. 1982. Afrikaans: Creole or non-creole? *Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik* 49:169–207.

McWhorter, J. 2005. *Defining creole.* Oxford University Press.

Mufwene, S. 2001. *The ecology of language evolution.* Cambridge University Press.

Trudgill, P. 2011. *Sociolinguistic typology.* Oxford University Press.

Location

The symposium will take place in the Harry Ransom Center on the corner of 21st Street and Guadalupe Street, in the Tom Lea Room (HRC 3.206). To get to the Tom Lea Room, take the main entrance to the HRC, turn left, and take the elevator up to the third floor. Exit the elevator and turn right; the Tom Lea Room is down the hall on the right-hand side.

Schedule – Day 1

The Texas Symposium on Classifying Contact Varieties
Location: Tom Lea Room, Harry Ransom Center, HRC 3.206

Thursday, January 15, 2026

Time	Speaker and affiliation	Title
1:00–1:30	Hans C. Boas & Marc Pierce (The University of Texas at Austin)	Welcome and Introduction
1:30–2:15	Glenn Gilbert (Southern Illinois University Carbondale)	The "Speed-Up" Nature of Language Contact
2:15–2:45	—	Coffee
2:45–3:30	Ian Hancock (The University of Texas at Austin)	Creolization: Instant or Gradual?
3:30–4:15	John McWhorter (Columbia University)	The Radically Isolating Languages of Flores: A Challenge to Diachronic Theory
4:15–4:45	—	Roundtable Discussion

Schedule – Day 2

The Texas Symposium on Classifying Contact Varieties
Location: Tom Lea Room, Harry Ransom Center, HRC 3.206

Friday, January 16, 2026

Time	Speaker and affiliation	Title
9:00–9:45	Paul T. Roberge (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)	Language Profiling Within a Sane Creology
9:45–10:30	Lars Hinrichs (The University of Texas at Austin)	Feature Pools and Social Ecologies: Classifying Toronto Jamaican Speech Between Ethnolect, Multiethnolect, and Non-Creole Contact Variety
10:30–11:00	—	Coffee Break
11:00–11:45	—	Roundtable Discussion

11:45–12:30	Siegwalt Lindenfelser (Leibniz Institute for the German Language, Mannheim)	On the Linguistic Classification of Unserdeutsch (Rabaul Creole German)
12:30–2:00	—	Lunch Break
2:00–2:45	Hans C. Boas & Marc Pierce (The University of Texas at Austin)	Evaluating the (Possible) Creole Status of Texas German
2:45–3:30	—	Roundtable Discussion
3:30–4:00	—	Coffee Break
4:00–4:30	—	Roundtable Discussion

Abstracts

The "Speed-Up" Nature of Language Contact

Glenn Gilbert
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Since 1961, this work in linguistics has been guided by the scientific method in the larger sense. Linguistics is essentially a social science, akin to sociology and anthropology. Hans Boas' background discussion for this symposium mentions various proposals for identifying creole languages based on their evolution and structure. Attractive as Bickerton's diagnostic features have always been, any feature list only deals with tendencies and cannot be taken as a litmus test for "creolicity."

Rapid change resulting from intense language contact involving groups of people is viewed as an acceleration of the direction of change that languages are undergoing anyway. It is a vision of the future of a language that can be experienced today, a kind of linguistic time travel. This contrasts with Bickerton's notion that creoles give a glimpse of language long ago, at the beginnings of human language.

Creolization: Instant or Gradual?

Ian Hancock
The University of Texas at Austin

The goal of this symposium is to examine different ways to classify language contact. The existence of immigrant German in Central Texas, and what has happened to it since the mid-1800s, is what sparked the decision to convene this meeting.

Texas has contact varieties of many different languages, including two barely surviving creoles and a now-extinct pidgin, and this presentation focuses on one particular creole and the contact that

created it. Whether contact between just two languages, or between several dialects of the same language, can lead to creolization is debatable and suggests that it may be a matter of degree.

Three central questions in the study of creolization are: (1) what constitutes creolization in the first place; (2) what social conditions are necessary for it to happen; and (3) whether the creolization process is instantaneous or gradual. The presentation examines one English-lexifier creole, Krio, spoken in the Gambia and Sierra Leone, with a historical link to a community in west Texas.

The Radically Isolating Languages of Flores: A Challenge to Diachronic Theory

John McWhorter
Columbia University

The languages of central Flores are all but devoid of affixation, which is atypical for Austronesian languages, including closely related languages elsewhere on the island and in nearby regions. A traditional approach attributes this analyticity to grammar-internal drift, involving stress, analogy, and reanalysis.

This presentation argues that there is strong evidence that these languages underwent heavy second-language acquisition by adults in the relatively recent past, most likely by male invaders from another island. The evidence includes phenomena familiar from creolization theory and a cross-linguistic approach to analyticity and its causes.

Language Profiling Within a Sane Creology

Paul T. Roberge
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Anyone who writes about creole languages and creolization has to cope with a terminological and conceptual minefield. A tripwire lies in the aim of sparking a scholarly discussion about different ways of classifying contact varieties.

The presentation questions whether *contact variety* should be equated with *contact language* and examines definitions that restrict contact languages to new media of communication arising over a relatively short time. Prototypical contact languages include pidgins, creoles, and bilingual mixed languages, with multiethnolects potentially forming a fourth class.

The study proceeds from the premise that there are no natural classes of languages and that boundaries are largely arbitrary, though useful for disciplinary coherence if grounded in clear criteria. There is probably no definition of *creole language* that will satisfy all scholars, and there are no features that are both unique to creoles and universal among them.

This raises the risk of either accepting fuzzy labels or proliferating categories such as semicreole, creoloid, intermediate creole, and others. An alternative is to deny a separate category of *creole* and treat creoles like any other language, though the implications for pidgins remain unclear. The study

supports the view that the range of languages considered in creole studies should be broadened and that longitudinal development and socio-historical data should be privileged.

Feature Pools and Social Ecologies: Classifying Toronto Jamaican Speech between Ethnolect, Multiethnolect, and Non-Creole Contact Variety

Lars Hinrichs
The University of Texas at Austin

This paper argues that Toronto Jamaican Speech (TJS) exemplifies how diasporic contact varieties in large Western cities challenge and refine existing models for contact variety classification. It is based on analyses presented in a forthcoming book by Hinrichs.

Drawing on Mufwene's feature pool framework (2001), TJS is situated at the intersection of two socially defined categories, ethnolect and multiethnolect, with Jamaican Creole as a tributary to both the Toronto Jamaican ethnolect and emergent Multicultural Toronto English. Social criteria such as age, family background, and migration history distinguish ethnolectal from multiethnolectal speakers, while structural criteria address whether TJS should be treated as creole, dialect, creoloid, or koine through the traceability of features to specific input varieties.

The analysis shows that creole status is excluded on socio-historical grounds, including the absence of slavery and the lack of mutual unintelligibility among adult groups. It argues that social and structural classification must be integrated.

On the Linguistic Classification of Unserdeutsch (Rabaul Creole German)

Siegwalt Lindenfelser
Leibniz Institute for the German Language, Mannheim

This paper discusses the linguistic classification of the German-based contact variety Unserdeutsch (Rabaul Creole German) as a creole language by comparing it with various socio-historical and structural creole features proposed in the literature. It distinguishes Unserdeutsch from other types of contact varieties, such as mixed languages and so-called language island dialects, and considers which subtype of creole it represents.

The paper highlights challenges in determining which features are particularly important for classification, including the difficulty of assigning binary values to highly variable language systems and of interpreting certain synchronically observable structural features. Unserdeutsch originated at a mission station in Papua New Guinea during the German colonial period and is now critically endangered, with data coming primarily from the Unserdeutsch corpus available online via the Database for Spoken German (DGD) since 2024.

Evaluating the (Possible) Creole Status of Texas German

Hans C. Boas & Marc Pierce
The University of Texas at Austin

Texas German (TxG), a set of varieties descended from the dialects brought to Texas in the 19th century by German-speaking immigrants, has been heavily influenced by English. The effects of this contact are visible in all domains of TxG, including phonology and syntax, although language contact is not always the sole factor behind these changes.

The effects of contact are so far-reaching that it could be argued that TxG is a creole, or at least a semicreole, yet this possibility has not yet been examined in detail in the literature. This presentation evaluates arguments for and against this classification.

The case for TxG as a creole rests on striking parallels with Unserdeutsch (Rabaul Creole German), the one indisputable German-based creole that has been documented. Both TxG and Unserdeutsch have largely eliminated marked phonological structures such as front rounded vowels, lexicalized *for* as a complementizer, and adopted a consistent SVO word order.

However, other German dialects show similar developments, suggesting that the case against TxG as a creole is more compelling. First, it is difficult to define *creole* precisely, so TxG cannot be labeled a creole solely on the basis of its resemblance to Unserdeutsch. Second, although English influence has increased considerably in the past six decades, the core of TxG remains a standard-near variety of German. Third, some similarities between TxG and Unserdeutsch can be attributed to factors such as the impending death of TxG, making it largely redundant to invoke creolization. The presentation concludes that TxG is best treated as a contact variety of German, in line with varieties such as Kiezdeutsch.