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Pidgins, creoles, and the creation of language

To make progress in the scientific study of the origin of language in *Homo sapiens* and its subsequent development, linguists have sought to identify phenomena observable in (or deducible from) actual instantiations of language that offer windows (in the sense of Botha 2006) with a view on the remote past. Situations in which full modern language has been disrupted are thought to preserve properties and/or processes that are the most deeply entrenched in evolutionary terms. The survival of certain features—and not others (such as the details of phonology, phrase structure, and especially inflectional morphology)—in “degraded” forms of language may serve as evidence for their “evolutionarily more primitive character” (Jackendoff 1999:276). The more rudimentary a variety, the greater its window potential should be.

The familiar view is that early-stage pidgins mirror an antecedent protolanguage, which designates a form of communication containing arbitrary, meaningful symbols but lacks any kind of syntactic structure (Bickerton 1990:122–26, Jackendoff 2003:235). These restricted codes are what some linguists would prefer to call *jargons*, which are ad hoc, unstable, *individual* solutions to the problem of interethnic communication. Conceptualization of an asyntactic protolanguage along the lines of modern jargons seems reasonable and could even be correct. But such a window on language evolution would be grounded in a phenomenon that is actually quite distinct from stable pidgins, which are *communal* solutions to the problem of intergroup communication, are developmentally more advanced, and have socially accepted linguistic norms. The differential treatment of the Basic Variety (Klein and Perdue 1997) and jargons is unwarranted. Both variety types represent a kind of minimal pragmatic response to communicative exigencies upon initiation of interlingual contact.

Of probative value, too, are circumstances in which modern speakers have created a language or part of a language *ex nihilo*, availing themselves only of certain minimal requirements for linguistic development (cf. Comrie 2000). These situations include—albeit controversially—the formation of creoles, which have conventionally been understood as the creations of children who received pidgins as their primarily linguistic data. However, current theory has distanced itself from the idea that creoles are nativized pidgins, and there is, in fact, no definition of *creole* that is acceptable to all linguists who study these languages.

The “creativist” or “constructive” approach adopted here rejects entirely the propositions that (i) each pidgin and (subsequently)/or creole can be regarded as a restructured form of a preexisting language and/or the product of a special kind of second-language acquisition, and (ii) that pidginization involves the actual “stripping” of a target or lexical-source language (*pace* Heine and Kuteva 2007: ch. 4). Moreover, the conventional distinction between pidgins and creoles based on whether they are the first language of some of their speakers serves no useful purpose.

The essence of pidgin formation is language construction. Of central interest is the instantiation of pidgin structures that are not selected from pre-existing “input materials” but reflect language-independent solutions to the problem of intergroup communication. This type of linguistic creation occurs during tertiary hybridization, when a lexifier language is socially remote, and the linguistic milieu is highly diverse. The more different the areal linguistic background is, the less likely is substratum influence, and the more speakers rely on universal

strategies.

The bridge theory licensing the application of inferences from the formation of pidgins to the structural elaboration of protolanguage proceeds from the observation that “the selection pressures driving evolution from one stage to the next, can be related to the increasing complexity of proto-human society” (Johansson 2005:239). If this assertion is defensible, then human language commenced with the emergence of more or less discrete communication systems among and within small groups between which there was little contact at the outset. It is the establishment of cross-group communication networks that triggered the structural elaboration of linguistic systems commensurate with the emergence of new communicative domains among our hominid ancestors. As with pidgin formation, the negotiation of these systems implies the creation of and competition among linguistic features, which were selected and grouped together according to their communicative efficacy and social functions.

References

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