

The Formation of Pidgin Languages

This essay will attempt to shed light on formation and development of pidgin languages. Several theories exist concerning the origin and evolution of pidgins, some of which are almost diametrically opposed to each other. We can roughly distinguish between two main types of theories: the monogenetic approach, according to which all pidgin languages are based upon a single common ancestor, and the polygenetic approach, which assumes that different pidgins developed independently from each other. In the first part of the essay I shall give an account of the monogenetic approach and its implications, its shortcomings and merits. The second part will deal with the polygenetic approach and its different facets, whereas the third part will concentrate on the different stages of pidginisation as well as on several socio-linguistic factors which play a role in the development of a pidgin. In the last part I will conclude that whereas most of the different approaches which have been discussed have some validity insofar that they draw our attention to specific aspects of pidginisation, none of them is entirely satisfactory and that some questions relating to pidgin formation remain unresolved.

What is striking about pidgin languages is that they all seem to share certain common features, such as a specific word order and morphological simplification. One way of accounting for this similarities is to postulate a common ancestor upon which today's pidgins are based. Early theorists believed that the sailors' lingua franca was passed on to Africans, Asians, Polynesians, etc. and that this "nautical jargon" provided a nucleus for pidgins, which

then were expanded according to the model of the learners' mother tongue (Todd 1990). Others argue that all European-language-based pidgins and creoles derive from a fifteenth-century Portuguese pidgin with African substratum languages (Todd 1990; Hall 1966). These pidgins, in turn, might be considered to have emerged from the Lingua Franca which was used in the Mediterranean region during the Middle Ages (Adler 1977; Holm 1988). The common origin would account for the grammatical similarities between different pidgins, while their differences, especially with regard to their vocabularies, are explained by the theory of relexification, according to which different pidgins evolved through borrowings of vocabulary items from different superstratum languages (Foley 1988; Hall 1966).

While the Nautical Jargon theory draws our attention to the fact that some similarities between pidgin languages in different parts of the world can be explained by the influence of sailors, the relexification theory points to the importance of word borrowings in the development of pidgins and creoles (Mühlhäusler 1986). However, monogenetic theories generally fail to address the question as to how a proto-pidgin came into existence in the first place and why this process is to be considered as unique. As Todd (1990) points out, there are pidgins which are entirely based on non-European languages (e.g. Ewondo Populaire and Hiri Motu), which none the less seem to share certain characteristics with European-based pidgins. This evidence shows the limitations of the monogenetic theory in accounting for similarities between pidgins. It is however important to take into consideration both "monogenetic" elements (i.e. the notion of a common origin of certain pidgins) and the phenomenon of relexification when it comes to analysing the common features of pidgins or when an attempt is made to classify pidgin and creole languages. For some similarities may be due to different pidgins being historically related to each other. As Hymes points out "non-European-based pidgins are very different in structure from the European-based, much more complex and lacking even the typological features common to the European-based pidgins (Hymes 1971, p.

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Advocates of the polygenetic approach have argued that similarities existing among the world's pidgins and creoles can be accounted for by acknowledging that these languages all derive from Indo-European stock and that, with regard to the Atlantic varieties, the majority of the speakers share 'a common West African substratum' and had to come to terms with similar physical and social conditions (Todd 1990). However, this explanation fails to take into account pidgins based on non-European languages. Furthermore, as Holm (1988) points out, the existence of 'a common West African substratum' is questionable, and the differences between the African languages involved in the pidginisation process are considerable. Thus, there is a need of further explanation regarding the observed similarities among pidgins.

The 'Foreigner Talk' or 'Baby Talk' theory attempts to explain the morphological simplifications of pidgins by pointing at the fact that a different register is used to address foreigners (as well as babies). However, as Mühlhäusler notes, "the importance of foreigner talk in pidgin formation appears to be restricted to relatively early stages of development". Moreover, considerably inconsistent, "foreigner talk tends to be a mixture of cultural conventions and genuine natural intuitions on language simplification" (Mühlhäusler 1986, p. 106). Therefore, we would have to expect at least some variation in foreigner talk influence. One could, however, argue that there are universal patterns of linguistic behaviour involved, the influence of which is much greater than that of cultural particularities.

Bickerton (1981) goes even so far as to postulate a universal bioprogram which creole speakers of early generations draw upon. Holding only children capable of having recourse to this bioprogram, his theory suggests that universal features are mainly to be expected not in pidgins, but in creoles. Mühlhäusler, however, notes that "it certainly seems

that adults have retained the capacity to develop consistent grammatical structures out of rather inconsistent input", thus calling into question the "critical threshold model" applied by Bickerton (Mühlhäusler 1986, p. 164). Under the condition that it is accessible also to adults, the bioprogram could be invoked to account for similarities not only among creoles, but also among pidgins. According to Foley, it plays even a bigger role at the pidgin stage: "there are no great differences in the Tok Pisin of expanded pidgin speakers and creole speakers. There are, however, a few interesting innovations. [...] These changes result in an increase in the opacity in the grammar. [...] These facts would seem to call into question Bickerton's claims that children acquiring a creole always arrive at the most 'natural' grammar, determined largely by the bioprogram" (Foley 1988, p. 180).

Calling into question the importance of a postulated proto-language, one could argue that universal external factors (e.g. child - adult relationship) as well as innate patterns of psychological development lead to similarities in the process of language acquisition by children throughout the world. As Todd points out, "the stages in the development of language seem to be largely unaffected by cultural differences. Children, of all races, first begin to babble, then to acquire the intonational patterns of their speech community, to produce individual words and then short combinations of words" (Todd 1990, p. 41). Analogically, we could postulate a universal propensity to simplify one's language in cases of communicational difficulties (e.g. when talking to foreigners or small children). If we assume that for this kind of simplification people have recourse to earlier stages of their own language acquisition, this would explain for at least some of the similarities among pidgins. The question, however, remains open, as to what role genetically determined factors play both in language acquisition and pidgin formation.

In order to tackle the question of how the different processes we have looked at are

involved in the pidginisation process, we have to analyse the formation process of pidgins. Mühlhäusler (1986) distinguishes four stages of pidgin development: jargon, stable pidgin, expanded pidgin and creole. A jargon is "reverentially impoverished, has little grammatical integrity – often just a vocabulary with grammatical rules drawn from the speaker's native language – and shows high variation from speaker to speaker" (Foley 1988, pp. 166f). We can assume that in this stage spontaneous simplification plays a major role. It is also to expect that at the same time, through this simplification with view to better understanding, a common core crystallises on the basis of which the future pidgin develops. Hall notes that a pidgin language is generally reduced "in the direction of whatever features are common to the languages of all those using the pidgin, for mutual ease in use and comprehensibility, thus arriving at a kind of greatest common denominator" (Hall 1966, p. 25). The unstable jargon, based on the greatest common denominator between two languages, however, might not be sufficient for the purpose of the users of the pidgin, which makes it necessary to innovate and to establish a coherent grammatical structure, possibly drawing upon universal structures (Mühlhäusler 1986, p. 148). This explains for the structural differences between stabilised pidgins and their source languages. The degree of simplification and the importance of the recourse to universal patterns depends on the extent of the "common core". This is illustrated by the fact that "Police Motu exists in two forms, one more simplified and less Motu-like than the other. The more complex, more Motu-like form is spoken by native speakers of Austronesian languages closely related to Motu, while the simpler form is used by speakers of Papuan languages unrelated to Motu" (Foley 1988, p. 172). A stable pidgin, being extremely useful in inter-group communication, can be extended and utilised outside the range of its original use. If such a pidgin acquires its own native speakers it is called a creole. Nativisation, however, is only of secondary importance for the extension of a pidgin: what counts is its "status as a *primary* language (functionally) in a community" (Hymes 1971, p.

79), which will lead speakers to increase its indexicality by deviating from natural grammar (Mühlhäusler 1986). The end product of the pidginisation or creolisation process is rather similar to established languages. As Hall notes, there is "no structural criteria which, in themselves, will identify a creole as such, in the absence of historical evidence" (Hall 1966, pp. 122f), and Adler (1977) regards it even as possible that all languages have gone through a pidginisation process at some point of their history.

It appears that social circumstances play a major role in the development of pidgins. Some authors have suggested that it is necessary for the development of a pidgin that there is a relationship of dominance between the languages involved (Foley 1988; Hymes 1971). Adler, however, argues that a pidgin can also arise, "when traders of two linguistic groups meet and when each of these groups consider themselves at least equal, if not superior, to the other group" (Adler 1977, p 127). The critical question seems to be whether one group will learn the other group's language. This can be prevented by social circumstances (e.g. European masters trying to prevent slaves from acquiring their own language) or merely by a large number of language groups being involved in the process of pidginisation. Yet, Foley (1988) holds that the participation of several groups in the pidginisation process is not a necessary feature, and his account of Tok Pisin developing through its use within villages among people speaking the same native language suggests that the social status of the languages in question is of much greater importance than their number.

We have seen that most theories concerning the development of pidgin languages fail to account by themselves for all the phenomena involved in the process, regardless whether they invoke a "nautical jargon", "relexification", a "common West-African substratum", "baby talk", a "bioprogram", or "universal external factors". However, they all have some relevance for the analysis of the process of pidginisation and should therefore not be dismissed

heedlessly. We have seen how the different aspects of pidginisation theory are related to each other and that they can be understood as parts of a more comprehensive approach. Some questions, however, remain unresolved – particularly those regarding the influence of universal patterns as well as the relative importance of the different factors involved in pidginisation.

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