A Brief Study of Pidgins and Creoles

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Abstract: This article explores about the earlier misconceptions about the Pidgin and Creole languages and what actually a Pidgin or a Creole is and also how new languages like them are formed. Usually the interaction between the European colonizers or traders and colonists or immigrant laborers create socio linguistic environment for the formulation of a Pidgin or a Creole. As the Pidgins are created out of the bare necessity for communication and they are very unstable by nature it is almost impossible to define them. However Creoles are stable and acquired as first language by native speakers. The origin, interrelation and differences between Pidgins and Creoles are briefly discussed here.

Keywords: Pidgin, Creole, Language, Communication, Grammar, Interlanguage, Communication.

There have been various studies of Pidgin and Creole languages, some as early as the Nineteenth Century. However, Pidgin and Creole studies as an academic discipline was not established until the 1950s and early 1960s. Part of the reason for the late establishment of Pidgin and Creoles as a legitimate field of study is the disparaging attitude that not only non linguists, but also linguists have toward the status of Pidgin and Creoles as languages. What earlier generations thought of Pidgin languages is all too clear from their very names: ‘broken language, bastard language, nigger French, isikula (coolicie language)’, John Holm (2000). This contempt often stemmed in part from the feeling that Pidgins were corruptions of ‘higher’, usually European languages. The speakers of such languages were often perceived as semi-savages and those speakers of Creole languages who had access to education were duly convinced that their speech was wrong, and they often tried to make it more similar to the standard. Even linguists thought of Pidgin languages as ‘aberrant’, defective and inappropriate for any serious study. Only after 1950s and 1960s, linguists realized that Pidgins are not wrong versions of other languages but rather ‘new’ languages. In academic circles, especially in recent years, attempts have been made to remove the stigma so frequently attached to them, by pointing out that there is no such thing as a primitive and inferior language. The following discussion will unravel the idea gradually.

The extremes to which social factors can go in shaping the transmission and use of language can be found in the process of pidginization and creolization. Pidgin is a ‘lingua franca’ spoken as a second language. But Creole is a first language which has developed out of an original Pidgin and expanded its resources and functions by becoming the mother tongue of a speech community. Pidgins are evolving language systems like interlanguages arising as a medium of communication between speakers of different languages, characterized by grammatical structures and lexical contents originating in different sources (by unintelligibility to the speakers of the source languages and by stability). The main characteristic of a Pidgin is that it has been stripped off everything but the bare essentials necessary for communication. However, if all the individuals in a Pidgin speaking community begin to reduce and simplify their language on an ad hoc basis that will result into no Pidgin language but only to a jargon with no fixed norms. A Pidgin is more stable and has certain norms of meaning pronunciation and grammar although there is still variation resulting from the transfer of features from the speaker’s first languages. Some of its characteristics are: limited vocabulary; elimination of many grammatical devices such as number and gender; lack of inflectional and derivational morphemes; lack of verbal inflection; loss of prepositions and indicators of time, aspect and mood; lack of locative prepositions and plural indicator; movement rules among others. Typically it is a contact language between two groups, neither of which speaks it as a first language and one of which is socially dominant. The purposes of communication concern mainly business matters and so does the vocabulary shaped at the beginning of the language contact phenomenon. Later on when more contexts of contact appear, new words are added to the newly created language in order for it to serve new discourses. Thus, we can say that the purpose of contact delineates the scope of new word formation. Holm, in his definition of a Pidgin, states that in fact no one learns this contact language for social purposes. It is invented whenever a new range of expressions are to fulfill current needs of communication. It is extremely difficult to define a Pidgin because each definition leaves some lacunas behind. Still here I present two most recent definitions of two most famous researchers in this field.

Terry Crowley (2008) writes of the term Pidgin as being “fraught” and states that:

Languages designated as Pidgins range from extremely rudimentary short-term contact languages used only in a very narrow range of contexts to structurally and lexically far more expanded varieties which have been in use over an extended period and for a much broader range of functions, even though in each case there may be a shared lack of native speakers.

Salikoko Mufwene:

(…) Creole and Pidgins are new language varieties which developed out of contacts between colonial non-standard varieties of a European language and several non-European languages around the Atlantic and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Pidgins typically emerged in trade colonies which developed around trade forts or along trade routes, such as on the coast of West Africa. They are reduced in structures and specialized in functions (typically trade), and initially served as non-native lingua francas to users who preserved their native vernaculars for their day-to-day interactions. (Mufwene 2008)

Almost all definitions of Pidgin languages emphasize the instability and fragility of the entire sociolinguistic system, in which the Pidgin in question functions: “[p]idgins, by their very nature, tend towards instability, both in terms of linguistic system, and in terms of their function. If they do not belong to the small group of Pidgins that become standardized, or nativized, or both, they may well disappear completely when the social need that caused them to come into existence passes” (Arends et al. 1995). Mark
Sebba (1997), when describing different classes of Pidgins, notices that those which quickly appear and disappear are Pidgins of either sporadic or one-time contact, they can never have a chance to evolve into extended Pidgins or creoles.

According to Schumann some social factors like dominance immigration, enclosure and some psychological factors like language shock, cultural shock and motivation lead to the process of pidginization. It is the process through which native speakers of two different L1s evolve a contact language so that they can both function within the same community. Grammatical and other complexities of a natural language are sacrificed for the sake of day to day communication. pidginization thus constitutes restrictions in use accompanied by reduction in form. Once a Pidgin is formed it may be ‘depidginized’ by gaining features of socially dominant languages at the expense of the Pidgin forms. Thus pidginization is the diachronic process through which a language is created, not the psychological process through which a particular individual attempts to communicate with someone else. Again though in very small number of cases a Pidgin may be caused out of the vertical level of communication in the same language speaking community between the languages of two social classes. However as David Crystal (2003) observes no Pidgin does survive a century.

A Pidgin may be an 'interlanguage' between two different language speaking communities; as a mid-point between a superstrate containing the language of socially superior or donor language (may be of colonizers or evaders as English French or Spanish) and a substrate containing the language of socially inferiors (may be of dominated Africans, West Indians or of immigrants like Puerto Ricans in America). The term interlanguage introduced by Larry Selinker (1972) refers to the independent linguistic system which in the process of second / foreign language acquisition shows specific, idiosyncratic features related to the characteristics of the native language (L1) and the target language (L2). Although the concept of interlanguage is related to the process of the second language acquisition, Selinker indirectly refers to the concept of Language Acquisition Device introduced by Noam Chomsky. This device, or a universal innate ability (later transformed as Universal Grammar) to acquire a language, allows children to construct grammatical structures based on the system of rules which derive from universal grammar (Chomsky 1965, 1981). Interlanguage can be perceived as a continuum between the poles defined by the native language (L1) and the target language (L2).

Example of Pidgin Languages:


Liberian Pidgin: This English based Pidgin is spoken extensively in Liberia as a second language

Nauruan Pidgin: Derived from the now-extinct Chinese Pidgin English and Melanesian-type Pidgin, Nauruan Pidgin English continues to be spoken in the tiny island country of Nauru in the central pacific.

Settla: Settla is a Swahili Pidgin that established to promote communication between native Swahili speakers in Kenya and Zambia and English-speaking settlers in Kenya and Zambia.

Tok Pisin: It is English based Pidgin spoken in Papua New Guinea.

There are lesser controversies on the term Creole than Pidgin. The word seems to have been derived from French ‘Creole’. It is quite closer to Portuguese ‘crioulo’ than Spanish ‘criollo’ though it goes back to Iberian meaning ‘breed, bring up, to nurse’ but the present meaning is a native to a locality or country. In the seventeenth century, it was originally used to refer to people from European countries born in the colonies. Semantically, the word Creole changed to refer to customs and languages of people in the colonies. Later it changed to language emerged of Pidgin, based on European languages like Portuguese, English, Spanish, French or Dutch. Now the term refers to any language generated out of such situation, regardless of what input language is.

A Creole is a first language which has developed out of an original Pidgin and expanded its resources and functions through becoming the mother tongue of a speech community. These Creoles are actually transformed Pidgins becoming the first language of a new generation, born in a Pidgin language environment and acquiring it as their L1. However all the linguists do not consider Pidgin as an obvious base for a Creole; Unlike a Pidgin a Creole language such as Jamaican Creole is learnt by children as their first language and one can find more mature lexical expressions, development of the idea of tenses in a Creole language which were absent in a Pidgin. A Creole develops another two important features as ‘embedding’ i.e. the use of complex clause structures and the organization of phonemes with propriety and speed. Some Pidgins like Nigerian Pidgin English, West African Pidgin can also be referred to as a Creole. The reason is that there are people who learn the Pidgin as their mother tongue so a Pidgin becomes a Creole (Wardhaugh, 2006).Creoles are developed by children that are born into a multilingual environment. It is interesting that Creoles are similar to each other than they are to any other language. It is also claimed that pidginization is second language learning with restricted input and creolization is first language learning with restricted input as well (Wardhaugh, 2006).

Pidgin has no native speakers while Creole has native speakers, the former is created by adults, but the latter is invented by children. Linguistically, Pidgin’s form and grammar is simplified and reduced, sometimes can even die out, but Creole is a stable and developed into full-fledged complete and adequate natural language. Creole often exists in post-colonial areas and it is used as a daily vernacular, while Pidgin mostly exists in colonial period (i.e. the European based Pidgins, not that we don’t have Pidgins presently, there are lot of Pidgins existing today), and some in pre-colonial time and its usage is restricted. Creole has less or elaborated grammatical structures in grammar than older languages do i.e. it can be standardized or not, but definitely more than Pidgin. It has much variation but coherent sociolinguistic norms (of evaluation/integration), has wider domains and are used more for expressive, and Pidgin is a product of incomplete second language acquisition, and it has small core vocabularies and borrowed extensively outside. Pidginization is the process of reduction while creolization is the process of expansion. To the utter contrast to Pidgin, in a Creole the substrate language provides the major contributions and instead of adopting universal features most of Creoles seem to have made a selection from their two basic contributory languages. Thereby creolization increases the complexity of Pidgins to such an extent that they gain the sophistication of full languages and take on their full range of functions.

Most of the Creoles are derived from situations where either an imported labouring and indentured servile class or colonists were living under the subjection of European rulers. So Creoles are the result not merely of linguistic process but of interplay between language and economic, social, educational and political factors deriving from what we called ‘communication strategies’. Wardhaugh (2006) points out that in contrast to Pidgins, ‘creolization involves expansion of the morphology and syntax, regularization of the phonology, deliberate increase in the number of functions in which the language is used, and development of
a rational and stable system for increasing vocabulary’. Sometimes it is very difficult to say whether a variety is a Pidgin, expanded Pidgin, or a Creole. For example, Tok Pisin is sometimes called a Creole and sometimes a Pidgin. Example of Creole Languages: Based on French: Haitian Creole, Louisiana Creole, and Mauritian Creole. Based on English: Jamaican Creole, Guyanese Creole, and Hawaiian Creole. Based on Portuguese: Papiamentu, Cape Verdean Creole.

References: