FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Pidginization theory and second language learning/acquisition

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Received 17 May 2011; accepted 15 February 2012
Available online 27 May 2012

KEYWORDS
Pidginization theory; Language acquisition; Language learning

Abstract The study discusses and evaluates the pidginization theory and shows, through various standard and extensive references, how it relates to Second/Foreign language learning. In the introductory statements, the definition and sources of pidginization are illustrated. This is followed by background studies with special reference to the authors who have explored this sociolinguistic phenomena. In the discussion section, the linguistic characteristics of the pidginization theory are minutely examined in the context of Second and/or Foreign language learning. In this section, association between some variables such as linguistic universal and simplification, which dominate the structure of pidgin languages and their pedagogic significance, are examined. Finally, in the concluding remarks it is reasonably inferred that there is an analogy between pidginization theory and the early stages of Foreign/Second language acquisition, and Creolization (i.e. end result of pidginization) and the later stages of Foreign/Second language acquisition.

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1. Introduction

Pidginization is a sociolinguistic phenomenon. It is a language that is essentially based on acculturation or contact with the target culture. Despite the fact that pidgin is not regarded as a natural language (such as English, French, Arabic, … etc.). It has a similar function, since it is employed primarily for communication purposes.

In this section, the study intends to introduce the term pidginization in its inclusive sense. At the initial stages, definitions and sources of this sociolinguistic term will be presented. This will be followed by studies related to pidginization and its relationship with language learning and/or acquisition. And then, the focus will be moved to the linguistic characteristics of pidginization.

2. Definition and sources

Pidgin has been defined as a contact language and is sometimes, called a “makeshift”, “marginal” language, or “mixed languages” (Crystal, 1987, p. 334).

Malmkjær and Anderson (2001) listed six sources for the term pidgin. Some of these sources indicated that it is a Chinese corruption of the English word “business”. It may be derived from the two Chinese characters, Pei and tsin meaning “paying money”, or from the South American Indian language, Yago, whose word for the people is ‘Pidjian’ (Malmkjær, 2001, p. 81).
Yule (1996) defined pidgin as, “...a variety of a language (e.g. English) which developed for some practical purpose, such as trading among group of people who had a lot of contact, but who did not know each other’s language” (Yule, 1996, pp. 233–234).

He also, pointed out that, “when a pidgin develops beyond its role as a trade language and becomes the first language of a social community, it is described as a Creole” (Yule, 1996, p. 234).

Similarly, Crystal (1991) stated that “pidgins are formed by two mutually unintelligible speech communities attempting to communicate, each successively approximating to the more obvious features of the other’s language” (Crystal, 1991, p. 264).

3. Review of literature

Most work on pidgin(ization) put more emphasis on the study of pidgin languages and their sociolinguistic aspects, and very little research has been conducted on how pidgin(ization) relates to second language learning and acquisition.

Yet among the well-known linguists who conducted studies related to this sociolinguistic area are: Hymes (1971), Muhlhausler (1977), Schumann (1976), Todd (1990), Valdman (1977), Anderson (1983), Bickerton (1977). Muhlhausler (1997) views pidgins as “…examples of partially targeted second-language learning and second-language creation, developing from simpler to more complex systems as communicative requirements become more demanding” (Muhlhausler, 1997, p. 6).

On the other hand, Birkerton, 1977 believes that “pidginization is second-language learning with restricted input… (it) is a process somehow distinct from other processes of language acquisition” (Birkerton, 1977, pp. 49–46).

McWhorter’s perception of pidginization is that it is “… the initial restructuring of a language by a group of learners, this entails structural reduction and substrate transfer” (McWhorter, 1995, p. 240).

Todd (1990), introduced four theories related to pidgins: the baby-talk theory, the independent parallel development theory asset, the nautical Jargon theory, and the Monogenetic Relexification theory. Some of these theories, such as, the baby-talk theory, seem to have some implication or bearing on language acquisition, and second language learning. This is supported by the fact that the “… imperfect mastery of a language…, in the child with its first language and in the grown-up with a second language learnt by imperfect methods, leads to a superficial knowledge of the most indispensable words, with total disregard of grammar” (Todd, 1990, p. 27).

In his analysis of the pidginization theories, Bell (1976), pointed out that the “‘baby-talk’ theory assures that norms of ‘foreigner talk’ become the norm of teaching, i.e. the normal problems of learning are compounded by the presentation to the learner of a deviant model by the teacher…” This theory suggests that a pidgin variety of a language consists of a ‘frozen’ or ‘fossilized’ interlanguage which has become accepted as a medium for group rather than individual use” (Bell, 1976, p. 158).

4. Linguistic characteristics of pidgin language

Unlike natural (source) languages such as English, pidgins have more simplified linguistic features. At the phonological level their phonemic inventory is more simple. The reason is that the pidgin speakers are not aware of the intricate phonemic sounds that characterize the English language. For example, “‘unusual sounds like [ʃ], [ʤ] are replaced by more common ones like[ʃ], [ʤ]” (Crabtree and Powers, 1991, p. 355).

Reduction of consonant clusters is also noticeable in pidgin languages. The clustering of a group of consonants is also oftentimes confusing for the pidgin speakers, whose knowledge of words and their sounds is quite uncomplicated and minimal. This is also attributed to the fact that “pidgins have a preference for syllable types closer to the CV type” (Crabtree and Powers, 1991, p. 355).

At the morphological and grammatical levels, the simplification in the linguistic structure of the pidgins is also clear. Pidgins are “… characterized by an absence of any complex grammatical morphology and (the presence of) a limited vocabulary. Inflectional suffixes such as –s (plural) and –’s (possessive) on nouns in standard English are rare in pidgins, while structures like tu buk (two books) and digyal pleis (‘the girl’s place’) are common. Functional morphemes often take the place of inflectional morphemes found in the source language. For example, instead of changing the form of you to your, the English-based pidgin uses a form like bilong, and changes the word order to produce phrases like buk bilong you.” (Yule, 1996, p. 234).

“…” The pronoun system of a pidgin is typically reduced as in Chinese pidgin English which has three pronouns, first, second, and third person, but no number distinctions. Most pidgin pronoun systems are not marked for gender or case” (Malmkjaer, 2001, p. 84).

When it comes to the lexicon of the pidgin, it is interesting to note here that the pidgin terminology has been conspicuously constricted. It did not evolve like the mainstream language because of the undeniable fact that it just does not possess the tools of inflexion and word-formation like them. It is also bound by its geographical limitations. Malmkjaer makes a point regarding this aspect of the language, “…The vocabulary of early pidgins was mainly based on European languages and was limited to that required for trade, administration and giving orders … any gaps in the vocabulary of a pidgin in the early stages of development, will be filled in through borrowing or circumlocution” (Malmkjaer, 2001, p. 83).

Because pidgin languages, compared to ‘ordinary’ languages, have no tense markers, inflections, articles, subordinate clauses, etc., they are regarded as ‘stripped-down’ languages. “What they are left with are universals … those characteristics shared by all languages ” (Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 77).

They are probably “examples of the result of universal principles of language acquisition” (Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 77).

Sebba (1997) made a brief yet comprehensive summary on pidgin(ization). Some of the points he listed indicate that pidgins:

- have no native speakers,
- are the result of contact between two or more languages,
- usually draw most of their vocabulary from one language (the lexifier),
- have grammars which are simplified and reduced compared with the grammars of their input languages.
- tend to have simple phonological systems
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- tend to have analytic (isolating) or agglutinating morphology
- tend to have semantically transparent relationships between words and meaning
- have small vocabularies where words cover a wide semantic range (Sebba, 1997, p. 69).

He also illustrated some observations on the features of pidgin languages, such as that the pidgins have:

- no definite or indefinite article;
- no copula to be (at least in the present tense);
- no complex sentences (e.g. sentences involving relative clauses);
- no passive forms;
- very few or no inflections for number, case, tense . etc. (Sebba, 1997, p. 39).

5. Discussion

Based on the definitions, the sources, the views, and the characteristics of pidginization theory, it seems that similarities (and/or differences) do exist between this phenomenon and the language acquisition/language learning processes. This inference is deduced by presenting references from empirical studies by noted experts on language.

First, L2 is usually acquired through a lengthy process of learning in the classroom with the help of a teacher and in a formal setting. We say this usually, because in some cases, L2 may also be acquired through social interaction with native speakers, without the use of the formal teaching setting. The result is usually a kind of L2 with little respect for grammatical rules and no knowledge of the written aspect of the language. This type of L2 remains confined in its uses to given registers and for given purposes. In this respect, this type of L2 resembles the pidgin.

Second, Creole, which in fact, is the end result of pidgin, is very much like a native language (L1) as it has native-like speakers who perpetuate the language in time and space, but without the use of a formal teaching setting. In some instances, however, Creole may exist in a written form (as is the case in the Caribbean). In short, it is a means of communication that is spoken but never taught formally, (cf. Valdman).

Third, pidgin on the other hand, is only used as a functional means of communication. It tends not to be learnt in a formal teaching setting. It is different from Creole in that it does not coincide with one speech community. Native speakers of other languages speak it, and use it only for certain given purposes and in given registers.

These differences are reflected in the way as these so-called languages are acquired.

The acquisition of the first language as well as of Creole may be safely seen within the concerns of language theories developed by the proponents of universal grammar, as well as theories propounded by nativists such as Krashen, for whom language acquisition processes make use of universal grammar and strongly rely on the generative transformational grammar. Therefore, L2 acquisition could profit from research flowing from studies on L1 and Creole acquisition, making use of the universal grammar.

On the other hand, the acquisition of pidgin would, to my mind, find little application from such studies as the processes of acquisition involved in it differ from those involved in the acquisition of L1, L2 and Creole. Factors such as the age of the speakers of pidgin (usually adults), and the purposes and register (quite limited and well defined for the speakers of pidgin) justify this view. Furthermore, pidgin is, for the most part, a form of communication which makes use of two different language sources, at least for the purposes of communication intended for a given purpose (usually speakers of a minor language finding themselves in a wider speech community having a major language, for example).

In more practical terms, commonality between pidgin system and the interlanguage system of the foreign language learner is particularly noticeable. For example deletion of verb inflections such as (-s) after a third person singular occurs among some FL learners at their early stages of learning.

Similarly, deletion of the copula among some learners of English such as the Arabs, especially beginners, occurs in subject-predicate constructions such as, ‘the car new’ for ‘the car is new’, That is, they acquire a linguistic variety similar to that of pidgin. This is probably attributed to the fact that, ‘pidginization may be a universal first stage in second language acquisition’ (Mitchell and Myles, 1998, p. 180).

The Simplification (pidginization) system, has some significant pedagogic outcomes:

First, it can reinforce avoidance of most linguistic errors.

Second, it enables FL learner to avoid complex utterances which sometimes cause negative outcomes.

Third, perhaps the pedagogic weakness of the notion of simplification is that it “… does not describe an activity of the learner” (Anderson, 1983, p. 126).

Finally, I believe Brown and Gonzo (1995) summary of Schumann’s views on pidginization in second language acquisition emphasizes the relationship between these two processes. It follows that, “… pidginization in second language acquisition can be viewed as initially resulting from cognitive constraints, and then persisting due to social and psychological constraints.” (Brown and Gonzo, 1995, p. 276).

Consequently, it can be comfortably deduced from the aforementioned hypothesis that the second language, in the formative stage of its acquisition, depicts the usage, though for the short term, of a nonmarked, simple code, resembling a pidgin. “This code would be the product of cognitive constraints engendered by a lack of knowledge of the target language. The code may reflect a regression to a set of universal primitive linguistic categories that were realized in the early stages of first language acquisition” (Brown and Gonzo, 1995, p. 276).

Though Pidgins are words strung together with little in the way of grammar, they become lingua franca for the ease and clarity of their expression and meaning. On his visit to New Guinea many years back Britain’s Prince Philip came to know to his wonderment that he was known there as “fella belong Mrs. Queen” (Parker, 2008, pp. 33–34).

Pidgin, therefore, has the potential to become a complete language. When it is introduced at an early age, the learners more often than not, inject their own invented grammar system which transforms the language into a complex system of structures. But this complex language, because of its freshness and utilitarian usages, becomes highly expressive and popular.
6. Conclusion

The preceding views and the discussion on pidginization theory considering how it relates to second and/or foreign language acquisition and learning, may lead to the following conclusions:

First, the simplicity of pidgin(ization) is a valid evidence that items of universal linguistic features can be introduced at the early stages of foreign language learning. Such approach could reinforce positive facilitation for the acquisition of more advanced linguistic items.

Because language acquisition has genetic bases, which are represented by the cognitive approach, it seems to have relevance to the pidginization theory. It seems, as Todd pointed out, that, “If it is possible to show that human beings have predetermined biological properties for acquiring language then it may well be that the capacity for linguistic simplification and accommodation – the process which produces pidgins – is also innate and universal” (Todd, 1990, p. 41).

Second, the acculturation variable in the pidginization process cannot be disregarded in the context of second language learning process. It is a significant factor responsible for reinforcing a productive language achievement level. After all, foreign language learning/acquisition cannot be highly achieved in a situation of cultural absence. That is, language cannot be learned without reference to culture.

Third, there is a noticeable analogy between pidginization and the early stages of acquisition of a foreign language, and Creolization (i.e. the end result of Pidginization) and the later stages of foreign language acquisition. That is, a language learner acquires a limited knowledge of the language at his early stages such as, simple forms, and limited vocabulary. But when he reaches a maturational level of learning his acquisition becomes more advanced, and hence his knowledge of the language rules becomes more noticeable.

Finally, despite the weaknesses and/or limitations of pidgin(ization) in terms of reduction and simplification of its linguistic features, compared to that of their input languages, it seems that pidgin has noticeable bearings on language learning and language acquisition.

Having said all, what remains considerably obvious is that, while it is understandable that Pidgin helps in the acquisition of a second language in its early stages, it cannot do so at the higher stages of language learning. At an early stage of language acquisition the cognitive process, the innate language instinct, is more at work than the highly developed linguistic faculty of mind. At a later stage of advanced language learning, rules, structures, semantic awareness, and syntactical organizations are some factors that come into play. These factors run counter to the pidginization process, and therefore, it can be of little help in the way of higher language acquisition.

References