

Re: Related languages (Re: A China–Sumer connection)

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From: Neeraj Mathur (neemathur_at_hotmail.com)

Date: 03/17/05

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"Comm" <tjsrno@spampost.com> wrote in message
news:FG9_d.10842\$oO4.3945@newsread3.news.pas.earthlink.net...

>

> "Neeraj Mathur" <neemathur@hotmail.com> wrote in message

> news:d1af19\$7ig\$1@news.ox.ac.uk...

>

> An aside – you have a beautiful name! Ok, see inside :)

Thank you very much! It's Sanskrit. 'Neeraj' means literally 'born from the water', and is the name of the lotus flower upon which the Hindu god Vishnu reclines.

>> "Comm" <tjsrno@spampost.com> wrote in message

>> news:9lLZd.9617\$oO4.4756@newsread3.news.pas.earthlink.net...

>>>

>>> "Neeraj Mathur" <neemathur@hotmail.com> wrote in message

>>> news:d164co\$i91\$1@news.ox.ac.uk...

>> I'm a bit confused here, because the definition of 'creole' that I gave,

>> which you agree with, was based entirely on grammar and structure (note

>> phrases like 'simplified languages', 'grammatical complexity').

>> Vocabulary has nothing to do with that definition of creole.

>

> Hmm, not to my ear. I hear what happens when Mexicans, Anglos, Haitians

> and Jamaicans have to work together. Not too long before they speak a

> language in everyday use that heh, no one ELSE understands. Then the

> words I used before "contact and blending" (Martin also said blending, I

> think) is more appropriate.

Yes, certainly, there is often vocabulary blending. But does that make it a pidgin or a creole? Vocabulary alone can be used to communicate very basic ideas, I'm sure, and so that might work for pidgin. But the distinction between pidgin and creole must be based on grammar.

> I think I know what you mean. Ever hear hillbillies talk? They say

> things like "uglysome," "lonesome" (means lonely, but "lonsome" is still

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- > *used by everyone), they'd us "some" instead of "ly" all the time, or a lot*
- > *of the time – even "friendlysome!" And they make words like "yorn."*

What does 'yorn' mean? Something to do with yesterday..?

- > *The speech is also highly metaphorical. It takes a while, but it's*
- > *understandable. The grammar is mutilated – unless you regard it as another*
- > *language (I do, but if I had to edit somethnig they wrote, I became a*
- > *grammar/spelling nazi). The thing with written language is that it tends*
- > *to be held in stasis by "those who ahem, Properly Speak it" – unlike*
- > *non–written language.*

You're absolutely right here. No linguist worth his salt would disagree with you. Within the speech–community of any given language, there is likely to be one or two 'prestige' dialects – to the linguist, this does not make the other dialects unworthy of study. But, as you said, all the varieties do have grammar. These grammars can be understood from a historical perspective.

- > *It's everyday speech and no, it's not regional at all! I just said to*
- > *the handyman before, when he asked me "Where you were?" I answered, "I*
- > *left out to th'store, missed ya." He's a bilingual Puerto Rican from NYC*
- > *and he had no problem understanding what I said – and I talk very fast.*
- > *He said what he was going to do to a room (which I can't quote verbatim).*
- > *I said, "ged." Normal English!*

Normal? I'm not certain. I speak English as a first language, I grew up in Toronto, and I'm sure I wouldn't have understood the exact nuances of what you meant. Heard on its own, 'I left out' would leave puzzled; in the sentence you gave, I would wonder what the particular meaning of your sentence is. It seems that it is not equivalent to 'I went to the store' or 'I was at the store'; perhaps the closest is 'I'd gone out to the store'? Certainly, in the moment and with context, I would have understood enough to go ahead with the conversation. But that doesn't mean that the sentence is grammatical in any of the versions of English that I know. The fact that it is grammatical in the English you speak is quite interesting; the fact that it seems to have a very specific semantic niche means that your grammar and lexicon are certainly complex. I'd be interested in knowing how this construction developed. I wouldn't think that it has much to do with creolization!

- > *Now, is "where you were?" a Spanish grammer thing? I don't know. He*
- > *speaks English with a NY accent, not a Spanish accent. He was born here.*
- > *I'm also phonetically spelling out the conversation here, verbatim. This*
- > *is normal interactive conversation, everyday mundane stuff.*

'Where you were' might work as a word–by–word translation from Spanish 'donde estabas', if the person thinks 'donde = where' and 'estabas = you were'. Of course in English, 'where you were' is most naturally interpreted as a relative clause; most English speakers find that in questions, wh–movement forces the verb to go in second place, and if this makes the

verb appear before its subject, it must be replaced by one of the invertible auxiliaries. What I just said is not something that teachers or parents beat into their children, and wasn't always the case; but you said yourself that you found 'what light through yonder windows breaks?' ungrammatical. (You would probably not have felt as strongly about 'What light breaks through yonder window?' or, better in keeping with the aspect rules of modern English, 'What light is breaking through yonder window?'. Now it's just the vocabulary that seems a bit odd.)

- > *I'd have to say that all English speakers would understand it. It would*
- > *only be "ungrammatical" if editing was required! The point to language is*
- > *not proper grammar that's held in stasis – – the purpose is being*
- > *understood – communication.*
- >
- > *See above what I said about normal mundane conversation. I have said in a*
- > *crowded room "eeh, cold." everyone understood me. Some said "me too."*

There are three distinctions that speakers make: 1) understanding a given utterance; 2) judging an utterance to be grammatical or not; 3) producing an utterance. These are not just things that are taught by parents or schoolteachers.

As an example, I offer you myself: I grew up in a bilingual home, where everybody spoke both Hindi and English. I learned both as first languages. However, since for all of my life I have lived in English–speaking places (England for the first four years, Canada thereafter through high school, now back in England for university), I have only ever been schooled in English. I know virtually no Hindi slang, and I don't know the sorts of constructions that Hindi–speaking kids would use that get their parents annoyed (like 'ain't' in English). I have never been taught Hindi actively, other than its alphabet, and I have never made any formal study of its grammar. Still, I can tell you when something is grammatical or not in the language. If somebody uses a plural verb with a singular noun, I feel that it is odd; if somebody fails to make the proper agreements for gender or gets the gender of a word I know wrong, I know immediately that they have made a mistake. I knew this even before I learned about linguistic theory and grammar in more general terms or from other languages I have studied. Communication is not impaired, but I can tell when something is grammatical or not.

Here's another example. Suppose you were on a tour bus, and the guide points to an artifact and says, 'This bridge has been built two hundred years ago.' I am certain that you understood him completely. On the other hand, you would almost certainly feel that something was odd about the sentence and you wouldn't feel it to be grammatical. That is because you have an inherent notion of a distinction between a preterite and a present perfect, and you know that only the preterite is appropriate with adverbial phrases that fix a reference point in the past. This isn't something you've necessarily studied, and you may not be able to put it in those words, but you would still feel that the sentence is ungrammatical. You might say to the guide, 'Don't you mean, this bridge *was* built two hundred years ago?' and expect

him to answer, 'Yes, *was* built. Sorry!'

- > *This means that: 1) English*
- >> *speakers have an intuitive knowledge of a grammar that is psychologically*
- >> *real to them;*
- >
- > *I doubt it. They are corrected as kids when they often say things, and*
- > *they say things as if they are using that creole grammar (I read one paper*
- > *on that, which was astonishing). Some kids, not all, are constantly being*
- > *corrected by their parents due to wrong grammar.*

Of course, conscious correction is possible. But that's not the primary way that children learn grammar rules. I was never corrected for using 'wrong' grammar in Hindi, nor was I ever taught what 'right' grammar should be. Nevertheless, I know what is grammatical and what is not in Hindi.

- > *There is nothing innate about how we speak a language. It's learned –*
- > *from home, school and then from peers, TV and etc.*

I agree that it is learned. Most of this learning – all, in some cases – is subconscious. In either case, if language is learned, we must ask ourselves what exactly is learned. As I see it there are two things that children learn: grammar rules and vocabulary items. Most children learn these subconsciously – I don't think either of us has ever looked up 'mom', 'toast', or 'bus' in a dictionary.

- > *The only valid experiments in language to determine the way the brain*
- > *works would be illegal to do. Take a group of newborn babies from various*
- > *ethnic groups – separate them from ANY heard/spoken language. Caretakers*
- > *would have to be mute, never speak (they'd have to be cared for up to a*
- > *point). Do the same thing again – only this time with identical twins.*
- > *See what happens by the time they are 7 and talking, and then age 18 and*
- > *talking. That would teach you about language, I really think. What*
- > *language does the human ANIMAL speak in the wild – and what grammar?*
- > *You'd find out that way. You'd also find out how capable 7 year old kids*
- > *can be if they have to be! But they would have a language. What would it*
- > *be? What kind of grammar would they have?*

These would be interesting experiments. As it is, most linguists are limited to things like studying language acquisition in infants, studying language disorders, and those few rare cases where somebody is brought up in a relatively language–deprived environment (there was an American girl named 'Genie' I think who was in this situation, and there is a lot of material on her; I can find you references if you're interested in seeing what happened).

- > *No, there are more rules and such imposed on people at an early age,*
- > *either at home, school, or from TV. Take English – somewhere along the*
- > *line English speakers dropped all that imo silly gendered word crap – they*
- > *dropped the cases too – and there is hardly any verb declension compared*
- > *to other languages. In a funny kind of way, English IS like Chinese that*

> way. *It's simple, direct.*

Of course, what English dropped in those categories it made up for by gains in others. 'The man ate the leaf' means something different from 'The leaf ate the man', and 'ate the the man leaf' doesn't mean anything at all. In Old English you didn't need to worry so hard about those awful word order rules; in Indo–European you likely didn't bother with them at all until you were worried about topicalisation / focus.

Here's an example of a redundant rule in English: for the third person singular of any verb in the simple present tense, a sibilant ending is added /s, z, Iz/. This is not something that a child learns from parents, or from schoolteachers, explicitly; I think that most studies show that children learn this rule at about the time that they get beyond the two–word sentence phase (I may be wrong). This agreement adds nothing to communicative efficiency. However, a statement like 'he walk home from school at 3' is felt to be ungrammatical to an English speaker. This is the sort of thing I meant when I said that there are more rules than are needed. This is a rule that is learnt subconsciously at an early stage.

> *Hmm, every Dane I know understands German a bit, they can read it too – but not the other way around! I know that vowel sounds change – they just seem to do that – regionally – but I'm not able to say why.*

Vowels change, and so do consonants. German 'z', for example, has a regular correspondence to English 't' (compare 'to' and 'zu'; 'heart' and 'herz'). One consonant has changed. Another example of regular change is the loss of /r/ after a vowel within a syllable in many dialects of English.

About one–way understanding: this does seem to happen in many languages, and is an interesting phenomenon. You'll find a lot of Punjabi speakers who can understand Hindi/Urdu, but not the other way around. Odd.

> *OK – about the grammar. I hear ungrammatical, horribly ungrammatical English every day in 99% of my daily dealings. I also speak it. And I speak it very very fast – as do others speaking to me. The words slur together to such a degree that they become one word.*

'Ungrammatical' can have two meanings: 1) not conforming to the grammar that a person inherently, subconsciously knows; and 2) not conforming to the grammar that has prestige in a society. Perhaps a lot of the 99% can fall into category 1, even if not category 2. I'm not convinced that the existence of 'idiolects' is proof of creolization of a language.

> *That was not what happened between the Romanian and the Pole. They were talking – then both switched to broken English and dragged me into it asking me about my related ethnic groups in – which ones were they in the former USSR.*

That is interesting. Are you sure that they were both speaking in their natural way, without any affectation of their language (such as contrived

vocabulary choices) to make themselves understood? Are you sure of how much they were understanding of each other?

I suppose if need arose I could deliberately pick my Hindi sentences so that a Farsi–speaker could follow me. But this doesn't mean that a Farsi–speaker would understand much of a conversation he overheard between two Hindi/Urdu speakers.

> *I think spoken Middle English was. You can't know what that was like –*
> *you can only know what intellectuals of the time (the educated!) wrote*
> *down.*

Yes, that is a problem. It is a bigger problem that, until the Norman invasion upset the political structure, most Old English texts were also written, not just by educated people, but by conscious conformation more or less to a standard language, that of Alfred the Great. This means that changes that were gradually occurring between Old and Middle English appear to have happened all at once at the time of William's invasion. The effect would be vaguely similar to if, say, tomorrow, Russia took over all English speaking countries and English was then written phonetically in Cyrillic script, with each region writing their variety of English according to their own speech. To a linguist looking back in nine hundred years it would seem that English underwent huge changes all at once at the time of the Russian takeover. He might be tempted to think that it was in fact because of the Russian takeover that the changes occurred, whereas the truth is that the Russian takeover simply cleared the way for the changes to be seen.

> *And I think that is the big problem. The Romanian was using mostly Slavic*
> *words. I even recognized a few of them (tho I no longer speak a word of*
> *Russian – well, curse words I remember HA!!), enough to know the brunt of*
> *the convo – which "races" would end up on which side! The Hispanic with*
> *me – and she understands all kinds of Hispanic (Spanish, Portuguese and*
> *even that other language spoken in Spain – the name of the language*
> *startes with a 'c' – I don't remember what it's called – but she*
> *translated stuff for me that was spoken in it. – and she also speaks*
> *Italian fluently her husband is Italian) – she did not understand a*
> *single word of it. Not one SINGLE word. The Pole understood it. Now*
> *here is the thing: apparently, it was easier for the both of them to*
> *speak like that, than to resort to what English they both knew – and I*
> *know they knew enough English to ask me a kind of complex question about*
> *ethnicity and religion.*

Ah, there's my answer. Okay, now I understand your point a bit more: you are suggesting that a linguist should recognise a close link between Slavic and Romanian because a Romanian speaker can choose from amongst the words in his lexicon to make himself understood to a Slav, although this means that he can no longer be understood by other Romance speakers.

Yes, you have a point there. I would just mention that such Romanian would sound very forced and contrived to most Romanian speakers. A better test would be to see how much a Pole can understand when overhearing a

conversation of two native speakers, or a folk song.

- > *Written language, even right now – and definitely in the past before*
- > *public school – is probably NOT what the ordinary people were speaking. I*
- > *really don't think I need a thesis to support that idea, either.*

Yes, I agree. I still don't think, though, that that justifies the claim that English is, or has been, a creole.

- > *People from India I've known, most of them wre doctors I worked with at a*
- > *job (highly educated, you see?) spoke Perfect Proper English. They often*
- > *had a hard time understanding casual chat – even from me.*

Yes; happened to my dad when he showed up for his second degree at Hull in England. While he had no trouble following his lecturers, he couldn't deal with the registrar asking, 'What's your name, love?'. Go figure.

Neeraj Mathur