

Re: Learning a language

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From: Eugene Holman (*holman_at_elo.helsinki.fi*)

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In article <40CFBAE8.425D@worldnet.att.net>, "Peter T. Daniels"
<grammatim@worldnet.att.net> wrote:

> *Eugene Holman wrote:*

> >

> > *In article <40CEF95E.1A4D@worldnet.att.net>, "Peter T. Daniels"*

> > *<grammatim@worldnet.att.net> wrote:*

> >

> > *<deletions>*

> > >

> > > *The way you've been approaching pidgins and AAVE doesn't have its roots*

> > > *in Labov, that's for sure.*

> >

> > *Now that we've waxed all nostalgic about our shared Cornell past, what is*

> > *your intake on the following situation from the Cornell area?*

> >

> > *About twelve miles due south of Ithaca there is a town called van Etten.*

>

> *Four years there, and I never heard of the town, much less its Finnish*
> *dialect.*

>

<deletions>

> *Because of your statement in the second paragraph after my comment*

> *above: "Its grammatical structure is clearly Finnish."*

It is, even though reduced and with some forms that would be regarded as illiterate simplifications. Finnish is an agglutinative/fusional language with a highly integrated morphological structure that would be rather impervious to influence from English. That does not mean that this Finnish grammatical structure cannot be made to function with a totally different lexicon, thus making it questionable whether the resulting code could reasonably be called Finnish or not. I could just as well have said the grammatical structure of Hawaiian Creole, which arose from an unstable jargon, is clearly English lexically, or that the grammatical structure of Chinese Pidgin English shows many clearly Chinese features of morpho-syntax. Its lexicon is as clearly English.

Pussi peipipukki päkjaardilta livinruumiin. Sen jälkee teikauta karpitsi.
push baby–buggy back–yard–ABL living–room–ILLAT it–GEN after take–aut
garbage.

"Push the baby carriage from the back yard into the living room. After
that take out the garbage."

(Standard Finnish: Työnnä lastenvaunut takapihalta olohuoneeseen. Sen
jälkeen vie roskat.)

The grammatical structure is clearly of Finnish origin, the lexicon is as
clearly English.

> *None of the sociological or sociolinguistic details are relevant to the
> structure of the dialect.*

>

> *"Pidgin" does not refer to a social situation, but to a linguistic
> phenomenon.*

It is, but linguistic phenomena are social **by nature** and thus reflect
social situations, in the case of a pidgin, a specific sequence of social
situations.

1. A pidgin is a functionally restricted language lacking a community of
native speakers that arises when speakers of two or more languages who
share no common language have to communicate, usually in a only a limited
range of communicative situations. [Being restricted to certain types of
speech situations, and lacking native speakers are socially defined
parameters.]

2. The type of language that arises in this type of situation is an
amalgam, typically having a **lexicon** derived primarily from one of the
contact languages, typically the one of higher status, and a **grammatical
structure** combining elements of one or more of the substrate languages
with simplifications resulting from general language learning strategies
and the jettisoning of non–functional morphological variation. [The fact
that a language is in a substratum or superstratum position within a
specific territory is a consequence of social factors and typically
defines their relative prestige and the manner in which they will
influence each other. The substrate language will borrow cultural
vocabulary from the superstrate language, sometimes having to borrow
phonology, morphological patterns, and syntax as well, the superstrate
language will be more likely to borrow terms, overwhelmingly, nouns, for
local topography, flora, fauna, culinary items, and exotica. The nature
and degree of borrowing is determined by socially determined factors.]

3. A pidgin is different enough from the languages that gave rise to it to
be a linguistic norm that marks a clear break from the norms of the
contributing languages: it is a fundamentally new linguistic system, rather
than one handed down from the previous generation. [It is a new set of
norms for communicating; everybody who wants to use it has to make an
effort to learn it before being able to use it competently. Learning is a
social activity.]

4. A pidgin can acquire a body of speakers large enough for it to be handed down to their offspring and become the nucleus of their native languages. This next generation will elaborate its grammatical structure and range of functional valency, in which case it becomes a creole. [What was once merely "speaking funny" becomes a real language with speakers who take it seriously. This is a social re-evaluation of a system of norms and of the people who adhere to it.]

5. A creole can further evolve in such a manner that its speakers *associate* or *dissociate* it with the language of higher prestige in their speech community. This can lead to a *creole continuum*, in which the creole establishes itself as the basilect of speakers who use some variety of the higher prestige lexifier language in certain speech situations (e.g. the Jamaican Creole continuum), or it may lead to a distinction between two cognate but coexisting linguistic systems, each with its own set of registers, norms, etc. (e.g. Sranan Tongo and Dutch in Surinam). [This is a further re-evaluation of sets of norms, this time of co-existing and competing norms, and of assigning each of them to its proper place and status. Jamaican Creole is evaluated in its speech community as having lesser status than standard West Indian English does and it is consigned to speech situations characterized by informality and in-group orientation, Standard West Indian English being assigned to formal, out-group oriented situations. Sranan Tongo has been assigned a status more equal with Dutch in Surinam, thus it is the appropriate code to use in a wider variety of formal, out-group oriented speech situations.]

Why is the "broken Finnish" that has been almost completely relexified with English lexical morphemes, is used as an important secret code by local sports teams, as well as for socially circumscribed communicational situations by the inhabitants of Van Etten, New York, and which is nobody's native language or sole variety, not a Finnish-based pidgin? To speak it you have to learn 1) a few hundred high frequency Finnish morphemes, lexical and grammatical, in the meanings and pronunciations they had a century ago in Ostrobothnia dialect, 2) how to pass English lexical morphemes through a Finnish phonological filter, and then 3) how use them in the most frequent Finnish morphophonemic and syntactic templates.

Regards,
Eugene Holman