

Re: Responding to a challenge

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From: Raymond S. Wise (mplsrayNOSPAM_at_gbronline.com)

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"Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net> wrote in message news:4104E986.3B6@worldnet.att.net...

> *Raymond S. Wise wrote:*

>

>> *I think sign languages are young because I have never read of a sign language for the deaf which has been in continuous use longer than has American Sign Language (French Sign Language is distinguished from Old French Sign Language, from which ASL was derived, so I would consider French*

>> *Sign Language itself to have been in continuous use over a shorter period*

>> *than has been ASL.) A Dutch resupply camp for the East India Company was established on the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, and I would expect Afrikaans*

>> *to have developed before the beginning of the 1700s. American Sign Language*

>> *could not have existed before 1816, when Thomas Gallaudet brought Laurent*

>> *Clerc to the United States. So Afrikaans is older than any sign language of*

>> *which I am aware. Note that John McWhorter calls Afrikaans a "semi-creole,"*

>> *which would make this comparing apples and oranges: You have to compare sign*

>> *languages to creole languages.*

>>

>>>

>>>

>>> *Raymond> Relatively simple in *form,* not simple in their ability*

>>> *Raymond> to communicate ideas.*

>>>

>>> *What makes you think sign languages are simpler in form?*

>>

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- > > *Well, first I believe creole languages are simpler in form than most other*
> > *spoken languages. If you don't accept that, then you will of course not*
> > *accept the following: Sign languages developed in a way which very much*
> > *resembled the development of creole languages.*
>
> *Two deaf infants will come up with a way of communicating with each*
> *other that's not based on any preexisting linguistic system. (See the*
> *Nicaragua case.)*

Yes, I am aware of that fact. That only indicates one way in which sign languages are different than creoles, and John McWhorter pointed to it (and to at least one more difference, the use of noun classifiers). That does not falsify my statement that "Sign languages developed in a way which very much resembled the development of creole languages" and McWhorter argues that sign languages may be considered "manual creoles" at the end of a discussion of sign languages which included an explicit reference to Nicaraguan Sign Language (he had visited the school where the language began).

- >
> > *Add to that the fact that it takes time for "baroquification," as*
McWhorter
> > *put it, it follows that sign languages would be equally simple in form*
to
> > *creole languages, perhaps even somewhat simpler, because creole*
languages
> > *bring some of the baroque elements into the language from the parent*
> > *languages.*
>
> *No, the parent languages are pidgins, which do not have the "baroque*
> *elements."*

It depends upon whether you are willing to call pidgins "languages." I usually refer to them as "communication systems," not feeling that it is appropriate to give them the status of languages. I feel the same way about signing systems which are coded forms of English or other oral language. Pidgins do retain at least some baroque elements from the languages they were formed from, if I am remembering McWhorter correctly on that point. If I am not, then that means that pidgins are simpler in form than even I imagined!

- >
> > > *Raymond> I believe them to be so because I have read that they*
> > > *Raymond> are so.*
> > >
> > > *So, you never attempted to learn a sign language to see how simple*
> > > *they are in form?*
> >
> > *Just so we are clear on the matter: I make no claim that any sign*
language
> > *is "simple" or "simple in form," nor do I make such a claim for creole*

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> > *languages or Esperanto, nor do I make the claim even for pidgins or the*
> > *signing system of the North American Indians. If I were to learn a sign*
> > *language and subsequently say that it was relatively easy compared to*
> > *English, French, or Esperanto--which would be my prediction for English*
and
> > *French, I have no prediction in the case of Esperanto--I take it that*
you
> > *would deny that had any relevance, since you do not believe, for*
example,
>
> *It would not have any truth. Learning ASL is not easier than learning*
> *any other language.*
>
> > *that Esperanto is relatively simple in form compared to English.*
>
> > > *Raymond> It makes sense that they would be so, too, since it*
> > > *Raymond> takes time for languages to build up complexities which*
> > > *Raymond> are unnecessary to the purpose of communication (for*
> > > *Raymond> example, all the many ways which English has of turning a*
> > > *Raymond> singular word into its plural took time to acquire).*
> > >
> > > *There have been deaf people societies since men and women existed.*
> > > *What makes you think that sign language didn't develop until recently?*
> > > *I believe sign languages are as old as acoustic languages, and undergo*
> > > *similar kinds of developments and build up similar complexities.*
> >
> > *I have not claimed that sign languages developed only recently, only*
that
> > *sign languages are young languages, by which I mean sign languages which*
> > *currently exist. This says nothing about sign languages which have gone*
> > *extinct, such as Martha's Vineyard Sign Language and the Old Kentish*
Sign
> > *Language from which it is believed to be derived. If there are indeed*
sign
> > *languages for the deaf which go back for centuries, they could indeed be*
> > *studied to see if the complexities--useless--to--communications have been*
> > *developed.*
>
> *Just because it never occurred to anyone that deaf gesturing was a*
> *language before a couple centuries ago doesn't mean they weren't*
> *languages.*

If you will reread what I wrote above, you will see that when I said that sign languages were young languages, I was not excluding the possibility that there had been sign languages which had become extinct. In fact, I made explicit reference to two such languages, Old Kentish Sign Language and Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, and you can also throw in Old French Sign Language, if you do not consider it and French Sign Language to be one language.

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It's *currently existing* sign languages which are young. American Sign Language, for one, appears to be a creole based in part upon Old French Sign Language, and perhaps (the matter is controversial) Martha's Vineyard Sign Language.

>
> > *Raymond*> *Sign languages are relatively young languages,*
> > >
> > > *Wanna list the age of every sign language in common use throughout the*
> > > *world?*
> >
> > *As I said, I believe that American Sign Language is the oldest sign*
> > *language. Note that I am not making any such claim as "all sign*
languages
> > *come from ASL," just that the sign languages which existed before ASL*
died
> > *out. The exception would be French Sign Language if we can consider Old*
> > *French Sign Language and French Sign Language to be one language, in*
which
> > *case French Sign Language would be the oldest sign language now still in*
> > *existence.*
>
> *So what? Having no information isn't the same as nonexistence.*

Understand that I am claiming only that sign languages now in existence are relatively young languages. If you are saying that there are sign languages which have existed since before the time of American Sign Language and continue to exist, such languages could be studied for evidence of the baroque elements I mentioned previously, but I know of no such language. If you are saying that there were most likely sign languages which existed before American Sign Language and which then became extinct, I certainly agree it's possible and expect that it was the case. In particular, I expect that the private sign language upon which the Abbé de l'Épée created his version was a complete and natural language, and most of what Épée did amounted to mucking it up with coded French, which was subsequently discarded as a result of creolization.

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Raymond S. Wise
Minneapolis, Minnesota USA
E-mail: mplsray @ yahoo . com