Pidgins and creoles, once denigrated by native speakers of world languages and even held in low esteem by some of their speakers, have been given their rightful place among all those languages studied by linguists. Now taken seriously as authentic and legitimate means of communication by millions of human beings throughout the world, they have been studied as any language might be. But since they have arisen in special circumstances of language contact, not being passed on like natural languages from speakers of one generation to the next, they have been of particular interest to those concerned with the origin of language, the characteristics of linguistic 'models' human beings might be born with, and other matters of a theoretical nature.

As might have been expected, the more linguists studied the pidgins and creoles, the more problematic became their nature. For one thing, pidginization and creolization, as processes, had to be distinguished from their products -- so-called pidgins and creoles. Again, it was once believed that if a pidgin did not die out, it would become the native language of some, if not all, speakers. At that time a creole would have come into existence. But some pidgins have existed for some time without acquiring native speakers. Moreover, as there are different 'paths' to creolization, so are there 'creoles' without antecedent pidgins. Generalizations about pidgins and creoles have become more difficult to make than even ten years ago.

The generalization about the process of creolization needs more study. One early assertion needs testing, namely: pidgins become creoles when they are spoken natively (as primary languages) by young people and children. There is evidence in both Tok Pisin and Sango that it may not be the fact of speaking a pidgin natively that makes it a creole, and at the same time become a language significantly different from the antecedent pidgin, but that it has become the primary language of numbers of people, that is, a linguistic code used (a) extensively (as measured theoretically in a speaker's day) and (b) variably with respect to a large range of functions, similar to if not identical with those in a natural language.

We are now justified in saying, although on still modest grounds, that a pidgin can change (or possibly always changes) some time (or possibly a long time) before it becomes a creole.

The task we are faced with, whether by studying on-going creolization or by studying historically what may have happened in the past, is to describe or characterize the very nature of creolization. What goes into the making of a creole?

Only three factors have been invoked with any seriousness: (a) the use of the language natively or extensively; (b) the use of the language in a wide range of contexts and for many purposes; (c) and urbanization. Urbanization and native use are easily documented in field research. The functions of creolizing pidgins are, however, more often assumed than they are empirically demonstrated.

What is now needed to make further advances in the study of creolization is a broadening of the perspective. We can do this, first, by recognizing that creolization is only language change. That is, as any comprehensive text on language change must consider what happens to pidgins as well as natural languages, so any study of creolization must take into consideration what are the many factors in language change.

If, for example, pidgins can begin to creolize linguistically among adult second-language speakers, what explains these changes? Surely language contact plays a role. But do not one's self-perception and one's role in a community also figure in how a person treats the language he or she uses?
SOCIAL MILIEU IN PIDGINIZATION, CREOLIZATION, AND LANGUAGE CHANGE
W. J. Samarin
University of Toronto

Reflections about a Proposal for a Conference
May 12, 1992

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