
**Introduction**

This is undoubtedly a very interesting course. I taught something like this at the University of Toronto for many years in addition to ‘Sociolinguistics,’ ‘Language and Social Issues,’ ‘Language and Ethnicity,’ and ‘Language and Culture.’ All related.

In some ways a hard course to teach, because there has never been a good textbook for it. I had thought about writing one in my retirement, but I’m doing something else: working to the finish line of my life on Sango, a pidgin in the heart of Africa.

I’ll define *pidgin* in a minute.

I’m not going to give you a lecture on Sango, however. But it will figure importantly to illustrate or contradict what has been said about pidgins.

My role, as I understand it, is to talk as generally as possible about pidgins and creoles. This phrase, *pidgins and creoles*, is said in one breath; the two phenomena are usually talked about together. You’ll understand the reason during this hour.

**Pidgins in the Study of Language**

Pidgins may be a rare bird as far as language is concerned. There aren’t too many in existence today, and there probably has always been only a few. Perhaps they came into existence only in recent history.

But rare things are frequently important because of what they contribute to understanding something larger.

Language, for instance.

You’re familiar with language. I’m talking to you in a language we share. You’re learning about language in this course, and if you took courses in linguistics, you’d learn a lot, lot more.

Unfortunately, linguists spend most of their time studying the form of language. Linguistics is to language as physics is to the relations between phenomena. But what is language for? What are its functions?
This is another topic that I have to leave quickly. I don’t have time to look at all the possible functions. Only one of them is selected for our consideration today. Besides, linguists have not yet arrived at complete agreement on the functions of language. That’s curious.

Here’s the function important for us, the one that is well illustrated in pidgins, which are languages that are created, not simply inherited, by human beings.

**Language makes it possible for human beings to interact; it contributes to our drive or instinct or endowment or gift of being SOCIAL CREATURES.** By being social creatures, of course, we can do much more than we could otherwise. And because language is a symbolic system, it contributes to our ability to perceive, classify, compare, and so forth. In the end, we do extremely complicated things.

Let’s say then that **Language unites.**

But, you immediately respond, that’s not entirely true! There are different language; therefore they separate human beings. And even varieties and styles of language separate people. By becoming a person with a university education you will talk and write differently from others.

That’s yet another topic I can’t talk about: that is, the way languages change and the reasons for change. But linguistic diversity is central to talking about pidgins.

**Origin of Pidgins**

The reason for that last declaration is that **pidgins arise when human beings don’t have the opportunity to learn each others’ languages in the usual way.**

When immigrants come to settle in this country they eventually learn enough of English and French to get along. Many learn the languages quite well, depending on their age. I know, because my parents immigrated as children from Russia before the Revolution of 1917.

So **what happens when there are problems in cross-cultural communication?** Oh my! Here’s another rich topic that we can’t spend too much time on. The reason is that there are several different things, and these things vary according to circumstances.

It depends on how different the languages are, on the social relations between the speakers (friendly or not, unequal in power), on how long they people are going to interact, -- to name just a few. But you don’t often get pidgins. People are generally able to learn a language, albeit in a broken way, somewhat ungrammatical, mixed in vocabulary, and accented in pronunciation.

In unusual circumstances, unusual things happens. **Pidgins are unusual.**

1. Unusual in the way they arise
2. Unusual in what they end up being
Before taking up the first point I have to inform you that the study of the origins of pidgins is primarily a historical one. We don’t have the privilege of seeing a pidgin coming into existence, being born. Of course, linguists have tried to overcome this problem by looking at other things: the language of young children, and, among other forms of incomplete language, the kind that a person uses in helping someone still incompetent: in something called **foreigner talk**.

He not here.
I see him yesterday.
I no see him.

Let’s say, then, that the ways study how pidgins arise are these:

1. Historical reconstruction
2. Observation of certain kinds of situations
3. Experimentation with situations that are imagined to be like **pidginization**

Personally, I have not been impressed with the second and third, and too little has been done with history.

Nonetheless, there has been general agreement that **pidgins have arisen in situations of linguistic diversity, where learning in a normal way was impossible or difficult, and where social relations were unequal.**

The typical situations were in **trade** and in **plantations**. In the latter case, the workers were either slaves or paid workers of Europeans. Most generalizations about pidgins are based on what is known or supposed about these contexts, especially the latter. That’s why they’ve been called trade languages, contact languages, contact vernaculars, etc. Notice that these names focus on their function as lingua francas. The name pidgin focusses on the kind of language it is. Any kind of language can be a lingua franca, as is English today; only a few were created as pidgins.

In these contexts a great deal has been made about the role of the European in creating the pidgin: that he modified his language to make it easier for slaves to learn -- the baby-talk hypothesis. Recently it has been recognized that slaves didn’t learn directly from the whites: they learned a broken language from the field bosses, the managers, and all other non-Europeans in a privileged position who had learned enough of the foreign language to be intermediaries.

The origin of Sango is similar in some ways and different in others.

**The Origin of Sango**
Van Gele’s trading (exploring) expedition of 1887, followed by occupation by Belgians and French, with French and Dutch traders.

Travel on the river. Use of Yakoma as canoers.

Diversity of the workforce, but important role of speakers of Bantu languages.

Rapidity of the emergence of some kind of jargon: 1887-1896 (nine or ten years). Something more stabilized by 1911: a pidgin. See jargon/pidgin distinction below.

**Sango and Community**

Before looking at what Sango is as a pidgin and what pidgins are in general, let’s return to the topic of function.

1. Sango made possible communication where it had been impossible.
2. Sango created community if not solidarity.

The first accomplishment is a great if not spectacular one, given the fact that the language was created in such a short time. But the second is equally important, given the fact that most of what has been said by speculators about pidgin origins. Here was a language created to make it possible for people to get on together, to get on with life, to have fun, in fact.

Of course, there were armed guards on the canoes. Of course, these guys in following orders given by their bosses requisitioned food products, chickens, goats, and canoes. Of course, these guys took advantage of the people, whom they saw as savages, below themselves, because they were Muslim.

But these guys also spent weeks and weeks together with men who must have become friends. They talked about events in their pidgin during the night. Some of these guys had wives at one or another of the military posts.

That’s what I mean by community. Of course, later, as the whole territory was conquered and occupied by the French, the pidgin spread everywhere. In the 1950s, however, not everyone in the rural area could speak it. But since independence in 1960 it has been the national language; in 1991, co-official language with French.

**Pidginization and Pidgins**

It is time what I told you what a pidgin is, why Sango is a pidgin. Doing this is both easy and difficult. It is easy in general terms, but difficult when you want to get very scientific. With respect to the latter, I will simply say that no one has arrived at a definition that tells us from a purely linguistic point of view how a pidgin differs from any other natural language.
On the other hand, superficially, it’s quite obvious what a pidgin is. Imagine if you can what the simplest language in the world would be. That would be a pidgin. Of course, we have to add that it’s a simple language that arose spontaneously, not created by an individual, like Esperanto, or by a committee.

Let’s see: A pidgin is a very, very simple language that arises in certain contexts. The process that leads to a pidgin is called pidginization. However, pidginization, although quite common, only rarely leads to a pidgin. That’s because the process is simply simplification: all the irregularities are eliminated; phrase, clause, sentence, and discourse structure are drastically simplified. Imagine Latin and German without nouns in different classes called genders; imagine these languages without any case system; imagine these languages, as well as English and French and Italian and Spanish, without irregular verbs. That’s the kind of language you want to learn! That’s what you would like to be tested on. Something you can pick up in a couple of months.

Pidginization is common because we all do a certain amount of it when we are learning a foreign language. You can get around difficulties by using something perfectly grammatical. But it wouldn’t be correct to call your simplified language a pidgin unless it were compared with the language that was your target.

Therefore a pidgin is not simply a simple language but one that we have some reason in believing was derived from another language.

Would we know that a language was a pidgin if we found it somewhere in the middle of other languages? Not with certainty.

So, a pidgin is a simplified language. The past participle implies historicity.

Equally important is this fact: a pidgin is a language. In this respect it is different from a jargon. When you and someone else through something together to get buy on one or more occasions, you are jargonizing. But when a certain way of talking emerges out of a lot of jargonizing, when there are rules and patterns, we can say that a language has emerged. At that point, you don’t do what you want to; you have to learn what system others have already arrived at.

The Fate of Pidgins

I said that people have to learn pidgins, as I did Sango in 1952, using no grammar (there was none) and no dictionary (there was none). Nobody told me that every vowel had a tone, but I suspected that this would be so, knowing that African languages were tonal. I sought to speak Sango like an African, not like an English- or French-speaking missionary.

Everybody in the CAR had to learn Sango; it was not native to them. In the last thirty years children have begun to learn it as their first language because they never hear enough of their parents’ ethnic language or languages to be able to learn them. Is Sango still a pidgin?
page 6 is missing
For quite a few years it was customary to say that a pidgin that had acquired native speakers had become a creole. This leads to the anomaly that although they speak the same language with each other, parents are talking Pidgin Sango and the children Creole Sango.

But creole has been used in other ways, too many for me to discuss with you. Your professor is a specialist on one creole, derived, presumably from an earlier pidgin, from English. Now, the fact that most creoles that have been studied have been derived from European languages, most of what is said about ‘creoles’ is really about such languages, not like Creole Sango. I’m referring to Haitian Creole, Jamaican Creole, Guyanese Creole, Papiamentu, Hawaiian Creole, Portuguese Creole, and so forth. Arguments are raging about these languages:

1. Were they all derived from pidgins?
2. Do some of them have a common language?
3. Do they have linguistic features in common?
4. Are they linguistically different from natural languages, apart from their history?
5. Can we identify and define a creole?

It would take a book to discuss these questions, some or all of which would have no certain answer. In any case, whatever is said about creoles with European lexifier languages, practically everything that is said about these creoles does not apply to Creole Sango.

Let’s get back to our question: the fate of pidgins. Here are some possibilities:

1. They disappear, like Chinook Jargon (almost).
2. They continue as second languages: Sango, about 100 years now.
3. They acquire first-language speakers.
4. They remain constant or change linguistically.
5. They absorb a great deal of the dominant language, whether it’s related or not.

The fate of pidgins is determined in part on what they are: they’re simple and they might be identified with foreign oppression. Whereas French is the language of education and prestige in Haiti and the CAR, Sango is the language everyone talks. And Sango can’t go very far as an official language, because it simply can’t do what French does: it’s too simple both grammatically and lexically.

A Sketch of Sango

Now I should tell you something about Sango as a language.

First, I should correct an impression you have mistakenly got. Because Sango is simple, you think that it’s easy to speak. That’s not the case at all. It’s simplicity poses all kinds of problems. I have spoken it for more than forty years, living more than ten years in the country. Central Africans are amazed at my competence, but I know that I can’t put together discourse the way they do it. The people arrived at some solutions, like gere ti kutukutu for automobile wheels.
But when I was giving an extemporaneous lecture on linguistics once, I wanted to say that something was parallel to or analogous to something else. I was stumped.

Another one of the reasons is that **Sango is an African language**. What does this mean?

*Lo fono na le ti kodro.*

That’s literally, ‘he/she strolls-about on the face of the village.’ But it’s not a sentence we would imagine as the translation for our ‘He/she is taking a walk in or about the village.’ The word ‘face’ is used for the surface of a river. That’s reasonable. But why should a village be seen as having a surface?