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The Birth of a Language

Posted by Marisa Brook on November 3rd, 2006 at 5:12 am

Languages are thoroughly organic one is complex and versatile, constantly shifting according t those who use it. When social, political or environmental ch a gap in a language, its individual speakers use creativity a problem-solving skills to generate a solution. Successful ch language are spread quickly and often intuitively.

Another example of creativity influencing language is when of children invent their own languages; however these do n languages in the fullest sense. They are typically simple, ar the structures and/or vocabularies of languages that the chi know; they tend to function more as secret codes than anyt

In at least one case, however, a group of children was able
spontaneously invent a totally new language out of necessit
children in question were deaf, illiterate, and devoid of all bu
basic language skills, yet they were able to devise an intrica
communication to use amongst themselves. Nicaraguan Sig
(or ISN, for either *Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua* or *Idioma*
Nicaragüense) is a unique and remarkable linguistic phenon
recent years.

After the Sandinista revolution of 1979, Nicaragua opened a
program for deaf children at a special-education center as p
nationwide campaign to increase literacy. A second school
operating in 1980, and by 1983 the two schools had 400 stu
between them.

However, progress proved hard to come by. There was no a
of the hundreds of established sign languages from around
instead, the students were instructed in lip-reading and alph
finger-spelling. Overall, though, the children seemed to reta
what they were taught. Because the young students had vir
language skills, the finger-spelled letters meant nothing to th

This was unsurprising. Prior to these attempts at teaching th
communicate, deaf children in Nicaragua had interacted wit
respective families via idiosyncratic systems of very rudime
(known as *mimicas* in Spanish). This meant that deaf childr
different families couldn't even understand each other, let a
friendships.

But an interesting effect appeared once the many deaf child
begun interacting in the group setting of the schools. The ch
learning and elaborating on one another's *mimicas*, and the
system of signs rapidly grew. The amazed teachers watche
students began to communicate quite successfully among t
This was immeasurably more than any little 'secret code' ba
existing, spoken language; these children were inventing th
structure of ISN along with the vocabulary. They were, in a
teaching themselves to use language in general.

When the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education became aware
members found themselves baffled by the phenomenon. Th
help from sign-language specialist Judy Shepard-Kegl, ther
Northeastern University in Boston. Intrigued, she set out for
document and analyze the fledgling language. She boldly s
directly interacting with deaf teenagers at a vocational scho
was able to figure out a handful of the more straightforward
as "house" and "what's up?" - but found herself confounded
majority of the communication. Frustrated, Kegl moved on t
younger children.

The difference between the teenagers' and the children's la
striking. The younger speakers of ISN included many more
example, verb agreement, in which the number, gender, an
the subject(s) is indicated with verb inflection. It was obviou
children were using their language at a substantially more fl
than the teenagers, a finding which coincided with the theor
period" for language acquisition. The idea holds that, in gen

children can rapidly absorb and master new languages unti
six; the ability declines quickly until age twelve, and after th
acquisition of a new language requires substantially more e

In the case of ISN specifically, Kegl suggests that the gestu
exchanged by the older students were interpreted by the yo
language input. The younger children learned the gestures
naturally began to add to them, filling in any linguistic gaps
along the way. This was what allowed ISN to become a lan
than a mere set of signs. At this point the older children lea
their younger classmates; their less fluent usage was akin t
second-language acquisition in adulthood. Of course it is st
the language could change over time, but it has developed
the process would be no different from the gradual shifts of

Kegl and her husband, James She
went on to found two experimental schools - the Escuelita d
and Escuelita de Condega - to teach and observe ISN direc
at the schools are careful not to introduce any elements of
sign-language systems; these could possibly contaminate t
development of ISN. The language now has an estimated 9
signers.

The implications of a spontaneously-created language are m
Prominent linguists such as Noam Chomsky and Steven Pi
interpreted ISN's birth as evidence supporting their respecti
that human beings possess an innate capacity for complex
Obviously it would be unethical to perform an experiment to
a group of children left to grow up completely isolated will d
language, but the circumstances under which ISN was born

Late prominent American Sign Language researcher Willian
however, believed that the development of ISN may have b
along by the children's limited exposure to Spanish and to c
signing. Either way, it is incredible that such an elaborate la
improvised and refined by a group of children who had neve
heard a single word. ISN's origins - along with the fact that i
thriving after twenty years - stands as a testament to the hu
natural ambition to express complex ideas, even in the face
obstacles.

Article suggested by David.

More information:
Article: "A Linguistic Big Bang"
Wikipedia article
Article and video clip from PBS
Nicaraguan Sign Language Projects, Inc.

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November 3rd, 2006 at 5:31 am
Joee says:

Phurst!

And Damn Interesting.

November 3rd, 2006 at 7:08 am
nath says:

Remarkable!
I remember finding it suprising that sign language was diffe
than here in the UK. The whole alphabet in the US can be g
one hand - a distinct advantage I would have thought.
One thing which suprised me further was when I was snowb
a couple of American friendswho were deaf, they would ofte
with one another on the lift whilst wearing mittens - I was ba
A bi-lingual friend of mine tried to explain it to me; they said
conversations were often predicatable in any given situation
mitted-hand was shapely enough to insinuate a statement a
easily, a reply.
Try it for a few days, when you notice someone about to sp
predict what they are going to say.

p.s. Great atricle by the way, I hope I haven't strayed to far
subject :)

November 3rd, 2006 at 7:28 am
Christian Flury says:

Thanks for the great article, that's damn interesting, indeed
particularly intriguing that they developped an apparently qu
grammar (more of my thoughts on this at
http://christianflury.com/blog/2006/11/the_nicaraguan_sign_
Fascinating!

November 3rd, 2006 at 7:48 am
banana989 says:

Very cool ! DI does it again.

November 3rd, 2006 at 9:54 am
just_dave says:

That is pretty incredible.

I wonder though about, "teachers at the schools are careful
introduce any elements of other sign-language systems; the
possibly contaminate the development of ISN." Wouldn't isc

students from other language elements actually *prevent* the
from developing naturally?

Look at other languages; if there is interaction between spe
different languages, terms are shared between them, and b
positively affected by such "contamination". There are many
other languages that have no equivalent - or inadequate eq
English, but terminology from other languages has found co
among English speakers.

November 3rd, 2006 at 11:48 am
HarleyHetz says:

just_dave said: "That is pretty incredible.

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different languages, terms are shared between them, and b
positively affected by such "contamination". There are many
other languages that have no equivalent - or inadequate eq
English, but terminology from other languages has found co

among English speakers."

I would suppose that they are trying not to contaminate this
occuring" experiment. The thinking is probably something li
to continue on their own and see where they go with it". Tha
prove more interesting than trying to "teach" them how to sh

I find it incredibly interesting, and I imagine that by allowing
it themselves, the language is probably more efficient than i
"teachers" were to teach them things that they knew. Very c
kudos to David for suggesting it, and Marisa for the work on

November 3rd, 2006 at 1:06 pm
Drakvil says:

Wow. I notice the loophole in the sentence "teachers at the
careful not to introduce any elements of other sign-languag
these could possibly contaminate the development of ISN."
are not exposing them to SIGN language from other system
hope they are exposing them to the written forms of langua
the ISN can be translated into the written word so they can
better with others in their society. It would be sad and tragic
up being able to communicate only by signing and were iso
rest of society.

Perhaps as a further experiment, they may take all students
after a certain date and start exposing them to ALL forms o

language. See what develops from that… polyglot signers, language that is made up of signs from the total of the rest just "borrowing" signs from other systems to supplement IS English has words like "deja vu" and "maitre'd" thrown in. A everyone in Japan knows what the words "ball", "strike" and English in the context of baseball.

Good job Marisa, DI!

November 3rd, 2006 at 6:18 pm
junebee says:

Cool. And, I only recently found out that sign language has spoken language.

November 3rd, 2006 at 8:10 pm
Elsie says:

Great article! Makes me want to know even more about this ISN considered a "pidgin," technically? Or are the children "speaking" it as a first or native language?

November 4th, 2006 at 4:45 am
denki says:

ISN is something you learn about if you take a linguistics cl
you take a good linguistics class. What this article doesn't h
would be great, is examples of the language itself. What is
some of the more interesting facets of ISN; there is no deve
alphabet as the children weren't literate enough to "translat
manner; almost all (at least when I learned of it) of the langu
of gestures of nouns and actions. One example we learned
rolling; a ball was made up of a fist, and the verb roll was th
rotating the hand. The most interesting thing is that to expre
gesture itself was sped up; an adverb (such as rapid) would
express in a language made up mostly of sight-based input
liberally; nouns and verbs), as the community is not influenc
languages to find it necessary to add new symbols for abstr
that is what I can remember about it (and to other linguists
forgot almost every linguistic term, especially if it was Chom
major was Japanese Linguistics, so I'm really of no help in t
world).

To answer some questions: "Wouldn't isolating ISN student
language elements actually prevent the language from deve
naturally?" Not given their environment, and the content/co
conversations. If you were to introduce new language elem
just complicate the language, as it is a simple construct of n
verbs. It functions with as little clutter as possible, as the ge
represent something without the need for all the linguistic c
put in our sentences. The children introduce new words as
based on need, and until comes a time when it has matured
"spoken" by a few more thousand, it is unlikely that complex

abstracts will be expressed. To introduce new language ele
words would mean that the children would have to learn ent
ways to express them, which might not be possible in ISN, v
require the language to be dropped in favor of a language w
absolutes and, most importantly, wordbase. How would the
economics? By letting the kids run with it, they will have to c
for those kinds of things on their own (if they ever get aroun
will create a structure that already coincides with their gram
language will be able to evolve. I really didn't answer that qu
can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink it. I
kids would be willing to learn a language totally foreign to th
own works so well, and really, why would they even need to
complex things they don't have a need for? (this…string of t
continued with the next question)

"Is ISN considered a 'pidgin?" Nope. It's a native language t
there isn't any real outside sign influence, they don't really i
outside signs as it is too…hmmm…not complicated, just "st
would be the same as comparing early Kanji to late Kanji. E
(reallllllly early) was more pictographic; a tree looked like a
people unfamiliar with the spoken language could see the "
"oh it's a tree." If someone who used early Kanji saw late Ka
why the tree looks so different, because now not everyone
Same kinda thing with this language; why use a complex fo
simple?

Apologies for just blabbing and not making any sense, I hav
while and I don't feel like finding sources to support my clai

re-learning linguistics, I should probably do that too. Oh, an
are really, really DI. It doesn't really sound like it I know, but
the *why* we speak and why we speak certain things at certa
gets real fun; go social linguists!

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