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WHEN IS A PIDGIN NOT A PIDGIN? AN ALTERNATE ANALYSIS
OF THE ASL-ENGLISH CONTACT SITUATION

Dennis Cokely

Pidgins and other results of language contact.

Since 1973, with the publication of Woodward's article "Some characteristics of Pidgin Sign English," it has been usual for linguists, sign language teachers, and others to refer to the continuum of language varieties between American Sign Language (ASL) and manually represented English as "Pidgin Sign English" or "PSE." Since that time, however, there has been increased theoretical and descriptive activity among linguists working with pidgins and creoles and among linguists working with ASL. It seems appropriate to re-examine in the light of this increased activity the sociolinguistic nature of the situation that results from the contact of ASL and English.

Linguists differ on the definition of the group of special languages called pidgins and creoles. As De Camp points out (1977), some definitions are based upon the role of these languages, i.e. their function

in the community; some are based upon the historical origins and development of these languages; and some are based upon formal linguistic characteristics, e.g. restricted vocabulary or lack of inflectional morphology.

Although no single satisfactory definition has emerged, there do seem to be certain preconditions for the emergence or development of a pidgin (Ferguson & DeBose 1977). These preconditions may be summarized as follows:

1. Asymmetrical spread of the dominant language among speakers of one or more subordinate languages, without reciprocal spread of that or those among speakers of the dominant language;
2. A relatively closed network of interaction, limited with respect to speakers and uses, which is conducive to relative stability;
3. An attitude on the part of a significant number of users that the emergent variety is recognized as a separate entity; i.e. it is perceived as a "whole" by the communities.

Although these preconditions seem to be necessary for a pidgin to emerge, not all language contact situations result in the emergence of a pidgin (Whinnom 1977). This is true even in cases where all the preconditions exist. Pidginization is only one possibility; the following types of sociolinguistic behavior can also be found when languages are in contact:

- a. Bilingualism -- some critical number of individuals possess competence in both the "dominant" and "subordinate" languages;
- b. Simplified registers -- special varieties of a language are used to address people whose knowledge

of that language are felt to be less than normal;

c. Learners' grammars -- imperfect approximations of the target language are employed by users of other languages, who are in the process of learning the target language.

It is important to note that these language behaviors are not mutually exclusive; two or more may best explain the sociolinguistic functioning in a given situation where languages are in contact.

Pidgin Sign English.

In reassessing the sociolinguistic complex that has come to be known as Pidgin Sign English, it seems reasonable to begin by finding whether the preconditions for pidginization apply in the situation or situations where ASL and English are in contact:

1. Asymmetrical language spread: Before 1970 it could be reasonably said that few hearing people recognized, accepted, or became competent in ASL. (The few who did were most likely children of deaf parents.) One of the main reasons for this was the lack of descriptive and instructional information focused on ASL. The lack of such information made it possible for the hearing majority to try to convince deaf persons that their ASL was simply a substandard dialect of English, unfit for any serious communication and even less so for education (Lane 1980). Given this view, no one would have seriously considered studying or trying to acquire ASL. In the early 70s, however, this situation began to change. Descriptive linguistic research demonstrated that ASL is not a substandard dialect of English but rather a unique and distinct language. In 1972 the first

materials for teaching and learning ASL became available (Fant 1972), and since then the number of ASL instructional texts has risen greatly (Cokely 1980). In fact, Gannon has speculated (1981) that by the late 1970s more hearing than deaf people had studied ASL. Even in the education of deaf students and in teacher training programs, ASL is becoming more and more widely recognized and accepted, although not yet widely incorporated into the instructional methodology of those fields. While it is therefore true that if the reference is to the entire U.S. (hearing) population, an asymmetrical condition still exists, it may no longer be accurate to posit such an asymmetrical condition if the reference is to those (hearing) people with professional and personal contacts with the Deaf community. (The capitalized adjective refers to a people who have formed a distinctive society or culture, and who may not necessarily all be deaf in the audiological meaning of that term. Baker & Battison eds. 1980: xi.) Certainly the dramatic increase in ASL classes in the last few years, the acceptance of ASL courses for college credit, and the acceptance of ASL in fulfillment of degree requirements, the emergence of academic majors in sign language studies, sign language linguistics, and deaf studies -- all indicate an equalizing of this prior asymmetrical condition.

2. A relatively closed network of interaction: This is a way of stating that the domains in which pidgins emerge are limited (e.g. to trading); they show consequently the restricted vocabulary characteristic of a pidgin language (Rickford 1977). The communication resulting from such interaction

tends to be context-bound and often dependent upon non-linguistic semiotic channels for the transmission of messages. It is also true that the number of individuals who engage in such interlinguistic communication (by choice or necessity) is restricted (Ferguson & DeBose 1977). This is because not every member of a linguistic community has a need to engage in direct communication with members of the other linguistic community. Not everyone knows or needs to know the interlinguistic form of communication (i.e. the pidgin), because most have no occasion to use it and because their own native language is used in the home. A trader, for example, may use the pidgin every day, but the trader's family may never use it or know it because their native language fulfills all the communication needs (De Camp 1977).

Given that pidgins arise in restricted contact domains, it is reasonable to ask whether there is sufficient restriction to the contact between the Deaf and Hearing communities to give rise to a pidgin. Even a cursory examination of the situation reveals that the contact domains are not restricted. Inter-community contact has occurred and continues to occur across all age sectors and in almost all places of societal co-existence: education, medicine, law, religion, business, industry, etc. Although this extensive contact may not be by choice on the part of members of the Deaf community, it is mandated by the lack of parallel services, agencies, and institutions operated by members of the Deaf community. Increased interactional opportunities have also been mandated by Federal legislation (e.g. P.L. 94-142, Sections 503 & 504), which further expands the domains of inter-community contact. Because of the extended

domains of interaction, it is reasonably accurate to say that the entire Deaf community (children and adults) is ultimately faced with engaging interactively with the Hearing community (even if this interaction is not by choice). Thus the situation is quite unlike most situations in which pidgins have emerged, where contact in a special activity is maintained by a restricted number of individuals from each linguistic community. Instead interaction occurs between virtually all members of the Deaf community and at least a restricted number of the Hearing community; i.e. those hearing people with professional or personal needs for interaction with deaf people.

3. An attitude of recognition. This precondition for pidgin emergence calls for the perception or recognition of the communication mode between communities as an entity separate from the native language of the two (or more) linguistic communities. This presumes of course that the two communities are aware of each other's languages and their differences and for a variety of reasons are not in a position to learn the other's language. The resultant linguistic accommodation is that both groups are content with the pidgin as an imperfect or makeshift "language" for their intercommunity communication (Reinecke 1971).

The Deaf community it can safely be said has long been aware that spoken English is the language of (most of) the dominant, hearing community in the United States. However, it has only been within the past ten years that the hearing community has begun to recognize and accept the role of ASL in the Deaf community. Before the early 1970s it would have been

extremely difficult to demonstrate that the hearing community or any large portion of it was cognizant that ASL is a unique language separate from English and from other forms of gestural-visual communication. Instead, the preponderance of evidence indicates that any and all signing was viewed as "the language of signs" or "the sign language of the deaf;" i.e. the channel and the expressive medium of communication used by deaf people were recognized as distinct; but there was no recognition, as this precondition requires, that in fact a separate language was involved. Thus, the perceptions of what has been called Pidgin Sign English as an entity separate from the native languages of the two communities (Deaf and Hearing) have been tainted by the impression, in both communities, that any and all signing was the "language of the Deaf community" (i.e. the language not being English was no language at all).

Language contact.

Given this discussion of the preconditions necessary for the development of a pidgin, a reasonable case can be made that in the contact of ASL and English none of these preconditions has been sufficiently met to allow a pidgin to develop. This raises the question: If analysis of them as forming a pidgin does not account for intermediate ASL-English language varieties encountered, what kind of analysis does? In order to address this question it is necessary to examine other kinds of sociolinguistic behavior commonly found where languages are in contact.

A. Bilingualism. Definitions of bilingualism range

from broad statements (e.g. "the practice of alternately using two languages," Weinreich 1958) to more specific but hard to measure conditions (e.g. "functional proficiency in two languages," Hatch 1977). Whether a broad or narrow definition is used, bilingualism must be understood to be separate from biliteracy; i.e. the ability to read and write two languages. It is possible for a person to be bilingual but not biliterate or to be biliterate but not bilingual. In the strictest sense of the term, relatively few people would qualify as full ASL-English bilinguals, because this would necessitate some level of functional, conversational proficiency in ASL and in spoken English. (Proficiency in using a manually coded form of English should not be equated with proficiency in spoken English; linguists have stated that such codes do not and cannot adequately and completely represent spoken English (Cokely & Gawlik 1973, Woodward 1973, Markowicz 1974, 1977-78, Stokoe 1975, Charrow 1976). Thus, only those individuals who are competent ASL signers and competent speakers of English can be called bilinguals. Limited access to ASL models has traditionally kept all but a very few hearing people from becoming competent ASL users. Likewise, limited access to spoken English and varying degrees of speech intelligibility have kept all but a very few deaf people from becoming competent English speakers.

Deaf people can and do become literate in English; but because ASL does not have a conventional orthographic system, it is impossible for a hearing person or a deaf person to achieve biliteracy in ASL and English. The distinction between full bilingualism and biliteracy for individual members of the two

groups can be seen in the following chart.

	Bilingual competence		Literacy	
	ASL	English	ASL	English
Deaf	Y	P	N	P
Hearing	P	Y	N	Y

Y, no obstacle N, not presently possible
 P, possible, but physiological or environmental obstacles
 to attaining competence

In the light of this discussion of bilingualism, it seems reasonably accurate to say that full bilingualism does not in general characterize the linguistic interaction where ASL and English are in contact. Nor does biliteracy describe the situation, because ASL does not have a written form and because deaf and hearing people alike lack adequate opportunities to achieve competence in each other's language.

B. Simplified registers. A register is a particular way of using a language in a particular situation (Hymes 1971). It is a specialized use of a language in a given context; e.g. classroom register, religious register. Registral variation, a range of registers corresponding to a range of different occasions and language users, is conventionalized and shared by the community (Ferguson & DeBose 1977). One type of simplified register, which has been intensively studied, is "baby talk," the variety of language that a community regards as appropriate for addressing young children.

Another kind of simplified register that has been

much studied is "foreigner talk;" i.e. the variety of language regarded by the community as appropriate for addressing foreigners or "outsiders." There seem to be several levels of foreigner talk depending on whether speakers of other languages are perceived as socially inferior, less civilized, socially superior, etc. (Heidelberger Projekt 1975). As with all registers, a certain set of features characterizes foreigner talk; these features include the following:

1. short sentences
2. analytic paraphrases of lexical items and certain constructions
3. reduction of inflections
4. lack of function words
5. avoidance of slang or dialect forms in favor of more standard forms
6. use of full forms instead of contractions
7. repetition of words
8. slow, exaggerated enunciation

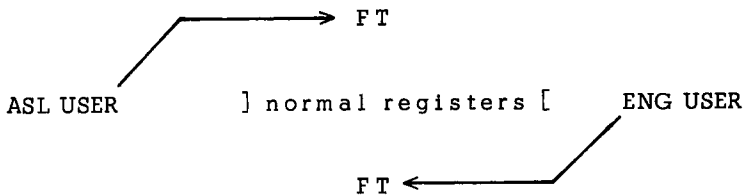
(Ferguson & DeBose 1977)

These features generally seem to coincide with some of the features that have been used to describe signing in the ASL-English contact situation (Woodward 1973, Cokely 1979, Baker 1980). The suggestion then presents itself that what has been called Pidgin Sign English is in fact a product of the linguistic accommodations made by deaf and hearing people interacting with the the other group.

First, Deaf people have until recently assumed (with some justice) that hearing people are incapable of or uninterested in acquiring competence in ASL. Second, hearing people in contact with Deaf people have traditionally felt that they must use simultaneous communication if the latter are to

acquire competence in spoken English. But studies have shown that the signing behavior of experienced users of simultaneous communication offers at best simplified and reduced forms of English-based messages (Marmor & Petitto 1979, Baker 1980). In addition, Colonomos (1982) has suggested that the spoken English of hearing persons using Simultaneous Communication resembles that of speakers addressing foreigners or children.

This situation, then, can be described as one in which members of the Deaf community communicate with hearing people in a foreigner talk register of ASL, and members of the hearing community communicate with Deaf people in a foreigner talk register of English. The resulting dual use of foreigner talk can be diagrammed as follows:



It should also be noted that foreigner talk can vary in the degree of foreignness; i.e. the incidence of the eight foreigner talk features listed above can vary from slight to very full, depending on the users's assessment of the addressee's status and competence in the user's language (Ferguson & DeBose 1977). This then would account for the variation that has been termed the ASL-English continuum (Baker &

Cokely 1980, Woodward 1973, Stokoe 1970), and would account for varieties of signing that are "more like ASL" or "more like English." The degree of the "foreignness" is a relative matter. More ASL-like signing is less foreign to an ASL user but more foreign to an English user, and vice-versa.

While it is true that many of the features that characterize foreigner talk also occur in the early stages of pidginization, not every instance of foreigner talk results in the creation of a pidgin, as Ferguson and DeBose point out:

Even in the case of unrelated languages, however, if the contact situation is characterized by a relatively high ratio of native target-language speakers to non-native speakers, and by interaction in a wide range of communication situations, any pidginization that occurs tends to be brief and transient, because reduced idiolects rapidly and regularly develop into normal, foreign-accented varieties of the target language. (Ferguson & DeBose 1977)

If this is indeed the case, then the process of pidginization is widespread and common, but the emergence of pidgin languages (e.g. Russenorsk, Chinook Jargon) is quite uncommon. Rather, the process of pidginization most often results in foreigner talk or heavily foreign-accented varieties of the target languages. Thus, it appears that the existence of the ASL-English continuum and the variation along this continuum can be partially accounted for by the phenomenon of foreigner talk.

There is, however, another factor that contributes to the existence of this continuum:

C. Learner's grammars. When a user of Language X

begins to learn Language Y, the learning or acquisition occurs in stages. These stages reflect the various changes in the user's knowledge of Language Y and the ability to use it. At any stage of the learning process the learner will produce errors. These errors are signals that learning is occurring and can indicate progress and success in language learning (Corder 1967, Lange 1977).

Studies of adult language learners in the initial learning stages show that they frequently rely on the syntax of their native language, because it is a "meaningful" system within which they can function (e.g. Taylor 1975a, b). This reliance on native-language syntax results in transfer from the native language to the target language (Ausubel 1967, Taylor 1974, Brown 1972). However, as the learner gains proficiency in the target language, that language system becomes more "meaningful" and the learner begins to work within that system. In beginning to function within the target language system, the learner may use syntactic rules inappropriately while attempting to create a novel utterance in the target language; i.e. the learner overgeneralizes. Thus, as proficiency in the target language increases, reliance upon native language transfer decreases and (at times mistaken) reliance on newly learned target language rules (overgeneralization) increases.

Language learning, especially among adults, cannot be plotted as a smooth growth curve. Not only do changing sources of error interrupt it, but there is a strong likelihood that an adult language learner will "fossilize" at some point in the attempt to master the target language. Fossilization occurs when

the learner ceases further systematic development in the target language (Selinker 1972, Vigil & Oller 1976, Selinker & Lamendella 1980). Fossilization has also been said to occur at that point where the learner's acculturation into the target language ceases (Schumann 1976). The important point in any event is that it is possible to speak of gradations or variations in learners' attempts to master the linguistic norms of the target language.

It would seem then, that at least part of the variation along the ASL-English continuum can be viewed from the shifting perspective of native language transfer, overgeneralization, and fossilization. For example, a hearing person beginning to sign may initially rely upon the syntax of English, and so produce more English-like signing; then, gaining more proficiency in ASL, will rely less on the native language but will overgeneralize ASL syntactic features, producing more ASL-like but still not native signing. Whether the person stops learning there (fossilizes) or goes on to gain native-like competence in ASL depends upon the extent to which the individual is accepted by and acculturated into the target society, the Deaf community. A similar process may be posited for ASL users who for whatever reason attempt to represent English with manual signs (and/or speech).

The ASL-English continuum.

The discussion thus far suggests that the variation along the ASL-English continuum is not a pidgin, although the process of pidginization may have been at work and may be continuing. This variation seems instead to be the result of

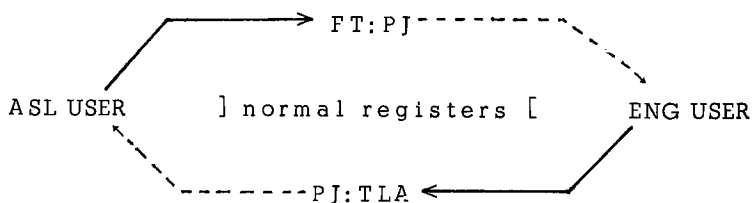
interaction of linguistic accommodations of target language users and the successive approximations of target language learners. Depending upon the degree of acculturation into the target language community, an individual's linguistic performance can be categorized as more ASL-like or more English-like. What the foregoing discussion suggests is that a dynamic, interactive model should be used to account for the variation in the ASL-English contact situation. This model proposes that the hearing person's initial exposure to ASL is actually to a simplified register of ASL; i.e. foreigner talk. (And of course this is to be distinguished from exposure to attempts to represent English manually, which in addition to the problems inherent in such representations may also be the result of a learner's grammar of English.) As the hearing learner becomes more proficient in this foreigner talk register of ASL, interaction occurs less frequently in the foreigner talk register and approaches more and more closely to the standard norms of American Sign Language.

While the hearing person is trying to master the initial model of ASL (in a foreigner talk register), however, native language transfer occurs as errors or intrusions producing more English-like signing. At some point in the process, further learning ceases, for a variety of reasons, and the individual's mastery and understanding of ASL "fossilizes" at a point which may be either more ASL-like or more English-like.

A somewhat similar process can be seen in educational programs for deaf students. In this situation, however, the students see hearing signers

using two registers of English -- foreigner talk and "teacher talk" -- either alternately or simultaneously. Because of the problems inherent in trying to encode English manually, there are limitations on how closely teachers can represent the standard registers of English (Marmor & Petitto 1979, Baker 1980, Kluwin 1981). Furthermore, interference or intrusions arise in the students' registers, because ASL, or the variety of ASL used by the student peer group is a more "meaningful" linguistic system for the students.

The following diagram is an attempt to illustrate the interactive model proposed here. It must be recognized that the limits of a two-dimensional representation do not allow an adequate account of the dynamic characteristics of human interaction. Nor does this diagram account for other factors that vary with individuals and are vital in any language learning and acquisition situation (e.g. attitude, motivation).

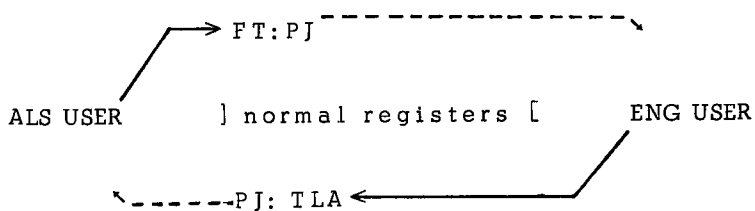


Of course actual communication, even between just two individuals, is more complex; it involves "give and take" as the participants seek the most comfor-

table means of linguistic interaction. Communicators are constantly using their own subjective assessment of each other's proficiency and making linguistic accommodations based upon those assessments. The speaker's or signer's assessment of the addressee's proficiency determines, in part, the degree of foreigner talk used. The degree of foreigner talk used is the native user's attempt to match the perceived proficiency level of the addressee. The learner's grammar of the addressee is in turn influenced by the foreigner talk model presented (Hall 1966, Ferguson 1971). Thus, in the case of hearing and deaf individuals in communication, their interaction circles or spirals toward a closer approximation of each other's register. In cases where the participants do not know each other well, the initial utterances are likely to be examples of foreigner talk (by the Deaf person) and attempts to use ASL on the part of the hearing person; or else foreigner talk by the hearing person and attempts to use English by the Deaf person. The participants in the interaction then begin to form judgments about each other's proficiency from these initial utterances. The resulting linguistic accommodations (i.e. more ASL-like signing or more English-like signing) are then based on judgments of each other's proficiency that have been formed on the basis of the foreigner talk (in ASL or English) initially used.

The next diagram illustrates the relationship between the input (foreigner talk) and proficiency judgments. Again, a static two-dimensional diagram cannot do justice to the dynamic nature of human interaction.

Several types of linguistic accommodation can result from the proficiency judgments made by communicating individuals. One set of such accommodations will result in signing that is more ASL-like, as illustrated below:



In this instance the judgment of proficiency is positive, from the point of view of the Deaf person; the English user of signs is perceived to be able to handle more ASL-like signing. Consequently, the ASL user accommodates by using less foreigner talk and a more standard register of ASL. The result is more ASL-like signing.

Of course the judgment can as well be negative from the Deaf participant's point of view. In which case the result is as diagrammed next. In this situation the English user is judged to have limited proficiency in ASL, and the resulting accommodation is continued use of foreigner talk, an even greater use of foreigner talk features than initially, or attempts at using manually encoded English -- in any of the three cases, the result is more English-like signing (interfaces shifted right in the diagram).

The judgments of proficiency made by communicators are not, of course, conscious judgments. Instead they are motivated by the (below awareness) desire of participants to communicate and to make whatever accommodations are necessary to enhance their communication. An additional consideration is the perceived relative status of the participants and the perceived linguistic expectations of any situation.

One more point worth considering is that the foreigner talk register of ASL also functions as the language model the hearing learner is most likely to be exposed to. Hence, the model that learners are most often striving to emulate is actually different from the standard registers of the target language that they suppose they are learning. Because the foreigner talk register is used when the learner is perceived as an "outsider" (whether because introduced as hearing or because of attempts to use ASL), it becomes extremely difficult for the learner to gain exposure to the norms of the target language. This occurs either because the participants are genuinely interested in communicating with each other and do not allow the target language to be an obstacle (Ferguson & DeBose 1977), or it may be, because one of the participants may feel that the standard norms and registers of his or her language should not be shared with "outsiders." The latter situation has been given as one reason Deaf people are reluctant to use ASL with hearing people (Kannapell 1980).

The fact that hearing people are probably most often exposed to a foreigner talk register of ASL, and the reluctance of Deaf people to use ASL with hearing people may help to explain why the signing of

so many hearing people is characterized as "more English-like." In other words, their signing has fossilized at that English-like stage because adequate models of ASL are lacking to them.

Summary.

I have used recent sociolinguistic research to show that the ASL-English contact situation does not, in fact, result in the emergence of a pidgin. Although the process of pidginization may be detected in the ASL-English situation, the preconditions for the development of a pidgin language are not adequately met. Instead the variation along the ASL-English continuum of varieties or registers can be accounted for by the dynamic interplay of foreigner talk, judgments of proficiency, and learners' attempts to master the target language -- whether this is ASL for hearing users or English for Deaf users. Obviously research is needed in this area of sociolinguistics to describe with more precision the foreigner talk used in ASL-English encounters and the learners' grammars as they develop and, it may be, fossilize.

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