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SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF PIDGIN SIGN ENGLISH

James C. Woodward, Jr.

0.0 General Remarks. This paper should *in no way* be regarded as anything near a comprehensive treatment of the language varieties included under the term Pidgin Sign English (PSE). This paper merely attempts to introduce some of the observed characteristics of PSE varieties and to present a very general case for the classification of these language varieties as a pidgin. Some of the much needed systematic research on PSE is outlined in the last section of this paper.

1.0 Introduction. Although pidgin and creole languages have existed for a long time, they have only relatively recently become an important object of interest for linguists (Hall 1968 and DeCamp 1968a). In fact, research on pidgins and creoles is crucially needed for a better understanding of language in a dynamic framework, as proposed by Bailey (1970) and others.

One pidgin that has virtually been ignored by linguists is a visual-manual pidgin — PSE. Visual-manual languages offer linguists important insights into the nature of language (Bellugi and Fischer 1972), since changes in channel often result in radical changes in codes of code structure (Hymes 1964). PSE is especially interesting in this regard since PSE is actually influenced by a visual-manual language, American Sign Language, and an auditory-oral language, English.

2.0 Pidgin and Creole Languages.

2.1 Pidgins. There is no really good definition of pidgin and creole languages. However, it is generally agreed that pidgin languages are reduced in structure, contain a partial mixture of structure of two to several languages, and contain structure common to none of the languages in the communication situation. Pidgins are not native languages of any of the

users. Pidgins are used primarily in restricted social situations for communicative purposes and are not generally used for socially integrative and personally expressive functions (Smith 1972). Generally along with this restricted function of language go negative attitudes towards the pidgin.

2.2 Creoles. An oversimplistic but often used definition is that a creole language is a pidgin that has become the native language of a group of people. But, as Hymes (1968) points out, a language may be creolized without going through a pidgin stage. A language in a creole stage adds redundancies lacked by pidgins and is more often used for integrative and expressive functions of interaction in a community. If the creole users are monolingual, naturally, the creole will be used for these functions.

3.0 Pidgin Sign English.

3.1 Introduction. Stokoe (1970), Meadow (1972), Moores (1972) have discussed the language situation in the deaf community as a diglossic situation. Woodward (1972 1973) added the notion of continuum to the language situation in the deaf community, making it possible to speak of a deaf diglossic continuum between American Sign Language (ASL) and Standard English. It has been pointed out many times in the past that ASL is not English but another language (Stokoe 1965, 1970; Bellugi 1972, Meadow 1972, and others) and it has now been demonstrated that certain ASL grammatical variation is conditioned by hierarchies of ASL chero-logical (phonological) features and not by English phonological features (Woodward 1973a).

Going back to the notion of a language continuum that has a different language at each pole, it seems reasonable to conclude that the intermediate varieties on the continuum will show reduction and mixture of grammatical structures of both languages as well as some new structures that are common to neither of the languages. All of these characteristics do appear in PSE and are typical characteristics of pidgins. Thus Woodward (1972, 1973), Stokoe (1972) and Friedman (1973) have suggested that some of these intermediate varieties along the deaf diglossic continuum should be included under the title of Pidgin Sign English.

3.2 Some Linguistic Characteristics of PSE. This section is a taxonomic

approach to some of the surface grammatical characteristics of PSE. (Much more information is necessary before PSE deep structure, lexical realization, and “phonology” can be discussed.). This is not the most fruitful approach, naturally. However, not enough is known yet to handle even surface grammatical variation of PSE in a dynamic framework. Section 4.0 will discuss the possibility of using variation theory in future PSE research.

3.21 Articles. ASL does not have articles; English does. PSE has a variable use of articles that is undoubtedly conditioned by environments. For older and less educated users, articles are probably used less frequently. PSE has a sign for *a* $\text{A}^\text{>}$, and fingerspells *the* t-h-e.

3.22 Plurality. ASL pluralization of some nouns by reduplication is probably conditioned phonologically in an implicational series, just as ASL verb reduplication is (Woodward 1973a). PSE retains some noun reduplication and does not generally use a marker to represent English *s* “plural”.

3.23 Copula. ASL does not have a copula; Standard English has a highly inflected copula. PSE used by older people generally has an uninflected copula – the ASL sign for *true*. More recently there have been new signs added to parallel English copula forms. It is interesting to note that presence of past tense copula forms in PSE implies presence of present tense forms.

3.24 Aspect.

3.241 Progressive Aspect. Progressive aspect in ASL is represented by verb reduplication (Fischer 1972). Verb reduplication along the deaf diglossic continuum is ordered implicationally (Woodward 1973a). PSE retains verb reduplication in a few heavily weighted environment, e.g., ‘run’, ‘drive’. PSE also makes use of PSE uninflected copula or inflected forms (see 3.23) plus a verb for Standard English *be + ing*. PSE, however, drops the redundant *ing*.

3.242 Perfective Aspect. ASL has a perfective aspect marker ‘finish’. PSE makes use of an allomorph of ‘finish’ – ‘finish₂’ “Finish₂” is also used in more formal ASL signing. In PSE the verb following ‘finish₂’ remains uninflected (*-en* is dropped).

3.3 Summary. While these are not all the surface grammatical charac-

teristics of PSE that have been noticed, these characteristics point up some close similarities between PSE and other pidgins. In most pidgins, articles are deleted; the copula is usually uninflected; inflections such as English plural are lost and most derivations are lost, just as they are in PSE. Perfective aspect in pidgins is often expressed through *finish* or a similar verb like *done*. The problem with further listing of characteristics is that lists are merely lists. To be adequately able to describe and explain PSE, one has to incorporate variation into the grammar. However, this requires much more research than has been done on PSE. Discussion of this problem is postponed until section 4.0.

3.4 Some Sociological Characteristics of PSE. PSE may be learned at almost any age by a deaf person, but there are restrictions on who learns PSE at what time. It has been estimated that 10-20% of the deaf population has deaf parents. A tiny proportion of these parents are highly educated and have native English competence. In this tiny minority of the deaf, PSE may be learned with ASL from infancy. For the majority of children from deaf parents, it is more likely that they will learn PSE as a second language from association with deaf people educated in more formal, i.e. English-mediated, situations.

Until recently, the majority of deaf children from hearing parents were not formally exposed to any sign system until high school age. It was believed that any variety of signs would inhibit speech production. (All research studies on this topic show the opposite, e.g. Stuckless and Birch 1966, Meadow 1966, Moores 1973.). Deaf children from hearing parents picked up ASL from deaf children with deaf parents, since ASL is preferred for informal conversations, and children mostly have informal conversations. PSE was then learned in some high school classrooms.

Thus, until recently, for the majority of the deaf, PSE has been a second language, as is expected of a pidgin. With recent attempts at standardizing PSE to Manual English and with the early preschool experience, using Manual English, that more deaf children are receiving, the future status of PSE is uncertain.

PSE has been seen as somewhat more prestigious than ASL. Although at first it may appear strange that a pidgin is respected more

than another language, this situation is explainable. In deaf education which is about 90% controlled by the hearing (Kannapell 1973), language is equated with English. It seems that anything that approached English (PSE) was better than something that didn't (ASL). Both Stokoe (1970) and Markowicz (1972) have good treatments of this phenomenon.

Whatever the attitude of people towards it, PSE is still used primarily in restricted situations by most of its users. Deaf people generally use a variety that approaches PSE on the continuum primarily for communication with hearing people. Varieties approaching ASL are preferred by the majority of deaf people for integrative and expressive functions within the deaf community.

It seems that from what little is known about its sociological characteristics, PSE functions like a pidgin for the majority of the deaf. Much more research is needed, however, before any definite conclusions can be drawn about social functions of PSE. The social functions will probably vary depending on social class membership and psychological factors such as attitudes towards deafness, ASL, and English.

4.0 Variation Theory and PSE – Towards Future Research. This paper has pointed out the need for future research in PSE. Variation theory currently offers the only framework that can be used to describe PSE. PSE is highly variable; and as Bailey (1970), Bickerton (1972) and others have pointed out, static language models cannot account for real language phenomena that include variation.

The only studies utilizing variation theory to be done on the deaf diglossic continuum have concentrated on variability in ASL rules (Woodward 1973a, 1973b). Woodward (1973a) demonstrated that implicational scaling as pioneered by DeCamp (1968b) and Stoltz and Bills (1968) and modified by Bailey (1970) and Bickerton (1972) can describe variation along the deaf diglossic continuum. From implicational scales, rules with weighted cherological (phonological) and semantic features were developed to account for the observed variation. Woodward (1973b) pointed out that the ASL rules described in Woodward (1973a) were not only internally ordered implicationally but also externally ordered implicationally, so that ASL competence in Agent-Beneficiary Directional-

ity implies ASL competence in Negative Incorporation which implies ASL competence in Verb Reduplication.

The same type of implicational research can and should be done with PSE grammatical variation. For example, it seems that presence of past tense copula forms in PSE implies presence of present tense forms. Undoubtedly, other cherological and grammatical environments are important in conditioning what copula forms appear.

There is probably some correlation of PSE grammatical variation with social variables, such as whether the person is \pm deaf, has \pm deaf parents, learned signs \pm before the age of six, and has \pm attended some college, and quite possibly a number of other social variables. (Woodward, 1973a and 1973b showed that the four social variables mentioned above were correlated with certain ASL grammatical variation.).

5.0 Final Remarks. Much research is obviously needed in PSE grammatical description and in PSE's relationship to ASL and Standard English. This research cannot wait too long, for PSE may be short-lived as many pidgins are.

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