A love affair with pidgin

AMY E. TILLMAN

An account of a private language that variously draws on English, French, and Wolof, a language of West Africa

IN RECENT years, a married couple in the United States developed a pidgin-like patois (for their own use) out of three languages that one or the other knew well but both did not share. The following account, while telling something of their story, looks at how such a private 'language' can impact negatively on second-language acquisition. The study seeks also to gauge the effect of this personal 'pidgin' on Pierre, a native speaker of Wolof, and on his acquisition of English, a language he needs to know. In one sense their private language is a success, but in another it is a problem, because Pierre needs to become fluent in the language of his new home. He and Mary have created a language style that suits their daily needs, but their very success and originality may be preventing Pierre from moving on into conventional English.

Introduction

Mary and Pierre are my neighbours. Pierre, who is from Senegal, is married to Mary, who is American. Mary speaks English and Pierre speaks Wolof, his mother tongue, and French, a major language in West Africa. They have been married for two years, and have lived in the United States since April 2005, the point from which Pierre has made his attempt – or not-quite attempt – to learn English.

Mary is pregnant and expecting around July 25, 2006, and an important question arises: What language(s) will the baby speak – English, Wolof, and/or their own Wolof/English blend? Their native languages are so dissimilar that, for effective communication, they have resorted to a shared self-created medium that is both a private *lingua franca* and a kind of *pidgin*. They have created a new mixed language: the outcome in effect of Pierre's missed opportunity to learn English systematically.

After months of observing Pierre and his efforts at acquiring English, I can attest that he has shown little progress. He has frozen – fossilized – in learning it. This paper takes a pedagogically-motivated look at the effects that such a situation (the development and use of a private pidgin) can have on a learner whose aim has long been, and presumably still is, to acquire the full range of English.

Mary and Pierre did not at any point sit down and say, 'We can't understand each other, so let's devise a pidgin' (cf. Bickerton 1976). Rather, with each and every conversational exchange, however minute, their pidgin brings new understandings, however slow. And in the process the pidgin itself has slowly and steadily grown.

Fossilization

The process and outcome known as *fossilization* can be found in a range of cases of adult second-language acquisition, suggesting that L2 learners often reach a point at which they fail to progress, despite both exposure to rich

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amounts of input and adequate motivation (cf. Sundquist 2006).

Linguists of many kinds have encountered the process, and there are many learners who, in the midst of acquiring their L2, like Pierre get stuck, incapable of ridding themselves of inaccurate or inadequate patterns acquired along the way. He is certainly engaged in this 'non-learning' and (as the metaphor goes) has 'fossilized'. In second-language research, awareness of the role of fossilization has contributed heavily to the creation of two major movements, one promoting the importance of grammatical accuracy, the other stressing communicative competence.

Pierre has fossilized, not because of a lack of English grammar (the view of the first of the above two camps) but through lack of a broader competence (the view of the second): he cannot communicate in mainstream English beyond a handful of words. The relationship between Pierre's pidgin and his weak English language acquisition is striking. His pidgin is not the result of poor second language learning; rather, he has been able to establish and conventionalize meaning through this pidgin (cf. Jourdan 1991), with or without any influence (or input on his part) from standard English.

Pidgins and second language learning

In general terms, a parallel can be drawn between acquiring and using a *pidgin* (as the term is understood in the world at large, in the literature of linguistics, and as used here) and acquiring and using a *second language*. This relationship was noted in the late nineteenth century, in the work of Hesseling (1897), and later in the work of Jespersen (1922), and has received growing attention since then. It has helped generate a debate in the field of pidgin studies, notably in the controversy over whether or not the formation of a pidgin is an outcome of *first* or *second* language acquisition – an issue explored in Anderson (1983) and DeGraff (1999a).

Despite arguments over the nature of pidgin languages, two points are clear: the formation of an interlanguage like Mary and Pierre's involves degrees of input from both sub- and super-strate sources, and such a pidgin is guided by principles that regulate all cases of language contact (cf. Mufwene 1990; DeGraff 1999b). It is now widely accepted that pidgin formation is akin to, but not the same as, second language acquisition (SLA). Their similarities are not only in personal and social development but also in the processes and principles at work in the formation of all pidgins and in all instances of SLA, formal or informal, and some are basic to the development of both. Notably, both begin with an early learning stage in which an interlanguage (IL) is created.

An IL exists at a stage developed by learners of an L2 who have not (yet) fully acquired it, have only approximated it, have preserved some features of their first language, and, in speaking or writing the target language (TL), create innovations distinct from the everyday usages of both the TL and the mother tongue. By and large, such a language is used by speakers from different language backgrounds in order to communicate with one another.

Pidgins, in comparison with established languages, are pre-eminently marked by a reduced vocabulary, a general absence of bound morphological elements, and a limited or reduced range of syntactic structures. 'These are precisely the characteristics found in early IL systems, seen, for instance, in the "basic varieties" of a host community TL' (Perdue 1997:7). Pidgins share strategies of first-language (L1) transfer and internal innovations found in early IL. The creation of pidgins sheds light on the ways in which early IL and early pidgins develop: 'Like L2 learners, pidgin speakers creatively adapt their limited intake from the source language(s) to achieve communication' (www.ling.ohio-state.edu/~dwinford/creole_formation_and_SLA_1.doc).

A pidgin is in effect (and can in the course of time be recognised as) a new language which develops when speakers of different languages seek to communicate when they have no language in common. A pidgin is however a version of at least one language, which lacks everything except what is necessary for basic communication. It arises when there is sustained contact between otherwise very distinct communities, and the ways in which it develops can be directly attributed to that contact.

A pidgin, like all language, is a rule-governed system, based however not on the native linguistic competence of a speaker but on a convenient 'simplified and reduced form of speech used for communication between people with different languages' (Schumann 1975:394). There might normally be more people

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involved, but two would appear to be sufficient: Consider Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday – or Mary and Paul.

Scholars refer to the elaborative stages of pidgin formation as *pidginization* – 'that complex process of sociolinguistic change comprising an expansion in inner form, with a convergence, in the context of extension in use' (Hymes 1971:11). Pidginization is the result of a social and psychological distance from the speakers of a target language. It is basic in scope, and essentially legitimate, grammatical, and indeed transforming (cf. Schumann 1975). Pierre's acquisition of English may have begun in the usual way, through formal instruction, but, because of his circumstances (brought up in an African country where French is the primary language of European origin) and perhaps choice, along with Mary (a consenting competent everyday user of English), it proceeded with a highly reduced and idiosyncratic system.

Indeed, Mary and Pierre's pidgin began not just with his encounter with English but as a second language variety of its Wolof rather than its English superstrate, from which it gradually diverged. 'But from the perspective of the act of [pidgin] creation itself . . . if an individual's acquisition of [his] TL begins with a highly produced system – a basic variety, then it makes more sense to say that such reduced systems are the true starting point' of Pierre's pidginization, just as they are for [his] SLA (cf. www.ling.ohio-state.edu/~dwinford/creole_formation _and_SLA_1.doc).

The process of pidginization preceded Pierre's SLA. He sought to learn English in the 'normal' way, as a second or target language, but the usefulness to him of standard English is called in question, because he operates through a privately created 'pidgin' (cf. http://way.net/creole/pid-form.html). He had already attained a goal of sorts.

Pidginization involves an initial IL stage followed by two further stages: (1) input/intake from native and non-native varieties of the lexifier language (the system that provides the words, in this case mainly English); (2) L1 influence, and internally driven changes that regularize and expand the grammar: 'The interaction between L1 knowledge, intake from superstrate sources, and creative adaptation operates within the developing IL system itself' (cf. www.ling.ohio-state.edu/~dwinford/creole_ formation _and_SLA_1.doc). The creation and acquisition of pidgins differ from the usual forms of SLA; in pidgins, there are real differences from both mother tongue and other tongue.

Pidginization in SLA initially results from cognitive constraints, then persists because of social and psychological constraints. One finds pidgins where kinds of social and psychological distance prevail (cf. Schumann 1975). Pierre, with Mary's help, has found his own pidgin, and it is in that pidgin (and not English) that his language acquisition is located, which has inevitably had a definitive influence on his acquisition of English.

Predication

This pidgin language, created by Pierre with Mary's 'collusion' (as it were), obviates his need for acquisition of English as a second language: for immediate everyday purposes he does not need it; his communicative needs are already being met. Upon observation, however, it becomes clear that, in the course of negotiating meaning, Pierre uses whatever resources he has at his disposal – except by and large his knowledge of French, a skill that will not necessarily help him in the United States. He pulls out all the stops however for one particular goal: to share and communicate with his wife.

'Yes,' Mary concedes. 'To be able to communicate we definitely speak a lot in pidgin.'

In creating their own way of communicating, they have, with their Wolof/English hybrid, managed to carve out a manageable translinguistic existence. In 'Wolof/English' they are able to communicate with one another and share meanings as husband and wife. Unfortunately, however, this ease in communication also seriously hinders their plans. In his wife's company, Pierre does not need English – although he wants it. For him, 'English is the key to all doors'. Even so, however, circumstances have produced a paradox: he can communicate with his wife with little difficulty, but has stepped back from the wider society, has paused, and has fossilized in his SLA.

Second language acquisition requires solid motivation. Its end point (if a learner's motivation, tutors, conversational partners, environment, and instrumental and other factors are all optimal) is a proficiency so accurate, so fluent, so automatic, so implicit that there is rarely recourse to explicit conscious thought

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about the medium in which the message is delivered (cf. Ellis 1993, 315). Pierre however is not proficient, not accurate, not fluent, and his English is not automatic or implicit. He has achieved so much – and so little. Wolof is his mother tongue, he knows French, and he uses an effective private language with his wife, but in all else he cannot use the language of the country in which he now lives and hopes to study and work.

Wolof, English, and Pierre and Mary's compromise

The tribal language Wolof is the foremost of six national languages officially recognised by the government of Senegal in West Africa. Close to 90% of the Senegalese understand it, and it is the language of choice on the streets, although strictly speaking it is the language of the Wolof people <http://www.bcconline.org>. It is the language of choice for a majority of Senegalese.

All pidgins have a *base language* that is the source – and in a broad sense the infrastructure around which – the pidgin develops. When asked on what language their pidgin, Wolof/English, is based, Mary said: 'I would say Wolof, with some French. I understand more Wolof than Pierre does English. I am more interested in Wolof and being able to speak fluently. We use French as a bridge if we have to.' The samples of Wolof/English taken from Mary and Pierre indicate that Mary is right: Wolof is manifestly the base language of the pidgin.

As regards Mary and Pierre's pidgin one can say (in the words of Wald 1974:308) that much 'phonological and syntactic variation cannot be resolved into discrete linguistic systems. Instead, it extends the notion of linguistic structure to allow for variable rules which are favoured by linguistic and social context in their probability of application'. In this instance, Wolof, French, and English have been in contact so long that they have converged into a mixed private language for two with its own miniature phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and grammar (which differs in a range of ways from the grammars of the source languages).

While Mary and Pierre's speech features English and French words, it derives mainly from Wolof. Linguistic examples support this claim. Wolof/English uses, not the verb conjugation characteristic of English but pronoun conjugation, characteristic of Wolof. Indeed, in Wolof (Wolof/English's base language) verbs are unchangeable words and cannot therefore be conjugated. To express different tenses or aspects of an action, the personal pronouns are conjugated – not the verbs. This, crucially, is how Wolof/English differs from both French and English. For example, in Wolof/English, Mary and Pierre have kept the unconjugated verb *dorsey* ('go'), the conjugated pronoun *danuy* ('us') and combined it with English *somewhere* to create *Danuy dorsey somewhere* (meaning 'Let's go somewhere', but like 'Let's us go somewhere').

In Wolof/English, tenses like present tense, past tense, and future tense are of secondary importance: they play almost no role. For Mary and Pierre, 'it is the aspect of an action from the speaker's point of view which is of crucial importance. The most important aspect is whether an action is *perfective* (finished) or *imperfective* (still going on) from the speaker's point of view, regardless of whether the action itself takes place in the past, present, or future. This can best be seen in the phrase generated by Mary, when she says *Naa acheter jeb* ('I already bought rice': essentially 'I-past buy rice'): that is, she uses the past tense of the pronoun *naa* ('I'), combining it with the French infinitive form *acheter*.

The use of tenses in Wolof/English is encoded in temporal relations which illustrate problems for both substrate and superstrate analysis. It remains to be seen whether this temporal property of Wolof/English is due to influence from Wolof itself, or is a phenomenon retained from the early stages of learning English. It turns out – at least as far as surface similarities go – that Wolof/English is, in principle, compatible with both analyses.

In terms of temporal relations, examples of the Wolof/English pidgin denote situations which started before the moment of speaking and continue up to a certain point on the time line. If such a temporal relation is expressed by a pronoun, such a use of that pronoun is sometimes referred to as 'the universal use'. With respect to the time span under consideration (past up to and including the moment of utterance), this universal use is equivalent to existential use. Potential and universal uses differ in the relative duration of the situation, be it coextensive with the time span considered in case of the universal pronoun or included within a particular time span expressed by that pronoun.

It is in the analysis of the present tense that exchanges done by conjugating temporal pro-

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nouns can best be seen, in examples like the judicious use of temporal pronouns, as when Mary asks Pierre if he has any money: *Yaa ngi hali?* (where *yaa* is the situative/perfective second person singular 'you/thou'). The decision about the origin in the pidgin of this use of the tense in terms of the pronoun (in terms of substrate or superstrate influence) is difficult to make.

Wald notes (1974:313): 'Observers agree that acquisition of a second language on a large scale is motivated by the necessity for communicating with a group that has something that the second language learners want.' According to Pierre, Mary and he speak Wolof/English because 'they have no choice'. Mastering the art of communication is something they both want, but, for the two of them, it is easier to speak a private and unique 'language' like Wolof/English (which features elements familiar to Pierre that are based on languages, Wolof and French, that he already understands) than it is for him to try to speak English alone.

Wolof and Wolof/English

Wolof is *the* language of Senegal, one of six languages with official national recognition. Close to 90% of the population understand it. Strictly speaking, it is the language of the Wolof people, but it is also the language of choice on the streets (cf. <http://www.bcconline.org>). It is also the language of choice for Pierre and for Mary, who actively seeks to learn it: a factor of some significance.

All pidgins have a *base language*, their primary source and the infrastructure out of which they are built. When asked about the basis of their pidgin, Mary said: 'I would say Wolof, with some French. I understand more Wolof than Pierre does English. I am more interested in Wolof and being able to speak fluently. We use French as a bridge if we have to.' The samples of Wolof/English taken from Mary and Pierre indicate that she is right: Wolof is manifestly the base language of the pidgin: see the accompanying Panels 1 and 2.

In a study of Mary and Pierre's Wolof/English, much 'phonological and syntactic variation cannot be resolved into discrete linguistic systems. Instead, it extends the notion of linguistic structure to allow for variable rules which are favoured by linguistic and social context in their probability of application' (as Wald put it, 1974:308). In their pidgin, French, English and Wolof have been in contact long enough to converge, creating a patois with its own phonology, syntax, vocabulary and grammar.

While the shared speech of Mary and Pierre features both English and French elements, it derives mainly from Wolof. Linguistic examples support this claim, as for example where Wolof/English uses pronoun conjugation (a

1

Some words from Mary and Pierre's pidgin

The words of Wolof/English derive from Wolof, English, and French (the former colonial language of Senegal). A representative selection:

waw 'yes' (from Wolof)
deedeet 'no' (from Wolof)
hello-hello 'hello' (from English, reduplicated)
jour jif 'thank you' (from Wolof)
neb 'egg' (from Wolof)
nekre 'to be' (from Wolof)
baguette 'bread' (from French)
choux 'cabbage' (from French)
jeb 'rice' (from Wolof)
marché 'market' (from French)
sublay 'onion' (from Wolof)
nekre 'to be' (from Wolof)

2

A conversation between Mary and Pierre

Danuy dorsey somewhere 'Let's go somewhere' (from Wolof and English)
Au marché? 'To the market?' (from French)
Wow, au marché. Quoi do nu ngi need? 'Yes, to the market. What do we need?' (from Wolof, French, and English)
Lo gem ne bagma 'Whatever you buy is good' (from Wolof)
Naa acheter jeb 'I already bought rice' (from Wolof and French)
Waaw. Nu ngi have jeb, sublay, choux 'Yeah. We have rice, onions, cabbage' (from Wolof, French, and English)
Okay, neb et lait. Yaa ngi hali? 'Okay, so eggs and milk. Do you have the money?' (from Wolof, French, and English)
tuti 'a little' (from Wolof)
Dama take mon hali, rek ya ngi just tuti 'I will take my money, but only if you just have a little' (from Wolof and English)

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Temporal pronouns in Wolof 3

	Situative		Terminative		Objective		Processive	
	Perf.	Imperf.	Perf.	Imperf.	Perf.	Imperf.	Perf.	Imperf.
1st person singular *I/me*	maa ngi	maa ngiy	naa	dinaa	laa	laay	dama	damay
2nd person singular *you*	ya ngi	yaa ngi	nga	dinga	nga	ngay	danga	dangay
3rd person singular	mu ngi	mu ngiy	na	dina	la	lay	dafa	dafay
1st person plural *we*	nu ngi	nu ngiy	nanu	dinanu	lanu	lanuy	danu	danuy
2nd person plural *you*	yeena ngi	yeena ngiy	ngeen	dingen	ngeen	ngeen di	dangen	dangeeny
3rd person plural *they*	nu ngi	nu ngiy	nanu	dinanu	lanu	lanuy	danu	danuy

characteristic of Wolof) and not verbal conjugation (a characteristic of English). In Wolof, verbs are unchangeable, and to express different tenses or aspects of an action personal pronouns are conjugated, not verbs (see Panel 3). In this, Wolof and Wolof/English differ markedly from both French and English. For example, in Wolof/English, Mary and Pierre take the (unconjugated) Wolof verb *dorsey* ('go') and the (conjugated) Wolof pronoun *danuy* ('us') and combine them with the English word *somewhere*, to get *Danuy dorsey somewhere* ('Let's go somewhere').

In Wolof/English, systems such as the present, past, and future tenses are secondary, playing almost no role. For Mary and Pierre, 'it is the aspect of an action from the speaker's point of view, which is of crucial importance. The most important aspect is, from the speaker's point of view, whether an action is *perfective* (finished) or *imperfective* (still going on), regardless of whether the action takes place in the past, present, or future' (*Wikipedia*, 'aspect', 2006). This can best be seen when Mary says: *Naa acheter jeb* ('I already bought rice'), in which she uses *naa*, the Wolof *past-tense form* of the equivalent of the pronoun I, combined with the unconjugated form of the French verb *acheter* ('to buy'): see Panel 2.

The use of tense in Wolof/English is encoded in relations which illustrate problems for both substrate and superstrate analysis. It remains to be seen whether this temporal property of Wolof/English is due to influence from Wolof itself, or simply a phenomenon retained from the early stages of learning English. It turns out – at least as far as surface similarities go – that Wolof/English is, in principle, compatible with both analyses.

In terms of temporal relations, examples of Wolof/English denote situations which started before the moment of speaking and continue up to a certain point in time. If such a temporal relation is expressed by a pronoun, such a use of that pronoun is sometimes referred to as its *universal use*. With respect to the time span under consideration (past time up to and including the moment of utterance), this universal use is equivalent to existential use. Potential and universal uses differ in the relative duration of a situation, whether it be coextensive with the time span considered in the case of the universal pronoun or included within a particular time span expressed by that pronoun.

Exchanges achieved by conjugating temporal pronouns can best be demonstrated in an analysis of the present tense, when for example Mary asks Pierre if he has any money: *Yaa ngi hali?* The decision about the origin of this use

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of the tense (expressed via the pronoun) in terms of substrate or superstrate influence, is difficult to make, although in Mary and Pierre's case the superstrate (English) has a powerful influence.

'Observers agree that acquisition of a second language on a large scale is motivated by the necessity for communicating with a group that has something that the second language learners want' (Wald 1974:313). Mary and Pierre speak Wolof/English, according to Pierre, because they 'have no choice': they have to be able to talk to each other and apparently it is easier to speak a private and unique Wolof/English (based on languages Pierre already knows) than for him to try to speak only English or for Mary to speak to him in English or French or English mixed with French.

Conclusion

People from the same culture more or less understand each other, and Mary and Pierre's aim is much the same. By and large they meet it, but it has a detrimental side: it prevents Pierre from (or at least impedes him in) learning English. He certainly possesses a new pidgin that contains many English elements, yet he holds back when it comes to learning English in full, a sort of learning which (with his pidgin working as it does for him) is, at least for the time being, dispensable. While outsiders praise Pierre for his progress in English, saying that 'today' it is good, he is by no means wholly there. He should be farther, instead of just being good 'today'. What about tomorrow?

The pedagogical implications vary: Is a learner who speaks a pidgin or quasi-pidgin as apt to learn a second language, elements of which already operate within that pidgin? What sorts of barriers are built up by the pidgin? How does the pidgin meet communication needs and how does using the pidgin (or when will it) translate into second-language achievements beyond communicating with his Anglophone wife in a medium they have created together?

In pedagogical terms, when we look at fossilization, we need a perspective that is centred on the target language and its forms. Teachers should for example know about fossilization, and set realistic goals. They should not 'appeal to the futility of fossilization as an explanation, rather they should seek to keep learning alive' (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Indeed, pedagogical intervention must be designed to address particular challenges:

> [O]nly with optimal learning [can] learners' full potentials have a chance to be realized. Only then might we have the chance to distinguish fossilization-as-product from a learning plateau. Only then can we explore the line between the bounds of fossilization and the boundlessness of potentiality (Larsen-Freeman 2006:198).

On close examination, it is evident that, at least for this couple, questions like these do have answers. In the presence of a pidgin, linguistic needs shift and are variable. Although Pierre is not acquiring his target L2, his immediate communicative needs are being met, and so, for him, in the home – and with his wife as his interpreter in the wider American world – there would appear to be nothing left to learn, although manifestly he will make no real progress in general everyday professional and social terms.

Mary and Pierre's situation is simple. They are tangled in a love affair – not only with each other, as a couple, but with a novel language experience: their love affair with pidgin, within which social and psychological distances and barriers still prevail. ■

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