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The Birth of a Language: Is Nicaraguan Sign Language a Creole?

With the founding of a new school for special education in Managua approximately thirty years ago, Deaf Nicaraguans came together in greater numbers than ever before. Though teaching in this school was exclusively in written Spanish, Deaf students soon began to communicate manually, giving birth to a new language: Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL). Each year children enter the school and learn the language naturally from their older peers, eventually becoming Deaf adults who use NSL for daily communication. As succeeding generations learn NSL, the language itself grows and changes. Unlike the canonical creole creation scenario, Nicaraguan Sign Language does not have existing mature language to draw its structure from. I argue, rather, that new structure in this language consists largely of innovations.

Here I investigate the emergence of several argument structural devices: consistent word order, spatial coreference, and paired verb constructions. Word order is a common strategy used to indicate who did what to whom in both signed (Sandler, Meir, Padden, and Aronoff, 2005) and spoken (Dryer, 2005) languages. Spatial coreference is a strategy commonly found in mature sign languages around the world to indicate agreement between verbs and their subjects and objects (i.e. Meir 2002; Padden, 1983; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999); in other words, to again indicate who is doing the act and who is receiving it. Paired verb constructions have been reported in some sign languages, but have not yet been widely investigated; in this type of construction, each potential participant in a transitive event has its own verb, for example: MAN KISS WOMAN GET-KISSED, again providing information on who is doing the act and who is receiving it. All of these devices are currently emerging in NSL and here I ask how they work together in sentences describing transitive acts; more specifically, to what degree do the three devices appear in complementary distribution to one another, and to what degree do they redundantly mark the same distinctions? I investigated this question across five groups: hearing non-signing Nicaraguan adults asked to communicate with silent gesture, adult Nicaraguan homesigners (isolated deaf individuals who have not learned NSL but communicate manually though systems of their own creation; homesign was the starting point for NSL) and three successive generations of Nicaraguan signers.

All four deaf groups, but not the hearing gesturers, use a consistent verb-final order in the overwhelming majority of their productions; however, their ordering of nominal elements is more varied—sometimes signs for agents precede signs for patients, sometimes they follow. In contrast, spatial coreference appears to emerge gradually: 2nd and 3rd generation signers produce more verbs agreeing with multiple arguments than 1st generation signers and than homesigners or gesturers. Paired verb constructions show the same gradual pattern of emergence as spatial agreement.

Interestingly, the individuals in each group who use spatial coreference to mark who did what to whom are the same individuals who use paired verb constructions. Though they mark the same distinctions, spatial coreference marking *and* paired verb constructions are becoming more common in this new language, suggesting that both

regularity and redundancy may be present from the earliest stages in the birth of a new language, even when that new language cannot draw structure form extent languages.

References

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