On the relevance of pidgins and creoles in the debate on the origins of language

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The general assumption is that language started as a reduced code, referred to as ‘protolanguage’. Since there is no direct access to data manifesting the nature of incipient human language, it is inferred that reduced linguistic codes that are available to us may provide a window on the nature of protolanguage. Pidgin languages feature among the reduced codes that have been identified in the literature relating to the origins of language. The proposal that pidgin languages provide a window on the nature of a hypothesised protolanguage is due primarily to Bickerton (1990, 1998, 2000), based on Bickerton (1984), followed by Givón (2002a, 2009) and Heine and Kuteva (2007) among others. My lecture bears on the relevance of pidgins (and creoles) in the debate on language origins.

While reviewing the literature pertaining to pidgins and creoles (hereafter PCs) in the debate on the origins of language, I was struck by two major facts: First, the lack of reference to data drawn from pidgins and creoles, and most importantly, drawn from restricted pidgins; second, the lack of reference to work carried out in the field of creole studies over the last thirty years. In my assessment of the relevance of PCs in the debate on the origins of language, I will refer to data on restricted pidgins, as well as to recently developed paradigms of research on the origins of PCs.

Part 1 is dedicated to the Bickertonian approach to PCs genesis. It contains a presentation of the main features of his research paradigm, as well as a discussion of its various components. Part 2 reports on the shift in research paradigm made in the field of pidgin and creole studies, from the study of language varieties to the study of the processes that yield these language
varieties. More specifically, it briefly introduces theories of the emergence and development of PCs based on processes that otherwise play a role in language creation and language change in general. On the basis of the data and analyses presented in the first two parts of the lecture, the last part addresses the question of whether PCs do actually provide us with a window on protolanguage/language.

References


