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PIDGINIZATION IN VIETNAM

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language variation, both synchronic and diachronic, constitutes a major thrust of linguistic research. In particular, distinct language systems influence each other in various ways when they are brought into contact. Since many different ethnic groups have co-existed and moved about in Southeast Asia for millenia, it is often difficult to solve such problems as the proof of genetic affiliations and the identification of areal features which have diffused across linguistic boundaries.

Recent events in Southeast Asia have forced intimate, but historically brief, contact between large segments of European and Vietnamese speech communities. In 1970-71, I had the opportunity of observing directly Viet-American social and linguistic interaction, the latter of which I interpreted as an on-going process of pidginization. The language changes which occurred may be temporary, yet the processes which they exemplify may be applicable to situations for which direct evidence is lacking. Certainly, any theoretical formulation of linguistic or sociolinguistic interaction must account for data such as that described below.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS OF PIDGINIZATION

When distinct cultural systems come into contact, various interactions can occur. If the members of the different communities are to have any communication beyond the most rudimentary and transitory acknowledgement of each other's existence, one or more of the linguistic systems must be modified. Following Nida's[4] and Reinecke's[6] arguments, there are several possibilities when two groups interact linguistically. Both groups can use a third language accessible to each, and this language is called a _lingua franca_. One group can accept a greatly modified version of the other's language. If the modified version and its parent language are mutually intelligible, the modified language is called a _koiné_. If the two are mutually unintelligible, the modified language is called a _pidgin_. A pidgin which becomes the primary or native language of its speakers is called a _creole_. The above arguments can be generalized to the case of more than two groups in contact.

The processes by which pidgins arise are largely unknown, or at least

not agreed upon. Bloomfield[1] suggests that pidgins arise in master-servant situations where the two parties have different languages. The masters use "baby-talk" to make themselves understood, the servants approximate this simplified language, and then the masters imitate the servants. Nida and Fehderau[4] postulate a similar "feedback" system, wherein the speakers of the "source" language use simple terms and syntax, which are then modified by the speakers of the other language, and the modified version is then imitated by the original speakers. Hockett[3] offers a "baby-talk" hypothesis similar to that of Bloomfield. Hockett insists that a pidgin is not a mixed language but is merely an extreme modification of one of the source languages. Cole[5](p. 552), on the other hand, describes the pidgin Fanagalo as "a disintegrated mixture of mutilated elements from two entirely different language families." De Camp[7] refutes the "baby-talk" theory by citing accounts from 18th Century Jamica, where white settlers learned creole from their slaves, and argues in favor of a monogenetic theory of origin. That is, creoles are all modifications of one language, Portuguese being a prime candidate, with relexification occoring. Relexification is the process whereby semantic slots in a language are filled by lexemes from a different language. De Camp admits, however, that Far Eastern pidgins do not share many features with Caribbean creoles. Samarin[9] (p. 126) defines <u>pidginization</u> as "any consistent reduction of the functions of language both in its grammar and its use." Samarin claims that this process is a common phenomenon and that pidgins are just special cases.

Regardless of the particular process which is advocated, certain characteristics of pidgins are agreed upon. Pidgins have small vocabularies in comparison to other languages. Hall[2] estimates 700-1500 words for the typical pidgin, and Cole[5] estimates the vocabulary of Fanagalo at 1500 words. Consequently, extensive use of circumlocution and paraphrase is necessary to enlarge the semantic domain of a pidgin. Nida[4] asserts that the structure of a pidgin is simplified, also. Single forms of lexical units are used; morphophonemic alternations are dropped. Hockett[3] says that the grammar is not necessarily simplified, but it is more regular than that of the source language. Since inflections and grammatical categories are reduced, word order carries a greater functional load in showing the relationships between words.[2]

Historically, pidgins seem to have developed in contact situations

between European and non-European communities. Communication was necessary for trade or because the non-Europeans were slaves or servants. Since communication was only in a limited domain, such as trade, the full power of one of the native languages was not needed. Sometimes, social pressures prevented one group from adopting the other's language intact. Thus, the colonialists might assume that learning the native tongue was beneath their dignity. Reinecke[6] states that the presence of many languages enhances the spread and survival of pidgins.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN VIETNAM

Vietnam was under French domination from the middle 1800's to 1954. Tây Bôi, or Vietnamese Pidgin French, is reported to have begun in French garrisons in the 1860's and continued until 1960, leaving few marks on the spoken language after this period.[8] Tây Bôi exhibited the standard characteristics of a pidgin. In the Swadesh 200 word list, 94% of the Tây Bôi equivalents were from Standard French. The French and Vietnamese speakers of Tây Bôi used their respective native phonological systems. The Saigon dialect of Vietnamese has five tones, which are an integral part of the phonemic system. These appear in Tây Bôi, but without any phonemic function. Structurally, Standard French inflection was mostly dropped, nouns appeared without articles, gender was ignored, and number was indicated by context. The verbs were invariant, and followed the French infinitive. Word order was often a word-by-word translation from Vietnamese.

In the 1960's, United States foreign policy led to a massive influx of American armed forces personnel into Vietnam. In 1969-70, I was trained intensively as a Vietnamese linguist in the Defense Language Institute, and I then endured further training as an interrogator. The U.S. Army sent me to South Vietnam in 1970-71. For four months I was stationed in Can Tho, a large city located in the Mekong Delta. At that time, Can Tho was one of the few large Vietnamese communities which was "on limits" to G.I.'s. The city was safe enough that only a 9:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. curfew was imposed on American servicemen, and this was largely circumvented by G.I.'s merely staying off the streets, but still not returning to their designated quarters. Since several other cities had recently been put "off limits" to G.I.'s, many merchants, bar girls, and prostitutes flocked to Can Tho in order to separate

G.I.'s from their money. To perform this operation efficiently, communication was necessary, and the burden of communicating rested upon the Vietnamese. Also, many Vietnamese were employed by the U.S. military as PX salespeople, kitchen workers, maids, etc. The ability to communicate made such employment easier to obtain.

IV. CONDITIONS OF DATA GATHERING

Into this milieu I was dropped, equipped with a native speaker's knowledge of English, two years of high school French, and a recent period of saturation in Vietnamese. I had enough free time that I was able to wander about the city conversing with everyone I encountered. The Vietnamese reactions to my spoken Vietnamese were invariably positive. Surprise, smiling approval, and eagerness to talk with me encouraged me to increase my Vietnamese fluency.

Conversations with different individuals over several months all indicated that certain opinions toward language were held by most Vietnamese who had any sustained contact with Americans. Those that did not speak English expressed the desire to acquire English in order to get better jobs. Since very few Americans spole Vietnamese, my consideration in using their language was appreciated and resulted in more friendliness being shown toward me than to other G.I.'s around me.

American attitudes toward language were also consistent. Because most G.I.'s expected to be in Vietnam for only a year, learning Vietnamese offered no long-range benefits. Even the Defense Language Institute managed to kill the linguistic motivation of most of its students. Prejudice against all Vietnamese and a sense of superiority supported the common attitude that it was the responsibility of the Vietnamese people to learn English if they wished to talk with Americans. Vietnamese who attained skill in using American slang, especially profane terms, were particularly admired by Americans for their linguistic virtuosity. When my G.I. companions observed the special attention and favored treatment I received, they often said that they would like to know Vietnamese. Yet, even though the U.S. military offered brief language courses, almost no one bothered to make the effort.

V. OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

In the introduction to Reinecke's[8] article on Tây Bồi is the statement: "The Pidgin English of Vietnam derives from Pidgin English used by American forces previously in Japan and Korea (personal communication from Mr. Saul Brosdy to the editor)." I saw little evidence foo such a broad generalization. The one class of evidence that showed Japanese lexical influence was the kinship terminology used around U.S. military posts. "Papa-san" refers to a father or old man. "Mama-san" refers to a mother, older woman, or a woman in charge of any business establishment. "Girl-san" refers to any girl considered young, usually up to the early 20's. "Boy-san" refers to male children, usually up to early teens. "Baby-san" refers to very young children of either sex. These terms were used by both Americans and Vietnamese.

The French lexical influence was small in terms of numbers. Three words causght my attention immediately. The word [bu ku], meaning "much" or "very much", is not related phonetically to any Vietnamese word of similar meaning, but is obviously similar to the French "beaucoup." The word [fi ni], meaning "finish", is clearly of French derivation and is used as a verb, both transitive and intransitive, and as an adjective. I speculated that the word [ti ti], meaning "very little", was taken from the final syllable of the French "petit" and then reduplicated, since reduplication is a common process in Vietnamese. However, the word [tí ti], meaning "a bit" appears in the dictionary[11]. Reinecke[8] cites "beaucoup" and "fini" as the only vestigal influence of Fay Boi and refers to Norman Stageberg ("Pidgin French Grammar: A Sketch", Modern Language Journal 40:167-169) as making the same speculation concerning [ti ti] as I did. I became acquainted with a retired Vietnamese military policeman who lived near my quarters. When he discovered that I could speak French, he used only that language with me, even though we could both talk more fluently in Vietnamese. I concluded that this was an isolated example of the prestige that French formerly enjoyed in Vietnam, but had no lost with the increase of American influence.

Apart from the above, I detected no linguistic influences besides English and Vietnamese. The Japanese and French lexemes were important because they were used with great frequency and were learned by most Americans in Vietnam.

The process of pidginization, in Samarin's sense, was a continuous

one which operated somewhat differently on Vietnamese and Americans. There was no term referring to a Vietnamese Pidgin English, nor was there any evidence that any person, Vietnamese or American, recognized the existence of a language distinct from Vietnamese and English, yet related to one or both. For Vietnamese, there was the process of learning English as a second language. The social and economic impact of Americans on the Vietnamese life style was tremendous, but everyone realized that the Americans would leave in a matter of years. In fact, I was often asked for my estimation of the date of the American withdrawal from Vietnam. Thus, there was no trend of replacing Vietnamese by English. As the war dragged on, and the economic situation deteriorated, more people turned to the Americans as a source of revenue. I met girls working in bars which catered to G.I.'s, and girls who were employed in various capacities by the U.S. Army, many of whom had been associated with Americans for many years and had acquired fluent English. I also met many Vietnamese who had just begun such work, due to the widening scope of the war, and who were just beginning to acquire a few American words and phrases. In learning English, the Vietnamese would first make heavy use of a small number of Vietnamese words which were known by Americans. Then, they would enlarge their English vocabulary, modified by Vietnamese pronunciation, using word-by-word translation from Vietnamese sentences. The syntax would then be modified to resemble the simplified English used by Americans. Finally, those with sufficient contact, motivation, and language skill would master colloquial American English.

The G.I.'s, except for a small minority who had spent several tours of duty in Vietnam, generally arrived in Vietnam with no knowledge of the language and no motivation to learn it. After a few months, they learned a handful of Vietnamese expressions, pronounced within the American phonological system. Some Vietnamese structural features also crept into G.I. speech, and these were used even when no Vietnamese were present. Except for the Vietnamese words, G.I.'s developed a simplified version of English which was almost immediately intelligivle to a native speaker of English.

Since most young Vietnamese men were in the Vietnamese Army, most Americans in Can Tho had contact with Vietnamese women, girls, and young boys. Due to the social interaction between G.I.'s and Vietnamese girls,

a ubiquitous expression, so overused that it was usually regarded as a joke, was: "I love you [bu ku], you love me [ti ti]." The word [fi ni] denoted finishing anything, in particular, romantic or sexual relationships, as in " he [fi ni] her", meaning " he terminated his relationship with her." It is interesting that the only French words noticeable in the language used in Viet-American communication were prominent in the context of romantic relationships.

When Vietnamese persons used Vietnamese words which had been adopted by G.I.'s, their own pronunciation was sometimes patterned after that of the Americans. A common Vietnamese expression meaning crazy is [diɛn kái dàu], where ´ is a rising tone, ` is a falling tone, and the literal translation is "crazy the head", that is, "crazy in the head." This I heard from both Americans and Vietnamese as [dIŋ ki dau]. The Vietnamese [tɔI biét], meaning "I know", became "I [bIk]" when said by Americans, and [tɔI xoŋ͡m biét],"I don't know" became "no [bIk]". The five tones in the Saigon dialect of Vietnamese were ignored by Americans' pronunciation. Co-articulated sounds, such as the final ŋ͡m of the negative particle above were adopted as [ŋ] only or [m] only, when such words were attempted at all by Americans.

Reduplication is an important device in Vietnamese. It is used for emphasis and euphony. For example [tʃạm], where . is a low tone, means "slow", while [tʃạm tʃạm] means "very slow." [lạp] = "repeat", [lạI] = "again", and the usual expression for "repeat" is [lạp lạI]. Here there is no change in meaning, but a Vietnamese would say that it sounds better than [lạp] alone. Two examples of reduplication were adopted by G.I.'s. The term "same-same" functioned both as verb and as adjective. Thus, the sentence "I am going to the same place as you are" would be rendered as " I go same-same you." In the phrase [di di mau], [di] = "go", [mau] = "quickly", and the composite is best translated as "scram!". Here the Vietnamese pronunciation presented no problem for Americans, so the phrase was adopted intact.

Vietnamese have no initial [p] in their phonology. Thus, the "piastre", the Vietnamese monetary unit, was usually abbreviated by the Vietnamese as [fi]. This also illustrates the tendency of Vietnamese to shorten words, since most Vietnames words can be regarded as monosyllabic or disyllabic. In Vietnamese, things and people are complimented by calling them"number one"

and criticized by calling them "number ten." These terms were used in English by G.I.'s. I also heard Vietnamese imitating what was evidently an American generalization by calling bad things [nʌmba tɛn t^hau] which represents "number ten thousand." [θ] and [ð] are also absent from Vietnamese phonology, while [t] and [t^h] contrast.

Compromises between Vietnamese and English word order were common. The sentence "Friend you go where?", meaning "Where is your friend going?" is a literal translation from Vietnamese. It is a typical example of what I heard, mostly from Vietnamese. "What you do?" is an example of compromise. In Vietnamese the verb form is invariant, which accounts for "do" not being inflected, while the Vietnamese word order would be "You do what?". This type of construction was often used by both G.I.'s and Vietnamese.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

I concluded from the above evidence that pidginization is Vietnam was a very dynamic process which thrived under special conditions. As Vietnamese were driven by economic pressures toward more intimate contact with Americans, they were motivated to learn English. Various factors such as age, educational level, and type of contact, determined how well English was mastered. At any given moment, there were Vietnamese at each stage of the learning process. Simultaneously, large numbers of G.I.'s were being cycled in and out of Vietnam, the usual period spent by a G.I. in Vietnam being one year. They arrived as monolingual English speakers, and after a brief exposure to Vietnamese and to other G.I.'s who had already been in Vietnam for a few months, they internalized a limited number of Vietnamese expressions with American pronunciation and simplified their syntax under some situations. Intercommunication involved a restricted semantic domain, primarily concerning simple economic transactions and limited social relationships. Therefore, the language acquisition on both sides necessary to function adequately in this situation was also limited. Indeed, since Americans could communicate adequately with Vietnamese who spoke some English, I believe that American adoption of Vietnamese linguistic features was often the result more of social pressure than of the need to communicate. That is, the use of Vietnamese linguistic features functioned as a social bond between G.I.'s who served in Vietnam. Supporting evidence for this type of behavior was the development of elaborate

greeting rituals which were almost entirely restricted to black G.I.'s and which evidently re-enforced social cohesion in this subgroup of Americans in Vietnam.

When I visited Long Binh, Saigon, and some areas 30 or 40 miles north of Saigon, I encountered some regional differences in Vietnamese pronunciation, but the Viet-American linguistic interaction was virtually identical to what I observed in Can Tho. I assume this was because both the G.I.'s and Vietnamese circulated through common areas of the country.

With the American withdrawal from Vietnam,relatively fewer Vietnamese will have contact with Americans, and I would predict that those who do maintain contact will become fluent in English. If the present American contempt for all things Vietnamese continues, and the official policy of placing no importance on Americans learning Vietnamese does not change, than the pidginization of English should cease, because standard English will be understood by all concerned.

The observed pidginization depended on such factors as the constant influx of monolingual Americans into Vietnam and of monolingual Vietnamese into contact with the Americans. Because these conditions no longer exist, I would predict that the pidginization described above has ceased in Vietnam. However, the massive flow of Vietnamese refugees into the United States sets the stage for further language change, which ought to be examined. Again, the burden of change lies on the Vietnamese, who must acquire sufficient English to function in the United States. This time, there is no need for those Americans in contact with the refugees to learn Vietnamese and no social motivation to do so. Unless the Vietnamese form isolated communities with only limited contact with other Americans, I would predict that pidginization will not occur. Instead, the refugees will progress through various stages of acquidition of American English, the retention or loss of Vietnamese being another question.

The discrepancies between the above analysis and the traditional theories concerning pidginization point out the need for more field work as the basis for theoretical progress in linguistics. The type of language change noted here should be considered in the formulation of comparative accounts of language development, especially in areas,such as Southeast Asia, which have rich and complex linguistic histories.

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