

Sign Languages, Creoles, Complexity, and the Development of Predication

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This paper presents the results of two wide-scale cross-linguistic studies showing that sign languages and creoles differ systematically from other kinds of languages with respect to two central features of morphosyntax, namely the flagging of core arguments and the expression of tense-aspect-mood (TAM) categories. Specifically, both the usual or obligatory flagging of core arguments and the obligatory expression of TAM in basic simple clauses are rare in sign languages and creoles but widespread in other kinds of languages. With respect to these two features, at least, sign languages and creoles thus emerge as less complex than other kinds of languages.

This paper argues that the lesser complexity of sign languages and creoles is due to their relatively short histories as young languages. Both sign languages and creoles exhibit a developmental path leading from simplicity towards greater complexity, a path characteristic also of two quite different realms: first-language acquisition and, according to some scholars at least, the evolution of language itself. This paper argues that the simplicity of sign languages and creoles with respect to the flagging of core arguments and the expression of TAM categories may provide a model for early stages in the acquisition of language by children and the evolution of language itself. Building on the notion of predication proposed in Gil (2012), which relates these two features, it is argued that sign languages and creoles represent a grammatical type in which predication is either absent or only weakly developed, a type that is also observable in the language of young infants and may be reconstructable for that of our hominin ancestors.