Emerging languages in Esoteric and Exoteric Niches: Evidence from Rural Sign Languages

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There is a longstanding contention in linguistics as to whether the social structure of communities can affect the structure of languages. This question is pertinent to theories of language evolution as languages used in different populations have been hypothesised to adapt to the environmental niches in which they are used (Lupyan & Dale, 2010), and studies have started to emerge which look at the evidence for this shaping process, but so far have mostly focused on trends in morphological and syntactic features (e.g. Lupyan & Dale, 2010; Bentz & Winter, 2012). The present study will investigate the effects that pragmatic processes (the inferential processes that interlocutors make during interaction) have on semantic structures in communities in different environmental niches, using data from a rural sign language (RSL) used in North Bali called Kata Kolok.

RSLs, which are found in small villages of the developing world, have been compared to the home-sign systems of children born into an environment with no sign language input (Washabaugh, Woodward, & DeSantis, 1978). RSLs are languages in esoteric niches, with much smaller speaker communities than Urban Sign Languages (USLs), which are used in exoteric niches as national sign languages used by the majority of signers within a country. We will be contrasting RSLs with USLs to explore the claim that languages in esoteric niches have semantic structures that are more dependent on context than languages in exoteric niches (Wray & Grace, 2007). Observed differences between RSLs and USLs support this hypothesis, as users of RSLs frequently employ pointing behaviours to index referents and can have highly context dependent adjectives (e.g. colour terms), as part of their language (Washabaugh, Woodward, & DeSantis, 1978; de Vos, 2011). However, the existing work does not address the implications that this has for issues in language evolution.

We will focus specifically on the colour term system of Kata Kolok and suggest a possible timeline for its emergence. We argue that Kata Kolok's colour terms are derived from synonymous nominal expressions, which were themselves originally derived from pointing gestures. Moreover, following several theories of semantic change (cf. Traugott and Dasher, 2002; Ariel, 2008; Wilson, 2009) we conclude that diachronic semantic shift is the direct result of synchronic pragmatic processes. Therefore, by investigating Kata Kolok we hypothesise that the individual communicative decisions made by language users can shape the lexicon of an entire language. In doing so, we hope to provide an insight into how this relatively young sign language is evolving within an esoteric niche, thereby providing evidence for the importance of pragmatic processes in both language genesis and change.

In conclusion, we will show how languages can adapt to fit their environmental niches as a result of pragmatic processes, thus providing support for Wray and Grace's (2007) claim that our earliest language-using ancestors may have had significantly different linguistic forms, not

necessarily because of biological differences, but rather because of the different communicative context in which they found themselves.

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