

How Food and Sex Delayed or Prevented the Emergence of Pidgins

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Traditionally, the scholarship on the emergence of pidgins has focused on alleged sporadic contacts between the European traders and their partners on the coast of Africa, Asia, and later in the Pacific as an explanation. It has also invoked multilingualism among the indigenous partners, who presumably needed a lingua franca to communicate among themselves. The history of this pre-19th century trade, which involved agents of European mercantile companies (such as the British and Dutch East India Companies) and agents of rulers of the relevant territories in Africa and Asia (also the trade guild in China), speaks otherwise. The European agents hardly penetrated the interior, where the commodities were bought through indigenous brokers identified as go-betweens or intermediaries, learned the European languages, often in Europe, long before trade started in earnest. The European agents learned a little bit of coastal languages at their trade fortifications, where they often formed unions with local women, while they were waiting usually for months for significant amounts of commodities to accumulate and for the right wind to sail back to Europe. They also sired children who learned their fathers' languages, sometimes in Europe, and would later work as brokers in the lucrative trade. The European agents also secured food and other commodities for their survival through their local brokers. In this paper, I focus on the social dynamics of these encounters and submit that they were not conducive to the emergence of pidgins as communal varieties, although, to be sure, the acquisition of foreign languages as L2 went through individual transitional interlanguages. The value and quantity of the commodities were too high to trade in a broken language; and the indigenous "elite" class of interpreters invested seriously in learning well the relevant languages of their lucrative profession.