CLAUSE STRUCTURE IN THE RUSSIAN-CHINESE PIDGIN

ELENA V. PEREKHALSKAYA
St. Petersburg State University, Department of General linguistics

1. CLAUSE STRUCTURE IN THE RUSSIAN-CHINESE PIDGIN. The pidgin in question is known as the Kyachta language, the Maimachin idiom, the Far East Pidgin Russian or the Siberian pidgin, yet the most usual name is the Russian-Chinese pidgin (RChP). This name presupposes that the main contributing languages in the formation of this pidgin were Russian and Chinese. Was it really so? Certain features in the clause structure may contribute to the solving of this problem.

The RChP in its basilect form practically lacks the inflectional morphology which contrasts with a very complicated morphological structure of the lexifier. In the Russian language the clausal structure is overtly expressed by the system of grammatical cases and prepositions and to a lesser extent by the word order. The RChP lost both grammatical case and prepositions so the clausal arguments are interpreted mainly by the general semantic context:

Agent-Patient

(1) Eta l’udi patom dzimli kapadzi (K)
This person then ground dig
'Then this person dug the ground.’

(2) Hedzu -- liba kupi-la (Sh)
Hedzu--- fish buy-PAST
'Hedzu bought fish’

Other arguments

Location

(3) Sam --- gorod pashol jivo.’ (FEP)
Himself- city went 3Sg.
‘He himself went to the city’

(4) My prijehal kareisa fanza (Tz)
1Pl came Korean house
‘We came to the Korean houses.’

Instrument

(5) Buldozera rovno delaj (K)
bulldozer even make
‘they leveled the ground with the help of bulldozer.’

All arguments are identically expressed by noun phrases which may consist of a noun with or without dependant words (demonstratives or adjectives) or a personal pronoun. Thus, we rely mostly on the semantic role of the argument in order to determine its grammatical role in the clause. The Pidgin has only the active voice so the semantic role of agent always corresponds to the grammatical relation of the subject and the semantic role of patient corresponds to the grammatical relation of the direct object, cf (1) and (2).

Thus the actual interpretation of the grammatical structure of the clause is mainly based on the general semantic context. It may also be interpreted by the word order.

2. WORD ORDER. As has often been pointed out the RChP tends to have the SOV word order. If the clause contains both the Object and the Benefactive or other arguments, the Object occupies the place nearer to the Verb.

(6) evó dúmaj majá jevó čéna daváj (Ja)
3Sg think 1Sg 3Sg price give
‘He thinks that I give him the <real> price.’
Necessary lumber.company cutter what carry-PAST

'It was necessary to carry things to the lumber company by motor boat.'

All the secondary arguments (Location, Instrument, Means of transportation etc), with the exception of the adjunct of Time tend to occupy the position between S and V:

'This man who climbed into the well'

As RChP was always an oral auxiliary language it probably never had any norm, even a norm “de facto”. Therefore the grammatical rules were often violated and the word order was never really strict. Cf. (3), (4), (17). Without the strict word order rule the task of argument interpretation of a clause becomes almost impossible taking into account the lack of both inflectional morphology and prepositions. The last resort here would be to use the general context of the expression.

3. CONTEXT INTERPRETATION. The exact interpretation of a single clause is impossible in RChP. In fact, the expression kaban taskaj (wild.pig drag) would be probably understood as “wild pigs usually drag (steal)”, because the word taskaj is highly polysemantic in the pidgin. It may mean “pull, drag, steal, carry”. But the wider context makes it possible to figure out the real meaning of this clause: “we had to carry <carcasses of> wild pigs <to the riverbank>”.

In order to make the argument structure more transparent the whole situation is often cut into minor situations so that each predicate would have only one or at the most two arguments.

The segmentation of the text into very simple clauses is a characteristic feature of all variants of the RChP. Practically all the texts available, be it modern recordings, citations in fiction or examples in linguistic articles present this feature.

4. LEXICAL MEANS OF EXPRESSING THE CLAUSE STRUCTURE. At some point of its history the RChP was expanding. This process was connected with the formation of new grammatical means on the basis of lexical items. The RChP was clearly in the process of forming a class of postpositions. Postpositions are also characteristic for Govorka, the Taimyr Russian-based pidgin. In Govorka the posposition mesto is used to mark different adjuncts. In RChP certain nouns, adjectives and adverbs could also be used as postpositions

Nouns
5. CONCLUSION. While expanding the RChP clearly had a tendency to establish the SOV word order, the system of postpositions and the system of deictic adverbs make the locative arguments more precise. The first two features are not characteristic of either the Russian or Chinese languages but are common for languages of the Altaic family which is spread all over Siberia. Native speakers of these languages often used the RChP for communication with Russians and other Europeans, as it is attested by the sources for the RChP. It seems obvious that this pidgin probably originated in the process of Russian-Aborigine Siberian trade and only after that it began to be used by the Chinese. As J. Nichols pointed out “the contribution of the Chinese … was not so much the nature of the pidgin as its stability” (J. Nichols, Pidginization and foreign talk: Chinese Pidgin Russian \ Papers from the 4th Int. Conference on historical linguistics, John Benjamins, 1980, 405). The name Russian-Chinese pidgin seems erroneous and it seems more adequate to speak about the Siberian pidgin formed on the Russian lexical basis in the course of communication with Altaic speaking peoples of Siberia.

SOURCES


(FEP) Far-East Pidgin recorded by the author in the settlement of Krasnyj Yar (Primorsky area, Russia) in 1985.


(K) Kukan variety recorded by the author in the settlement of Kukan (Amurskaya area, Russia) in 1991.


(Tz) Tazy variety recorded by the author in the settlement of Mikhailovka (Primorsky kray) in 1991.