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The Creators of Grammar

No student of a foreign language needs to be told that grammar is complex. By changing word sequences and by adding a range of auxiliary verbs and suffixes, we are able to communicate tiny variations in meaning. We can turn a statement into a question, state whether an action has taken place or is soon to take place, and perform many other word tricks to convey subtle differences in meaning. Nor is this complexity inherent to the English language. All languages, even those of so-called 'primitive' tribes have clever grammatical components. The Cherokee pronoun system, for example, can distinguish between 'you and I', 'several other people and I' and 'you, another person and I'. In English, all these meanings are summed up in the one, crude pronoun 'we'. Grammar is universal and plays a part in every language, no matter how widespread it is. So the question which has baffled many linguists is - who created grammar?

At first, it would appear that this question is impossible to answer. To find out how grammar is created, someone needs to be present at the time of a language's creation, documenting its emergence. Many historical linguists are able to trace modern complex languages back to earlier languages, but in order to answer the question of how complex languages are actually *formed*, the researcher needs to observe how languages are started from scratch. Amazingly, however, this is possible.

Some of the most recent languages evolved due to the Atlantic slave trade. At that time, slaves from a number of different ethnicities were forced to work together under colonizer's rule. Since they had no opportunity to learn each other's languages, they developed a make-shift language called a *pidgin*. Pidgins are strings of words copied from the language of the landowner. They have little in the way of grammar, and in many cases it is difficult for a listener to deduce when an event happened, and who did what to whom. **[A]** Speakers need to use circumlocution in order to make their meaning understood. **[B]** Interestingly, however, all it takes for a pidgin to become a complex language is for a group of children to be exposed to it at the time when they learn their mother tongue. **[C]** Slave children did not simply copy the strings of words uttered by their elders, they adapted their words to create a new, expressive language. **[D]** Complex grammar systems which emerge from pidgins are termed creoles, and they are invented by children.

Further evidence of this can be seen in studying sign languages for the deaf. Sign languages are not simply a series of gestures; they utilize the same grammatical machinery that is found in spoken languages. Moreover, there are many different languages used worldwide. The creation of one such language was documented quite recently in Nicaragua. Previously, all deaf people were isolated from each other, but in 1979 a new government introduced schools for the deaf. Although children were taught speech and lip reading in the classroom, in the playgrounds they began to invent their own sign system, using the gestures that they used at home. It was basically a pidgin. Each child used the signs differently, and there was no consistent grammar. However, children who joined the school later, when this inventive sign system was already around, developed a quite different sign language. Although it was based on the signs of the older children, the younger children's language was more fluid and compact, and it utilized a large range of grammatical devices to clarify meaning. What is more, all the children used the signs in the same way. A new creole was born.

Some linguists believe that many of the world's most established languages were creoles at first. The English past tense -ed ending may have evolved from the verb 'do'. 'It ended' may once have been 'It end-did'. Therefore it would appear that even the most widespread languages were partly created by children. Children appear to have innate grammatical machinery in their brains, which springs to life when they are first trying to make sense of the world around them. Their minds can serve to create logical, complex structures, even when there is no grammar present for them to copy.

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1. In paragraph 1, why does the writer include information about the Cherokee language?
 - A. To show how simple, traditional cultures can have complicated grammar structures
 - B. To show how English grammar differs from Cherokee grammar
 - C. To prove that complex grammar structures were invented by the Cherokees.
 - D. To demonstrate how difficult it is to learn the Cherokee language

2. What can be inferred about the slaves' pidgin language?
 - A. It contained complex grammar.
 - B. It was based on many different languages.
 - C. It was difficult to understand, even among slaves.
 - D. It was created by the land-owners.

3. All the following sentences about Nicaraguan sign language are true EXCEPT:
 - A. The language has been created since 1979.
 - B. The language is based on speech and lip reading.
 - C. The language incorporates signs which children used at home.
 - D. The language was perfected by younger children.

4. In paragraph 3, where can the following sentence be placed?

It included standardized word orders and grammatical markers that existed in neither the pidgin language, nor the language of the colonizers.

 1. A
 2. B
 3. C
 4. D

5. 'From scratch' in paragraph 2 is closest in meaning to:
 - A. from the very beginning
 - B. in simple cultures
 - C. by copying something else
 - D. by using written information

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6. 'Make-shift' in paragraph 3 is closest in meaning to:

- A. complicated and expressive
- B. simple and temporary
- C. extensive and diverse
- D. private and personal

7. Which sentence is closest in meaning to the highlighted sentence?

- A. All languages, whether they are spoken by a few people or a lot of people, contain grammar.
- B. Some languages include a lot of grammar, whereas other languages contain a little.
- C. Languages which contain a lot of grammar are more common than languages that contain a little.
- D. The grammar of all languages is the same, no matter where the languages evolved.

8. All of the following are features of the new Nicaraguan sign language EXCEPT:

- A. All children used the same gestures to show meaning.
- B. The meaning was clearer than the previous sign language.
- C. The hand movements were smoother and smaller.
- D. New gestures were created for everyday objects and activities.

9. Which idea is presented in the final paragraph?

- A. English was probably once a creole.
- B. The English past tense system is inaccurate.
- C. Linguists have proven that English was created by children.
- D. Children say English past tenses differently from adults.

10. Look at the word 'consistent' in paragraph 4. This word could best be replaced by which of the following?

- A. natural
- B. predictable
- C. imaginable
- D. uniform

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The Creators of Grammar - ANSWERS

1. A
2. C
3. B
4. D
5. A
6. B
7. A
8. D
9. A
10. D