

Richard Senghas

Anthropology/Linguistics, Sonoma State University

Fragile Emergent Languages: Nicaraguan sign language as an example of a new classification of language endangerment

5:00 - 7:00 pm Haines Hall 352

Wednesday, January 20, 2010

Current paradigms of language endangerment highlight the extinction processes of languages, but do not adequately account for or describe the situations for emerging languages (e.g. Nettle & Romaine 2000; Fermino 2000). The emphasis in the prevailing paradigms is on potential (or realized) language loss, and not on potential language gain or birth. This leaves us without an appropriate classification for the particular form of language endangerment applicable to emergent languages. Typical language contact scenarios involving pidgin and creole languages, and even atypical cases such as the recent emergence of Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua (ISN, aka Nicaraguan Sign Language), demonstrate that there are many languages that emerge in various settings and under varied conditions. It is worth comparing these many cases of language emergence (both spoken and signed) to identify what factors may be common, which are particular, and whether or not more general principles may be identified that may improve our understanding of the emergence, survival, or extinction of new languages. Globalization processes are central in many, if not all these cases of language contact and emergence, and therefore bear special attention. Ideologies of language and identity recur as some of the most central factors. This paper examines the history of ISN, compares it with other cases of emergent languages, and proposes a new category of language endangerment: fragile emergent languages.