

Language Contact and Linguistic Structure

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What constrains the linguistic consequences of language contact in bilingual situations? While all linguists would undoubtedly acknowledge that social factors come into play, there exists considerable disagreement as to whether linguistic constraints on the outcomes of such situations even exist. An extreme, but highly influential, position over the last decade or so is that linguistic factors do not matter at all; in short, 'anything goes' (Thomason & Kaufman 1988; Thomason 2001). From this perspective, degree of contact alone (ranging from 'casual contact' to 'very strong cultural pressure') determines the linguistic outcomes of language contact. However, while as sociolinguists we might be tempted to applaud the centering of a sociohistorical approach, as Gillian Sankoff (2002) has noted 'anything goes' actually amounts to throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

There are problems with evaluating such a perspective, problems due to a not insubstantial portion of the language contact literature itself. In this talk I sketch some of those problems, which include the nature of the data invoked in support of particular claims and how such data are classified by researchers, the kinds of comparisons made among varieties past and present, and the tendency towards focusing on products rather than delineating processes. I illustrate such problems with examples of classic studies from the literature which claim massive (and direct) structural borrowing, showing that there is insufficient evidence to support some rather well-known linguistic 'facts'.

Given that theories of language change are only as good as the descriptions on which they are based, I argue that variationist methodology and theory are essential to contact research, since they provide the tools for tracing the path of language change. Moreover, they allow us to deal with the degree of variability which obtains in minority speech communities, a particular problem which has plagued much nonquantitative work. Both of these points are supported by examples from the variationist contact literature.

Perhaps more controversially, I also take it as a given that the study of (contact-induced) grammatical change must be responsible to a theory of grammar. I provide an illustration of how combining variationist and generativist perspectives is a fruitful method for investigating mechanisms of language variation and change. In my own research, I adopt a generativist approach whereby syntactic structure is largely determined by lexical items, more precisely by the feature specifications of lexical items. Drawing on data from ethnographic, sociolinguistic and diachronic corpora, I account for the emergence of particular English-influenced constructions in closely-related varieties of Canadian French. I show how small differences in the inventory and properties of lexical items come to have big effects and provide an explanation for a wide range of structural variation in the recipient language. Results such as these argue against the 'anything goes' position and support a theory of grammar contact by which contact-induced linguistic change is mediated by the lexicon (King 2000).

References

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