Conflicting Interests and Language Change
Arguments for a connection between language use and change often rely on the two notions of speaker effort and hearer understanding: speakers tend to minimize effort by reducing frequent forms, which eventually interferes with understanding and leads to reanalysis by learners. However, this approach assumes that perfect communication between the speaker and hearer is always the goal. While this might hold when speaker and hearer interests align, it fails to do so when they diverge. Here we consider the impact of divergent interests on linguistic behavior over time. We use evolutionary game theory to model the effect of varying degrees of divergence between speakers and hearers, and show how linguistic signals evolve over time: small divergences allow for stable signaling, large conflicts lead to a collapse between categories, and in between we observe cyclic behavior.

We apply this model to two analyses of Jespersen's Cycle. The first case relies on the distinction between plain and emphatic negation. Speakers want to convince listeners of some proposition, regardless of its truth, while receivers want to believe it only if it is indeed true. If hearers respond more favorably to emphatic than plain negation, then speakers will be tempted to use emphatic negation exclusively. But, to emphasize everything is to emphasize nothing: emphatic negation will be devalued and a new form will be needed to achieve the same effect. The second case relies on the distinction between discourse old and new information. If discourse old information has a special status, then again speakers will be tempted to mark propositions as discourse old. This will also, lead to a collapse in the distinction between the two categories and necessitate the use of a new signal to convince hearers. Over time, this gives rise to a cycle in the forms of negation.