

Deliberate (morpho)syntactic change

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A few preliminaries:

What is language change?

A language change consists of two processes: (1) an innovation, and (2) the spread of that innovation through the speech community, to both children and adults. (But with pidgins and changes in written language only, the spread won't include very young children.)

A linguistic change can only be studied after it's well under way...except in some trivial instances like newly invented words, and in some cases of deliberate change.

What is contact-induced language change?

Contact is **a** cause of linguistic change if it is less likely that a given change would have occurred outside a **specific** contact situation.

- Not necessarily the **only** cause
- “Less likely” \neq “impossible”
- You must be able to identify a **specific** contact situation.

Contact-induced change includes

- Obviously, transfer of linguistic features (with or without actual transferred morphemes)

Not so obviously, contact-induced change includes

- innovations in a dying language that do not make its structure more like that of the dominant language
- innovations that appear at a late stage of a chain reaction triggered by an initial instance of structural transfer
- innovations introduced deliberately to make one language more different from another language

Change in frequency IS change in the language

E.g. word order in Kadiwéu (Guaicuruan, Brazil) (Sandalo 1995):

- Naturally-occurring discourse:
VSO, SVO, SOV, VOS, OVS, OSV
- Elicitation sessions:
usually SVO
- Cf. Portuguese: SVO
- (Not a change; but a potential change.
I'll get to that.)

Possibility vs. probability of language change

- The question of whether a linguistic change is **possible** is settled as soon as a new feature appears anywhere, just once, in a single person's speech. Whether it becomes an actual change is then a matter of social and linguistic **probabilities**.
- Therefore, for instance, anything that can be code-switched from language A into language B can also turn into a permanent interference feature in B.

- And also, because calculating the social and linguistic probabilities is so hard (i.e. impossible), one can talk only about **necessary** conditions for change, not about **sufficient** conditions for change.)
- So...some of my examples today will be potential changes, not actual ones.

How do you know when a linguistic innovation (and maybe the spread as well) was deliberate?

Sometimes you know for sure:

- Someone said “I/X did it” and/or you saw (heard) them do it.
- It happened as part of language planning.

Much more often, you don't know for sure.

But you can make reasonable (“reasonable”?) inferences when

- it happened much too fast to be “ordinary” language change, or
- the change was Not Ordinary.

We'll begin with easy cases.

Speakers' creativity:

- Kids' secret languages
e.g. Harpy Garpy Larpanguarpage:
Tharpis sarpentarpence arpis wrarpittarpen
arpin marpy sarpecrarpet larpanguarpage.
- Cf. Mōkkī (Baluchistan): 'However artificial its origin and character, it is at any rate acquired naturally and as a matter of course by Lōṛī children' (Bray 1913)

Pidgins as distancers

E.g. 17th-c. Delaware-based pidgin (Jameson 1909, quoting Michaëlius):

They 'rather design to conceal their language from us than to properly communicate it, except in things which happen in daily trade; saying that it is sufficient for us to understand them in that; and then they speak only **half sentences**, shortened words...; and all things which have only a rude resemblance to each other, they frequently call by the same name.'

Then there was poor Reverend W.G. Lawes (New Guinea, 1874):

the Motu were never keen on teaching him their “true” language but instead attempted to communicate with him and later to teach him “a simplified form of their language”However, it was not until some time later that his son, Frank, who played with the boys of the village and learned the “true” language from them drew his father’s attention to the deception’ (Chatterton 1970).

Language planning:

E.g. standardizers' zeal in English:

- Ban on split infinitives (Robert Lowth, 18th c.? 1834?)
- Ban on double negatives (1762?; 'making English agree with formal logic')
- preposition stranding (Dryden, 17th century)

Language planning, cont.

Estonian: Johannes Aavik, language reformer
His goal: to replace 'linguistically inferior and awkward compound constructions' (Saagpakk 1982) and to make morphosyntactic changes to make the language better – e.g. a synthetic superlative inspired by German.

Aavik's successful innovations are 'proof that arbitrarily coined new derivational and inflectional morphemes...can be wholly accepted by language users and...incorporated into the language' (Oksaar 1972).

Now, on to those reasonable (or “reasonable”) inferences about deliberate morphosyntactic change

Consider Uisai (dialect of Buin, Bougainville Island, PNG; Laycock 1982):

Elaborate system of feminine & masculine agreement (verbs, nouns, noun modifiers). Uisai has reversed all the lexical gender assignments:

Uisai N_{fem} = other Buin N_{masc}

Uisai N_{masc} = other Buin N_{fem}

Could this have happened via gradual, unconscious change?

Surely not.

- Too fast (these are **dialects**)
- Too weird

The most extreme cases: bilingual mixed languages

At least, bilingual mixed languages of this type:

- created rapidly
- as in-group languages;
- neither structural component is distorted,
- so the creators must have been fluent in both languages,
- which means that they cannot have arisen during a process of L_1 acquisition.

E.g. **Media Lengua** (Ecuador):

Spanish lexicon, Quechua grammar

ML:

unu fabur-ta pidg-nga-bu bini-xu-ni
one favor-acc ask-nom-ben come-prog-I

Spanish:

Vengo para pedir un favor
I.come to ask.inf a favor

Quechua:

šuk fabur-da maNa-nga-bu šamu-xu-ni
one favor-acc ask-nom-ben come-prog-I

E.g. Michif (Manitoba, North Dakota):
French noun phrases; Cree (Algonquian) verb
phrases and sentential syntax (also Cree
demonstratives):

<i>La</i>	<i>žüma:</i>	<i>ki:-aja:w-e:w</i>
the.sg.f	mare	past-have-trans.anim.3→3'
<i>ã</i>	<i>pči</i>	<i>pulã</i>
a.sg.m	little.sg.m	foal

'The mare had a little foal'

(The French NPs are *la jument* 'the mare' and
un petit poulain 'a little foal'.)

Mednyj Aleut (Copper Island, Russia): Aleut, but entirely Russian finite verb inflection

Beringa Aleut	Mednyj Aleut	Russian
awa-lag-ađa! work-not-imp.sg 'Don't work!'	ni-aba-j! not-work-imp.sg	ne rabota-j! not work-imp
uŋuči-ku-ḫ sit-pres-s/he 's/he sits'	uŋuč-it sit-pres.s/he	sid-it sit-pres.s/he
uŋuči-na-ḫ sit-past-s/he '(s/)he sat'	uŋuč-il sit-past.(masc?).sg	sid-el sit-past.sg.m.

All these creations cannot have been fully UNconscious;
but can I prove that they were fully conscious?

No.

But I **can** prove that speakers can perform comparable linguistic manipulations.

Consider Montana Salish (a.k.a. Salish-Pend d'Oreille, a.k.a. Flathead)....

- 150 years of intense contact with English,
- with strong pressure to assimilate;
- borrowings from other indigenous languages,
- but **not** from English (or French, except personal names);
- the few remaining native speakers are also L₁ speakers of English.

A little example of what S-PdO speakers occasionally do:

T Čoní wĩčis Malí

vs.

Wĩčis Malí t Čoní 'Johnny saw Mary'

A more interesting example:

Čoní naq^w' t q'ett tl' Malí

'Johnny stole a (deer) hide from Mary'

vs.

Naqw'-m-ł-t-s Malí q'ett-s t Čoní

'Johnny stole Mary's hide'

Q: Is this an actual change?

A: No. But it's a **possible** change.

Nor is this kind of thing unique to Salish-Pend d'Oreille speakers: cf. Nisgha (Tsimshianic; Tarpent 1987):

In elicitation, bilingual speakers accommodate their ergative syntax **systematically** to English accusative syntax:

- Ordinary Nisgha: no object if identical to object of preceding clause, as in
They heard him but didn't see
- Overt object pronouns used only for emphasis in such constructions
- But object pronouns used freely in accommodated Nisgha as in
They heard him but didn't see him

Conclusion

At least since the mid-19th c., the tradition in historical linguistics has been that

Non-trivial language change is unconscious; speakers don't, and can't, control it.

The traditional view over 150 years and across deep theoretical divides:

- Max Müller (1861): It is 'not in the power of Man to produce or prevent changes in language.'
- Edward Sapir (1921): 'A speaker engaged in a change is not an agent but a victim.'

- Noam Chomsky & Morris Halle (1968) assume 'the adult's inability to modify his grammar except by the addition or elimination of a few rules.'
- Roger Lass (1997): The 'mistake [in functionalist explanations of language change] is considering language change to be something that speakers "do" ...rather than something that happens to their languages...'

Lass again (1997, on his own continuing use of generic *he*):

‘I can’t not use it (without a conscious decision of a type not at all characteristic of “normal” change)...’

(a nasty exam question: Define “normal” linguistic change.)

The anti-tradition (e.g. me):

Speakers can and do make deliberate, conscious changes that affect their language's history profoundly.

- Some such changes are deliberate.
- But the vast (?) majority of changes are unconscious and nondeliberate

That is:

Although speakers **can** change their language deliberately and dramatically, they don't usually do so – even in small groups. They need a powerful social motivation: secrecy, distancing from neighbors, ethnic in-group identification,