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Language contact: Constraints and common paths of contact induced language change

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It is a perhaps trivial truth that language contact over time will change the languages involved, but robust models accounting for contact induced change are still at a premium. We know that languages can influence one another in a situation of contact, but predicting the outcome of a language contact situation remains an immensely challenging task. And even though various substantial contributions to the field (Weinreich 1953; Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Aikhenvald and Dixon 2001; Curnow 2001; Ross 2001; Thomason 2001; Johanson 2002; Winford 2003; Heine and Kuteva 2005; Aikhenvald 2006) have increased our knowledge – both empirical and theoretical – considerably, the principles and mechanisms involved in language contact as well as their interaction remain difficult to capture.

Current interest in language contact research has clearly shifted from the analysis of individual situations of language contact to a systematic comparison of and across language contact situations, perhaps seriously starting in 1953 with Weinreich's seminal monograph, which is still widely quoted. Generally speaking, this comparative approach aligns itself with cross-linguistic typological work where interest does not focus on the grammatical systems of individual languages, but rather on the properties such systems have in common across languages. In the same way as typological work is interested in identifying constraints on the general architecture of languages and thus in restricting the scope of logically conceivable languages, the systematic comparison of language contact situations aims to identify constraints on the quality and quantity of mutual influence between languages. In short, it tries to restrict the scope of possible influence through contact that languages can exert on one another and to identify the constraints involved as well as the paths such contact can take.

Another issue concerns matters of likelihood and relative sequence with which linguistic items and structures are affected in a language as the consequence of contact with another, which are generally held to be principled and not random. Moreover, language contact research inspired by typological work is typically interested in providing explanations and motivations why some paths of contact induced change are common while others are absent or rare, and which assumptions concerning the speakers – the eventual locus of language contact – are necessary in order to explain the phenomena observed.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, language contact appears to be influenced by – if not constrained by – various social parameters of the contact situation, the modules or levels of language involved (phonology, morphology, etc.) as well as the overall architecture of the languages in contact. It has also been hypothesized that issues of markedness and complexity play a role. Since the locus of language contact is the speaker, results from language acquisition research are highly relevant for language contact and need to be included too. Previous research into language contact has unearthed a multitude of formal and functional constraints determining and restricting the outcome of language contact and has also worked towards the identification of the relevant mechanisms. Most of these constraints and motivations have the status of hypotheses rather than proven facts and a lot more work needs to be done to show that they are really warranted. A crucial problem for the analyst is that the factors introduced above interact with one another in intricate ways. Many of these issues are taken up by the contributors to the current volume in one way or another. In what follows, I will make an attempt to address these problems briefly while, at the same time, weave in the perspectives, findings and generalizations laid out by the authors in their contributions.

As far as the social parameters of language contact situations are concerned, it has been observed that the number of speakers in the respective linguistic groups, the relative social

status of the groups involved as well as the relative prestige of the languages to a great extent determine the linguistic outcome of language contact. In addition, it matters a lot how long two communities with different languages stay in contact and, above all, how intense the social and linguistic contact between the groups is. One of the best predictors of contact induced language change probably is the degree of bilingualism found across the communities in contact and, to give an extreme case that may be more widespread than often assumed, whether one community is gradually shifting to the language of the other community, thus instantiating a case of language shift. Such social factors are considered the primary determinants of contact induced change by Thomason and Kaufmann (1988). Clearly, anybody interested in the linguistic principles determining contact induced language change is required to filter out the noise produced by these social factors, but this appears to be an almost insurmountable task because language contact situations usually differ in terms of their social constellations and are thus strictly speaking not comparable. It would be desirable, for analytic purposes at least, to have a set of contact situations that are comparable with respect to the social factors involved, but such a wish is obviously difficult to grant.

The relevance of the social factors summarized in the preceding paragraph immediately manifests itself in the modules of language preferably affected by language contact. For example, it has been found that in a situation of contact between two stable linguistic communities, the replication of material in the one language from the other begins with lexical units and only much later begins to affect grammatical units. Conversely, if a community for whatever reason decides to shift to the language of another group, the modules most likely to be affected are those of phonology and syntax. Thomason (2001) distinguishes these two scenarios by reserving the term ‘borrowing’ for the first case and ‘shift-induced interference’ for the second.

Most of the contributions assembled in the present volume illustrate the relevance of these social factors and even explicitly address them. For example, the linguistic results of language contact in Nepal are impossible to understand without a discussion of the social factors involved. I felt quite puzzled by the complexities of the social constellations described in Michael Noonan's paper. The relevance of social factors is also explicitly addressed in the contributions by Michaela Hilbert (Indian English, Singapore English), Conxita Lleó, Susana Cortés and Ariadna Benet (Catalan, Spanish) and Lukas Pietsch (Irish, English).

It has also been hypothesized that typologically closely related languages are highly susceptible to contact effects while more distantly related languages are assumed to be less likely to influence one another (Thomason 2001). In keeping with fundamental assumptions underlying research into linguistic universals, this hypothesis is based on the idea that languages are not arbitrary collections of structural properties, but obey certain laws of language architecture. As a corollary of such a principled nature of language, it follows that in situations of language contact properties that do not fit into the receiving languages cannot be transmitted or need to be modified so as to fit the receiving language. Provided these assumptions about the structure of language are correct, contact induced language change should be restricted by linguistic universals (e.g. implicational universals) in a principled way. In accordance with results from typological studies one could hypothesize that grammatical hierarchies (animacy hierarchy, accessibility hierarchy) are more strongly complied with in situations of language contact than harmonic universals (Gass and Ard 1984; Croft 2004). Interestingly enough, some phenomena appear to spread from language to language no matter how closely or distantly related the relevant contact languages are, as Thomas Stolz shows in his study on reduplication.

The set of language contact situations discussed in the present volume is quite diverse and it may be left to the reader to decide which of them classify as contact between typologically close or distant languages. I will here restrict myself to a listing of the language pairs analyzed, even though this listing is not fully complete since too great a number of contact situations have been addressed (a surprisingly high number of language pairs involves English): Arabic/ Domari, Basque/ French, Basque/ Spanish, Catalan/ Spanish, English/ Breton, English/ Chinese, English/ Dutch, English/ German, English/ Greek, English/ Hindi, English/ Inuktitut, English/ Irish, English/ Latin, English/ Malay, English/ Montana Salish, Finnish/ Russian, German/ French, German/ Latin, Kadiwéu/ Portuguese, Low German/ Danish, Molisean/ Italian, Nahuatl/ Spanish, Polish/ Latin, Romani/ Greek, Standard French/ Colloquial French, Swedish/ Latin, Takia/ Waskia, Tamangic/ Nepali, Turkish/ Arabic, Turkish/ Azerbaijanian, Turkish/ Georgian, Turkish/ Greek, Turkish/ Kurdish. Mixed languages like Michif and Copper Island Aleut are also discussed.

Another issue concerns the notions ‘markedness’ and ‘complexity’ which are widely held to influence or to be influenced by language contact in spite of the fact that these notions are difficult to define and different definitions can produce highly diverging results. Following somewhat simplifying assumptions that markedness concerns the formal expression of semantic and functional oppositions and that degree of complexity roughly correlates with the number of formal distinctions available, it has often been suggested that an expectable result of contact induced language change is a reduction in terms of markedness and complexity. In other words, in contact situations languages are assumed to lose formal oppositions, grammatical categories, and the like. These assumptions are used as the basis for the analysis of the contact situation between Catalan and Spanish by Conxita Lleó, Susana Cortés and Ariadna Benet, who argue that precisely the marked vowels of Catalan are being lost due to influence from Spanish. Even though these assumptions have a certain intuitive appeal, there

is enough documented evidence that marked features can also be transmitted through language contact and that languages can acquire new categories and means of formal expression thus adding to their complexity. In his discussion of language contact between Tamangic languages and Nepali, Michael Noonan provides ample illustration of this statement albeit mainly in the areas of morphosyntax and rhetorical strategies.

Language contact by necessity has to occur in the heads of the speakers involved and hence a summary of the major factors determining contact induced language change cannot be complete without at least briefly addressing the complex topic of language acquisition. Abstracting away from important differences in the processes of acquisition of a first or a second language, the simultaneous or successive acquisition of two languages, the balanced or unbalanced acquisition of two languages as well as some others, a highly relevant finding of language acquisition research for contact linguistics appears to be the fact that the mutual influence of two simultaneously acquired languages is much lower that usually expected (Meisel 2007). This is a surprising finding from the perspective of research into language contact because it is usually taken for granted that bilingualism leads to contact induced language change. Moreover, cases of contact induced change have amply been attested in previous research activities. In the context of the present volume this general paradox is exemplified in the contribution by Margareta Almgren, Leire Beloki, Itziar Idiazabal and Ibon Manterola, who show that L2 speakers of Basque (children) who acquired Basque through immersion programmes yield nearly native-like production data and show virtually no influence from their Spanish L1. Martin Elsig describes how in French, largely due to internal developments, two varieties (Standard French versus Colloquial French) have emerged which are quite distinct in terms of their interrogative systems and, in spite of extremely close contact, show no mutual influence. Apparently, learners of French have no difficulty in keeping these two varieties of French apart. In sharp contrast to this, however, Michaela

Hilbert in her study of interrogative inversion in Indian English and Singapore English documents how apparently universal strategies of L2 acquisition have led to similar structural patterns in the two varieties of English, thus documenting contact induced change through language acquisition albeit precisely not through mutual influence of the languages involved.

Before turning to a discussion of more specific formal and functional restrictions on contact induced change, I would briefly like to address the mechanisms underlying the replication (borrowing or transfer) of material from one language in another. A very naïve view of language contact would probably hold that speakers take bundles of formal and functional properties, semiotic signs so to speak, from the relevant contact language and insert them into their own language. To be sure, this view is much too simplistic and not seriously maintained any longer. A probably more realistic view held in language contact research is that whatever kind of material is transferred in a situation of language contact, this material necessarily experiences some sort of modification through contact. In his contribution to this volume Lars Johanson explicitly states that "Copies are never 'imported' or 'transferred' foreign elements and never true replicas of their models. There are always dissimilarities in substance, meaning, contextual applicability and frequency between models and copies."

It is also clear that the copying of linguistic signs just by themselves is not the only process of copying or replication, and on the whole probably the least interesting one. Semantic and functional properties of some structural unit of the model language may be copied onto a structural unit of the receiving language that can in some aspect be related to the structure of the model language. In addition, it has been observed that even the combinatorial properties of some unit as well as its frequential properties may be copied or replicated. The relevance of frequential copying is nicely illustrated in the contribution by Nicole Baumgarten and Demet Özçetin, who show that the frequency of first person plural pronouns in German business

communication has increased, apparently under influence from English where the use of such pronouns in this text type is more common. A similar point is made by Erich Steiner who in his contribution argues that parameters like 'the proportion of explicit to implicit referents', 'the proportion of phoric to fully lexical (auto-semantic) phrases', 'the number of newly introduced discourse referents per discourse segment', etc., which give rise to typical text types, are open to contact induced language change due to different frequencies in the contact language. Frequential copying may be accompanied by structural reanalysis and it appears also feasible that this kind of copying can delay or accelerate processes of internal language change, often referred to as 'reinforcement'. There are also claims to the effect that the frequency of occurrence of some item positively correlates with the likelihood of its replication.

In a recent contribution by Heine and Kuteva (2005) an even more subtle mechanism of contact induced language change is proposed whereby speakers are assumed not only to replicate material, functional, combinatorial or frequential properties of some unit in the model language, but also processes of grammaticalization. Heine and Kuteva (2005) suggest that speakers of what they call the 'replica language' can identify grammaticalization processes that have taken place in the 'model language' and use lexical material available in the replica language to grammaticalize some grammatical element found in the model language. This model of contact induced grammaticalization is taken up for discussion in the contribution by Steffen Höder and Ludger Zeevaert, who on the basis of subordinating clauses in Old Swedish argue that the innovation of this clause type can be interpreted as a grammaticalization process triggered by functionally similar, but structurally not equivalent constructions in Latin.

In the wide body of literature on language contact (Weinreich 1953; Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Aikhenvald and Dixon 2001; Curnow 2001; Ross 2001; Thomason 2001; Johanson 2002; Winford 2003; Heine and Kuteva 2005; Aikhenvald 2006), we also find a number of more specific formal and functional constraints, which shall be briefly reviewed in what follows. There appears to be increasing agreement these days that some domains of grammar are more sensitive to contact induced language change than others, even though there is no consensus which grammatical domains exactly are sensitive or insensitive in this sense. A tentative hypothesis could be that structural properties which very much belong to the core of the grammatical system are less susceptible to influence through language contact than more peripheral grammatical domains, where core grammar could refer to parameters like basic word order, head-dependent order, inflectional categories and the like, i.e. altogether structural elements of language whose function is not particularly transparent to the linguistically naïve speaker. Non-core grammar, in contrast, could refer to topicalization structures, periphrastic constructions, sentence connectors, discourse markers and perhaps also some derivational morphology (cf. Ross 2001). It needs to be made clear once again that we are here dealing with hypotheses, not facts, and that these hypotheses are not even very precise.

Nevertheless, some of the contributions to this volume address this problem explicitly and appear to lend support to the idea of grammatical domains that are more or less sensitive to contact induced language change. For example, even though Bernd Heine neatly documents various cases of language contact (Arabic/ Domari, Finnish/ Russian, Kadiwéu/ Portuguese, English/Inuktitut, etc.) where the basic word order of one of the contact languages is changed, the relevant changes all appear to have happened indirectly, namely through the exploitation and generalization of an already existing word order pattern. Bernd Heine states quite succinctly that “In the survey data discussed in this paper we have not come across a single

case where speakers really produced a word order entirely alien to the language concerned – hence, there is not really a change from one word order to a new order." In a similar vein Bernard Comrie argues that inflectional morphology – clearly a core area of grammar – can in principle be borrowed, but is typically reinterpreted as agglutinative morphology, i.e. borrowed in one specific meaning only. He illustrates this claim on the basis of English, German, Polish, Romani, Michif, Copper Island Aleut, among others.

Another formal prerequisite for contact induced language change frequently voiced in the relevant literature concerns the availability of formal correspondences between the languages in contact. In other words, it is assumed that for contact induced change to happen speakers must be able to identify formally equivalent elements in the languages involved. Obviously, this does not concern the transfer of complete linguistic signs from one language to another, as is the case with lexical borrowing, but refers to those cases where the meaning or function of some structural unit of a language, or its frequency of use for that matter, is transferred to some unit of the relevant contact language. The crucial question here is how close or how distant such formal correspondences can be or have to be. In the chapter contributed by Lukas Pietsch, based on the contact situation between Irish and English, it is argued that such processes of identification can also occur on the level of constructions leading to the transfer of complete constructional schemata that may surface in various different realizations. Such identification and mutual adoption of constructional schemata can lead to convergence, i.e. a high number of matching structures.

As far as functional constraints on replication or transfer in situations of language contact are concerned, it has already been hinted at in various places throughout the preceding discussion that linguistic units with a transparent function are more readily replicated than those whose function is opaque. This observation ties in with what was said above about sensitivity to

contact induced language change. Moreover, this notion of transparency of function may be extended so as to embrace the wider concept of cognitive saliency, so that speakers could be hypothesized to replicate preferably those structures whose degree of saliency is relatively high. To be sure, saliency is an extremely broad concept and with respect to language contact it may comprise notions as different as functional transparency, prosodic prominence and maybe even social prestige. Functional transparency and saliency are topics that are addressed in various contributions to the present volume, but perhaps most explicitly in the study on reduplication by Thomas Stolz. There it is argued that reduplicated structures spread so easily in language contact precisely because they are highly transparent functionally and prosodically salient, since the word-initial position is usually exploited. These issues are also taken up for discussion in the studies by Bernard Comrie, Bernd Heine, Lars Johanson, Michael Noonan and Lukas Pietsch.

A final problem that needs to be touched upon briefly is the proper motivation of contact induced language change, i.e. why do speakers replicate items from one language in another in the situation of language contact? A frequently heard answer to this question is that speakers perceive something in the contact language that they feel is missing in their own language. In short, language A lacks what language B has and speakers replicate items to compensate for the perceived gap. Michael Noonan and Erich Steiner – rather cautiously – address this problem within the realms of the current volume. This view has a lot of plausibility for lexical borrowing, but appears to lose in plausibility the less transparent the function of the replicated items becomes. As a matter of fact, it is outright contradictory to an important precondition on replication introduced above, namely that speakers must be able to establish formal and functional correspondences between structural units in the contact languages. Taking this condition seriously we would in effect predict that languages replicate structures and categories they already possess, and – curiously enough – this is what we often

find. Some illustration is provided in the contributions by Bernard Comrie, Michael Noonan and Lukas Pietsch.

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