

INTENTIONAL LANGUAGE CHANGE

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The traditional view of linguistic change is that it is inexorable, beyond the control of the language's speakers either individually or in groups. This view has been expressed repeatedly over the past hundred and fifty years and across deep theoretical divides. Here are a few typical examples:

It is 'not in the power of Man to produce or prevent changes in language' (Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 1861).

'Sometimes we can feel where the drift [of a language] is taking us even while we struggle against it' (Edward Sapir, *Language*, 1921:156).

Noam Chomsky & Morris Halle assume 'the adult's inability to modify his grammar except by the addition or elimination of a few rules' and assign the initiation of significant language change to children's first-language acquisition (*The Sound Pattern of English*, 1968:251).

The 'mistake [in functionalist explanatory strategies] is considering language change to be something that speakers "do" (in any real sense, for any reason), rather than something that happens to their languages...' (Lass 1997:370).

The regularity hypothesis of sound change, given its great importance for historical linguistic methodology, may be the main reason for the traditional insistence that speakers cannot initiate and implement deliberate structural changes in their languages, because its

validity rests on the assumption that sound change proceeds independently of speakers' intentions (and of grammatical context). Presumably no historical linguist would wish to deny that the vast majority of structural linguistic changes fit this picture. Nevertheless, deliberate and conscious decisions taken by speakers can be shown to be responsible for nontrivial changes in various grammatical subsystems in numerous languages. The claim that such changes are impossible is therefore wrong; and so is the related claim, common in generative studies of language change, that very young children who are engaged in first-language acquisition are the sole initiators of significant linguistic change, because very young children lack the social maturity to participate in group decisions about language change.

It must be emphasized that in this context 'linguistic change' refers to the innovation itself, not to the spread of the innovation to later generations and/or to other adult members of the speech community. It is not necessary, therefore, to argue for the ability of an adult to change the grammar s/he internalized in early childhood; all that is necessary is that the adult produces systematically innovative linguistic structures that comprise part of the input for the next generation's language acquisition. Because they are systematic and consistent, these innovative structures must somehow form part of the adult's linguistic competence; but since an adult's competence certainly includes a variety of registers and often includes diverse dialects and even separate languages, it is unnecessary to assume that intentional innovation of new structures means a replacement of early-acquired structures by the new ones. The new structures might be additions to the adult's repertoire, not replacements of earlier structures (even if the earlier structures are no longer used at all).

It is easy to find trivial examples of intentional change. The most obvious instances are lexical innovations, for example slang terms, which have a notoriously rapid rate of turnover. In northern California college slang of ca. 1960, a synonym for *crazy* in its slang sense was *napa*, named for a well-known California mental institution in Napa Valley. In the 1990s

slang spoken by inmates in the Pennsylvania state penitentiary at Pittsburgh, a synonym for *crazy* was *snoo*—from the acronym SNU of the Special Needs Unit, where mentally disturbed inmates were housed. Similar examples can be multiplied endlessly.

Other lexical changes have at least minor structural effects, such as the replacement, by most Modern English writers, of generic *he* with *he or she*, *s/he*, or (though not in Standard English) *they* with a singular referent. The deliberate and highly politicized nature of this change is underlined by Roger Lass (1997:368), who defends his use of generic *he*:

‘I can’t not use it (without a conscious decision of a type not at all characteristic of “normal” change) and still be speaking “my own language”. Like all normal speakers, I am burdened by the historically given.’

This raises an important question: what is ‘normal change’, and is there any practical way to exclude intentional changes from its domain, or any theoretical justification for doing so? If intentional change were impossible, it would make sense to call it non-normal; but if it were impossible, speakers would be unable to abandon generic *he* in any case. These questions cannot be addressed directly here, but it seems extremely unlikely that every intentional change will be identifiable after the fact, and it is therefore risky to assume any sharp distinction between a normal change and a non-normal change.

Perhaps the largest group of intentional changes is to be found in processes of language planning (see e.g. Daoust 1997 for a survey of language planning, or any of the over 57,000 Google hits on the subject). Language academies often focus heavily on vocabulary, but some planners recommend structural changes, especially during processes of standardization. Early in the twentieth century, for instance, the Estonian language reformer Johannes Aavik introduced new structures as well as new words into Estonian, and some of these were adopted by Estonian speakers as regular features of their language; one example is the replacement of

phrasal superlatives (as in English *more handsome*) by one-word superlatives (as in English *handsomest*) (thanks to Ilse Lehiste for this example; see Saagpakk 1982:lxxix-lxxxvii and Oksaar 1972 for further examples).

Another prominent motivation for deliberate linguistic changes is a concern to emphasize a group's identity vis-à-vis some other group(s). (This is sometimes also a type of language planning, though it is rarely part of an official governmental effort.) The clearest cases result directly or indirectly from language contact.

Ma'a, the famous mixed language of Tanzania, is spoken in a speech community in which all of its current speakers are also fluent in at least one Bantu language, Pare. Ma'a has a voiceless lateral fricative, inherited from Cushitic; Pare, like other Bantu languages of the region, has no such phoneme. Maarten Mous notes that modern Ma'a speakers insert this lateral fricative into Pare words when speaking Pare, as a means of emphasizing their differentness from Pare and the difficulty of their Ma'a language (1994:199)—an instance of deliberate phonological change. A comparable but more dramatic example, this time of morphological rather than phonological distortion, comes from Bougainville Island, Papua New Guinea, as described by Donald Laycock (1982). As has been reported from elsewhere in New Guinea, speakers of the Uisai dialect of Buin apparently decided that their speech was too similar to that of their neighbors; without such a decision, followed by deliberate action, it is difficult or impossible to explain the change that distinguishes their dialect: all nouns that are masculine in other dialects of Buin, with all their elaborate gender agreement marking patterns throughout the sentence, are feminine in Uisai, and vice versa. This cannot have been a gradual, incremental change, and it surely was not the result of very young children's innovation.

A sociolinguistically similar example is found in Lambayeque Quechua, a variety of Quechua spoken in Peru (and, by report, in some other varieties of Quechua as well). Speak-

ers of Lambayeque Quechua told a visiting linguist (Dwight Shaver, as cited by David Weber, p.c. 1999) that they felt that they spoke too much like their neighbors, so they distorted their vocabulary by reversing the order of certain vowel-consonant sequences, replacing e.g. *yawar* with *yawra*, *kabalta* with *kablata*, and *-taq* with *-tqa*.

More thoroughgoing lexical distortion has been reported from widely separated localities, occasionally with significant enough results to produce (arguably) a new language. An especially striking example was reported from Baluchistan, in what is now Pakistan, in 1913 (Bray 1913:139-140). Sweeping changes that included such devices as metathesis and the addition of prefixes and suffixes made this language unintelligible to non-members of the speech community:

‘Mōkkī, the cant of the Lōrīs,...is an artificial jargon, which the Lōrīs have mechanically invented on the basis of the language of the people among whom they live, and which they more especially employ when they want to keep their meaning to themselves...And yet so universally and successfully is the jargon used, that it seems doubtful whether its artificiality suffices to debar it from being classed as a language...it is at any rate acquired naturally and as a matter of course by Lōrī children; it is no longer, it would seem, simply a secret patter; it is becoming a language for the home-circle...both Brahui and Baloch admit freely that Mōkkī is beyond them.’

With changes in the vocabulary so massive that people who had previously understood the group’s language were no longer able to do so, it is difficult to classify Mōkkī simply as a changed later form of any earlier language and thus as a member of a family tree.

There are, however, clearer examples of the disruption of language transmission, understood as the transmission of a complete language, including all grammatical subsystems,

from one generation to the next, with only relatively minor incremental changes. Some of these involve intentional change in the creation of bilingual mixed languages, in contact situations in which a new (sub-)ethnic group arises. Bilingual mixed languages like Michif (spoken primarily in Manitoba and North Dakota) and Mednyj Aleut (once spoken on Mednyj, or Copper, Island off the far eastern coast of Russia) cannot have arisen gradually, and they almost certainly emerged at least in part through deliberate, conscious decision. Michif arose as the language of a new mixed-blood White/Algonquian population that coalesced into a separate speech community, culturally and legally distinct from both source populations. Michif consists of Cree (Algonquian) verbal lexicon and sentence structure, including Cree phonology and fully elaborated Cree morphology, combined with French noun phrases in which the lexical items, the phonology, the morphology, and the syntax are all from Canadian French (see e.g. Bakker & Papen 1997). There is a bit of leakage from the Cree parts into the French noun phrases—Cree demonstratives and a Cree obviate suffix—but otherwise the two components are kept quite separate. Michif must have been created by fluent bilinguals; it cannot have been created by very young children, because children learning two first languages have not been found to create such mixtures. The language's date of origin is not known precisely, but it must have arisen in a short period of time.

Mednyj Aleut is (or was—it had almost vanished at last report) the language of a mixed-blood Aleut/Russian population that arose as a result of the Russian fur-seal trade that flourished around the Aleutian Islands during much of the nineteenth century. The language is mostly Aleut with some Russian admixture (loanwords and perhaps also some structural borrowings), except for the finite verb morphology, which has been imported intact from Russian (this characterization of the language as a whole is somewhat controversial; see Thomason 1997 and references cited there for description and discussion). Like the Michif speech community, the creators of Mednyj Aleut were a mixed-blood population, resulting

from unions of Russian traders and Aleut women. The mixed-bloods held a distinct economic and social position on Mednyj Island. Here too the exact date of origin is unknown, but it must have been considerably less than a hundred years, because the conditions that gave rise to it were not present before 1826, when Aleuts were first settled on the island by Russian fur-seal traders, and they were no longer present much beyond 1867, when the Russian American Company vanished and most Russians therefore left the island.

The conclusion is that adults are not only capable of inventing new words and new meanings for old words and then adding the innovative forms to their language or replacing old words with new ones; and they are not only able to modify a few fairly minor grammatical rules. They are also able to implement much more elaborate changes in their language, including massive lexical distortion and massive structural change as well. In the most extreme cases—given limits on the time available for the changes and/or on the possibilities for gradual incremental change—a significant component of these changes is almost certainly deliberate, conscious decisions by the speakers who initiate the changes; in a few cases, these decisions are actually articulated by the speakers. It is likely that the most successful intentional structural changes occur in small, compact speech communities. Exceptions may be found in some instances of national language planning, including language standardization, but nothing as elaborate as the changes that produced Uisai, Mōkkī, Michif, and Mednyj Aleut is known (at least to me) from successful language-planning efforts. Except for language planning, the literature on deliberate changes is sparse. Some discussion and references to particular examples can be found in Thomason (2001, chs. 6 and 8), and see also Thomason 1999.

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