

Does Language Contact Simplify Grammars?

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In recent years the old notion that extensive language contact tends to lead to overall simplification of linguistic structure has attracted a new set of adherents, among them Peter Trudgill and John McWhorter. English is frequently cited as an example of a language that has undergone dramatic simplification as a result of language contact, both in the transition from Old English to Middle English and in the emergence of a variety of Englishes all over the world. In this paper I will argue that extensive language contact does not lead predictably to overall grammatical simplification, and that English does not present a historical picture of simplification, whether due to language contact or to internally-motivated change. My main examples will come from contact situations that primarily involve hunter-gatherer communities whose languages have not been standardized, although they often display considerable dialectal variation. I have too little information to assess Trudgill's claim that 'low-contact languages' tend to remain complex, but I will argue against his claim that 'high-contact languages' tend to become less complex.

Outline of the talk:

- Language change in general → overall simplification?
- Most say contact-induced language change → simplification.
- A few say contact-induced language change → complication.
- I think they're all wrong, because:

- It is **very hard** (impossible?) to establish “→ more complex”.
- Imperfect learning \neq (only) simplification.
- English isn’t all that simple.
- Adults aren’t such bad language learners.

- Conclusion: There is no viable one-size-fits-all theory.

Language change in general → overall simplification?

No.

But many 19th-century Indo-Europeanists (e.g. August Schleicher) believed:

- Languages emerge and develop to a pinnacle of abstract structure
- and then they decay.

E.g. Proto-Indo-European was at the pinnacle — **lots** of inflectional morphology — while modern IE languages like English are decayed.

But...**Morphological simplification \neq overall grammatical simplification.**

(And this is also true of contact-induced morphological simplification.)

A truism in historical linguistics:

If you simplify a language’s structure in one place, you are likely to complicate it somewhere else.

(This is hard to test! And there are clear exceptions in cases of attrition in language death. But otherwise, on the basis of a great deal of evidence, it seems to be generally true.)

Claims that contact-induced language change → simplification:

E.g. Vogt 1948, Coteanu 1957; and Jeffers & Lehiste 1979, Whinnom 1980, Givón 1979, Mühlhäusler 1980.

And more recently.....

“...communities involved in large amounts of language contact, to the extent that this is contact between adolescents and adults who are beyond the critical threshold for language acquisition, are likely to demonstrate linguistic pidginisation, including simplification, as a result of imperfect language learning” (Trudgill 2004:306).

And also:

“Type 1 communities [relatively isolated, mainly L₁ speakers] permit complexities, while Type 2 communities [many L₂ learners, emphasis on ‘the communicative function’] restrict them” (Kusters 2003:9).

And also again:

“A crucial factor in language change is adults *abbreviating* the machinery of a language, along a gradient of degree according to typological distance between native language(s) and acquired language, demographic proportion of learners to native speakers, and the extent to which the native version of the acquired language remains available in the genesis context over time” (McWhorter 2005:265).

There’s also a minority view:

Contact-induced language change → grammatical complication.

E.g. C.-J. Bailey: Contact-induced change involves linguistic complication, the development of marked features.

And more recently, Johanna Nichols: “It can be concluded that contact among languages fosters complexity...” (1992:193).

I don’t believe that either of these positions is correct.

That is: I think the historical linguists’ truism works for externally-motivated change as well as for internally-motivated change — that simplification at one structure point is likely to be offset by complication at another. (Although there are cases where language contact

has arguably led to overall grammatical complication, they are rare; in this talk I'll focus mainly on claims of overall grammatical simplification, as signalled in the title of the talk.)

There are serious problems with the simplification claims. First,

Can overall grammatical complexity be defined and/or measured?

I am not optimistic.

Östen Dahl offers two definitions:

- **objective complexity:** the length of the simplest complete description of the language as a system
- **agent-related complexity:** ease/difficulty of learning the language

Cf. also Kusters (2003:6): "...I define complexity as the amount of effort an outsider has to make to become acquainted with the language in question."

But we have no complete description of **any** natural human language; and ease of learning is also problematic as a potential measure of complexity (more on this later).

The second problem with claims of overall grammatical simplification: morphological simplification is the focus of much (not all) of the recent work in this area, but

Morphological simplification \neq overall grammatical simplification

(wie gesagt)

The traditional claim is that when (especially inflectional) morphology is lost, the syntax takes over its functions. But those who argue for overall grammatical simplification tend to consider only superficial syntactic features like word order.

One problem with this methodology is that word order is notoriously slippery as a (partial) indicator of a language's syntactic structure.

Another problem with the idea that less morphology = simpler structure (an idea that dates from at least the mid-19th century) overlooks the fact that no one has yet succeeded in

producing a full description of any language's syntactic structure. It is, to put it mildly, not an easy task, because a language's syntactic structure is **very complicated**.

The third problem with recent claims of grammatical simplification, which appeal to imperfect L₂ acquisition:

Imperfect learning \neq (only) simplification

Shift-induced interference, with imperfect learning, comprises at least two processes:

- L₂ learners may fail to learn certain target language (TL) features, especially marked features.
- L₂ learners may carry over features from their original L₁ into their version of the TL = TL₂.

And often a third process is also involved:

- **If** the shifting group and the original TL group merge into a single speech community, original TL (TL₁) speakers are likely to borrow a subset of TL₂ features, \rightarrow TL₃.

The point here is that only the first process, failure to learn TL features, is at all likely to simplify TL structure, even locally — and it doesn't always do so.

A few examples of non-simplificatory shift-induced interference:

- The Russian “second genitive” is a partitive that arose when shifting Finnic speakers failed to learn the opaque declensional distinction between old *o*-stems and old *u*-stems, and instead introduced their own partitive-vs.-genitive distinction into their L₂ Russian.
- Also thanks to shifting Finnic speakers, Lithuanian acquired three new noun cases (illative, allative, adessive) and an evidential construction.

- The Ethiopic Semitic double-prefix causative construction (as opposed to the original Semitic single-prefix construction) is partly modeled on the double-suffix Cushitic causative, under the influence of shifting Cushitic speakers.
- Similarly, the Ethiopic Semitic prefix + suffix verbal negation pattern (replacing a prefix-only Semitic construction) has been influenced by the suffix-only Cushitic formation.
- ETC., ETC. (That is, it is very easy to find lots of examples of non-simplifying shift-induced interference.)

So even locally, at a single structure point, and even without considering the consequences of a given change elsewhere in the grammar,

shift-induced interference is very often not simplificatory.

Well, but: **How about English? It got simpler, right?**

Not so obvious.

McWhorter (2002) identifies ten lost features:

- inherent reflexives
- external possessors
- gender beyond noun
(but OE already preferred natural gender)
- verbal prefixes
- directional adverbs
- *be*-perfect (but this was still common through the 16th century, and it is still found — though [usually?] only with a single verb — in some dialects. The relevance of the 16th century is that it's probably too late for the loss of this feature to be due to shifting Norse speakers.)
- passive formed with a *become* verb

- V2 word order (but cf. Kroch et al. 1997 — see below)
- 2nd singular pronoun *thou* (but this remains in some dialects; and its loss in most dialects has been claimed to be due to the general European T/V distinction — i.e. to a borrowing of that distinction, probably from Old French, and subsequent analogic extension to all 2sg. functions; if this is correct, Norse influence had nothing to do with it)
- indefinite pronoun (but this loss has been claimed to be connected with the loss of V2 & the decline of the English subjunctive; this doesn't mean Norse was **not** involved as a cause of the change, but if there was an internal source of the change, then an extra-strong case would need to be made to justify a claim of contributing Norse influence)

The point is that several of the features that McWhorter proposes as examples of shift-induced interference from Norse don't hold up under a close analysis. Much more detailed analysis of the relevant morphosyntactic changes would be needed to test his hypothesis for these and the other changes he lists. As it stands, his basic argument is this: The loss of all these features, as a package, is unheard of elsewhere in Germanic and therefore cannot be due to internal change alone; French influence is ruled out by sociohistorical evidence that at least some of the ten changes started in the North, not in the southern areas where French speakers settled; and therefore, what other cause could there be other than Norse influence? The “what else?” argument has never been popular in historical linguistics, for good reason. And McWhorter has no argument, other than assertion, to support his claim that all these changes cannot be due to internally-motivated change. It is fairly common for one member of a language family to go further than other members in the direction of a widespread process of drift (in this case, a drift toward analyticity, among other things).

McWhorter's V2 feature, at least, does not support his claim:

Kroch, Taylor, & Ringe (1997) argue that, in Middle English, there's a sharp division between northern and southern dialects with respect to V2:

- South: V2 constraint = OE; also = Yiddish, Icelandic
- North: V2 constraint = Scandinavian; also = German, Dutch

The point here is that V2 was still robust in Middle English; Norse did influence the constraint in the North; but the northern V2 constraint was not simpler than the southern

V2 constraint. If Norse speakers acquired English V2, with some alteration in the direction of their native V2 constraint, then they can hardly also have been responsible, through massively unsuccessful acquisition of English, for the total loss of V2 later.

So there **was** Norse influence on V2 (etc.) in N(E) dialects, but not clearly (*pace* McWhorter) → simplification (or loss).

What about phonology?

This is relevant because Trudgill argues that high-contact languages have neither very large nor very small phonemic inventories.

But there are counterexamples — for instance Chinook Jargon, a pidgin and therefore by definition a super-high-contact language:

p	t		ts	č	k	k ^w	q	q ^w	ʔ
p'	t'	tł	ts'	(č')	k'	k ^{w'}	q'	q ^{w'}	
b	d				g				
		ł	s	š	x	x ^w	ɣ	ɣ ^w	
m	n				(ŋ)				
	r	l							
w				y					

In fact, the entire Pacific Northwest Sprachbund (centered in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia) features consonant systems with all these consonants, and a few more besides. This is relevant because this is a notably high-contact area overall.

A couple of other (minor?) issues

- Generalizations about language contact leading to overall simplification tend to be based on a very few cases.
- There are still very few detailed sociolinguistic studies of ongoing contact situations; so generalizing (as Trudgill does) about relative isolation, low contact, tight vs. loose social network structures, and other social factors is dangerously circular.

One remaining big issue:

Is English easy to learn?

That is, has English become simpler, easier to learn, because of extensive shift-induced interference?

- McWhorter: English (like some other languages) has been “broken down by large numbers of adult learners”.
- Both Trudgill & (citing Trudgill) McWhorter rely on “the lousy language-learning abilities of the human adult”.

BUT

- Most shift-induced interference does **not** produce major change in the TL, much less massive structural disruption.
- Adults aren’t such bad language learners — especially in societies in which multilingualism is highly valued — and 5-10% of adult learners **do** achieve L₁ fluency in their L₂.

Birdsong (2005) argues for a more nuanced view of SLA:

“...age effects in SLA are not indiscriminate, because they disrupt the learning and retrieval of idiosyncratic, irregular forms[...]more than abstract elements of the grammar....The age functions for both regulars and irregulars are not characterized by discontinuities or bottoming out, but by linear, unbounded performance decrements.”

Then there’s the issue of basic communicative skills vs. genuine fluency:

- A Swede: English grammar is easier, but the pragmatics is hard.
- An American in Scotland: Biblical Gaelic is too hard to understand, so in church they use English — but in a register \neq the spoken English of the community, and unintelligible to an American visitor.
- Many Australian Aboriginals:
English **is** easier; but English speakers have a secret language, and they withhold their **real** language from Aboriginals.

And it's not just English: similar comments have been made about other “easy” languages, e.g. Indonesian:

“Indonesian is an easy language to learn to speak badly” (attributed to John Wolff).

A final point about adult L₂ learning:

Consider bilingual mixed languages, e.g. Michif:

- NPs: French (lexicon, phonology, morphosyntax)
- VPs, overall sentence structure: Cree (lexicon, phonology, morphosyntax)

So, for instance, a Michif noun must be specified for

- masc./fem. gender, sg./plu. number
(for the French NP morphosyntax)
- animate/inanimate gender, obviative/proximate (for the Cree VP morphosyntax)

This is **more complicated** than either Cree or French alone, and
adults must have created this language.

[In the question period after I gave this talk in Bamberg, an audience member asked, What about “Light Warlpiri”, which — in the evidence provided by Carmel O’Shannessy, who discovered this language — was created by adolescents? My response (amplified from the response I gave in Bamberg): Like Trudgill, I’m lumping adolescents and adults together; this is careless, and I should’ve said so explicitly. It doesn’t affect my argument about bilingual mixed languages, because my point is that they cannot have been created by young children during a process of bilingual first-language acquisition, for two reasons: first, they resemble nothing that has been reported for bilingual first-language acquisition (and in fact they must have been created by fluent bilinguals, since there is no significant distortion in either of their linguistic components); and second, young children do not have the social perspective that would motivate the creation of a new language. All the bilingual mixed languages that have been analyzed carefully appear to have been created to serve as an in-group language for a new ethnic (sub-)group. Adolescents are surely responsible for some of them, but not all — for instance, Media Lengua, a Spanish/Quechua mixture spoken in the Andes, was apparently created by young men who had learned Spanish during periods of construction work in (Spanish-speaking) cities and who then returned to their Quechua-speaking rural homes with a new separate identity. But others, not only Light Warlpiri, were probably created by adolescents, and this is no surprise: teenagers are famous for their linguistic creativity, especially, but not only, in lexical innovation (a.k.a. slang).]

Conclusion:

There is no one-size-fits-all theory that will enable us to predict accurately the results of language contact, no matter how many social factors we take into account — and this is true even if we could arrive at a viable way of comparing two languages in terms of overall simplicity/complexity (which we can’t, or at least we haven’t done so yet).

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