1. Introduction

This paper explores several theoretical issues that arise in the study of universals of language change, both from the perspective of processes of dialect divergence and from the perspective of language contact. A major conclusion is that drawing a dichotomy between proposed “vernacular universals” and contact-induced change is not a good idea, because many linguistic changes involve both kinds of process—that is, various processes of contact-induced change and also universal tendencies of various kinds.

Historical linguists traditionally appeal to three ultimate causes of language change: drift, which refers to structural tendencies inherent in a given language (resulting from what is often called pattern pressures or structural imbalances); dialect borrowing; and foreign interference. The last two are of course not separable in any precise way, for two reasons. First, the spread of every linguistic change is due to contacts among speakers; and second, dialect borrowing and foreign interference are points on a continuum—it is impossible to draw a neat line between situations in which dialects influence each other and situations in which separate languages influence each other, since the overall process by which sister dialects become sister languages is gradual. Still, different methods have been developed for the study of dialect borrowing, i.e. interference between systems that are lexically and structurally very similar, and foreign interference, primarily the study of interference between systems that are not close lexically and/or structurally (Thomason 2003).

Drift as a cause of change subsumes pattern pressures specific to a particular language as well as universal structural tendencies, especially those driven by markedness. Underlying
the concept of drift is an assumption that a prominent (though by no means the only) driving force behind internally-motivated language change is ease of learning, which includes both ease of perception and ease of production. Because ease of learning also informs many or most types of contact-induced change, it is hardly surprising to find that the same types of change, and often the very same changes, result from drift and interference. For this reason, anyone seeking the best explanation for a given linguistic change must consider potential internal motivations and also potential external motivations.

The relevance of this point for the study of vernacular universals in general and World Englishes in particular is that, because different causes can have similar effects, a universal feature of “nonstandard” English-lexicon varieties (where “standard” is taken to mean conforming to the prescriptive norms of the historically most prominent English-dominant nations, i.e. the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) might not arise from the same source(s) in every variety. So, for instance, the typologically rare interdental fricatives might be absent in some nonstandard English dialects of England as a result of drift, but their absence in an English-lexifier creole might be due instead to structural contribution from the creole creators’ original native languages—and also, quite possibly, to drift. It is therefore not sufficient, in arguing for or against a contact explanation for a particular change, to show that the same change has occurred elsewhere under different circumstances; and the possibility of multiple causation, which is likely very common in developments that have led to World Englishes and English-lexifier pidgins and creoles around the globe, must not be overlooked. (See §4 below for a discussion of how to decide whether or not language contact has played a role in motivating a particular change.)

To the three traditional causes of linguistic change we must now add a fourth: deliberate
change by groups of speakers (Thomason 1997, 2007). Such changes, which frequently but by no means always involve lexical innovations, are found primarily in the languages of small speech communities, but they also occur in large speech communities, usually (maybe only) through formal language-planning activities. I will not consider deliberate changes in this paper, but they lurk in the background, ready to throw a monkey-wrench into any simplistic theory of what kinds of linguistic change are possible.

The empirical focus of this paper is twofold: first, on changes that have occurred under well-established contact conditions (including, to a limited extent, pidgins and creoles), and second on changes that have occurred in circumstances that suggest that drift was the major factor. Changes in both standard and nonstandard dialects will be examined.

Although the topic of vernacular universals has been most extensively explored in studies of World Englishes (see e.g. Chambers 2004), my main examples will come from other languages, since the concept of vernacular universals is intended to be general, not specific to English.

Because of the frequent emphasis on simplification as a (or the) major component of processes of change in such cases, I will concentrate especially on changes that are implausible as simplifications (§2). I will argue that in spite of the ease-of-learning view of much internally-motivated change, neither internally-motivated linguistic change nor contact-induced linguistic change is predictably either simplifying or complicating (§3). In other words, some internally-motivated changes simplify a language’s structure, some complicate it; and some externally-motivated changes complicate a language’s structure, while others simplify it. And many changes are neutral: they have neither effect. Finally, the paper concludes with a consideration of the possibility (or not) of distinguishing changes due to universal tendencies from changes due to language contact (§4).

2. Are standard dialects more complex than nonstandard varieties?
Chambers claims that ‘[t]he theory of Vernacular Roots begins with the obvious but hitherto unexploited observation that dialects become more complex as they become more standard or literary’ (2006). But is this observation in fact accurate for English and/or for standard dialects in general? Certainly the opposite claim has been made for English, as in the following passage from Thomason & Kaufman (1988: 329):

‘Standard languages tend to be simpler (at least at the time of codification) than many of the vernacular dialects on which they are based, partly because they must accommodate the production habits of speakers on the low end of the range of structural complexity within a network of dialects.’

Thomason & Kaufman, however, distinguish between two general types of standardization processes—evolutionary and revolutionary (1988: 209-210)—and the tendency toward simplicity is likely to be true only of standard dialects of the first type. Evolutionary processes arise through dialect mixture when a particular region or city becomes dominant for sociopolitical reasons; its speech becomes a model for official and social purposes, speakers of other dialects move to the dominant locale and adopt its dialect, with modifications through dialect mixture or even koinéization, and so the standard language emerges. Standard English and many other standard languages of Europe arose in this way. In the other general type of standardization, the revolutionary (or artificial) process, there is little admixture (at least at first) because one region’s or city’s dialect is elevated in toto (and rather abruptly) to standard status. This process is common around the world; one European example is the former Standard SerboCroatian, together with its newly-emerging derivatives Croatian, Bosnian, et al. Examples are more common outside Europe, for instance Standard Indonesian. The relevance of this distinction for the question of the simplicity of standard dialects is that the second type—standard varieties
that arise by fiat rather than through relatively gradual development—are unlikely to fit into a model that assumes that all standard varieties are more complex than all nonstandard dialects: Standard SerboCroatian, for instance, is (or was) just another dialect that happened to get elevated to standard status, so it is arguably no more complex, and no simpler, than any of the nonstandard SerboCroatian dialects. (I use the term SerboCroatian to refer to the dialects of the majority language of the former Yugoslavia, before the break-up of that country into several nations. The specific developments discussed in this paper all occurred prior to the recent break-up of the old Yugoslavia.) Whether Standard English (or any other gradual, ‘evolutionary’ standard dialect) is simpler or more complex than nonstandard dialects is an empirical question that cannot be solved by mere assertion, by Chambers or Thomason & Kaufman or anyone else. In one sense, admittedly, a standard dialect that becomes the vehicle of administration of a modern nation-state is almost certain to be more complex than any nonstandard dialect: if the dialect that has no history of national usage comes to be used for running a country, new vocabulary will certainly be needed, especially administrative lexicon. This increase in technical terminology is all too likely to be offset by a sharp decrease in such lexical domains as ethnobiological terminology and other non-urban semantic fields, if the new standard dialect happens to come from a previously rural dialect (but usually it doesn’t). (An increase in literary lexicon is not a necessary concomitant, though, especially if the culture previously had a robust oral literature.)

For the topic of vernacular universals, however, structural changes are more interesting. Here’s one example in which the development of a grammatical dimension in the standard dialect turned out to be simpler than a partly parallel development in certain nonstandard dialects. The language is Lithuanian, and the grammatical dimension is case inflection in nouns. During the 16th and 17th centuries, as a result of interference from the case-rich
language(s) of shifting Finnic speakers, Lithuanian acquired three new cases, an illative, an allative, and an adessive. All three cases were widely used in the 16th and 17th centuries, but the allative and the adessive have now vanished from Standard Lithuanian. In certain isolated southeastern dialects, however, all three of these new cases are still in regular use, along with the inherited cases that are shared by the standard and nonstandard dialects. (See Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 242-243 for discussion of this example, which comes ultimately from Senn 1966: 92, and cf. also Fairbanks 1977: 117.)

Other examples of standard-dialect structure that is arguably simpler than nonstandard-dialect structure can be found easily in newly-standardized languages. Here’s an example from Montana Salish, a gravely endangered language spoken in northwestern Montana (U.S.). The elaborate Montana Salish phonemic inventory has thirty-eight consonants, including four pharyngeal resonant consonants: plain, glottalized, labialized, and glottalized labialized. Efforts to preserve and revitalize the language have resulted in an increase in written materials, which, although this is not a dialect that is ever likely to be used for official governmental purposes, involves a process of standardization: choices are being made about which symbols should be included in the orthography. Symbol choice does not in itself present major problems, because the writing system is recent (so that it fits the phonemic structure closely) and is based on an Americanist version of the International Phonetic Alphabet. But the four pharyngeal phonemes are problematic, because most of the fluent speakers, and all of the younger tribal members who wish to learn their heritage language, either don’t hear the pharyngeals at all or perceive them as vowel length. If they don’t hear them, they can’t write them. So although the few remaining elders who speak the language fluently have regularly-occurring pharyngeals in numerous words, it is difficult to justify incorporating these phonemes systematically into the writing system—it would guarantee consistent misspellings. The fluent elders, who
don’t generally attempt to write their native language, will continue to pronounce the four pharyngeals when they speak, but no one else will either pronounce or write them; and in this respect, the newly-standard dialect will be simpler than the “nonstandard” dialects spoken by these elders.

Finally, although pidgins are frequently cited (incorrectly, in my opinion, for historical reasons) as simplified versions of the vocabulary-base language, even pidgins often have complex features that are lacking in the standard variety of the lexifier language. One example is shared by the English-lexicon pidgins American Indian Pidgin English (AIPE, now extinct) and Tok Pisin of Papua New Guinea: this is the marking of transitive verbs by a transitive suffix—the same suffix, in fact, although these suffixes must represent independent developments, not some old historical link between these two pidgins. The suffix is -um (AIPE)/-im (Tok Pisin), both ultimately from English him. Their use is clear in sentences like AIPE Me see-um chief ‘I see/saw the chief’ (literally ‘1sg. see.transitive chief’) and Tok Pisin Na em i pain-im wanpela man ‘Then s/he found a man’ (lit. ‘then s/he predicate.marker find-transitive one man’).

So far my examples of structural complication in nonstandard dialects (and pidgins), as opposed to standard dialects, have come from language contact situations: shift-induced interference in the case of the new Lithuanian cases, borrowing from English (perhaps mediated by literacy in English) in the case of the shaky Montana Salish pharyngeal phonemes, and language creation in multilingual contexts in the case of the AIPE and Tok Pisin transitive suffixes. Examples that complicate nonstandard dialect structure are easy to find in internally-motivated change too. One instance is found in the history of the oblique plural cases in masculine o-/C-stem noun inflection in several SerboCroatian dialects (see Thomason 1977 for the development of SerboCroatian C-stem masculine nouns from older o-stem masculine nouns). SerboCroatian is traditionally divided into four
primary dialect groups: Štokavian, Čakavian, Kajkavian, and Torlak, although Torlak is sometimes seen as a subdivision of Štokavian (see Ivić 1958 for an authoritative discussion of the various dialect groups).

The process of drift has led to a variety of configurations of the seven inherited noun cases in SerboCroatian dialects. In the three oblique cases of the plural—the instrumental, dative, and locative—many dialects, including Standard SerboCroatian, have undergone partial or total syncretism; other dialects have not. In Table 1, the starting point for these three cases is represented by late Proto-Slavic and echoed, after regular sound changes, by 14th-century Štokavian SerboCroatian (SC) (Svane 1958). Following these two languages are the relevant case suffixes for modern Standard SerboCroatian (a Štokavian dialect) and one representative nonstandard dialect from each of the four major dialect groups: Resava (Štokavian; Ivković 1927), Novi (Čakavian; Belić 1909-1910), Virje (Kajkavian; Fancev 1907), and North Timok (Torlak; Stanojević 1911).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LANGUAGE/DIALECT</th>
<th>INST.pl</th>
<th>DAT.pl</th>
<th>LOC.pl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proto-Slavic:</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-omŭ</td>
<td>-ĕxŭ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th-c. Štok. SC:</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-omĭ</td>
<td>-exĭ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard SC:</td>
<td>-ima</td>
<td>-ima</td>
<td>-ima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resava SC (Štok.):</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-ima</td>
<td>-a/-i/-ima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novi SC (Čak.):</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-on</td>
<td>-ih</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virje SC (Kajk.):</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-om</td>
<td>-e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Timok SC (Torlak):</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 (no oblique plural cases)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Masculine o-stem oblique plural cases in SerboCroatian and its immediate ancestors.
Of the five modern dialects, only Northern Timok, which has lost all oblique plural cases, is simpler than Standard SC, in which the three oblique plural cases have merged morphologically. The other Štokavian dialect, Resava, has undergone partial syncretism in the instrumental and locative cases—one variant of the locative is identical to the instrumental suffix -i, and another locative variant, -ima, is identical to the dative suffix -ima—while the other two modern nonstandard dialects, Novi and Virje, have kept all three cases separate. There are other dialects besides Standard SC that have merged all three of these cases, and others besides Resava that have merged two of them. The point, however, is that Standard SC is simpler than many nonstandard dialects in this feature. In other features the standard dialect is more complex than at least some nonstandard dialects, and in still other features the standard dialect equals at least some nonstandard dialects in complexity. No valid generalization can be made, therefore, about the overall complexity of Standard SC by comparison to nonstandard dialects.

The same conclusion can be drawn from a set of changes in Slavic territory as a whole, namely, the history of the noun-class category of animacy in Slavic languages. The changes in the individual languages are, as far as can be determined, internally-motivated, i.e. due to drift. In some languages and dialects, the result is a simpler system than in Proto-Slavic; in others, the result is a more complex system; in still others, the Proto-Slavic morphological pattern is preserved intact. There is no correlation between the morphological results and the status of a given language/dialect as standard or nonstandard.

The morphological distinction between animate and inanimate nouns was clearly very new in late Proto-Slavic, and its origin has been a subject of lively controversy for decades (see e.g. Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 249-250). In the earliest Slavic texts its morphological and semantic range was quite limited: the distinction was present only in the accusative
singular of masculine \textit{o}-stem nouns, and in this noun class only free, adult, human males were grammatically animate. Specifically, in an animate masculine \textit{o}-stem noun the accusative singular suffix was identical to the genitive singular suffix, while in inanimate \textit{o}-stem nouns the accusative singular matched the nominative singular.

In all the daughter languages of Proto-Slavic the animacy category has expanded semantically since Proto-Slavic times, usually to include all mammals and often to include other creatures as well. Morphologically, as noted above, the results vary considerably between and often within languages. Table 2 shows the patterns in late Proto-Slavic and three modern daughter-language systems: Standard SerboCroatian, Novi SerboCroatian (Belić 1909-1910), and Standard Russian.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{lcc}
Language/Dialect & inanimate & animate \\
\hline
Proto-Slavic: & sg.\texttt{ACC} = sg.\texttt{NOM} & sg.\texttt{ACC} = sg.\texttt{GEN} \\
Standard SC: & sg.\texttt{ACC} = sg.\texttt{NOM} & sg.\texttt{ACC} = sg.\texttt{GEN} \\
Novi SC: & ACC = NOM & ACC = GEN \\
Standard Russian: & sg.\texttt{ACC} = sg.\texttt{NOM} & sg.\texttt{ACC} = sg.\texttt{GEN} \\
St. Russ., all noun classes: & pl.\texttt{ACC} = pl.\texttt{NOM} & pl.\texttt{ACC} = pl.\texttt{GEN} \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textbf{Table 2. Animacy in Slavic languages}

Standard SerboCroatian has the exact same morphological pattern for the animacy category as in late Proto-Slavic: the only grammatically animate nouns are masculine \textit{o}-stems, and the distinction appears only in the accusative singular: accusative = genitive.
singular in animate nouns, accusative = nominative singular in inanimate nouns. In Novî SerboCroatian the distinction has remained in the singular of masculine o-/C-stems, but it has also spread to the plural. The result—formally, removal of the ‘singular’ specification required for Proto-Slavic and Standard SC—is a simpler system, in terms of rule complexity: the Novî rule is more general.

It isn’t clear whether the Standard Russian system is simpler or more complicated than the Proto-Slavic and Standard SC system. The singular pattern is identical to both of those languages: animacy is grammatically relevant only in masculine o-stem nouns and only in the accusative singular. But in the plural, all noun classes—not just the masculine o-/C-stems but also the a-stems and the old i-stems (modern feminine C-stems)—have an animate/inanimate distinction, via extension of the singular masculine o-stem pattern to the o-stem plural and then generalization of the plural pattern: accusative = genitive in plural animate nouns, accusative = nominative in plural inanimate nouns. Unlike the Novî SC pattern, the Standard Russian pattern may be considered more complicated than the older system, because two rules are needed, one for singular and one for plural nouns; these two rules cannot be conflated. Nevertheless, both Standard Russian and Novî SC have generalized analogically from the late Proto-Slavic pattern. The difference is that Russian has taken the process further, with a resulting asymmetry between singular and plural in the grammar of animacy.

Finally, Standard Czech has generalized the animate/inanimate distinction in a different way, moving toward a system in which animate masculine nouns are distinguished from inanimate nouns throughout the paradigm. The animate/inanimate distinction has spread to most cases in both the singular and the plural of both the o-stem masculine and the a-stem masculine nouns. The result is an extremely messy system indeed, far more complicated than the late Proto-Slavic pattern, in part because the generalization hasn’t
gone all the way—in a few cases, animate and inanimate masculine nouns still have identical suffixes. At least some nonstandard Czech dialects show the same developmental tendencies as the standard dialect in the animacy category, but their declensional systems now seem to be retreating from the earlier tendency to increase the grammatical scope of the distinction (Thomason 1976).

The point of this rather elaborate description of the morphological development of the animacy category in several Slavic languages is that no safe predictions can be made about changes in standard vs. nonstandard dialects. Not all the languages have changed the original morphological pattern in any way. In those languages that have changed, all the developments are variations on a theme—the morphological expansion, through analogic changes, of the animate/inanimate distinction. Some of these expansions simplify the overall system; some complicate it. There is no evidence that standard dialects are more likely to develop greater complexity than nonstandard dialects, in spite of the fact that the greatest increase in complication, in this small sample, is found in a standard dialect (and even that fact could be due simply to the relative difficulty of locating grammars of nonstandard dialects without traveling to the various countries).

3. Ease of learning in externally- and internally-motivated change

The investigation of proposed vernacular universals leads directly to the issue of markedness, or ease of learning, because this would be a (or the) fundamental building-block of a theory of universal tendencies of development. But ease of learning, important as it is believed to be in processes of language change, is a slippery concept. There is experimental evidence to support some claims of (for instance) perceptual saliency in phonetics, but for most areas of language change no experimental evidence is available. Markedness is crucial here, but of course markedness itself remains a controversial matter.
Nevertheless, the two most widely used tests of markedness—range of occurrence in the world’s languages and age of learning by first-language acquirers—remain useful as rough indicators of marked (harder to learn) vs. unmarked (easier to learn) linguistic structures. Consider, for example, the English interdental fricatives: they are quite rare in the world’s languages, and they tend to be learned later than other fricatives in first-language acquisition of English. It is therefore reasonable to claim them as universally marked segments. By contrast, nearly every language in the world has an /n/ phoneme, and children learn it early: [n] is therefore considered to be a universally unmarked segment. In morphology, agglutinative morphology, being more transparent in its easily-segmentable affix boundaries, is unmarked relative to flexional morphology, in which two or more morphemes are often bundled together into a single indivisible affix. In this section I will talk about ease of learning and markedness as if they were straightforward, but readers should keep in mind that many of the most important questions about these concepts have not yet been answered satisfactorily. The discussion must therefore be considered tentative. It is not true that all types of language change are linked to ease of learning, but probably the majority of non-deliberate changes do have something to do with it. For internally-motivated sound change, there is a now rich body of research on the diachronic role of phonetic context in both perception and production; in internal morphosyntactic change, analogic processes generalize or extend patterns in ways that often make learning the system easier. For contact-induced change, the overall picture is more complicated (see below). Ease of learning plays a role in proposals of vernacular universals because the simplifications that are predicted for nonstandard dialects are thought to make learning the dialects easier.

Only some of the changes discussed above in §2 are clearly connected to ease of learning. The Montana Salish pharyngeals—which are universally marked—are losing ground with
speakers and especially writers because they’re hard to hear, at least for speakers who are now English-dominant (i.e. all the remaining speakers of the language, including the most fluent native speakers in their daily lives). Most of the changes in the SerboCroatian oblique plural cases are syncretic, a process that arguably reduces the learner’s burden by reducing the number of morphological distinctions that must be learned; and the development of the Slavic animacy category in Novi SC is clearly simplificatory. The contact-induced change that introduced three new cases in Lithuanian, however, complicated the language’s case system, the AIPE and Tok Pisin transitive suffix cannot be viewed as a simplification of English verbal structure, and animacy developments in some Slavic languages—most strikingly in Standard Czech—are definite complications of the system.

Ease of learning most obviously influences contact-induced change in cases of shift-induced interference, where imperfect learning plays a major role in the process of interference. It does not appear to be as important, and is often quite irrelevant, in borrowing in the narrow sense of Thomason & Kaufman 1988, namely, under conditions of full bilingualism, where imperfect learning plays no role in the process (the discussion below and in §4 is based in part on material in Thomason 2001, ch. 4).

Shift-induced interference comprises at least two, and often three, different types of process. First, second-language speakers of a target language who are not fully bilingual in the target language (TL) may incorporate features of their native language, their L1, in speaking the TL. Changes in a TL that are carried over from a shifting group’s original L1 cannot be predicted to result in simplification of the TL if they become a permanent part of it. Sometimes, as in the example of the new Lithuanian cases that arose through interference from shifting Finnic speakers, the innovations in the TL complicate its system; in other instances shift-induced interference results in simplification of particular structure
points, as in the loss of grammatical gender in a Latvian dialect due to carryover from Livonian, a Finnic language which (like other Uralic languages) lacks gender and whose speakers shifted to the Latvian dialect (Comrie 1981: 147).

Second, imperfect learning by a group of speakers may involve a failure (or refusal) to learn certain TL features—especially marked features, namely, those that are harder to learn. Changes of this type do tend to simplify particular structure points in the TL, although a favorite and generally valid truism in historical linguistics must always be borne in mind: a change that simplifies the system in one place may well complicate it in another. So, for instance, recent learners of Montana Salish, all of whom have English as their L1, have failed to acquire the pharyngeal phonemes, which belong to a universally marked phonetic category and are in fact demonstrably hard to hear in this language. This failure is leading to the loss of all four pharyngeal phonemes, a clear simplification in the consonant inventory; but it is doubtful that this loss constitutes an overall simplification in the system, because the phonological effects of the pharyngeals on neighboring segments remain, especially vowel lengthening and vowel lowering, possibly adding one or more new vowel phonemes to the phonemic inventory. Most claims of overall simplification through imperfect group second-language acquisition (or, for that matter, through any other process of language change) must therefore be hedged so as to confine the claim to a particular area of the receiving language’s structure.

The third type of process that is often, though not always, operative in shift-induced interference is adoption by the original TL community of a subset of the innovations introduced by the shifting speaker group. This typically happens when the shifting group merges with (part of) the original TL group to form a single speech community. This new merged community, at first, will feature both what might be called TL1, the language of original TL speakers, and TL2, the shifting group’s version of the TL, modified by
carryover from their original L₁ and failure to learn certain features of the TL. As part of the merger of the two originally separate speech communities, TL₁ speakers may borrow some of the innovations that are present in TL₂, thus forming a third, merged version of the TL, TL₃. As with the learners’ failure (or refusal) to learn certain TL₁ features, the innovations incorporated into TL₃ are likely to be the least marked innovations, in this case because the original TL₁ speakers are likely to have only passive knowledge of TL₂ and may not be fully familiar with all the marked innovations present in TL₂. This is by no means a hard-and-fast prediction, of course; language change is never wholly predictable. Other social, demographic, and linguistic factors (such as the relative sizes of the two speaker groups) also play a role in determining the final shape of TL₃ (and indeed in the formation of TL₂ as well). But in the formation of TL₃, as in the failure-to-learn aspect of the formation of TL₂, ease of learning is likely to be a significant factor.

In borrowing in my narrow sense—that is, incorporation of features from one language the innovator knows well into another language that the innovator knows well—ease of learning is much less likely to play a major role. The reason is that the agents of change, the people who introduce the innovations into the receiving language, are fluent speakers of both the source language and the receiving language. Imperfect learning plays no role because there is no imperfect learning involved in the process. There are therefore no intrinsic barriers to adopting marked, harder-to-learn features from the source language, and such features are easy to find in borrowing situations—and much more common than in cases of shift-induced interference. This does not of course mean that all or even most structural features transferred in borrowing contexts are marked: unmarked, easy-to-learn features are also very common as interference features in these situations, since they are certainly very common in the source language (as in all languages). In addition, it may be that only some speakers of the receiving language also speak the source language fluently, and in
such a case the chances for general adoption of marked structural features borrowed by fluent bilinguals will be sharply reduced.

In any case, both marked and unmarked structures are common interference features in contact situations intense enough to permit structural borrowing. A fairly typical set of changes in intense borrowing situations is found in interference in Asia Minor Greek dialects from Turkish (see Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 217-222). Some of the borrowed features are (locally, at least) simplifications, e.g. the replacement of the inherited interdental fricatives by stops, the general (though not absolutely complete) loss of noun-adjective agreement, and the general (though again incomplete) loss of grammatical gender. Other borrowings from Turkish arguably complicate Asia Minor Greek structure, among them the development of vowel harmony in some of the most-affected dialects. Still others neither clearly complicate nor clearly simplify Asia Minor Greek, e.g. the change from SVO to SOV word order and related word-order changes.

Overall, then, great caution must be exercised in making predictions of simplification in contact-induced change. Ease of learning can safely be expected to play a significant role only in shift-induced interference, and even then only when shifting speakers fail (or refuse) to learn certain marked TL features and/or when original TL speakers fail (or refuse) to adopt some of the marked innovations from TL₂ when the two speaker groups form a single speech community. This of course does not mean that the majority of contact-induced changes are simplificatory. It may well be the case that they are, at least as far as local simplification is concerned, i.e. simplification at a particular structure point as opposed to the receiving language’s grammar as a whole. But it may also be the case that most contact-induced changes complicate the grammar or are neutral in their effects, neither simplifying nor complicating the grammar—especially if we consider the grammar as a whole, not just one single structure point at a time.
Similarly, internally-motivated change, even when it is clearly linked to ease of learning, is not predictably simplificatory, in large part because of the simplify-here-but-complicate-there truism mentioned above. Examples abound. One familiar case is the merger of the high front unrounded vowel phoneme /i/ and the high back unrounded vowel phoneme /¨i/ in some Uralic and Mongolian languages. This merger complicates the vowel harmony pattern, since stems with original /¨i/ take back-vowel suffix harmony, while stems with original /i/ take front-vowel suffix harmony—an obvious complication for learners. As we saw in §2 above, the internally-motivated developments of the animacy category in some Slavic languages, most strikingly in Czech, proceeded by perfectly ordinary analogic changes but resulted ultimately in a much more complicated system than in late Proto-Slavic.

4. Conclusions: can change due to universal tendencies be distinguished from contact-induced change?

The answer to this question is: yes, sometimes. The hedge is vital for two reasons. First, for the vast majority of linguistic changes we cannot find a proximate or ultimate cause. The reason is that given enough time, later changes will accumulate in large enough numbers to destroy the evidence that might have permitted us to pin down a specific cause for a particular change. And second, many changes have more than one cause, and one or more of the causes of a particular change may be internal while another, or others, may lie in language contact.

The best we can do, therefore, is to lay out criteria for assessing the likelihood that language contact played a role in triggering a specific change. Here are the criteria that are (I believe) both necessary and sufficient to motivate a claim of contact-induced change (see Thomason 2001: 91-95 for more detailed discussion). A precondition is that the receiving
language must be considered as a whole, because structural interference will not be isolated in a system. (I focus on structural interference here because identifying lexical transfer is, by comparison, child’s play.) First, a (group of) source language(s) must be identified, and a case must be made for contact intense enough to justify a claim of structural interference. Second, it must be shown that the proposed source language and the proposed receiving language share several structural features—not absolutely identical features, because in contact-induced change there is very often alteration in transferred features, but features that are similar enough to be plausible candidates for a historical relationship through interference.

Third, we must be able to show that the proposed receiving language did not always have the shared features; that is, we have to prove that the language has changed. Fourth, conversely, we must prove that the proposed source language has NOT changed—that is, that it had the shared features before it came into contact with the other language. Fifth and finally, we need to look for internal motivations as well, given the very real possibility of multiple causation. In other words, a given change, or set of changes, might well be due to universal tendencies and also to contact-induced change.

If we are successful in satisfying criteria 1-4, not just for a single innovation in the receiving language but for a non-trivial number of independent innovations (i.e. innovations in different grammatical subsystems), then it is reasonable to claim that contact played a role in motivating the changes. If not, then not. Admittedly, there may be cases where one or more of the four main criteria can be omitted without weakening the argument hopelessly, but it will be harder to make a convincing case if there are gaps in the evidence. For instance, ancient contacts between Hittite, an Indo-European language, and Hattian, which had no known relatives and which was demonstrably in close contact with Hittite in the ancient Near East, are strongly suggestive of Hittite interference in Hattian (Goedegebuure
Hattian was a verb-initial language, but Hittite was a consistent SOV language, as were other languages of the region. The appearance of certain SOV-related morphosyntactic features in Hattian, together with a paucity of Hittite loanwords, suggests that some Hittites shifted to the prestigious Hattian language, bringing along some easy-to-transfer features of their original L₁. The case is not complete, however, because we have no historical evidence about the original word-order status of Hattian, and no related languages to compare its structure to: we therefore cannot prove that Hattian has changed—that it didn’t always have the SOV-ish word-order features. Still, given the extreme difference in its basic ordering schema and related features, the case for Hittite interference is rather strong.

The basic lesson, in any case, is that a role for language contact in motivating a change or set of changes can be firmly established. Establishing a role for drift, paradoxically, is often more difficult; but in many instances this too is possible, in a growing number of grammatical subsystems. And what we find is that the very same changes, especially changes from relatively marked features to relatively unmarked features at particular structure points, can and do arise sometimes from internal causes and sometimes from external causes. This means that an investigation of proposed vernacular universals has only just begun if one can identify shared features in nonstandard (or, for that matter, standard) dialects, because many, most, or all proposed vernacular universals are likely to be universally unmarked. Therefore, if at least some of the dialects are or were in close contact with other languages, both internal and external causes are more likely than not; and often both together may account for the same change. Identical innovations may arise from universal structural tendencies, from pattern pressures internal to a particular language, from shift-induced interference, from borrowing, or from some combination of these.
This is why I believe that it is unwise to ask whether universal tendencies or contact-induced changes are responsible for vernacular universals and other similar or identical innovations in closely-related dialects/languages. The question embodies several presuppositions that I reject on the basis of much empirical counterevidence: that similar or identical changes can safely be assumed to arise from the same cause; that there is usually or always a single motivation for a given change; and that the processes underlying universal structural tendencies differ significantly from the processes underlying many contact-induced changes—specifically, as I have argued in this paper, processes involving ease of learning are common to both.

But I also reject the recurrent claims that contact-induced change, at least in cases of shift-induced interference, predictably simplifies structure. Peter Trudgill, for instance, seems to espouse this position when he says that simplification in ‘high-contact dialects’ is predictable in part because of the influence of second-language learners of a TL (e.g. this volume; in Trudgill 2004 he presents a more nuanced theory, but there too his predictions are not valid in any general sense—see for instance the commentaries in the same journal issue, most notably Rice 2004 and Hajek 2004). As noted above (§3), however, only two of the three processes involved in shift-induced interference are more likely than not to introduce simpler features, and even those features may simplify target-language structure only locally, not throughout the grammar. Moreover, borrowing in my narrow sense is no more likely to simplify the receiving language’s grammar than it is to complicate it.

In the end, then, a one-size-fits-all theory is unlikely to succeed in accounting for the rich, and richly varying, body of data from language contact situations around the world. Linguists’ knowledge and understanding of contact phenomena are increasing rapidly, and with that increase comes a deeper understanding of the enormous complexity in this as in other areas of human linguistic behavior.
References


