Atomizing linguistic change and the nuclear step:
From emergence to individual realization.

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Traditional approaches to language change have often taken as a point of departure a ‘systems-based’ view of language: properties and tendencies are ascribed to abstracted structural entities that are not reducible to the properties and tendencies of individuals, manifested in individual acts of physical realization. It is as if the abstracted entity had a life of its own: if the “system” wants to become more analytic, how is this “tendency” (teleological or not) also represented in the individual act?

Very often, system-based theories (e.g. Lightfoot 1979) arrive at conclusions that are very different from hypotheses that are closer to the individual speech act (Stein 1990). System-based theories stress the commonalities, and not the differences, between the individual acts and their completely different contextualizations, a fact only partially represented by the concept of “variation”, which, however, is also predicated on groups, and not on individuals.

There is, however, a theoretical gap between theories about tendencies at the level of the system (the macro-level) and the processes observed in the generation of speaker innovation (the micro-level). Explanations in linguistic change theory have never systematically and consistently related the two levels.

It is, however, widely acknowledged that the ultimate locus of micro-origination of language change is innovation on the part of the speaker.

But what makes an individual speaker produce innovations in the first place? It is at this point that any theory of language change, any “tendency”, such as pragmatic strengthening or a move toward analyticity, must be plausible. Are these long-term tendencies of “the language” always “unintended” consequences of individual acts that are very differently motivated (Keller 1990/1994)? LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985), for instance, posit that there is purposefulness in the way speakers move their language, but not due to properties of the form of language.

It would appear that most of the problems of explaining language change stem from what Roy Harris (1981) has termed the two major language myths, “telementation” and the “fixed code” fallacy: that language consists of immutable form-function prefabs that by themselves somehow travel from speaker to hearer. It would appear that any attempt to explain language change at its source must take off from a realistic look at how communication using actual linguistic forms happens.

It is intriguing to analyse the process in detail, from a more interactive perspective of language use. Given an utterance intention, several questions can be considered:
- Why should a speaker ever choose a form different from any “standard” or “default” form? The fact that each and every speech act is differently contextualized leads us to consider a wide range of motivations.

- To the extent that we assume a deviation from a default, or a to-be-expected form, what would make the speakers assume they will succeed in carrying out this deviation?

- What is the “benefit” of deviating? Will scoring social capital points override the danger of punishment incurred by the deviation? In all likelihood, the benefit is not to make the language a typologically more harmonious or more analytical language.

An “atomistic” view of speaker innovation blends directly into a semiotically oriented view of “variation”. As we assume, with Tomasello, that cognition comes before language, and the contribution of the instruction content of a linguistic form in a given communicative act may have been overrated as natural (natural to professional linguists, that is), a plausible assumption is that the speaker makes an estimate of the current knowledge state of the hearer (focus, mutual knowledge, genre etc.) at any given moment. This affords sufficient redundancy to make the speaker think that a new, creative use of an old form – for whatever benefit or purpose – will still have the hearer do the targeted job in the hearer’s meaning-construction process.

The benefit will then be an additional element of meaning (a virtual history of employment of a form) achieved by the use of the new form. The by-product will then be a slight change in the abstracted history of use of the linguistic form: this is a speaker innovation, if the focus is on what has happened to the linguistic form, seen in isolation from the pragmatics of the whole micro-structure of the individual interactive communicative act.

Such an approach essentially amounts to notions of linguistic change that are compatible with views from pragmatics, an approach that takes apart form and function and looks at how speakers proceed from utterance benefits and purposes to the choice of forms. This perspective on the microstructure of a speaker innovation shifts the focus from the form of the linguistic sign and to its functionality in an individual speech act in real life, along with its pragmatic embedding.

The perspective proposed here, although at the core of communication through language, has not really been the subject of a broader interest in work on linguistic change. But it has come up, more unsystematically, in work oriented towards evolutionary and sociolinguistic thought, and more recently in conversational analysis looking at the micro-motivations and intended benefits of speakers in framing their utterances.

The workshop invites papers that address the following basic issues:

1. What makes speakers deviate in the individual speech act and produce speaker innovations?
2. What makes other speakers reproduce the innovations, so that change ultimately results? (Does this take us in a second big direction?)
3. How can individual emergence phenomena be explained at the level of speaker innovations and from there onwards?
We are specifically interested in papers that examine the micro-structure from an interactive, pragmatically-based perspective. We also encourage papers that represent empirical studies of the conditions and mechanisms behind speaker innovations. It may be that the Internet will afford us a new laboratory for this more pragmatic perspective. Obviously, the conditions on speaker “mistakes” and “deviations”, their motivations for creating them, their strategic calculations, and the “benefits” hoped for in the individual act of communication, will differ for the different levels of language. We are interested in theoretical approaches that address how emergence phenomena in language can be linked directly to processes of speaker innovation. Exactly how does it “emerge” at the level of the decision of the individual speakers?

References:


Le Page, Robert and A. Tabouret .1985. Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity. CUP- 


