New historical perspectives on non-dominant speakers as agents of contact-induced language change

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Workshop conveners
Petros Karatsareas, University of Westminster, P.Karatsareas@westminster.ac.uk
Jonathan Kasstan, Queen Mary University of London, j.kasstan@qmul.ac.uk

Workshop description

Since the publication of Weinreich's (1953) seminal work, the accepted view in the study of language change has been that contact-induced innovations are introduced into a given language by bi-/multilingual speakers, that is, speakers who have competence in two or more linguistic systems. It is now well-known that bi-/multilinguals may allow for one of their languages to influence the lexicon and/or the grammar of their other language(s) or, put differently, for one of their languages to borrow lexical and/or grammatical material and patterns from their other languages (this has variably been referred to as ‘interference’ or ‘transfer’, after Weinreich, 1953). Given the right sociolinguistic circumstances, borrowings can subsequently spread not only among other bi-/multilingual speakers but also among monolingual speakers of the language undergoing the change (Moravcsik, 1978; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Fisiak, 1995; Aikhenvald & Dixon, 2001, 2006; Field, 2002; Johanson, 2002; Jones & Esch, 2002; Myers-Scotton, 2002; Clyne, 2003; Winford, 2003; Heine & Kuteva, 2005; Matras & Sakel, 2007; Matras, 2009; Hickey, 2010).

In spite of its fundamental importance in the study of contact-induced language change, the very notion of bi-/multilingual speaker remains inadequately incorporated into most theories that have been developed to date. With a few notable exceptions (van Coetsem, 1998, 2000; Winford, 2005; Matras, 2009), many frameworks seem to use the term in a surprisingly loose manner and in its most basic sense (i.e. as someone who speaks two/many languages). This approach, however, does not profit from recent psycholinguistic research which highlights the multitude of different linguistic outcomes that bi-/multilingual acquisition (including attrition) can have. This recent research has also shown that different types of bi-/multilingual speakers can result from the interplay of such factors as the order in which the two (or more) languages are acquired, the age of acquisition in each language, and the amount and type of input that speakers receive in each language — all of which can vary in different sociolinguistic settings of bi-/multilingualism: simultaneous child bilinguals, sequential child bilinguals, adult L2 learners, child L2 learners, heritage speakers, L1 attriters (e.g. Li, 1994; Montrul, 2008, 2016; Meisel, 2011; Meisel et al., 2013).
The aim of this workshop is to address this shortcoming by incorporating insights from the most recent advances in the study of bi-/multilingual acquisition into diachronic accounts of historical cases of contact-induced language change. Our focus is on changes that were brought about by (types of) speakers who were not dominant in the language undergoing change. Consider, for example, the innovations that Turkish-dominant speakers introduced into the grammar of the Cappadocian Greek dialects (see Winford, 2005: 402–409 for an analysis in terms of van Coetsem’s notions of imposition and S(ource)L(anguage) agentivity), or the spread of the uvular /r/ from French among many western European languages (for an overview, see Trudgill, 1974).

We therefore include but also welcome contributions which examine cases of linguistic innovations that were introduced by L2 learners, sequential bilinguals, heritage speakers and L1 attriters. We also welcome contributions on the role that newly identified types of speakers play in language change, including most recently ‘new speakers’ – defined as adult learners who acquire the L2 (in particular minority or endangered languages) in a purely educational context (O’Rourke & Ramallo, 2011, 2013; Costa, 2015; Hornsby, 2015; Kasstan, 2015). Contributions may deal with unknown or understudied cases of linguistic innovation in specific languages or they may shed new light on diachronic developments that have already received the attention of previous scholars in the historical and contact linguistics literature.

Possible research questions include:

- What is the role that non-dominant bi-/multilingual speakers play in language change? What types of innovations do they tend to introduce into the language(s) in which they are not dominant? Are specific aspects of linguistic structure particularly vulnerable to such innovations? Can specific types of innovations found in the historical record be attributed to specific types of bi-/multilingual speakers?
- How can we bridge the recent findings of the study of bi-/multilingual acquisition with those that come from the diachronic study of historical cases of contact-induced change? In what ways can these findings help us to revisit well-known cases of change and how can they inform approaches to less well-known ones?
- What types of evidence, both linguistic and sociohistorical, are needed in order to achieve such a research endeavour? What are the methodological challenges, and how can they be tackled?
- What are the social and historical circumstances that favour the diffusion of innovations induced by non-dominant bi-/multilingual speakers among dominant bi-/multilinguals and, ultimately, among monolingual speakers of the language undergoing change?
References


