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Language Change

Joan Bybee



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JOAN BYBEE

University of New Mexico



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Language Change

How and why do languages change? This new introduction offers a guide to the types of change at all levels of linguistic structure, as well as the mechanisms behind each type. Based on data from a variety of methods and a huge array of language families, it examines general patterns of change, bringing together recent findings on sound change, analogical change, grammaticalization, the creation and change of constructions, as well as lexical change. Emphasizing crosslinguistic patterns and going well beyond traditional methods in historical linguistics, this book sees change as grounded in cognitive processes and usage factors that are rarely mentioned in other textbooks. Complete with questions for discussion, suggested readings, and a useful glossary of terms, this book helps students to gain a general understanding of language as an ever-changing system.

JOAN BYBEE is Distinguished Professor Emerita of Linguistics at the University of New Mexico.

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Preface

Language change is endlessly fascinating, whether it involves change in sounds, morphology, words, syntax, or meaning. When language changes we see that language users are not just passive recipients of the language of their culture, but are active participants in the very dynamic system that is communication with spoken language. Change reveals the nature of the cognitive processes and patterns used in speaking and listening, and shows us what ordinary language users can make out of the material they are given to work with. In fact, I believe that no approach to language is complete unless it deals as much with language change as with language states. Because I find change so revealing, it is no surprise that of all the courses I have taught, *Language Change* at the introductory level has always been my favorite. In that course I can lay out what is revealed by particular changes and demonstrate how the main patterns of change produce the general phenomena of language.

This emphasis on the dynamic aspects of language has also guided my research, so that the topics that go into a course on language change are many of the same topics I have focused on in my research, such as sound change, the morphologization of sound change, analogical change, and grammaticalization.

This book reflects my approach to teaching and understanding language change that has developed over many years of teaching and doing research. I have chosen to call the book *Language Change* because the perspective I have developed is more integrated with cognitive and usage factors than the perspective found in more traditional historical linguistics textbooks. I seek to suggest a certain coherence in the nature of change and thus, rather than cataloging and labeling the many types of change that have been identified over the centuries of study of how languages change, I hope to give students an idea of the major trends in change by accessing examples now available on change in many different languages and language families and reporting what is known about which changes are common and which are not. While I try to avoid polemical discussions in the book, I do have a certain perspective that drives the presentation; it is the view that language change takes place during language use, and the mechanisms that drive change are the psycholinguistic or cognitive processes operating in everyday conversation and language use.

The motivation for writing the book was to fill in certain gaps that occur in the excellent historical linguistics textbooks that were available when I regularly taught *Language Change*. I have tried to follow the lead of the excellent books

written by Campbell 1999, Crowley 1997, Hock 1986, and Trask 1995 (many of which exist in more recent editions than I am citing here). My decision to produce a book on language change rather than on historical linguistics follows from a desire to produce a more up-to-date treatment and one more integrated with new findings in cognitive and functional linguistics.

In particular, I feel that the topic of grammaticalization, which has recently generated so much research with stunning results, deserves a focused presentation in a book on language change, and this is absent from all other general surveys. So in this book two chapters examine the general mechanisms of change and survey the common paths of grammaticalization discovered in the languages of the world. I also feel that what we know about the traditional topic of analogical change has benefitted greatly from an examination of the processing and usage factors involved in change and, just as important, resistance to change. Analogical change can now be approached as the interaction of a number of cognitive factors, rather than by the traditional list of “principles”. The other great pillar of historical linguistics – sound change – can also be presented in a more coherent way as we learn more about sound change in the languages of the world. Rather than a disjointed laundry list of named types, we now know what types of change are more common and can begin to formulate some general hypotheses about the directionality and causes of sound change. We also have a clearer understanding of how sound changes diffuse through the lexicon. Finally, our understanding of syntactic change has made great strides due to the view that syntactic constructions develop from looser discourse structures using some of the same mechanisms we see in grammaticalization. In addition, viewing morphosyntax as expressed by constructions, we are able to examine the questions of where constructions come from, how they compete with pre-existing constructions, and what happens to old constructions. In addition, we can address the question of how constructionalization and grammaticalization interact with word-order change. In all these areas, we now have valuable studies of change in progress, which are essential to the identification of the mechanisms and processes involved in change.

The inclusion of these topics and particular approaches taken to the factors involved make this book a good companion to any synchronic approach that recognizes cognitive and usage factors in understanding language. The book is directed towards anyone who has a basic grounding in linguistics and would like to know more about how languages change, whether they are approaching this goal with a professor in a class on language change or reading on their own. If it contributes to the understanding of the linguistic phenomena that interest the reader, it will have succeeded in its goals.

Acknowledgements

It was on the suggestion of Andrew Winnard, editor at Cambridge University Press, that I considered writing a book, as he put it, to help students learning about language change. I had originally intended just to write up my class notes from the many times I have taught Language Change. However, once embarked on the project, I felt compelled to write a more inclusive account with examples that I would never have had time to present in class. This was partly for myself, to see for myself how the different areas of historical linguistics were each internally coherent, to argue for directionality in change, and to identify outstanding theoretical problems for our understanding of language change.

The perspective presented here has evolved in my own mind over several decades, starting with the influence of my first teachers, notably Theo Vennemann at UCLA and colleagues such as Tom Givon, whose class I attended at the 1976 Linguistic Institute, where I was also teaching. Joseph Greenberg's methods of diachronic typology, and his use of grammaticalization were imparted via Givon's lectures. The many colleagues whose interest in grammaticalization blossomed along with mine were very helpful in clarifying the phenomenon and my views about it. I thank Elizabeth Traugott, Bernd Heine, Paul Hopper, and William Pagliuca. I have also been influenced by the many brilliant students in Language Change classes as well as Grammaticalization classes over the years. Among them are William Pagliuca, Richard Mowrey, Scott Schwenter, K. Aaron Smith, Rena Torres Cacoullos, Damian Wilson, Esther Brown, Jessi Aaron, and Matt Alba, just to mention a few.

In preparing the manuscript I was fortunate to be able to call on colleagues with expertise in areas I have not researched myself. In particular, Larry Hyman and Jeff Stebbins helped me with material on tone change and reviewed my interpretations of it. Rena Torres Cacoullos and Shana Poplack discussed language contact with me and helped with comments on these sections. Carol Lord reviewed parts of the manuscript on serialization and grammaticalization. Also, I appreciate the folks I called on to help with specific examples or topics: Christopher Adams and Peter Petré. I am also grateful to my friends who were willing to just talk generally about the book with me and to offer support: Sandy Thompson, Bill Croft, and Carol Lynn Moder. Of course, any remaining errors of fact or interpretation are completely my own responsibility.

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