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Language Change

Contributions to the Study of Its Causes

***Leiv Egil Breivik and
Ernst Håkon Jahr (Editors)***

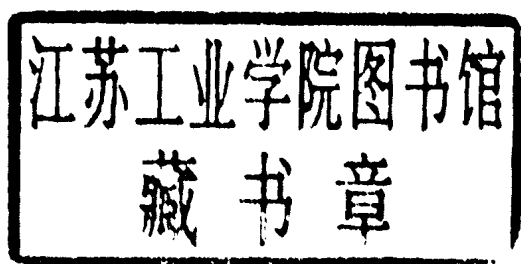
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Edited by

Leiv Egil Breivik and Ernst Håkon Jahr



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Preface

Most of the papers in this volume were presented at the symposium “The causes of language change: Do we know them yet?” held at the School of Languages and Literature, University of Tromsø, October 15–17, 1987. The symposium was made possible by generous financial support from the University of Tromsø and the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities.

Tromsø, December 1988

Leiv Egil Breivik
Ernst Håkon Jahr

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Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an upsurge of interest in historical linguistics, with attention to all areas of language. There has been a flourishing of new journals and scholarly work — dissertations, monographs, articles, and introductory texts. A great number of contributions have been prompted by the International Conferences on Historical Linguistics (ICHL), the first of which was held in Edinburgh in 1973 and the eighth and latest in Lille in 1987; by the international conferences on historical phonology (1976), historical morphology (1978), historical syntax (1981), historical semantics/word formation (1984), historical dialectology (1986), and historical linguistics and philology (1988), all of which were organized by the Institute of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań; by special sessions of recurring meetings and congresses, e.g. those of the Chicago Linguistic Society in 1976 and the 14th International Congress of Linguists in 1987; and by special symposia, such as those held at Santa Barbara in 1974 and 1976.

The present volume also reflects the current activity in the field. It is the outgrowth of a symposium, entitled “The causes of language change: Do we know them yet?”, held at the University of Tromsø, October 15–17, 1987. The title of the symposium was intended to provide an association to a much-cited statement by Leonard Bloomfield; in 1933, in his book *Language* (ch. 21.9), Bloomfield claimed that “the causes of sound change are unknown”. Undoubtedly, there is still much that is unknown in diachronic linguistics, much that still has to be investigated. However, recent research has delved more deeply into the complex causes of not only phonological change but of language change in general; there now seems to exist a better understanding of the motivations for, and mechanisms of, language change through time. This improved understanding has been made possible by the development and expansion of disciplines such as sociolinguistics, language contact research, communication theory, child language and creole studies — together with innovations in the study of language-internal developments as well as in the study of language universals and linguistic typology. We feel it is safe to claim that historical linguistics has now left the stage where all the causes of language change are unknown.

This volume contains eleven papers which were prepared for the Tromsø symposium (Breivik's paper was not presented, and Romaine

read a different one from that included here). The collection of papers covers a wide range of approaches; they draw their data from a variety of languages and language types, but all focus on the main topic of the symposium: the causes of language change.

In the first paper, Henning Andersen emphasizes the importance of understanding the circumstances which motivate speakers to change their language. He argues that the social dimension should be integrated into the description of language, thus eliminating the distinction between linguistic and extralinguistic factors. The functions that innovations have for speakers of a language are also discussed. The author views innovations as a metadialogue through which members of a community propose and reject or adopt new norms.

Leiv Egil Breivik's paper is concerned with the relationship between typological shifts and specific linguistic changes in English; it examines the ways in which sentences with existential *there* have changed and developed over the centuries, and tries to provide an explanation for the diachrony by appealing to various parameters. His data show that syntactic and semantic changes in these constructions are closely correlated with pragmatic factors; indeed, in a number of cases, pragmatics seems to be the primary causal factor.

A similar conclusion is arrived at by Jan Terje Faarlund, who examines the various properties pertaining to the Old Norse nominative NP and the Modern Norwegian subject. He argues that the grammatical changes that have taken place since the Old Norse period have been induced by thematic and contextual factors. Faarlund's general hypothesis is that, in a diachronic perspective, syntax is motivated by the pragmatics of previous stages. It is claimed that this hypothesis is supported by the cross-linguistic data.

Ernst Håkon Jahr considers the relationship between language planning and linguistic change. Particular attention is given to cases where a deliberate and successful effort has been made by political authorities or prescriptive linguists to change a spoken language or a spoken variety of a language in a desired direction. Examples of this are provided from Norwegian and Icelandic.

Charles N. Li's paper addresses two related issues: the diachronic development of switch reference in Green Hmong and the function of switch reference. The fact that switch reference can emerge in a prototypical isolating language which is verb-medial is intriguing from a typological as well as from a diachronic point of view. The Green Hmong data also pose a challenge to the standard interpretation of switch reference, under

which it is restricted to tracking the reference of subjects. Finally, the data are discussed within the context of the causes of syntactic change.

Helmut Lüdtke focuses on a set of phenomena which are not planned or intended but nevertheless a result of man's activity. He argues that such 'invisible-hand processes' are important causes of language change; they happen continually and inevitably. For example, the development from Latin to Romance provides evidence for the existence of the quantitative process whereby meaningful elements grow shorter and shorter as regards their phonological realization (shrinking). Invisible-hand processes are discussed in relation to a number of parameters.

Peter Mühlhäusler is concerned with the causes of the dramatic linguistic changes that are taking place in many parts of the Pacific area. He argues against the widely held assumption that language change should be explained in terms of changes in linguistic systems. In his view, most causes of change are person-made causes in linguistic ecology. Accelerated linguistic change in the Pacific is a consequence of modernization; the way man has caused language change is similar to the way he has brought about cultural change.

In his paper, John J. Ohala brings the study of linguistic change into the laboratory, arguing that modern instrumental phonetics allows us to identify some of the causes of sound change or at least locate the domain in which they lie. He discusses three mechanisms in detail (confusion of similar sounds, hypo-correction and hyper-correction), and gives recipes for eliciting in the laboratory sound changes caused by these mechanisms. Ohala's account is entirely non-teleological; for example, sounds are not claimed to change in order to be easier to pronounce.

The main topic of Suzanne Romaine's paper is the role of children in the overall communicative structure of the speech community: does variation in children's language use lead to long-term restructuring of the language system? Her data suggest that there is often a parallelism between first language acquisition and historical change, but she points out that much more research needs to be done on the ontogenetic/diachronic parallels and dependencies; we do not know as yet why the normal acquisition of language by children effects long-term changes only in certain cases.

Peter Trudgill examines the relationship between linguistic development and social context, with reference to the role of *contact* in linguistic change. The paper considers the extent to which changes that occur in situations of low contact are significantly different from those which take place in high-contact contexts. Trudgill stresses the importance of study-

ing low-contact varieties; his thesis is that insights into the causes and mechanisms of linguistic change are most likely to be found in investigations of data from isolated languages.

Language contact is also the topic of P. Sture Ureland's paper, the first part of which is devoted to a selective overview of recent works dealing with linguistic change. The author points out that the ethnic and language-contact hypothesis as formulated by medieval language philosophers has often been neglected by linguists working in this area. In his view, this is unfortunate since the impact of foreign influence is an extremely important causal factor. Contact-induced structures from several language areas are cited in support of this claim. Particular attention is given to Scandinavia, Holland, and the Engadine in the Swiss Canton Grison.

Understanding linguistic innovations

Henning Andersen

0. Introduction

The title of the symposium posed a question about the causes of linguistic change — do we know them yet? I suppose most linguists would hesitate to answer this question with a categorical yes or no, but would be inclined in one direction or the other. For my own part, I think an affirmative answer is in order, but for this answer to be unqualified, I feel the question would have to be phrased slightly differently. It should concern linguistic innovations and ask whether we can understand them yet.

I have formulated the title of this paper accordingly. In the remarks that follow, I will clarify the sense of the three words I chose for my title (sections 1–3) and will then try to substantiate my affirmative answer (section 4). As it happens, my title allows of an interpretation that is quite different from the one that probably comes to mind first, but which seems to be no less relevant. I will explicate this alternative reading of the title in my conclusion (section 5).

1. Understanding

The question the organizers of our symposium raised is straightforward, and it has been given straightforward answers in the past. And so it might be useful to take as point of departure a confrontation of two of the best known statements on the causes of linguistic change.

On one hand we have Bloomfield's position (cf. (1)), which sums up his evaluation of the theories that would explain sound-change by reference to economy of effort:

- (1) Although many sound-changes shorten linguistic forms, simplify the phonetic system, or in some other way lessen the labor of utterance, yet no student has succeeded in establishing a correlation between sound-change and any antecedent phenomenon: the causes of sound-change are unknown. (1935: 385)

On the other, there is Coseriu's position:

- (2) In one sense, the most general one, the so-called 'causes' are actually not unknown, but perfectly well known and observable every day, for they coincide with the very conditions of speaking and are part and parcel of every speaker's experience. In another sense — as cultural and functional determinants — the 'causes' of change derive from the general conditions of language and are, whenever a given language is adequately documented, by and large open to investigation. (1952: 83, 1967: 123 f.; my translation, HA)

The two quotations might seem to express diametrically opposite opinions of one and the same matter. But it would be a mistake to interpret them in this way — and not only because the question of the causes of linguistic change is not a matter of opinion. What the apparently opposite judgements of Bloomfield and Coseriu reflect is first and foremost a difference in metatheoretical premisses, a difference in scientific ideology, which it is instructive to make explicit.

Note that Bloomfield's statement is couched in orthodox positivist terms: it speaks of efficient causality, carefully referring to causality in its observable aspect, as correlations between antecedent phenomena and their consequents. Given this physicalist understanding of the notion of 'cause', few linguists would probably disagree with Bloomfield's conclusion that such causes of linguistic change are unknown. But at the same time, if the notion of 'cause' is restricted in this fashion few linguists today, probably, would find the question of the causality of change very interesting. To my knowledge, at least, no modern advocates of theories of economy of effort subscribe to the crude, efficient-causality view of the relation between explanantia and explananda which Bloomfield rejected.

Coseriu, by contrast, explicitly distances himself from such an understanding of the sources of sound-change, and of linguistic change generally, by using the word 'causes' in quotation marks. Instead he speaks

of the conditions of speaking and the conditions of language, and reveals in his choice of the term 'conditions' a more cautious view of the relation between the circumstances that surround language use and grammar and the changes that occur as time goes by.

To Coseriu, none of these circumstances acts as a cause of change. Change in language, as well as the absence of change, is produced by its speakers as part of that exercise of their free will which speaking is. In speaking, they may be motivated by the diverse circumstances under which they speak to deviate from the usage that is traditional in their community. But such a motivation is not a cause in the sense in which Bloomfield and his predecessors understood the word, for the individual speaker is free to let himself be moved, or not moved, by the given circumstance or circumstances. In Coseriu's view, the only true 'causes' of change are the speakers, who use their language — and, in doing so, observe or neglect their linguistic traditions as they see fit.

This is undoubtedly a fairly realistic way of looking at language change, not only because it assumes that any change may be conditioned by a number of coexisting circumstances, but also because it acknowledges the intentional character of speaking, whether it follows or breaks with tradition, and hence, by implication, an element of intention in both stability and change. In accordance with this latter aspect of Coseriu's theory, the language historian's task is one not of causal explanation, but of rational explication.

But a full account of the diverse kinds of change that occur in the history of languages must consider not only the aspects of change which are governed by the intentions of the speakers. It must include as well a number of different kinds of change which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be viewed as intentional in the usual sense of the word. Among these are changes of the kind Bloomfield was considering in the passage quoted above. We will look at such changes below, and I will try to show how such non-intentional changes, too, are compatible with the notion of rational explication (section 4.2.4).

1.1 Description, classification, explication

In discussions of linguistic change (as of any other phenomena), it is necessary to distinguish three different levels of inquiry — the particular, the general, and the universal (cf. Coseriu 1974: 23 ff.).

In diachronic linguistics, inquiry on the particular level (which Coseriu calls the historical one, and which might also be termed the idiographic) is concerned with individual historical changes and seeks to establish all the circumstances relevant to any such change, that is, to describe as fully as possible what actually occurred in the given instance.

Besides investigations of this kind there is a general level of inquiry, where similar changes in different languages are compared and contrasted, subsumed as tokens of types, and categorized from diverse points of view. Here different changes are examined with the aim of forming generalizations about that usually happens under such and such circumstances and, ultimately, of establishing what kinds of change are possible.

On this level of inquiry, where our experience with concrete linguistic changes is systematized, it is apparent that although all changes in some sense must be products of man's free will, they still give evidence of a fair degree of determinism. This is not surprising, considering that all languages conform to definite universal principles of use and of structure, which are not subject to human will. Coseriu, in my opinion, has tended to underemphasize this aspect of language change, and Itkonen denies its existence (1986). But to others it seems obvious that even on the particular level of inquiry, where we seek to describe and interpret individual changes as fully as possible, our success in identifying the relevant motivating circumstances and determinants and in clarifying their relative weight depends on our understanding of the universal principles which govern language use and grammar formation, and which thereby define the limits within which speakers are free to exercise their will.

These principles are central to the universal level of inquiry (which Coseriu has called the rational or philosophic one), where such problems are considered as what language change is, what the reasons for language change are, that is, why change is an invariable concomitant of any living language tradition — the problem of the mutability of language. Here it is essential to recognize that any language is a joint product of nurture and nature. On one hand, it is a cultural institution, assimilated by the individual and freely manipulated by him according to his needs and skill, and in relation to the limits set by social convention. On the other hand, it is acquired, maintained, and elaborated entirely by the grace of the natural language faculty that all members of our species share. It is against this background that the different types of rational explication must be applied which we will look at below.

Among the three different levels of inquiry sketched here — the particular, the general, and the universal — the question posed by the organizers of this symposium clearly refers to the last. No one would claim that we understand all the particular changes that have ever taken place in the languages of the world or even all the changes that are known to have taken place. It might even be hazardous to claim that all the possible types of change are known. But one can reasonably hold that we have an adequate understanding of the universal mechanisms of change and of the reasons why languages change.

It is in this sense that I interpret — and answer — the question posed in the title of our symposium, and I will consequently offer a survey of the major categories of change below (section 4) and a characterization of the different reasons for each of them.

2. Linguistic

There would be no need to explicate the second word in my title, *linguistic*, were it not for the fact that historical linguists, at least since the nineteenth century, have been concerned to make a distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic (or non-linguistic), but have disagreed both on where the boundary between these two domains should be drawn and on the very relevance to their inquiry of allegedly extralinguistic facts.

Here I will mention only the relation between linguistic and other social values, which has been particularly troublesome and remains of current interest. I will contrast two different points of view and suggest a synthesis.

In their seminal essay on the theory of language change, Weinreich et al. illustrate the remarkable backwardness of some of their predecessors in the field with the following quotation from Kuryłowicz, a consistent advocate of a formal, algebraic structuralism and of immanent explanations in diachronic linguistics (1968: 177):

- (3) One must explain linguistic facts by other linguistic facts, not by heterogeneous facts. ... Explanations by means of [heterogeneous] social facts is a methodological derailment. (The bracketed word is missing in the quotation, but occurs in the original; cf. Kuryłowicz 1948: 84, 1960: 246).

The omission by Weinreich et al. of the bracketed occurrence of 'heterogeneous' makes Kuryłowicz appear not to have considered language a social phenomenon, which is unjust. But the reinstatement of the word does not change the fact that Kuryłowicz (and some other structuralists) for one reason or another demanded a strict separation of what was properly linguistic from what was not and assigned exclusive relevance in historical explanations to the former.

The major contribution of Weinreich et al. — which has been universally acclaimed — was in arguing for social realism in the theory of linguistic change, in demonstrating how "sociological factors ... explain distributions and shifts in linguistic phenomena which, from a structural point of view, would have been seen as random" (177), and in clarifying how "the changing linguistic structure ... is embedded in the larger context of the speech community", and how "social factors bear on the system as a whole" or, perhaps more often, unequally on different parts of it, inasmuch as "linguistic structures [are] embedded unevenly in the social structure" (185).

Throughout the subsequent flowering of sociolinguistic studies it has proven practically impossible to escape the conceptual difficulties these few, randomly chosen quotations exemplify, first, the false dichotomy between the linguistic and the social, and, secondly, the notion that language is embedded in society.

This being so, it seems well worth emphasizing that the supposed dichotomy between language and society is non-existent in two respects. For one thing, language is an entirely social phenomenon and can in no way be separated from its social functions. For another, when linguistic rules make reference to social categories such as age, sex, or class, these categories are *eo ipso* linguistic categories. These categories can be, and should be, strictly distinguished from such notions as chronological age, biological sex, or socioeconomic status, which can be defined prior to, and without regard to, the investigation of any language. Of course, such language independent notions can be used as preliminary, auxiliary means to establish the social value of linguistic expressions. But what linguistic expressions index are culture specific categories such as 'youthfulness', 'femininity', or 'upper class', not as defined in universal, naturalistic terms, but as conventionally encoded and understood by speakers of the language in question at the given time. Far from being "sociological factors" or "social factors bear[ing] upon linguistic features" (186), these are simply linguistic features. They are language particular categories of content, indexed by linguistic elements of expression, and they are selected

for expression in discourse by speakers in accordance with their communicative intentions and with the same degree of freedom (and responsibility) as other categories of linguistic content.

Secondly, while it is a commonplace that language is totally embedded in society (linguistic facts are social facts, cf. (3)), what is important to understand is that through the sociolinguistic categories of content indexed by linguistic expressions, the categories of a society are ("unevenly", that is, selectively) embedded in its language.

What should distinguish our generation of linguists from that of Kuryłowicz is the understanding that social categories which are thus integrated into a language are not heterogeneous to it. If we look back at Kuryłowicz's methodological admonition with this, it seems, superior understanding and grasp the difference between "sociological factors" and sociolinguistic features of content, we can in fact give Kuryłowicz's statement our unqualified endorsement.

In speaking of "linguistic" innovations in my title I want to imply as broad an understanding of the word 'linguistic' as is necessary to accommodate the fact that the realms of content encoded by linguistic expressions extend far beyond what is given individual morphemic expression. No elements of meaning symbolized or indexed by linguistic expressions can be considered non-linguistic or extra-linguistic (cf. Hjelmslev 1961: 125 ff.).

3. Innovations

The third word in my title was chosen in an effort to pinpoint the phenomena that have to be explicated and understood in linguistic diachrony and to avoid the confusion and the misunderstandings that the word 'change' has traditionally given rise to.

To some extent speakers of a language can have the impression that their language is changing or has changed in their time. There is no reason why the word 'change' should not be used to describe this naive, subjective impression.

But in linguistics the word 'change' has come to be more of a liability than an asset. Several attempts have been made to define it as a technical term (Coseriu 1958: 45 f., 1974: 63 f., cf. Andersen 1975: 19, 22, 54;

Lüdtke 1985: 187), but perhaps it is best avoided altogether. It has been noted time and again — but is often not sufficiently appreciated — that in the literal sense of the word ‘change’, “linguistic change does not exist” (thus Coseriu 1985). What happens diachronically — in discourse as in grammar — is that innovations are made which for a time may occur or exist side by side with the corresponding traditional forms, and eventually may become established as traditional themselves. In such a diachronic development, which informally can be called ‘a change’, nothing strictly speaking changes into anything else. The key concept here is that of innovation, which we return to below.

Often, in the scholarly literature, the word ‘change’ is used indifferently about diachronic developments as just described and about an entirely different, purely metalingual notion, equally distinct from anything properly called change and therefore better denoted by a more precise, descriptive label. I use the term ‘diachronic correspondence’ for this, the relation between an entity belonging to one stage of a language and an equivalent entity of a later stage. Diachronic correspondences are, so to speak, the raw material on the basis of which the linguist determines whether there have been innovations or not during a given segment of time.

The simple fact that a diachronic correspondence may be the result of a series of diachronic developments (‘changes’) would in itself argue for a consistent, explicit distinction between the two notions. In fact, however, linguists have tended to take little interest in the actual diachronic developments in which a language tradition is preserved and renewed as it is passed on from speaker to speaker — which should be the historical linguist’s primary object of inquiry. Instead they have focused their attention on diachronic correspondences, calling these metalingual relations ‘changes’, and speaking of them as of objects changing into other objects, bizarre as it may seem. Consider, among recent works, Bynon (1977), who speaks variously of grammars turning into subsequent grammars (e. g., pp. 46, 57, 67) and of surface representations changing into later, different surface representations (e. g., pp. 53, 64); these are the “pseudo-connections” highlighted by Andersen (1973: 767); or see Itkonen (1983: 208 ff.), who defines several schematic types of diachronic correspondence, calls these abstractions changes, and theorizes that some of them are more rational than others. In other words, the word ‘change’ has commonly been employed not to describe anything going on in the object of inquiry — language in diachrony — but rather to sum up a reified version of the linguist’s observations (cf. Coseriu 1985).