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Internal vs. external factors in socio-historical explanations of change: a fruitless dichotomy?

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## INTRODUCTION

1. Stephen Jay Gould (1984:7) wrote that 'dichotomy is the usual pathway to vulgarization. We take a complex web of arguments and divide it into two polarized positions'. On this occasion Gould was writing about what he called the 'false antithesis between nature and nurture', but his remarks are equally applicable to the dichotomy which concerns me here: namely, that between internally vs. externally motivated linguistic change. and other dichotomies have been part of structuralist legacy of Saussure inherited by contemporary linguistics.

An early manifestation of frustration with this traditional dichotomy can be found in Weinreich, Labov and Herzog's (1968) discussion of empirical foundations for a theory of language change, where they emphasized the need to use the external history of a language in historical reconstruction and to abandon the dichotomy between synchrony and diachrony. This led to a view of language change embedded in both linguistic and social structure. We might conveniently cite their article as the birth of socio-historical linguistics although the authors do not use that term. Their so-called 'actuation problem', however, is the very heart of the matter since it deals with the motivation or causation of change. Nevertheless, one can still say that while attention is paid to external factors constraining and facilitating the implementation of change, they are still seen as separate from internal factors.

A recent manifestation of this can be found in Labov's three volume <u>Principles of Linguistic Change</u> (not yet completed), where he divides up the volumes as follows: Volume 1 deals with internal factors; Volume 2 with social factors, and Volume 3, cognitive factors. He (1994:1) comments that the separation of internal from external factors may not 'seem practical to those who view language as a unified whole where tout se tient, or to those who believe that every feature of language has a social aspect... it is reasonable to ask whether internal factors can be successfully separated from social factors'. He then goes on to argue that the rationale for the separate discussion of internal and external factors is their respective independence of one another.

Speaking of the results obtained from multivariate

models of analysis used to investigate change, it appears to Labov that 'if an internal factor is dropped or changed, changes appear in other internal factors, but the external factors remain unchanged; if an external factor is dropped or changed, other external factors change, but the internal factors remain as they were' (1994:3). He adds that the 'internal factors are normally independent of each other, while the external factors are heavily interactive'. Although Labov (1994:4) is careful to claim he is not offering a 'theory of language change' in the three volumes, he nevertheless, ventures that to 'explain a finding about linguistic change will mean to find its causes in a domain outside of linguistics'.

In just these few remarks we can see the simplistic way in which most sociolinguists have treated the 'social' as a set of separate and independent categories or factors such as social class, sex, style, etc., which can be correlated with bits of language. These correlations reveal little about the dynamic processes that bring them about in the absence of some more general theory about social behavior. 1

With nearly 30 years of empirical research within this paradigm, it is perhaps time for a reassessment of how successfully we have dealt with integrating the internal and external into our explanations of language change. To do so, I will look at approaches which have focussed on one or the other of the two poles, as well as those which aim for some degree of synthesis. While there are problems with all of them, I will suggest some ways forward.

## SYSTEM-INTERNAL EXPLANATIONS FOR CHANGE

2. I will begin by looking at approaches which rule out the contribution of system-external factors. With respect to the distinction between internal and external factors, Saussure permitted no compromise (1959:22):

'I believe that the study of external linguistic phenomena is most fruitful; but to say that we cannot understand the internal linguistic organism without studying external phenomena is wrong... One must always distinguish what is internal and what is external. In each instance one can determine the nature of the phenomenon by applying this rule: everything that changes the system in any way is internal'.

While I believe Saussure is right that one CAN study what he calls the 'internal linguistic organism' without studying external linguistic phenomena, the result is not satisfactory. As Meillet (1916:66) pointed out in a review of Saussure's <u>Cours</u>, by separating linguistic change from the external conditions on which it depended, Saussure reduced it to an abstraction which was

essentially inexplicable. If languages were not used, there would be no reason for them to change. More importantly, however, Saussure's injunction that we must distinguish between internal and external using the criterion that whatever changes the system in any way is by default internal, begs the question of what one means by 'system' and how one identifies a change in it. It also reflects a traditional bias against external factors which are seen to be inherently messy; only internal factors were systematic and therefore worthy of treatment.

The predominance of the generative paradigm in both mainstream and historical linguistics has been partly to blame for the fact that external factors are still generally appealed to only as a last resort for anything that could not be explained internally. Generative approaches have conceived of change variously as radical restructuring triggered by opacity (see e.g. Lightfoot 1979) or more recently as parameter resetting (see e.g. Lightfoot 1991), with the major role given to children's acquisition as the source of structural change. Parameter resettings constitute change in individual grammars. Lightfoot attempts to figure out what factors triggered a particular resetting by looking at the surface data before and after the reparametrization. The problems he encounters are made more complicated by the incomplete nature of the written historical record and unsuitability for answering with any decisiveness questions about what the input to learners must have been at a given point in time.

The dichotomy between internal and external motivation also informs the thinking of contemporary historical linguists who are not generativists, such as Lass (forthcoming, 6), who has quite recently reiterated the separation between internal and external when he writes we can (and indeed must) say quite properly that structural history of a language ('linguistic history' in the strict sense) is quite independent in principle of its social history. The story of a language 'itself' must be carefully distinguished from the story of its changing uses, users, and social context- just as the changes themselves (as results) must be distinguished from the mechanisms by which they came about lexical and social diffusion). The two are related in subtle and complex ways, but the relation is never 'causal' in any philosophically respectable sense.' He later says (forthcoming, 7) that it is a 'vulgar error to about the 'social causation' of changes talk linguistic structure'. Lass (1980:121) claims that where speaker-based 'external' (i.e. social) factors have been appealed to in historical linguistics, these have been 'superficial and otiose', often involving ad hoc appeals to 'unanalyzed social categories' such as prestige.

In a different discussion of endogeny (language internal origin) and exogeny in varieties of English, he (1990:48) further elevates the dichotomy to an axiom when he says whenever there is a choice 'between (demonstrable residue) and (putative) contact-influence, the former is the more parsimonious and hence preferred account'. Thus, he concludes that Hiberno-English is a 'perfectly normal first-language internally evolved variety, with only marginal contact effects'. In a similar argument about the putative influence of Afrikaans on South African English, he and Wright (1986:202) observe that the normal condition for a language-system is to be a self-contained structural network. Its degree of permeability to outside influences is inversely related to the 'structuredness' of the subsystem involved.

While it is always easy to SUSPECT borrowing if we know there has been contact between two languages, it is much more difficult to prove that it is actually responsible for a given syntactic pattern construction. It is always possible that the form in question evolved independently. Part of the problem in coming to grips with this issue is that we have yet to develop a rigorous theory of language contact which allows us to make reliable predictions about what can be borrowed under what circumstances. The traditional position has been that while the lexicon is highly receptive to borrowing, syntax is less so. This too is an oversimplification.

Thomason and Kaufman (1988)have proposed methodological criterion for establishing external causation of language change, namely, that if a language has undergone structural interference in one subsystem then it will have undergone interference from the same source in others as well. They believe that interference can occur in all subsystems of a language. The social context rather than the structure of the languages determines the extent and direction of interference. Lightfoot (1979:380) too provides an additional criterion; to prove that external influence produced a syntactic change, we must prove that the innovating forms were first used by bilingual speakers.

Such discussions often simplify the issue since contact does not manifest itself solely in terms of transfer of features from one language to another. Other effects of contact may be simplification or regularization of irregularity in paradigms, reduction of variants or options, overgeneralization, or an acceleration of change already underway. Sufficient studies exist to make it clear that the phenomenon of

language contact cannot be separated from the issue of decreasing usage. Where restriction in use occurs, the frequency of irregular and marked forms falls below a critical threshold and makes it less likely that these elements will be acquired by younger speakers. Dorian's (1993) discussion of the complexity of the factors which must be taken into account before one can meaningfully assess the question of internal vs. external motivation sounds a cautionary note.

It might be argued that I have muddied the waters by bringing language contact into the picture under the domain of external factors motivating change, but this reflects a more general lack of clarity in the literature as to what constitutes internal vs. external factors. Traugott (1994:492) points out in her review of Gerritsen and Stein's (1992) edited volume entitled <u>Internal and External Factors in Syntactic Change</u> that the papers therein make but a meager contribution to a theory of internal and external factors. She identifies as the reason for this the artificial dichotomy between the two sets of factors which has been part of the ideology of linguistics since Saussure. While Gerritsen and Stein urge a reassessment of the dichotomy, the problem is ultimately given short shrift.

Certainly what counts as internal or external depends on a particular theory. Stockwell and Minkova's paper (On the role of prosodic features in syntactic change), for example, does not consider the 'external' dimension at all, if what we mean by that is the consideration of factors outside the abstract language system internalized by speakers. What they take to be 'external' is the implication of the prosodic level in syntactic change. From a larger perspective of course both prosody and syntax are still system-internal by comparison, say, with the impact of social processes such as standardization and literacy on a language more generally.

As the papers in this volume demonstrate, the distinction between external and internal is far from straightforward and is to some extent muddled by many other terms often used in the explanation of change, e.g. 'natural', 'marked', 'autonomous', 'cognitive', 'social', etc. Moreover, one could argue that the borderline between what is regarded as internal and external is continually shifting. The role of an innate universal grammar is being progressively reduced by more sophisticated work in pragmatics and cognition with the result that a number of abstract and fundamental grammatical principles are being shown to derive from more general processing constraints and pragmatic considerations. While processing principles are often

thought of as no less innate than grammatical ones, they are generally regarded as system-external by generativists. As Gerritsen and Stein (1992:8) point out, the dichotomy between internal and external factors itself rests on another dichotomy, namely that between the language as abstract structural system on the one hand and its use on the other. Traugott concludes her review by saying that the question of what is internal and what is external will remain unresolved until we reach a better understanding of factors related to use or pragmatics and of how to theorize continua.

SYSTEM-EXTERNAL EXPLANATIONS FOR CHANGE

3. A few linguists have migrated to the opposite pole of the dichotomy between internal and external factors in their search for motivations for change. mentioned Meillet (1906:17), for instance, who argued that since language is a social institution, linguistics must be a social science and 'the only variable element to which one may appeal in order to account for a linguistic change is social change'. More recently, Milroy (1992) has proposed a speaker-based model of change, in which there is no system-internal motivation for change. All change is socially motivated, introduced by acts of speaking on the part of individual speakers, and then diffused through social networks of various types. Milroy (1993:216) states quite bluntly that 'change would not take place if the speakers did not in some way agree that it should take place'. This apparently conscious intentionality distinguishes Milroy's position from that of the Neogrammarians, who believed in the randomness of sound change. Labov (1994:604) too finds the Neogrammarian view 'essentially correct. ...structure is a largely mechanical system, out of the reach of conscious recognition or adjustment by its users'.

The problem for Milroy is to explain how these speaker-based changes get into the abstract structure we call language. Weinreich et al. do not have this problem since they make no distinction between a change and its propagation, nor between a change itself and an analysis of its mechanism. Milroy, however, invokes distinction between speaker innovation and language change. Thus, speakers innovate, while languages change. More specifically, innovation is an act of the speaker of influencing linguistic structure. innovations occur all the time and many will not enter the language system at all. Once they do enter the system, however, they follow the predictable paths through social and linguistic structures, which, thanks to the research program articulated by Weinreich et al. (1968), we now know a great deal about. The question then becomes: under what social conditions do innovations become change? There is another question of course, but it is ignored. Milroy says 'we are not asking how spontaneous innovations arise'. He goes on instead to say that linguistic change is a social phenomenon that comes about for reasons of marking social identity, stylistic differentiation, etc. If it does not carry these social meanings, then it is not a linguistic change.

Milroy's answer to the question about the social conditions appropriate for change is found in network structure. Members of dense, multiplex networks impose norms of behavior which restrict change. In dense and multiplex networks everyone knows everyone else in a range of capacities. Integration in such a group involves an acceptance of its norms. A closeknit network thus functions as a conservative force resisting pressures for changes originating outside the network. Where ties are loose-knit, people are susceptible to change. The innovators themselves are individuals weakly linked to a network and likely to be in a position to contract weak ties.

Milroy extrapolates from the findings of his work in Belfast to make claims about rates of change in whole languages, predicting, for example, that linguistic change progresses most slowly in tightly knit communities which have little contact with the outside world. He offers the conservatism of Icelandic as a case in point. However, that is true only for grammar and lexis. Another factor he does not mention which I feel is relevant is that Iceland has the longest unbroken tradition of writing in all the Scandinavian countries. Iceland also shows much greater purism in its policy towards foreign borrowing. Indeed, grammatical and lexical conservatism became a matter of national pride and deliberate policy in the 19th century as a symbol of resistance to Danish domination.

has conceded that relative geographic Milrov isolation may have as much to do with the uniformity of Icelandic as the preservation of close knit network structures. 'Relative' is a key qualifier here considering the respective contributions of isolation on the one hand and network structure on the other. Compared to Faroese, its closest relative, Icelandic evidently has far less phonological dialect variation (see Arnason 1980:60), and has preserved more of the proto-Scandinavian morphological system. Both Faroese Icelandic, however, are certainly more conservative than the mainland Scandinavian languages. By definition, change in a totally isolated language has to endogenous, but this still raises the question within Milroy's framework of where within these isolated tightknit communities weak network ties exist. If we accept that it is speakers who introduce innovations which may lead to change, then contact between speakers is necessary for change to spread.

Recent evidence from Dorian's (1994) work among Scottish-Gaelic speaking enclaves on the east coast of Sutherland make certain of Milroy's assumptions about the normativeness of dense, multiplex networks and their capacity to resist change questionable. The three Gaelicvillages in question are exceptionally homogeneous. Networks are virtually all kin-based, individuals interact in the capacity of kin, friends and thirty neighbors. Yet Dorian found some generational intra-village differences which did not correlate with the usual external variables of socioeconomic status, network, sex, and style, and are largely ignored by the villagers. She (1994:633) concluded that a 'profusion of variant forms can be tolerated within a small community over a long period, without discernible movement toward the reduction of variants and also without the development of differences in the social evaluation of most variants'. This profusion of variant forms might be equated with innovations which do not spread from one speaker to another and therefore do not make their way into the language system. For some reason, these variants do not attract social attention and are not then invested with the identity marking functions Milroy specifically links with change.

The explanation for what Dorian calls 'personal pattern variation' does not lie in the fact that Gaelic is dying in these communities since these particular instances are not tied to age or proficiency either. There are other cases of variation of the familiar type, related, for instance, to geography, which the villagers are keenly aware of even though they are no more or less salient from a linguistic point of view. We know from other studies that the rate of change in languages spoken by small linguistic groups can be very rapid, and is potentially much greater than in languages spoken by large industrial societies. Certainly there is rapid change going on with respect to other features of the language in these villages. These may be attributed more generally to the process of restriction.

Trudgill (1992) has elaborated the dimension of relative isolation in addressing the question of whether different types of societies produce different types of language structure and language change. Taking the Scandinavian languages again as examples, he wonders why Faroese has remained more conservative in its grammatical structure than Norwegian. As Trudgill points out, the Faroe islands are obviously more remote and isolated than

Norway. This gives rise to the hypothesis that varieties in contact change more quickly than those in isolation. Moreover, the kinds of changes that take place in contact languages often make them more simplified, regular and analytical in structure- pidgins being an extreme case. Yet similar trends can be seen across whole families of languages such as Indo-European. Conversely, other types of changes, such as fast speech rules, which make phonology more opaque to second language learners, are less likely to become institutionalized in high contact languages.

These ideas are, of course, not new. Trudgill would have found it useful to consult Thurston's (1987) study of language change in northwestern New Britain, Papua New Guinea, where the author tries to validate the existence of two kinds of language change, one gradual and the other abrupt, motivated by different social conditions. Like Trudgill, Thurston believes that centuries of ingroup use in small communities leads to the acquisition of complexity. Some of this complexity may manifest itself in the personal pattern type of variation Dorian found. Conversely, languages spoken by strangers to one another are simplified to a degree corresponding to the extent of their speakers' shared knowledge. The most radical change tends to occur in languages undergoing intense contact. It is also such languages which tend to display an unusual amount of what Grace (1992) calls 'aberrant' change, i.e. not easily explicable in terms of traditional comparative historical reconstruction.

These ideas receive some support from quite a different quarter when we look at the geographical distribution of diversity over time. In a far-reaching attempt to quantify typological structures and correlate them with patterns of migration, Nichols (1992) has identified 'spread zones', characterized by low structural diversity, innovating center and conservative periphery (e.g. Australia, W. European, central Oceania, Mesoamerica). Residual zones are high in genetic density (the ratio of genetic lineages per square mile) and structural diversity (amount of disparity exhibited by a language or group of languages). The island of New Guinea is an example; it alone contains about as many language families as the entire Old World.

The basic notions of historical linguistics apply well to spread zones because they have been worked out with reference to spreading language families such as Indo-European, and therefore less well to 'aberrant' languages. Spreading languages replace or absorb their predecessors and cause an increase in uniformity. There is a tendency for unmarked features to spread in situations of high diversity and language contact. In

this way a lot of genetic density has been lost in Europe through the spread of Indo-European. Western Europe is now dominated by language stocks that originated east of the Urals:namely, Indo-European, Turkic and Uralic. Only Basque and the indigenous Caucasian languages continue pre-Indo-European lineages. Basque is a good example of an extreme relic population and language. The Basques underwent the least genetic admixture with the invading Indo-European-speaking peoples. Today the Basques are both genetically and linguistically distinct. In the peripheral parts of the world, western Europe, central and southern Australia, eastern North America and parts of South America, we have extreme and idiosyncratic profiles.

Diversity appears to stabilize over time. There is evidence for west to east order as predictor of the frequencies of language structures. Australia represents the eastern extreme and constitutes the first split after the Old World from the tree of typological divergence. This is compatible hypotheses of a west to east expansion which went first from Africa and the Near East to the tropical Pacific. Western structures gradually expanded eastward and later entrants to the New World showed more Western admixture than earlier entrants. A reduction in diversity is a product of modern times, more specifically of social and political factors such as the rise of complex economies, urbanization, etc., and wide spread of languages driven by economic and political prestige. In Nichols' scenario the greatest degree of complexity is in areas of high diversity and contact. The Pacific emerges as an ancient center of typological differentiation.

#### CONCLUSION

4. What can we conclude from my brief and rather sweeping examination of the problems in separating the internal from the external in our search for motivations for change? Labov (1994:5) has commented: 'a set of propositions that relate general findings about language change to general properties of human beings or of human societies will certainly deserve to be called a theory of language change'. I believe we may be on the verge of sketching the outlines of such a theory if we can integrate some of the strands of research I have mentioned here. A number of things are required in order to do this. At present, socio-historical reconstruction is constrained by the fact that the external histories of most languages are unknown. Horvath and Wexler (1994:264) argue that the uncovering of these histories should be a major desideratum of historical linguistics. Presumably more communities were historically of the focussed type with high density networks in which people interacted mainly with others whom they had known most of their lives, generally shared the same knowledge, values, etc., but not necessarily the same speech repertoires. There is an urgent need for the comparative study of language variation and change in small scale societies which would allow us to contrast relatively isolated communities with those under intense contact. I cannot stress too much the urgency of this task since the world's small languages are disappearing, and with them the kind of complexity that develops in such intimate communities.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Students of gender have certainly questioned the nature of the relationship between two common social variables, namely, sex and social class. After reanalyzing a number of sociolinguistic patterns, Coates (1986) concluded that gender quite often provided a better account of the variation than did social class. Williams (1992) offers a more thorough-going critique of bias within sociolinguistics towards social theory based on Parsonian structural functionalism, emphasizing individualism, identity, consensus and mobility. The belief that change is functionally adaptive is also part and parcel of the Parsonian legacy.

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