

PAPER 7 (HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS)

Discuss the causes and mechanism of language change.

A language is composed of several sub-systems: centrally, a phonemic system, a grammatical system, and a morphophonemic system; peripherally, a semantic system and a phonetic system. It changes in the course of time and the change takes place in all its sub-systems. There are certain causes that bring changes in any language. According to Hockett, "There are three main mechanisms- that is, types of causes- for the various kinds of phylogenetic change, together with a number of subordinate mechanisms that are not so well understood.

SOUND CHANGE AS A MECHANISM

OE dative singular /st ne/ (stone) and genitive plural /st na/ fell together in pronunciation by ME times as /st n /. By the same Middle English times, OE genitive singular /st nes/ and nominative-accusative plural /st nas/ had both become /st n s/. Several different kinds of change are involved in this sequence of events. Continuous sound change had gradually lessened the acoustic difference between OE unstressed /e/ and /a/ until in OE they had become identical. When they became identical, a restructuring of the phonemic system (a phonemic change) had occurred, since certain contrasts which earlier had been part of the system were now lost. The sound change and the resulting phonemic change, led to a shape change in countless forms, including those cited above. In the inflection of 'stone' and of many other nouns, the genitive singular and the nominative-accusative plural had now become identical (ending in /-s/); likewise the dative singular and genitive plural (ending in /- /), such a falling together of the shapes representative of different inflectional forms, brought about by sound change, is known as 'syncretism'. The specific instances of syncretism just mentioned did not in themselves constitute a grammatical change since some nouns still maintained distinct shapes for the inflectional categories in question. However, it was one of the factors contributing to the eventual total loss of case inflection in English.

In this first example, thus, we see sound change functioning as a mechanism for the production of certain other kinds of change: phonemic change, shape change, and, in part, grammatical change.

In OE the noun meaning 'back' like a number of others, had two stem-shapes differing as to vowel: the singular had / /, as in nominative-accusative /b k/, while the plural had //, as in nominative-accusative /b ku/. Now in early Middle English times the two stressed short vowels / / and // had fallen together, as a single low vowel /a/, so that the two forms cited above had become respectively /bak/ and /bak /. The disappearance of the / /: // distinction was the result of sound change; but as a further result, there was an alternation change: a certain irregular alternation common in OE was lost.

Shortly after the events just described, early ME /a/ was lengthened to /av/ when followed by a single consonant in turn followed by an unstressed vowel. /bak/ and /bak / thus became respectively /bak/ and /ba k /; likewise, /fad r/ 'father' (from OE /fa d r/) became /fa der/, but its genitive /fad s/ (from OE /f deres/) retained the short /a/. In this case sound change brought about a new set of irregular morphophonemic alterations. The immediate consequences have now been obscured by subsequent events: the vowel of our NE, back reflects ME /a/ rather than /av/; some modern English dialects have /fej er/

'father' showing the ME form with lengthened /av/, but standard NE father is from the form with ME unlengthened /a/.

It is clear from these examples that sound change in addition to being one kind of phylogenetic change, must also be recognized as one of the mechanisms involved in other kinds of phylogenetic change. The truth of this is understood when we search in vain for any sequence of historical events in which sound change can be shown to be the result of some other sort of change. This does not mean, of course, that gradual modification of habits of pronunciation and hearing is "uncaused", but it does mean that the causes of sound change cannot be found within the systems of habit we call language.

BORROWING

The words like 'skirt', 'they', 'chair', 'table', 'veal', 'vest', 'potato', 'tabacco', 'hominy', 'typhoon', were, indeed, not part of the vocabulary of OE but have come into the language since. These words were taken from various other languages: 'skirt' and 'they' from Scandinavian in early times; 'chair', 'table', and 'veal' from Norman French after the conquest; 'vest' much later from Italian; 'potato', 'tobacco', and 'hominy' from various American Indian languages after the voyages of Columbus; 'typhoon' from southern Chinese in the early days of the China trade. French words coming into English after Norman conquest brought with them some new phonemic distinction such as the contrast between /f/ and /v/. Here then is a second important mechanism of phylogenetic change: technically it is called borrowing.

Borrowing is not always from one language into another, sometimes it is merely between dialects. Our words 'vat' and 'vixen' began with /f-/ in OE (/f t/, /fyksen/), and if they had the same continuous history as father, four, foot, they would begin with /f-/ today. But there is an area in the southeast of England in which all OE initial /f/'s were voiced to /v-'s; to this day people in this area pronounce 'father', 'four', 'foot', as well as 'vat', 'vixen' with an initial /v-/. Our contemporary NE has come down largely from the London English of ME times, and documentary records show that in ME times the two words (vat, vixen), having fallen into disuse in London, were reintroduced from the rustic dialects in which initial /v-/ was regular.

ANALOGICAL CREATION

The OE singular /bo.k/ 'book' and irregular plural /be.k/ 'books' both arrived into ME; respectively as /bowk/ and /bejc/. In ME times there were vast number of nouns in which the plural was formed from the singular by adding /- s/. On the analogy of these, a new ME plural form /bowk s/ was coined; for a time both /bowk s/ and /bejc/ were used, but eventually the latter died out, leaving books as the only plural.

The mechanism of analogical creation is responsible for the formation of plurals by adding /-s/ to a singular noun. A child or a foreigner may say foots instead of feet. We may portray the situation as follows:

*'boat' is to 'boats' as
'back' is to 'backs' as
'cliff' is to 'cliffs' as
'root' is to 'roots' as*

'foot' is to X (which is obviously foots).

Besides these three principal mechanisms, there are some minor mechanism also.

CONTINUATION

It is the reshaping of a word on the basis of consonant association with some other word. It is supposed, for example, that we say /fijmejl/ female, rather than the historically expected /fem l/ or /fijm l/, because of the habitual pairing of this word with male.

METAANALYSIS

It is akin to contamination, except that an older form is actually replaced by one which makes 'more sense' to the speakers who introduce the new shape. For example, some speakers replace 'welsh rabbit' by 'welsh rarebit'.

The remaining varieties are all observable as 'slips of the tongue'.

1. METATHESIS

It replaces an old form by a new one which differs in that two parts have been interchanged: 'disintregation' for 'disintegration', 'whipser' for 'whisper', 'it seems to sick' for 'it seems to stick'. One would not expect such slips of the tongue to have any lasting effect on a language; but in some cases they do. NE 'bird' reflects a metathesized form of OE /brid/ 'young bird'; 'horse' has metathesis as compared with the ancestral form beginning with /hr-/.

2. HAPLOLY

In haploly one of two more or less similar sequences of phonemes is dropped. One person always says 'morphonemics' instead of 'morphophonemics'.

3. ASSIMILATION

Assimilation makes one part of an utterance more like some nearby part in phonetic shape. When the two parts are adjacent, this may occur gradually as a part of sound change. But in distant assimilation other material intervenes. In Proto Indo-European the words for four and five began with different consonants. The distinction was maintained, for example in Sanskrit, which has /catur/ 'four'(from Proto Indo-European /kw/ and /panca/ 'five' (from /p-/).

4. DISSIMILATION

Dissimilation works in just the opposite way: where one would expect the same phoneme or sequence of phonemes twice, something else occurs in one of the positions. Latin 'peregrinus', 'foreigner', 'stranger', thus appears in the Romance languages with /l/ instead of /r/: Italian pellegrino (English borrowed from Romance pilgrim).