



Contact-genetic linguistics: toward a contact-based theory of language change



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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a theory of language descent based on an interplay between inheritance and contact mechanisms of language transmission. The proposed approach emphasizes the alternation between periods of gradual and rapid change in the history of languages, with the assumption that during both types of periods, change is due to language contact, with a differing agency of change and a different predominant mode of transmission (to L1 or L2 learners). Rooted in the diachronic aspects of language change, and incorporating recent advances in sociolinguistic typology and the typology of language-contact phenomena, the theory also contributes to our understanding of the concept of genetic relatedness.

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1. Language transmission and genetic relatedness

Until recently, the default view in genetic linguistics has been that the “normal” transmission of a language occurs when it is acquired by children as their first language (L1) from their elders. The necessary consequence of this view is that languages that fail to pass the criterion of “normal transmission” – in other words, languages whose past histories contain a significant amount of adult non-native (L2) acquisition – also fail to fit within the genetic classification scheme. Although these assumptions have implicitly underlain most of historical linguistic writing and discussions of language classification (Noonan, 2010), they are rarely articulated explicitly. A notable exception is Thomason and Kaufman’s (1988) extended discussion of the issue, in which the above assumption and its corollary occupy the third and the fourth place in the list of “fundamental theoretical assumptions that underlie the concept of genetic relationship”:

Third, a language is passed on from parent generation to child generation and/or via peer group from immediately older to immediately younger, with relatively small degrees of change over the short run, given a reasonably stable socio-linguistic context.... Our fourth assumption is that the label “genetic relationship” does not properly apply when transmission is imperfect.... We would claim that languages arising outside of normal transmission are not related (in the genetic sense) to any antecedent systems. (Thomason and Kaufman, 1998: 9–10)

The theoretical importance of the concept of “normal transmission” for that of genetic relationship is reiterated at various points throughout the book, including in the following passage:

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Our approach to the study of genetic relationship is thus based theoretically on the social fact of normal transmission rather than merely on the linguistic facts themselves. (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988: 12)

The principles articulated in the above quotes have remained largely in place, as evidenced by the following quote from a more recent source:

A language (or dialect) Y at a given time is said to be descended from language (or dialect) X of an earlier time if and only if X developed into Y by an unbroken sequence of instances of native-language acquisition by children. (Ringe et al., 2002: 63; cited here after Labov, 2007: 346)

Alongside this approach to the issue of genetic relatedness within what Noonan (2010: 48) refers to as “orthodox linguistic circles”, there has been growing awareness of a large number of linguistic varieties and language–transmission situations that do not fit the strict definition of genetic relationship provided in the above quotes. This naturally raises the question of how/whether to genetically classify language varieties that have come into being in situations of less-than-perfect intergenerational transmission.

Several kinds of such situations may be distinguished, each involving a different type and degree of adult non-native acquisition in the languages’ history. One concerns language varieties that have served as lingua francas over large areas, and have consequently had a significant history of non-native acquisition. In his 2007 book *Language Interrupted: Signs of Non-Native Acquisition in Standard Language Grammars*, John McWhorter argues that the grammars of several of the world’s major standard national languages show the effects of past periods of massive non-native acquisition. McWhorter examines five such languages in detail – English, Mandarin, Persian, Colloquial Arabic, and Malay – and mentions in passing others as also likely to have passed through periods at which the intergenerational type of transmission, which he also regards as “normal”, was outweighed by transmission to adult speakers of other languages. McWhorter views the latter type of transmission as “abnormal” and compares it with that which leads to the development of creoles. His views on the language transmission issue are articulated in the following passage:

However, I openly assert that creoles are the product of a process of language transmission that is most definitely *abnormal*. I designate creoles’ development as abnormal because the sociohistorical nature of their timeline is much less common than the timeline of thousands of other languages worldwide. That is, their development was not *the norm*. However, this book has been devoted to arguing that the development of many noncreole languages, including the one I am writing in which is my native language, was also abnormal. The development of both English and Haitian Creole was abnormal – and fascinatingly so. (McWhorter, 2007: 274; the emphasis is original)

In his book, McWhorter does not explore the consequences of these languages’ allegedly abnormal transmission for their genetic classification. Thus, their traditional genetic affiliation is not questioned (cf. “English and the other Germanic languages”, “Mandarin and its sister Chinese languages”, “Persian’s ancestor Old Persian”, pp. 10 and 138), and the book’s argument depends in part upon a systematic structural comparison between these languages and their “relatives”, whose transmission is assumed to have been “normal”. The issue of the genetic affiliation of lingua franca-type languages is relevant to the argument of this paper because, in their case, the assumed necessary condition of a genetic relationship – “normal transmission” – is not met. Strictly speaking, and in the spirit of the above quotes from Thomason and Kaufman (1988) and Ringe et al. (2002), no genetic relationship can be claimed between, e.g., the “abnormally” transmitted English and (other) Germanic languages, which have been transmitted “normally”.¹

But if the issue of genetic affiliation was not raised with respect to such major standardized world languages as English and Mandarin, it has been amply discussed in the literature with respect to another group of languages in whose histories non-native acquisition is known to have played a major role: creoles.² Creoles derive the bulk of their vocabulary from their lexifiers, whereas their grammars typically include elements from both their lexifiers and substrates, and also incorporate linguistic innovations and the effects of language simplification by speakers of the lexifier and imperfect acquisition by speakers of the substrate languages. Given these multiple sources of linguistic structures, experts are divided on the issue of the linguistic classification of creoles, based on whether they view their development from their lexifiers as continuous or interrupted. On one side of the debate are scholars such as Hall (1950, 1958), Goodman (1964), Owens (1991, 1997, 2014), DeGraff (2001, 2009 et seq.), Chaudenson (2003), and Mufwene (1997 et seq.), who argue for the continuity between creoles and their lexifiers and view them as genetically related. For example, Owens (1997) indicates that up to 90% of Nubi lexicon, and consequently also its phonology, are derivable from colloquial Arabic; and in related work, he shows that Nubi shares more structural features with colloquial Sudanese Arabic than with the southern Sudanese languages that have served as its substrates (Owens, 1990, 1991, 2014). On the opposite side of the debate are creolists and historical linguists who view creoles as structurally and socio-historically exceptional and rely on non-genetic approaches to their origin and classification, such as the universalist bioprogram idea (Bickerton, 1981, 1984); or emphasize their connection to their substrates (Lefebvre,

¹ Noonan (2010) believes that substratic influence is not problematic for the intergenerational transmission approach “as long as there are some members of the community who continue the generational transmission of the linguistic tradition” (57). This position immediately raises the question of how to determine the ratio of L1 to L2 language acquirers that is necessary for the language to (still) be viewed as genetically related to its source. I return to this issue below in connection with Holm’s (2004) model of partial restructuring.

² Ansaldo’s (2009: 94) remarks on the “ideological nature of classificatory debates” are particularly instructive in this regard. Cf. also Siegel (2007b) for a thorough overview of the issue of the genetic affiliation of creoles and the underlying ideologies.

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