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Rethinking language change from a dialogic perspective

Language is a tool for communication and thus first and foremost a social phenomenon. Any language has emerged from human agency and has thus been actively produced and stabilized through processes of interaction among human agents. However, the different forms of stabilization of language into generalizable procedures and routines that social agents employ in contexts of interaction do not converge into a static, fixed system of rules and principles in the generativist and structuralist sense. While effective communication is always based on a certain degree of dependence on the 'system' and its reproduction in order to be able to sustain routines and regulate social interaction in time and space, it also requires the change and recombination of existing structures in order to serve the particular communicative needs of a speaker in a concrete social encounter. Arguing with [Giddens \(1984\)](#), the abstract 'system' as a set of patterns and principles and concrete human agency are two sides of the same coin.

While it appears intuitively clear that language change is triggered by the actual use of language in dialogic interaction, descriptions of changes in language tend to background the individual speaker, focussing on or foregrounding the structures and rules that are subjected to change so that the acting speaker exists only virtually. However, in order to understand the motivating factors for change and the diffusion of innovations throughout a community of speakers it is required that the speaker and the communicative action involving such innovations be recovered. This is not only the spirit underlying all contributions to this special issue, but also a more general trend in current linguistic research, induced by the increasing popularity of usage-based approaches to the study of language structure and language change and by what appears to be a gradual shift from a system-based to an increasingly speaker-based perspective on language. Adopting a speaker-based perspective means that language is seen as a system shaped by general processes of human cognition (e.g. categorization, sequential processing, pattern recognition), principles of social acting (e.g. respecting face concerns, communicative accommodation), and the ways in which language is acquired. All of these aspects are interdependent and require a more integrated approach to the study of language, such as the construal of language as a *complex adaptive system* (CAS) ([Beckner et al., 2009](#)). Such integrated approaches are attractive for the study of language and language change as they offer a unified account of aspects that have been studied in a systematic way only in different subdisciplines of linguistic research, such as in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, or conversation analysis, and thus allow for overcoming the scientific compartmentalism that still predominates in many areas of linguistic research.

This special issue draws together a number of ideas on the importance of the social dimension of language as a motivating factor for language change, more precisely its use in dialogic contexts. The contributions account for a multitude of aspects that appear immediately relevant for explaining instances of language change, such as psychological principles of social behaviour in a general sense ([Tantucci, Culpeper & Di Cristofaro](#)), aspects of politeness and face concerns ([Archer](#)), frequency effects on language processing in dialogic contexts ([Haselow](#)), social deixis, e.g. power relations ([Buyle & De Smet](#)), socio-linguistic factors ([Hancil](#)), or genre/types of face-to-face interaction ([Lenker](#)). What they have in common the search for empirical alternatives to "mainstream" approaches to language change, which tend to conceptualize 'language' as an abstract, static object rather than as a social activity, and 'structure' as relatively fixed (at a certain point in time) and created outside communicative encounters rather than as an emergent phenomenon shaped in concrete interactions and becoming conventionalized through repeated use in dialogic contexts.

1. Dialogism

The term "dialogism" ([Linell, 2014](#); [Steffensen, 2012](#)) stresses the dynamic use of linguistic resources in the construal of meaning and the emergence of linguistic structure in concrete communicative acts and is used to promote the idea that structural change derives from language put to use in dialogic activities rather than resulting from an abstract language-internal process. The terms 'dialogue' and 'dialogism' are used in this special issue exclusively with reference to language

use in direct interactions between two or more mutually co-present individuals or communicative systems, e.g. face-to-face interactions based on spoken language, or representations of dialogue in historical texts. Common to all forms of dialogic approaches is the idea that language is inextricably bound to interlocutors situated in a concrete social interaction, which means that rule-based approaches to communicative systems, which separate the “system” from the users and the contexts in which they operate, are dispensed with. A dialogic approach to language change is thus able to tackle the problem of the system–action dualism addressed above and discussed in the context of social systems in sociological *structuration theory* (Giddens, 1984): it allows us to reconcile the structuralist idea that language systems exist outside concrete speakers and more or less force human verbal behaviour into prepatterned ways of acting with the phenomenological idea that human agency has brought about and continuously reshaped these systems, and to conceive of the relationship between language system and agency as mutually dependent entities. This way, we can account for stability in language by postulating that verbal actions are taken in continuity with the past while, at the same time, acknowledging that language systems are not mechanically reproduced, but – as any social system – are “an active constituting process accomplished by, and consisting in, the doings of active subjects” (Giddens, 1993: 121), i.e. every process of dialogic activity is and may create something new.

2. Process-based vs. result-based perspectives on language change

All of the contributions in this issue focus on the *process* of change rather than on its result. In this sense, they differ from mainstream approaches to language change, in which developments are usually explained in terms of paths or stages which a particular form or construction has gone through on its way from a state A (Form₁: Meaning₁) to a new state B (a new grammatical or lexical meaning of Form₁ or a modification of Form₁ (=Form_{1x}), i.e. Form_{1/1x}: Meaning₂), the latter of which may coexist with the former state A or replace A, thus focussing on the result or “outcome” of a particular change. Thinking in terms of different “states” implies that language is seen as an atemporal, fixed system at a given point in time, e.g. in period A, where we observe a (relatively) fixed pairing of Form₁: Meaning₁, and in period B, in which we find Form_{1/1x}: Meaning₂, as it surfaces in explanations such as ‘the definite article *the* developed out of the Old English demonstrative determiner *sē*’ or ‘the conjunction *but* is based on the Old English adverbial *būtan* ‘outside’. Result-oriented, product-based approaches suggest that language is an invariant system at a given point in time, existing “above” the speaker, who merely follows the conventions in a ritualized way. This view is not only problematic in that the source of change, namely incipient variation and divergence from “rules”, cannot be accounted for, it also contradicts the empirical observation that there are overlapping uses of individual forms and structures at all times, given that meanings and functions do not exist prior to language use and are merely reiterated, but are made in concrete speech contexts. Prior uses of certain forms or structures shape a speaker’s past experience with language and regularities, but – as with all forms of experience – acquired forms of (verbal) behaviour are adapted to concrete communicative needs in an entirely new communicative situation, which naturally implies minute alterations of the “system”. A recurrent observation made in each of the contributions to this special issue is that meanings, functions and structures are never fixed, not even in a given period, but – in Hopper’s (1998) sense – open and continuously in the making. The relation between forms and functions or meanings is constantly reshaped and negotiated in concrete “dialogic” acts, that is, in the joint action of two (or more) individuals in which it emerges.

In line with the conceptualization of language as a ‘complex adaptive system’ (Beckner et al., 2009) that is shaped and reshaped in language use, the contributions provide intriguing examples for the power of creativity, social forces, and principles of processing in triggering minute alterations of the ‘system’. These continuous alterations and innovations are in competition with tendencies toward uniformity and fixation (Bybee, 2010), which form the basis for behavioural routines, rituality and predictability. Instability in language is not only characteristic for asymmetric or irregular systems, but ubiquitous and a defining feature of language. It characterizes even highly ritualized patterns such as formulae of social exchange (e.g. greetings) which, as one is tempted to believe, should be fixed “for all times” since they are based on routinized behaviour and thus subjected to automated processing. However, as the study by Tantucci, Culpeper & Di Cristofaro on the history of the dialogic construction [A: *good morrow* B – B: (*good*) *morrow* (A)] in this issue shows, “the diachronic formation of such patterns does not necessarily trigger a blind reiteration of the same forms.” Rather, speakers creatively manipulate schematic or “entrenched” patterns for various reasons, e.g. in order to inhibit full reciprocity, avoiding predictability, or to create a “surplus” in politeness work. While such manipulations are often restricted to individual communicative encounters and thus mostly without far-reaching consequences, they have the potential to reshape a habitualized pattern in the long run. The language system is thus not to be seen as a repository of abstract structures, but as the byproduct of language use in interactive contexts (Hopper, 1998), given that language is not produced in a communicative vacuum, but in concrete speech events.

The perspectival shift from ‘language change a result’ toward ‘language change as a process’ requires a detailed study of the use of a particular pattern under investigation in concrete interactive contexts and thus imposes special requirements on the kind of data based on which a particular instance of language change can be documented. Rather than operating with structures outside their concrete usage contexts or working with abstractions from concrete instances of language use, it is required that the data derive from and are integrated in a concrete interactive context since this is the only way we can investigate the combined effect of many interacting factors, e.g. the role of socio-pragmatic, cultural-ritualistic, or frequency factors. Given the historical dimension of structural change and the unavailability of natural speech data from

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