Auxiliary deletion in the informal speech of Welsh–English bilinguals: A change in progress

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Abstract

In this paper we report on evidence from our corpus of Welsh–English conversations of a change in progress involving the deletion of the auxiliary verb in Welsh constructions with second person singular subjects. We discuss the mechanism behind this change, in particular whether it is due to language-internal factors or to the contact between Welsh and English. The results show that deletion of this auxiliary is very common in the speech of Welsh–English bilinguals, but that there is statistically significant age variation in its frequency, where speakers under 50 are more likely to delete the auxiliary than those 50 or older, which we interpret as change in progress (via apparent time). In trying to explain why auxiliary deletion occurs, we find that phonological constraints point to internal factors, whereas the similarity of the resulting word order to that of English suggests contact as a factor. We argue that the change has multiple causation and that language contact, and in particular certain historical changes that have occurred during the latter half of the 20th century, have boosted the process of internal change. The nature of the change provides, we argue, a path for grammatical convergence towards English.
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1. Introduction

Although, as Silva-Corvalán (1994:1) points out, structuralist views of language precluded the observation of change in progress, methodological advances in the latter part of the twentieth century have made this possible. By now the 'apparent time' construct (cf. Bailey et al., 1991) has become widely accepted. In the words of Bailey et al. (1991:241), ''[t]he basic assumption underlying the construct is that, unless there is evidence to the contrary, differences among generations of similar adults mirror actual diachronic developments in a language''. In this paper we shall use the apparent time construct to examine the evidence for change in the use of the auxiliary verb

bod 'be' in Welsh speech, while paying due attention to ''evidence to the contrary''. We shall then consider the cause of the changes established, weighing up the possible contribution of internal and/or external (contact-induced) factors.

There has been considerable discussion in the literature on the mechanisms which cause language change, particularly on the distinction between internally motivated change, where the change is a result of internal restructuring of the grammar, and externally motivated change, where the grammar of one language is influenced by the grammar of another language in contact with it (see the discussions in e.g. Farrar and Jones, 2002; McMahon, 2004; Backus, 2005; Treffers-Daller and Mougeon, 2005; Mougeon et al., 2005).

The process of internal language change is argued by Croft (2000) to consist of speakers selecting one of three options when speaking: (i) they use an established form (''normal replication''), or (ii) they use a new form which they have not used before (''innovation''), or (iii) they choose a recently innovated form over an established form (''propagation''). Normal replication is the conservative choice and inhibits language change, whereas innovation by itself is not sufficient to create a lasting change in a language (since there is no certainty that the same speaker will not choose normal replication the next time she has to select a form). Propagation of an innovation by sufficient speakers, however, can result in that innovation eventually becoming itself an established form, perhaps unsettling the 'old' form, and thereby changing the language. Thomason (2003:694) notes that, in principle, ''any feature that can appear in a single person's speech at any time. . . can turn into a permanent change in the entire language''. Internal language change is essentially a regularization of the variation found in human speech.

Externally motivated change, on the other hand, is precipitated by language contact (e.g. Weinreich, 1953:1; Winford, 2003:23). This change takes the form of parts of a language's grammar being lost, added to, or otherwise modified or restructured. For example, Finnish has shifted from SOV to SVO under influence from English and other Indo-European languages (Thomason, 2001:11), and Central Coast Salish has mostly shifted from VSO to SVO, probably under the influence of English (Shaw et al., 2008).

Several authors have in fact pointed out that it is frequently difficult to identify whether a particular change in a language in a contact situation is due to internal or external factors. Backus (2005:314) argues that ''internal and external factors often conspire'' and Thomason and Kaufman (1988:61) use the term ''multiple causation'', illustrating this with the example of the fricatives [f] and [v] in Middle English, which were formerly allophones but later became distinct phonemes, due in part to the borrowing from Norman French of words with initial /f/ and /v/ which were minimal pairs. Thomason and Kaufman argue that this was due to BOTH the external influence of French AND an internal process, where the influence of French ''generally anticipated or reinforced'' existing internal processes of sound change (1988:124).

In order to determine whether a particular change has been accelerated by language contact it is convenient to have a community of monolingual speakers of the language in question as a reference point. However, as Backus (2005:312) points out, many languages in contact with a dominant language no longer have monolingual speakers, and this is true of Welsh in Wales. Welsh is dominated by English not only because the majority of the inhabitants of Wales are monolingual English speakers, but also because all adult speakers of Welsh also speak English.

In this paper we examine one apparent change in progress in Welsh, namely the deletion of finite auxiliary forms of the verb *bod* 'be' (AuxD) in Welsh informal speech, and discuss whether or not the change is due to internal factors, external factors, or a combination of both—or, indeed, whether or not such a separation of causal factors is even possible—without adopting a priori the 'either–or' mentality criticized by Farrar and Jones (2002).

Welsh, a Celtic language, is spoken primarily in Wales, where language contact with English dates back to the time of the Anglo-Saxon settlers in Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries AD (Davies, 1994). As Thomason and Kaufman (1988) note, bilingualism is usually a prerequisite for any major kinds of externally motivated language change (e.g. word order or morphology, rather than mere changes in vocabulary), and Welsh–English bilingualism has been common in Wales since at least the 19th century. According to the 2011 UK Census, 19% of the Welsh population of 3.1 million people can speak Welsh. Although Welsh monolinguals existed in the past, all Welsh speakers are now bilingual in English to varying extents. Thomason and Kaufman (1988:50) propose a typology of language change that notes the link between the intensity of bilingualism in a language community and the extent and types of language change observed. Following their framework, we suggest that the situation of the Welsh language falls into the category of ''intense bilingualism'', so, according to Thomason and Kaufman's criteria, changes attributable to language contact of practically any kind could occur, and such changes can be extensive. We will examine AuxD with this prediction in mind.

In what follows we describe the phenomenon of AuxD in Welsh, using examples from our spoken corpus, *Siarad*, which we describe in section 4. We then review previous research on this phenomenon before presenting our own analysis of variation in AuxD and our interpretation of change in progress. We discuss internal and external contact-induced causes of the change, and the extent to which the change reflects convergence of Welsh towards English.