

Towards a holistic understanding of language contact in the past

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Workshop description and research questions

The classical 20th-century theoretical approaches to language tend to view grammar through a basically monolingual perspective. This general tendency is perhaps due to the Saussurean view on languages as abstract systems, but also to the dominant monolingualism ideologies of late-modern nation-states (in the context of historical linguistics, see Laakso 2014). The tendency to view grammar in isolation from multilingual settings is so pervasive that even modern approaches do not often overcome the monolingual paradigm. Undoubtedly, the biggest culprit in perpetuating such a view has been the generative quest of internal grammar and the misconceptions of what this is and how to capture it.

At the same time, the effects of language contact very clearly manifest themselves, as discussed in the literature on language contact (see Matras 2009), contact-induced and “shared” grammaticalization (see Heine & Kuteva 2005, Robbeets & Cuyckens 2013), sometimes resulting in areal patterns particularly relevant for linguistic typology (see e.g. Koptevskaja-Tamm 2006).

Given that grammatical transfer is very real—in fact, rather pervasive—many authors and workshops have tried to address the impasse in dealing with language contact. As practitioners working in the field of historical and contact linguistics, we feel that there continues to be an important gap between the fact of commonly happening grammatical transfer in language contact and our theorizing about such grammars. We believe that this gap needs to be narrowed and eventually closed for the sake of both theories of grammar and theories of language contact. In fact, we would like to take this further and ask the question: Do we really need a separate theory of language contact? The rather attractive alternative would be to reduce the effects of language contact to theories of language acquisition, sociolinguistics, external factors as well as more generalised cognitive mechanisms such as copy and analogy which once properly interwoven they can offer holistic explanations (see Sitaridou 2014, 2018, 2019).

The aim of this workshop is to contribute to this and other related questions. Below, we outline several themes that we find important for making such progress.

- a. Studies of language contact such as Matras (2009) attempt to establish hierarchies of language-contact influence by tying them to hierarchies of borrowable features, either grammatical or pragmatic. Despite some prima-facie typological plausibility of borrowability hierarchies can such hierarchies empirically capture what seems to be a vast array of possible

contact phenomena? In fact, are contact phenomena finite in their typology/manifestation or infinite given the possible number of combinations between languages (as social objects) and features? Parallely, in the generative tradition a similar attempt has been made by means of establishing interpretable and uninterpretable features in attrition and/or second language acquisition (see, for instance, Tsimpli 2003) and how these can be rendered vulnerable and lost in terms of language change (see Lavidas 2015, Lavidas and Tsimpli 2019, Sitaridou 2014, Neocleous and Sitaridou, to appear; Walkden and Breitbarth 2019). Does such feature-based approach allow us to make successful cross-linguistic generalizations? Moreover, how can historical linguists rely on such feature theories given the lack of consensus as to what is interpretable or not and how it may defer in different types of acquisition (Foreign Language Acquisition vs Second Language Acquisition vs attrition, etc.) (cf. different predictions made by Interface Theory (Sorace 2005, Belletti et al. 2005) vs Interpretability (Tsimpli 2003, Tsimpli & Mastropavlou 2007) vs Representational (Tsimpli et al. 2004; Tsimpli 2007; Tsimpli 2011))? Also, how such acquisition theories are compared to constrained theories of syntactic transfer under contact employing a parametric approach (Michelioudakis and Sitaridou 2020)?

- b. In the generative tradition, the locus of language change is taken to be language acquisition in childhood even if the locus of contact is the adult generation. However, how adequately can acquisition mechanisms be solely used to reconstruct prior stages of the language? Reanalysis, for instance, during first language acquisition is a super-powerful concept, but can it explain complex contact-related changes alone? In other words, doesn't it all depend on the input? If so, how can we reconstruct the input in a plausible way?
- c. A way to remedy the impasse for adequate theories of contact has been through the use of large data to gain higher resolution onto language change and contact (see Kroch (1989, 2001) in the formalist tradition, Todd et al. (2019) in the usage-based tradition, a.m.o.). Can such corpus-based, statistically sophisticated approaches contribute to our understanding of contact-induced change and how? Can large data show us how contact took place or merely show us that it actually took place?
- d. Classical comparative reconstruction has tended to posit static, variation-less systems in the proto-languages. However, more recently, the need to recognize proto-languages as subject to sociolinguistic variation and change has been fruitfully emphasized (e.g., Joseph 2006, 2012). Similarly, can we consider koines to be variation-less languages? If by proto-language we seek to establish a common denominator ancestor system does this equate with actually explaining language change, all the more of the contact type? What is the purpose of trying to establish proto-languages if variation has been constant all the way through?
- e. Recent anthropological research emphasizes the crucial contribution of linguistic ideologies (Kroskrity 2004, Lüpke & Storch 2013) in the functioning of multilingual communities. While the lexicon seems to be the easiest to control due to the transparent connection with ideological imperatives, one famous example of an ideologically driven syntactic constraint is the literary English prohibition of so-called split infinitives (e.g. "to first read the book"), motivated by the Latin model of synthetic infinitive. How can we theorize about the role that

linguistic and political ideologies (for the role of prescriptivism, see, for instance, van Gelderen 2004, 2006) play in grammatical transfer or, as a matter of fact, sometimes, in delaying or even stopping the spread of a given change?

- f. There has recently been a growing sophistication in the studies of extralinguistic determinants or correlates of contact patterns such as subsistence patterns (e.g. Epps 2017). The findings of such research should surely be incorporated into our understanding of grammar as an adaptive system, in general, and grammatical transfer, in particular—but how exactly?
- g. How can we theorize the path between individual multilingual practices and their mental representation (e.g., “multiple grammars”) and community-level/environmental contact-induced change? How can we use the latter to shape the linguistic reconstruction process? How can cue-based reconstruction (Sitaridou 2014, 2016, 2019) successfully take place unless we reconstruct the input on the basis of socio-cultural and politico-historical data to create realistic scenarios for language acquisition and contact for communities under study?

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