

Sociolinguistic typology and syntactic complexity

Trudgill (2011) has suggested that different types of language contact situation lead to differential simplification and complexification: for instance, long-term co-territorial contact is predicted to lead to additive complexification, whereas short-term contact involving extensive adult L2 use is predicted to lead to simplification. However, Trudgill considers only phonology and morphology, for which he provides an intuitive but informal definition of simplification; syntax is not considered in his book, as he admits (2011: 16).

In this talk I propose a specific implementation of Trudgill's insight within a Minimalist framework in which the locus of cross-linguistic variation is the featural content of individual lexical items (Borer 1984; Baker 2008: 353). I propose, following Trudgill, that the relevant notion of syntactic complexity in language contact situations is not processing complexity (Hawkins 1994; 2004) or UG or third-factor biases in any direct sense (e.g. Roberts & Roussou 2003; Mobbs 2008; van Gelderen 2009), but rather *L2-difficulty* in the sense of Dahl (2004: 294), i.e. how difficult an item is for a post-critical-period acquirer to learn. I assume a specific definition of syntactic L2-difficulty taken from the literature on second language acquisition: the Interpretability Hypothesis (Hawkins & Hattori 2006; Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou 2007), which states that uninterpretable features not employed during L1 acquisition will not be available to adult L2 acquirers.

With regard to simplification, the approach then predicts that, in sociohistorical situations in which adult L2 learners are particularly dominant, uninterpretable features will typically be lost. I will offer two case studies in support of this prediction: the transition from stage II to stage III of Jespersen's Cycle, and the loss of consistent null-subject status.

Case study 1: from stage II to stage III of Jespersen's Cycle (JC)

Wallage (2008) argues that the correct characterization of JC involves a negator in Neg⁰ (*ne* in Middle English) bearing an [*i*Neg] feature at stage I, which then becomes [*u*Neg] at stage II ('bipartite' negation), agreeing with an interpretable specifier in SpecNegP (*no(h)t* in Middle English). *ne*, along with its [*u*Neg] feature, is then lost. If this analysis is on the right lines, then Breitbarth's (2008) findings with regard to JC in Middle Low German (MLG) fit the generalization. Breitbarth finds that in different scribal dialects of MLG, the transition from stage II to stage III of JC happens at different times and at different speeds: in particular, the old preverbal negator *en/ne* is lost much faster in the north-eastern Hanseatic cities Lübeck and Stralsund than in the inland MLG-speaking areas. Her explanation is based on language contact caused by urbanization: Lübeck and Stralsund were international centres of Hanseatic trade at the time, founded on formerly Slavonic land by settlers from Low Saxony and Westphalia. Adult L2 acquisition may thus have led to a faster uptake of stage III of JC through loss of uninterpretable features.

Case study 2: the loss of null subjects

Following Holmberg's (2010) analysis of consistent null subject languages (NSLs), I assume that in these languages T⁰ bears a [*u*D] feature that allows ϕ P pronouns to incorporate into it. Under the hypothesis sketched above, we expect this uninterpretable feature to be susceptible to loss in language contact situations involving adult L2 use, leading to non-NSL or partial NSL status. The prediction is borne out: in heritage varieties of Spanish used in New York, the rate of pronominal subject use is much higher in second- and third-generation speakers than in Spanish-born speakers (Otheguy, Zentella & Livert 2007). The proposal also gives us a handle on why Brazilian Portuguese, a colonial variety likely to be spoken in high-contact situations, has progressed to partial NSL status, while European Portuguese has remained a full NSL. Furthermore, the literature on L2 acquisition suggests that L2 acquirers of NSLs will overproduce subject pronouns regardless of their L1; see Bini (1993).

I argue that this implementation of Trudgill's approach also makes the correct predictions with regard to syntactic complexification. Additive complexification, i.e. the transfer of uninterpretable features from one language to another, is predicted to arise typically in situations involving long-term stable bilingualism: *Sprachbund* phenomena bear this out. By contrast, spontaneous (non-additive) complexification, i.e. the emergence of new uninterpretable features, may occur in situations without contact: grammaticalization phenomena, in which uninterpretable features develop from interpretable features (van Gelderen 2009, 2011), are prime cases of this.

The proposal thus attempts to contribute to the 'bigger picture' in relating comparative and diachronic syntax to the findings of contact linguistics and L2 acquisition studies within a formal framework.

References

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