Symposium

Language Contact and the Dynamics of Language: Theory and Implications

10-13 May 2007
Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology
(Leipzig)

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I. State of the Art
Language "contact" and its impact on the dynamics of language are nowadays acknowledged facts. Questions relating to this topic no longer derive from marginal studies nor from the treatment of "special cases": whether the issue is to understand the evolution of languages, their structural and material transformations, or simply to take account of their ordinary use, language contact is present.

Empirical works and theoretical developments have extended beyond the study of pidgins and creoles, the study of language practices in multilingual contexts, and the study of bilingualism in general.

Studies carried out during the last two decades on mixed languages and on areas of linguistic convergence, concepts proposed in order to grasp the processes active in such interactions, efforts at theorizing in order to comprehend the significance of language contact, and the appeal to knowledge outside the "linguistic sciences" have contributed to opening up new perspectives.

The same is true of the reference to biology and to Darwinian theories, whose suggestive power feeds several current orientations, social anthropological, social psychological, and ethnomethodological approaches which demonstrate their relevance to understanding the dynamics of language and linguistic representations, the fashioning of rules, the elaboration of norms of interaction, and the selection and transformation of forms in usage.

Cognitive, evolutionary, and social psychological relevance is thus found crucially at the heart of the problem of language contact and of the dynamics of language; it contributes to clarifying, redrawing, and rearranging the major aspects of these domains while also retaining the effects of the contextualization of phenomena, social dynamics, individual activity and individuals' interpretative choice in the construction of norms and the elaboration of structures and use.

In parallel fashion, extensive research on language typology permits tracing in concrete form the map of linguistic phenomena – rare or common – in the world and furnishes the necessary basis for the development of empirically founded structural, cognitive, and evolutionary reflection

Finally, after a period when contact was considered a marginal phenomenon that could be ignored in theory construction, we have come to consider it as part of the reality of ordinary communication. Today, the question arises as to how far contact should be considered a constitutive phenomenon of the semiotic and structural elaboration of language. In other words as a phenomenon which, far from needing to be hidden, finishes by

becoming explanatory and asks to be integrated into theory construction. In this restructured context, the question of contact finds its place in the center of reflection not only on the dynamics of language, but on language itself.

Thematic orientation.

We have chosen three themes that are potentially important for the development of general reflection. Clearly, they do not exhaust the subject, but it seems to us that trying to deepen our understanding in these areas is a useful task at the present juncture.
For each theme, we have indicated below some ideas for making more precise the main lines to be followed and for suggesting the direction expected from proposed presentations:

I. "'Contact': an 'obvious fact ? A notion to be rethought?»
The aim is to open theoretical reflection on the importance of 'contact' as a linguistic and anthropological phenomenon for the study of the evolution and dynamics of languages and of Language.
Sub-themes:
The "creole" debate and its broader context.
The "mixed language" debate and its broader context.
The "variation" debate and its broader context.

Three empirically documented and "ideologically" founded debates
These have their own vitality as "debates" but equally, they allow one to illustrate and to question fundamental points regarding our understanding of the evolution of language and of the dynamics of languages: structural homogeneity and heterogeneity of languages (cf. metatypy, convergence and emergence of new languages), interpretation of phenomena as processes of construction of contextually determined forms, construction of norms, selection of reference points, stabilization or variation of linguistic forms, realization of processes of semiotization and retention of historicity in the dynamics of the transformation of languages, etc.

II. "Contact, typology and evolution of languages: a perspective to be explored"
Here the aim is to open discussion on the dimensions and cognitive determinants in the evolution and constitution of languages
Typology of the emergence of new languages and discussion of what is constructed by 'typology'.

Sub-themes:
cognitive determinants, grammaticalization
metatypy, convergence and emergence of new languages from the viewpoint of language typology
discussion of evolutionary and structural perspectives

Approach to linguistic and communicative phenomena which result from contact and empirical developments in this direction

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III. "Representation of the phenomena and the role of descriptors: a perspective to be established"
In connection with the double requirement of theoretical reflection and empirical underpinning, the aim is to develop an epistemological reflection on the elaboration of knowledge in the domain of languages and Language.
What are the relations among the social-anthropological, cognitive, evolutionary, and structural strands in the debate?

Models, metaphors, representations and attempts at (re)conceptualization:
Role of metaphor in the construction of representations.
Role of phenomena in description and in processes of analysis.
Reference to "'explanatory' paradigms": evolutionary, complex, ecological, structuralist, essentialist, cognitivist, ...

Relevant questions:
Do we need to rethink contact?
Is it is appropriate (or interesting) to consider contact as an "obvious fact" and/or as a "need" in the elaboration of linguistics?

Robert Nicolaï   Bernard Comrie