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Week 3 - Answers

Mesthrie, et al. (2009), Chapter 4

Johnstone (2008), Chapter 2

Before beginning I just want to briefly mention that, although this material is quite difficult, it is important for us to have a basic understanding of this principally because it can be surmised that the mechanisms for language change are not dissimilar to the mechanisms of language learning. Looking at language learning from a bilingual perspective (as I often think is the most helpful perspective to adopt) additional language learning is a type of language change. Therefore, rather than getting caught up too much in some of the specific details presented here and as a result becoming somewhat frustrated, I think is important for people look at general trends and try to think how this may relate to what we're doing in the classroom because in essence we are trying to get our students to change an already existing linguistic system and in the process build a new one.

1. Change is an inherent part of language, how is it that languages change and what are some of the variables that affect this? (Mes.)

It seems that it is quite difficult to separate language change from variability. All instances of documented language change started with variability. Not all instances of variability, however, lead to language change. Languages change in all ways imaginable. All components of language undergo both variability and change. This means phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, as well as discourse units.

Language change, in general, occurs for no clearly discernable reasons, such as physiological reasons like larger lips on average, or smaller tracheas. It is, in general, arbitrary. Language change is also incremental in several ways. Change always starts as variability within a certain group. The variability normalizes, meaning it is no longer a possible option, but the norm and of course first within the group in which it originated. From there the change spreads to other groups, basically repeating the cycle. At some point the change may stop due to boundaries, both physical and psychological within and between groups that restrict contact. For a change to spread contact is necessary. Contact spreads as a result of the phenomenon of accommodation. The more people and groups wish to accommodate towards each other the more changes will spread. When people/groups do not wish to accommodate, or can't due to distance or other physical boundaries, then change does not spread. The type of contact also affects change. Changes from above originate in more prestigious groups and may involve new innovations to an already established standard. Change from below comes from low prestige social groups and often affects vernacular

forms. None of this is absolute, but these are general trends. Now that we have taken a very brief look at some of the basic underlying processes of language change it's important to look at some of the specific mechanisms for change within language and then groups themselves.

The main language internal process for language change has been identified as lexical diffusion. What this basically means is that language change occurs at the lexical level. As we mentioned in class, and I mention it almost every class because this is obviously my main area of interest, lexis is the central core of language itself. Linguistic components either lead into lexis or lead of lexis. This basically means that units smaller than words (phonemes, syllables, morphemes) are used to create and build up words. Words themselves are use them to build larger units (phrases, clauses, discourse). At the center of all this are words themselves and the system of words and their full range of connections, meanings and realizations is called lexis. Lexical diffusion, again, basically states that language change moves through words. Language change takes a long time because it starts on certain words which belong to certain groups or networks and wants the change has moved through that network then it moves to another network and so on and so on until the change has taken over for the most part the language itself. Right off the bat we can see that this, in and of itself, is very similar to how we see change moving through communities.

The most prevalent model for describing how then change occurs across communities is the gravity or cascade model. Using physics is a basic model, gravity model states that communities are somewhat like objects in space. Larger objects have greater effect on smaller objects. Thus, if a larger or prestigious speech community or group has adopted a particular change than there is a higher likelihood that this change will move to smaller groups that are closely connected to that larger one. In the same vein, a change that occurs in the smaller group may not move on to a larger one despite connections simply because smaller groups have a larger effect than larger ones. But of course size is not the only variable there is also prestige as well as proximity. A smaller more prestigious group may also affect a larger one based on its prestige. Similarly groups that are near each other will tend to see changes developed in one community adopted by the other due to their proximity and connections due to the proximity. As we can see language changes really all about connections. This, and enough itself, is like language. For language to function well we need strong connections between different elements.

Looking at some of the variables which then affect language change, these are basically things that are used us establish groups. Below is a short list but it's important to realize that this is a short list because in human society we can create a group from anything. Groups are based on things that people share. These can be physical attributes as we see in gender, age and ethnicity groups, or is he may be psychological attributes as we see in groups with shared linguist at backgrounds as well as ethnicity.

Age

Region

Gender
Ethnicity
Socioeconomic status
Language background
Etc.

2. How does the nature of the speech community affect the rate of change?
(Mes.)

The speech community itself is one of the major variables that affect language change. This is an obvious statement as we are well aware that language is a living organism and is living in the minds of speakers. Once the speakers are gone languages are perceived as being dead. They may live on in fossilized form in examples of written discourse, but they basically cease to function. We can, therefore, easily understand both the nature of language and of language change as being linked to language itself but to the speakers of language and this is the major crux of the sociolinguistic approach to language and language learning. It is all about the speakers. But of course we find that an individual speaker is more or less irrelevant it's really about groups of speakers and these different groups taken together form a very complex entity with is often called a speech community.

Speech communities can vary in several ways but these all basically come down to contacts. Contacts within the speech community and with the outside. As we discussed above, the more contacts with in the speech community than the faster changes can spread within that community. This means not just the number of people that a given person knows but also the number of situations in which they encounter those individuals. Linking this more concretely to language we can talk about contexts. The more contexts in which one is able to effectively use language then the better they will be as a language producer or user. With these speech communities with very strong internal context can often become very isolated which means they do not accept changes from the outside and the changes that they have made with in their group do not reach the outside.

We, therefore, need to think carefully about the connections that our students have with each other in the classroom and with others outside the classroom. This is an important aspect of language if we really want to get our students to learn to be language users. As we have seen language learning, like language change, is about contacts. As we also saw from our reading of the myths, people do not learn nearly as much from indirect contacts such as we find in the media or in reading books or listening to highly contrived language tapes. People learn through direct contact with other people. You can't accommodate to a text because the text is frozen: it's a fossil. You may be able to learn a few little things from it but you can't learn with it and because the text is separated from the world, as we will soon discuss, there is not that much to actually learn from it. At some point we need to start treating our students like a speech community because that is exactly what they are.

3. What does vowel shift tell us about language change in general? (Mes.)

The important thing to come away with having looked only very briefly at vowel change is that change occurs in a pattern across language. This is not the same as lexical diffusion or the gravity model, but rather speaks to us about the inherent structure of language itself. It has been observed that changes in vowels often occur as groups. If one vowel changes its quality, this often leads to changes in other vowels in what have been described/identified as push or pull chains. When one vowel changes, for example is raised (/a/→/æ/), it may then blend with another vowel making it hard to distinguish certain words. As a response that affected vowel (/æ/) may also need to raise to /ɛ/ in order to avoid confusion, but this means that /ɛ/ may, in turn also need to raise for the same reason. This is how chains are born. Despite how it may have seemed due to the presentation in the chapter (Mesthrie, et al., 2009) languages generally do not overlap, at least not for very long. Much of language change is reacting to a change that has occurred. Languages try to preserve systems and this often leads to whole slew of further changes. This is an important point for us.

The same phenomenon is occurring in all areas of language (it is often just easier to see in vowels). Lexis, morphology, syntax, and discourse are all going through the same process. To return to the very beginning of where we started with a discussion of language change, it all begins with variability. How we deal with variability in the classroom is, therefore, absolutely pivotal to how well our students may or may not learn. As I mentioned in class we often treat our students substantially worse than we treat our friends or even casual acquaintances, particularly in regard to variability. Variability is not only unavoidable, but it is the norm. Every instance of language production is the ripe with variability, but this variability needs to either be close enough to the norm so as to be almost inconceivable or it needs to have a specific purpose within the context of language and world. I'm not sure that we needed whenever a way to encourage our students to be variable but we certainly need to go out of our way to allow our students to be variable the assessment of means to be a language speaker language speakers working variable are essentially dead because that's our definition of what a dead languages. A dead language is a fossilized unchangeable form. If we focus too much on getting our students to all be the same but no variability than they are also dead and they are producing dead language. From a more dangerous standpoint this means that they also cannot deal with the inherent variability that are always present in instances of language use.

4. How does discourse work to link language and the world? (Jo.)

There's a symbiotic relationship between discourse and the world. Language, and remember we are talking about language as a system inside the brain and not a particular piece of language, functions as a kind of link between these two concrete manifestations. The world affects the discourse which people produce because, as we will find out by studying pragmatics later, discourse must suit the world into which it is created. Thus, discourse is only useful when it functions in the world. So, the world determines the type of discourse

which a speaker or writer should produce. Now, the world affects this discourse and specifically in two different ways. Basically, there are two different types of context and remember it's important for us at this point to link context to the world. One context is called linguistic context. This is basically the previous pieces of discourse or texts which have been previously produced. So, a speaker, for example, needs to take what has previously been sent into account in order to make his or her own discourse fit the world. The other type of context is what is often called situational context and this involves context dealing with the physical world itself aside from discourse. So, situational discourse includes things like where you are, we were talking to, what the functions are which are trying to use and many other things. It is obvious how the world affects discourse how discourse affects the world should also be obvious at this point. What I've introduced above is a very concrete way of talking about discourse and the world.

There is, however, also a more abstract linked between discourse and the world and it is in this abstract linked that linguistic systems are actually built and changed. The world into which we are born affects the language system that we end up creating inside our head. As a concrete example of physical environment, someone who grows up in a desert is going to end up encapsulating the physical world in a different way than someone who grows up in a rainforest because their worlds are quite different. Societies are also quite different and languages develop in tandem with societal norms and needs. In this way the language in a way reflects both the world and the culture of the speakers. The structure of a person's language (and they all differ to different degrees) is what gives them options for creating discourse. In this abstract way, the world does affect discourse through language. We will go into more detail about this in the next question.

5. How is thought reflected in language? (Jo.)

The theory that thought is reflected in language is a highly contested one among linguists. Everyone agrees that language and thought at some point merge in the developmental process but the nature of that merge and the extent that merge is not clear. For us here we are going to take a more standard middle of the road view of trying to briefly introduce some of the other views in how thought is reflected in language. In order to this we need to go back to the very beginning of language development. In the earliest stage of language development and child goes through what can be called phase 1. In phase 1 a child basically needs to make sense of the world in one very important way of making sense of the world is by identifying and naming objects in the world. This meaning gets a child power over the objects in the world that they need in order to develop and use a linguistic system. Now it's interesting about this is that not all languages to lose to do behind or encapsulate/codify the physical world in the same way. Different languages in fact notice different things and the outward manifestation of this noticing is lexicalization or naming. It is from this initial naming in phase 1 that language is first built. Language is built-up through a system of categorization. So, once a few lexical items have been created through the naming process they need

to be characterized. Categorization is basically a process of taking items and putting them into different groups. For us as language teachers many of these categories which exist in English should be familiar; general grammatical categories such as nouns and verb as well as lexical categories like food, animal, inanimate object etc.. The linguistic system uses these categories to create acceptable utterances according to the norms of the underlying grammatical system that we are not going to talk about here. Now that we understand this we can begin to deal with the concept of linguistic relativity.

Linguistic relativity is an idea which basically claims that thought and language affect each other profoundly. How this happens is simply through attention and noticing. Since languages do not equally or often even similarly codify the world we tend to notice the things that are part of our language. This is certainly true particularly when we know a little bit about how the brain works. As a person let loose in the real world is constantly bombarded by all sorts of perceptual information coming in from five different circuits engaged through the hypothalamus, a part of the midbrain structure. Certainly there is way too much information coming in for all of it to be processed equally. The things that will be processed more carefully are the things that are familiar. Familiarity in the form of priming effects in the brain is an extremely important concept for how language works but also how we think. Thus, the basic idea is that in our daily lives where we are busy and constantly bombarded by all this perceptual information so we actually can't notice things that are not somehow encoded in our language. By coding things in language we are preserving them and strengthening their patterns of use. This is the main argument in linguistic relativity to the big question is the degree to which this actually happens.

While it is certainly true that language and thought would affect each other, it is certainly not clear whether our language limits or constrains our thought all the time. Certainly language will stop us from noticing things in the world which is because of other languages might notice but it doesn't mean we can't notice them if our attention is drawn to them. So, for us as teachers an important lesson to be derived from this is that we have to somehow help our students control their attention. If students can focus attention well then they can actually notice new things that will allow them to pick up elements of, for us, English. The basic idea is that English speakers think in a certain way because of the way they encode the world and the resulting structures of their language. In order for Koreans to speak English and understand spoken English they also need to share in English speaker's thought processes and/or view of the world. I could go on forever about this but I hope it is clear enough at this point.

6. How do the choices a language user makes reflect their view of the world? (Jo.)

In this class we're going to take the view that speaking is much more than simply trying to use knowledge to put together grammatically acceptable utterances. In our view maybe the more important part is making decisions about how to manipulate language in order to make the precise point which we want and which also happens to fit the situation in which the speaker finds

herself or himself. Thus, language production is all about making complicated decisions. Like any decision-making process these decisions can only be made if there is enough background knowledge. If you know absolutely nothing it is going to be impossible to make any kind of decision. Ignorance limits us to inactivity. Thus, the discourse that a speaker produces is based on a complicated set of decisions that the speaker makes, and has to make very quickly. The speaker needs to decide not only the form itself but what they actually want to say with that form. 'What they're trying to say' does not refer merely to the semantic content of the utterance but also to the underlying pragmatic meaning. This pragmatic meaning is often hidden and exposed to the hearer through particular language uses. I think in the book there was a pretty good example of a writer writing in what is clearly a child's style. A reader knows it's a child's style because they know how children speak. Thus, the way that we actually put together our pieces of discourse reveals our intent. Now, for the author of a book the intent is probably known and they spend a lot of time trying to code their intent. For us as speakers this often happens, should usually occur, as an automatic process. We reflect our view of the world, for better or worse, often without really knowing that we are doing so.

7. How is silence an important element of texts and how does that relate to us? (Jo.)

In order to really understand silence and how it functions in discourse we need to take a very different approach to our analysis of discourse and how discourse works. Instead of thinking of silence as something which is interspersed between a flow of discourse, it is probably better to think of discourse as floating on a sea of silence. In this way silence is seen as being a natural and not entirely meaningless context. Discourse is created to alter and fine-tune the basic meaning of silence. Once we have done this we can begin to think of the role that silence plays in between some of the discourse that is created. Remember that in this the discourse is created to create much more specific patterns of meaning than silence would allow therefore there's some sort of residual effect of surrounding discourse and intruding on the silence. As with discourse itself different languages actually deal with silence in different ways. That is the discourse that is created affects silence differently and in this effect silence actually comes to have different meanings in different languages. A simple example would be like the one I mentioned in class where when I make a request in English silence usually signifies noncompliance whereas in Korean in the same situation silence as a response to the same question signifies compliance. Aside from linguistic functions, silence is also a discourse marker. It serves to mark possibilities for turn-taking. It also serves as a marker for possible changes in topic.

What is really meant for us is that not only do we have to get our students to produce discourse by making a series of decisions about how to produce the discourse they also have to think about the effects of discourse and how discourse affects the surrounding silence in that language. Basically it all revolves around building language but as we build language we also build a worldview that goes along with it.