

Contamination in morphosyntactic change

The term ‘contamination’, invented by Hermann Paul, has too long occupied a marginal place in the study of language change. Briefly, it is most commonly exemplified as a kind of ‘associative interference’ such that the phonological form of a word comes to deviate partly from what would be predicted by regular sound change under the influence of another word with which it has some kind of semantic association. The phenomenon of contamination and the range of ways in which it can be manifested have been relatively neglected (cf. Fertig 2016:445), partly because of the unwarrantedly negative resonance of the term (cf. Dauzat 1922:72f.), but mainly because of the perfectly correct perception that contamination is erratic and unpredictable, and that to explain it one often needs specialized, non-linguistic, knowledge. As an example I shall briefly discuss the Romanian word for ‘stinging nettle’, *urzică*, which deviates phonologically from the historically expected ***urȋcă* because of a recondite association between nettles and weaving (cf. Romanian *urzi* ‘to weave’).

Treatments of ‘contamination’ frequently conflate two different kinds of phenomena, and I will first clear the ground of one of them: the fact that alleged phonological contamination often takes place between items enunciated in immediate succession in lists (such as numerals, days of the week) is a syntagmatic phenomenon more akin to phonological assimilation than to paradigmatic formal attraction between semantically related words. Contamination in the latter sense is a factor in language change which extends significantly beyond the examples of unexpected phonological deviation with which it is customarily illustrated. I shall analyse the theoretical implications of data from Italo-Romance and other Romance varieties showing that contamination is a significant factor in morphosyntactic change. Examples will include the aberrant transfer of verb and noun lexemes from open and productive inflexion classes to closed, unproductive, and idiosyncratic ones, and the aberrant shift of a noun displaying all the typical distinctive morphological characteristics of masculine gender to the feminine gender.

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