

Towards a Darwinian model of language change

Language change is likely to take place during the process of replication of a certain linguistic structure within a given communicative situation (Croft 2006). The question is why this happens and how it can be modeled in a theory of language change. If we take seriously the idea that language use consists in the replication of certain linguistic structures, then a crucial role is attributed to the listener. In Andersen's (1973) very popular model, the change is meant to take place "abductively" in the listener's mind when she models her linguistic behavior elaborating on the environment in which she is immersed. Elaborating on this, Ohala (1988: 179) sees the reason for most (phonological) changes in the listeners' misperceptions, which "resemble scribes' errors in copying manuscripts". Taking stance against any possible interpretation in evolutionary terms, Ohala (1988: 179) rejects the adaptive perspective connected with the selection of one possible replication with regard to the others concluding that "[l]ike scribal errors, there is no adaptive value to such variations". Furthermore, Andersen (2006) argues that the listener's production on which Ohala's idea of misperceptions is based is the result of intentional behavior pointing to a Lamarckian view of language change, whereas in the Darwinian model, mutations are random, i.e., unintentional and aimed at better adaptation of an organism to its environment. However, against a Lamarckian conception of language change one can emphasize the third type nature of language change (Keller 1994). In this view, misperceptions don't result intentionally from the listener's behavior. Rather, they are an unconscious, unintended side-effect of the real intention of the listener, namely to interact with a speaker in a communicative situation. This unintended result of an intended activity can be paralleled – *mutatis mutandis* – to Darwin's conception of selection as the blind result of the immanent tendency towards favoring 'the best to fit'. This keeps language change, especially with regard to its systemic dimension, distinct from other changes in the cultural domain as for instance the development of instruments and tools, of social relations and customs, etc. in which changing strategies are consciously pursued. With the help of a couple of case-studies, the paper will attempt to outline a Darwinian model of language change.

References

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