

Contact

The phenomena that are described by the term *contact* in linguistic anthropology are found in association with cultural contacts between groups of people sharing, or not sharing, cultural assumptions about social life and understandings about language. Far from being anomalous, contact, both linguistic and cultural, is a normal state of affairs, given that cultural groups and languages do not live in isolation. Cultural formations are not static either, but contact with other groups brings about changes at a pace faster than those produced by inner cultural dynamics. As one of the most salient effects of contact, change is the essence of languages and cultures and testifies to the vitality of linguistic communities. It also reveals the adaptive nature of culture. Therefore, by definition, a theory of contact should include a theory of change, social and linguistic, or, rather, a theory of changes.

The challenge for anthropologists and for linguists studying contact-induced change has been to understand the mechanisms of change and the processes that govern it. Linguists and sociolinguists studying language change in contact situations have focused on language interference (i.e., on the study of the structural and non structural factors that impede or promote interference), interlanguage, bilingualism, multilingualism, language shift, obsolescence, and on the genesis of pidgin and creole languages. Anthropologists working on cultural contacts have focused on cultural borrowing, diffusion, reinterpretation, syncretism and acculturation, but also on biculturalism and multiculturalism, and more recently on cultural creolization and on the effect of globalization on local cultures.

The history of peoples and their languages is best understood through their contact history. In order to understand how linguistic and cultural changes come into play, and more importantly why, one has to know the sociolinguistic history of speakers and actors, if only because linguistic and cultural contacts vary along different axes: duration of contact; intensity; respective status and political might of the cultural groups in a contact

situation; ideologies and space. These axes allow social groups and individuals voluntary or imposed access to other cultural or linguistic groups, and will affect cultural and linguistic changes differently. Permanent exposure to otherness through contact with neighboring groups may lead to an exacerbated sense of group identity that is often symbolized through added linguistic differences (as in the Amazon basin or in Melanesia). On the other hand, and for pragmatic reasons, it is often associated with multilingualism, which, in some cases, may lead to some dialect leveling. Some forms of contact, such as colonization and forced displacements of population, are extreme types that, through imposition of new ideologies and modes of life, have severely altered, and often destroyed, the pre-existing linguistic and cultural balance of power between neighboring groups. They have often brought about the birth of new languages (such as pidgins and creoles), but also the death or attrition of others. Under colonization, or any other forms of hegemonic conditions, the cultural anchoring of languages is challenged and often shattered, leading individuals and groups to adopt the language spoken by the dominant power, or, and it is often the same one, to adopt the language that will allow them to survive socially. All these types of contact lead to some measure of cultural and linguistic interference, borrowing, and change that are often analyzed in terms of loss, or in terms of spuriousness.

Students of contact-induced linguistic changes have searched for the typological constraints that allow for interference and borrowing across languages, and have sought to explain the nature of the changes in relation to the social conditions of enaction, particularly those surrounding the transmission of language between generations, or to other groups. Normal transmission, i.e., without cultural breaks, seems to lead to language maintenance with light or heavy restructuring depending on the nature of contact, and may lead to bilingualism and to shift. Linguistic and cultural breaks (such as the ones found on plantation settings in colonial Caribbean) are likely to foster the loss of the vernaculars and the genesis of pidgin and creole languages. By their very nature these conditions lead to shift. Students of contact-induced cultural changes do not agree on the characteristics of these changes, on whether they are qualitatively different from the ones taking place outside of contact, on whether they affect cultures differently, or, again, on whether they affect some aspects of cultures and not others. Of course, such analyses are predicated on the reification of culture by anthropologists, allowing them to privilege culture traits over processes or representations. This privileging of culture traits stresses the malleability of cultures in terms of recombinable elements, in a way that is quite akin to the search for structural changes that is associated with the study of linguistic interference. The efflorescence of cultural contact studies that took place in the 1940s and 1950s in the United States found some resonance in the studies of linguistic acculturation, and assimilation (of immigrants, particularly) that followed. Fishman's linguistic assimilation model is a case in point. All proved to be tautological because of their totalizing view of culture that made acculturation almost inevitable, and almost always unidirectional,

with diffusion (the corollary of acculturation) taking place from the dominant group to the dominated one.

Globalization is the new form of contact that social scientists are grappling with, and it is fast becoming a synonym, albeit very imprecise, for rapid social change. Its epistemological premise stems from that of World System Theory and it has all the flavor of old acculturation models. Globalization is a form of social change that is often presented as homogenizing. Yet this is not the case. The anthropological linguist recognizes in globalization the kinds of contact-induced ideological and experiential pressures that are likely to lead to rapid sociocultural formations, and particularly to the genesis of creole languages. That is, to the formation of new cultural forms. Playing with disciplinary boundaries, and with the epistemological hurdle represented by the borrowing of models across disciplines, one may propose that the model of linguistic creolization can be enlarged and applied to the social sphere, where it can help us understand the type of contact-induced changes brought about by globalization. Remembering the superstrate and substrate influences at work in the creation of pidgins and creoles, some similar parallels can be drawn with the processes at work during globalization. For instance, the complementarity of the substrate and the superstrate could reveal how and why, despite the onslaught of a generic world system of culture (the superstrate) onto local traditions (the substrate), the new cultural formations of Ibadan (Nigeria), Honiara (Solomon Islands), or Labastide-Murat (France) can be different from one another. Culturally, the new forms may appear very different from the substrate supplied by vernacular cultures, but in fact, very often, as I have shown for the Solomon Islands, cultural creolization allows for new shells to be filled with old meanings. The difficulty here will be to define the substrate. In fact, if we decide that these new cultural worlds are different from one another because the substrate influences are different, are we not saying that it is possible to define the substrate? This, of course, raises the question of the importance of the substrate in cultural and linguistic contacts, points to processes of identity maintenance and creation in contact situations leading to fast and rampant change, and defines the terrain of culture as a contested ground.

(See also *codes, crossing, endangered, grammar, identity, ideology, reconstruction, switching, syncretism, variation*)

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