

Loan Verbs in Contact Situations between Closely Related Languages Strengthening Existing Argument Structural Patterns

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In contact between closely related languages, mutual intelligibility is a contentious issue. Lexical distance, operationalized as the amount of cognate sets between languages, has been shown to be the linguistic factor best predicting mutual intelligibility (Gooskens & Swarte 2017). Generally, mutual intelligibility requires high similarity between language systems, which in turn is a factor shaping loan integration (Johanson 2002; Thomason & Kaufman 1988; Winford 2003). I argue that contact between mutually intelligible languages facilitates both the copying of cognate and non-cognate units and their properties as higher similarity between units of the languages in contact can favor integration of loans (Johanson 2002, p.292; Winford 2003, p.52). I will show that lexical copying of verbs between typologically close languages can present a force for stability in the argument structure of verb classes when existing argument structure patterns are strengthened through insertion of loan verbs (cf. Wohlgemuth 2009; Barðdal & Eypórsson 2020) with parallel structures into the same verb class (cf. Levin 1993). This opposes the common narrative of linguistic contact inducing or accelerating language change.

I discuss this for the contact situation between Old Norse (ON) (source language) and Old English (OE) (recipient language), the impact of which has often been discussed in terms of typological closeness and mutual intelligibility (Townend 2000, 2002). This paper traces the argument structural development of cognate and non-cognate verb loans from ON, like *give* and *cast* respectively, and the verb classes they enter into throughout Middle English (ME). Data are extracted from *The York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose* (Taylor, Warner, Pintzuk & Beths 2003) and *The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (2nd edition)* (Kroch & Taylor 2000). Distribution of loan verb usage clearly illustrates the influx of both ON cognate and non-cognate loan verbs into late OE and ME and establishment of some loans in the core vocabulary of English, as many ON loans are only first attested in writing during ME (Hug 1987; cf. Durkin 2014). A comparative mixed-methods analysis of the usage of all verbs from affected semantic verb classes compares the argument structure patterns of verb classes prior to and after integration of ON loan verbs. Diachronic analysis reveals that the argument structures stay stable throughout the integration of non-cognate loans, and that contrasts between OE variants are retained even after the integration of cognate loans.

This work argues for non-change as a possible outcome of language contact as the analysis shows that despite differences in argument structural integration of cognate and non-cognate verbs the underlying patterns of mapping semantic participants onto morphosyntactic relations in the affected verb classes stay balanced throughout contact between two closely related languages. Moreover, this work gives evidence towards lexical copying of verbs acting as a stabilizing force in a well attested historical contact situation and thus informs historical contact studies concerned with closely related languages.

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