

The Uniformitarian Principle and contact-induced change. The case of Spanish in Mallorca

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The Uniformitarian Principle claims, in very simple terms, that “the processes which we observe in the present can help us to gain knowledge about processes in the past” (Bergs 2012: 83). The principle has had ample application in historical linguistics; many language historians have adopted the view that language structure and the processes it undergoes are basically the same throughout the centuries. Labov’s famous formulation of the principle runs as follows: “the forces operating to produce linguistic change today are of the same kind and order of magnitude as those which operated five or ten thousand years ago” (Labov 1972: 275).

This paper aims to explore the methodological opportunities of applying the Uniformitarian Principle in historical sociolinguistics and, more specifically, in the study of language variation in past language-contact situations. To this effect I analyze three variable phenomena that are characteristic of the variety of Spanish in contact with Catalan in Mallorca: *seseo* (i.e. non-distinction of /s/ and /θ/); the use of the prepositions *en* and *a* to express direction of movement and static situation indistinctively; and sporadic mismatches in person agreement between intended subjects and their corresponding preterite verb forms (e.g. **yo quiso* ‘I wanted’ as opposed to standard *yo quise*). These traits are extensively recorded in historical documents written by Mallorcans from different social classes, and are also common among Catalan-dominant speakers nowadays.

Data for the comparative analysis comes from two newly developed corpora. For the historical analysis I use the Corpus Mallorca (www.corpusmallorca.es) which contains over a thousand texts in Spanish produced in the Catalan-speaking environment of Mallorca between 1640 and 1909. For the study of the current contact variety I extract data from the COSER corpus (www.corpusrural.es) which is made of sociolinguistic interviews collected among rural Catalan-dominant informants in 2017.

The quantitative analyses for the three variables reveal that certain structural features, such as lexical frequency effects in the case of *seseo*, or verb irregularity in the preterite data, are remarkably constant along the centuries and behave similarly in both corpora. At the same time, the degree of exposure to monolingual Spanish measured in terms of length of formal schooling or density of the Catalan-dominant population in the community where speakers live, seem to increase the frequency of non-canonical forms both in the historical and modern data. The results suggest that some familiar principles advanced in studies of language competence in situations of unbalanced bilingualism follow the Uniformitarian Principle and are thus helpful in understanding the structural and social mechanisms that influence processes of variation and change in language contact situations in the past.

REFERENCES

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