Bilingualism-induced Language Change and its Constraints in Relation to the Actuation Problem

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The central problem for language change that has been formulated as the "actuation problem" (Weinreich et al. 1968) involves explaining why changes happen when they do and in the languages they do, but not at other times or in other typologically similar languages. One clear factor that has emerged as a "cause for hope" in solving the problem has been language contact: a particular change takes place in a given language at the time it does because this language is in contact with another language from which the property in question is borrowed. In this paper we argue that this cause for hope needs to be considerably refined if it is to be helpful in relation to the actuation problem. First, contact per se does not necessarily lead to the transfer of properties from one language to another. In fact, the great majority of the contrasting properties between two languages are NOT transferred from one to another in situations of language contact at any given time, and studies of contact hitherto have failed to draw systematic attention to when borrowing does not take place, focusing only on when it does. The crucial refinement that is needed here is to talk about bilingualism, and specifically different types of bilingualism, sociolinguistically and psycholinguistically and with different pairs of languages, in order to make headway in understanding whether there will be any influence from one on the other. Second, even if the type of bilingualism and its distribution throughout a speech community at a given time does lend itself to borrowing, the actuation of a given change will be further constrained by general grammatical and universal principles on the one hand, and by general diachronic processes on the other involving gradualness and ease of innovation. Gradualness preserves mutual intelligibility across generations, and some linguistic changes (lexical ones or word order) occur more readily than others (e.g. word-internal morphology). In this paper we build on the general model of bilingualism, CASP (short for "complex adaptive system principles"), presented in Filipović (2019) and Filipović & Hawkins (2019), and apply it to language change and the actuation problem. CASP incorporates the typological, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors that are at play in bilingualism. We then link the predictions of this model to grammatical universals and to general diachronic laws and observed patterns in change. By combining bilingual-specific with synchronic and diachronic linguistic constraints in this way we can make predictions for when and whether changes will be found in the grammatical conventions of one or the other language of the bilingual. In this way talk of "language contact" becomes much more precise, we encourage further studies into when contact does NOT lead to change, we shift the emphasis to bilingualism, and we contribute to a solution for the actuation problem. Supporting data for our predictions come from bilingual studies in the published literature (including our own), from contact phenomena around the globe that either have or have not led to change, and from independently attested historical data.

Keywords: actuation, bilingualism, CASP model, language contact

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