Repetitional Responses in Language Change

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One of the central questions in the field of historical linguistics is how languages change. Even though the understanding of the principles that underlie grammatical change has increased (see e.g. Hill 2007, 2020 on change in inflectional morphology), it has been unclear to this day how new grammatical forms spread in a community of speakers. We therefore investigate the question of how new grammatical forms are passed on from innovative speakers to more conservative ones and eventually become part of their grammar. We would like to present our investigation in a talk in the general session of the ICHL25.

We propose that a decisive factor for the spread of new grammatical forms is conversational priming, where conservative speakers adopt new forms by repeating what a more innovative speaker says. Even though the role of conversational priming in language change has been acknowledged (e.g. Pickering and Garrod 2017), it remains exceedingly difficult to prove that a certain documented change has really occurred due to conversational priming (cf. Mair 2017:191). As a point of departure we therefore concentrate on a context where repetitions occur particularly often and are to some degree conventionalized, namely repetitional responses. Repetitional responses are found in different interactional contexts, for instance instead of, or in addition to, particles like *yes* and *no* as responses to polar questions in many languages (cf. Holmberg 2016, Enfield et al. 2019, Gipper 2020, Rossi 2020). Consider the following example from Tunisian Arabic:

(1) Q: ***shra*** *-shi* *John* *le-ktab* *haða:ka?*
bought -Q John the-book that
'Did John buy that book?'

A: ***shra*** / *ma* ***-shra*** *-sh*
bought not bought not
'Yes.' 'No.' (Holmberg 2016:63f.)

If in a conversation an innovative speaker uses a new grammatical verb form as a predicate in a question, even a conservative speaker will possibly have to repeat this verb form in order to answer the question properly, which means that she has to actively use the innovative form and therefore is not only exposed to it passively. The fact that the conservative speaker uses the innovative form herself facilitates its acceptance as an admissible variant and therefore its integration into her grammatical system after several iterations.

The crucial point for our own approach to investigate the role of repetitional responses in language change is that in such an answering system not all forms are repeated alike. For instance, in probably all languages with person marking on the verb, predicates of the third person are exactly repeated, as it is the case in ex. (1) above. In contrast, predicates of the first and second person singular are never repeated exactly when answering a polar question but the forms have to be substituted for each other. Consider the following Welsh example, where the question contains a verb in the second person and the answer contains one in the first person singular:

(2) Q: *A* ***welwch*** *chwi* *hwy?*
Q see you them
'Do you see them?'

A: ***Gwelaf*** / *Na* ***welaf***
'(Yes) I see (them)' '(No) I don't see (them)' (Sadock and Zwicky 1985:191)

We believe that such asymmetries, which may be of different kinds, influence the diachronic development of grammatical forms in that the forms that are repeated verbatim spread faster than those which are not. Hence, identifying synchronic asymmetries in the answering systems of the languages of the world is a first step for determining the role of conversational priming in language change. In a next step, it will be

necessary to conduct case studies in languages where the development of certain grammatical forms is traceable over a longer period of time.

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