

# LECTAL CONTACT AS A PATH TO LANGUAGE SPECIATION

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Language speciation has been attributed to a loss of contact between parts of a speech community, or to contact with other languages (Thomason and Kaufman 1988). In this talk, we offer a psycholinguistically-grounded account for language speciation that does not presume a pre-existing fracturing of the linguistic community, or external contact.

Speciation begins with lectal variation being associated with an areal, social or situational identity. Three stages of differentiation follow. **Form differentiation** is an accelerated (compared to drift) loss of shared vocabulary in the lects due to bilectalism. **Structural stability** is maintained by the same bilectalism, even when lexical forms have differentiated beyond mutual intelligibility. If bilectalism breaks down, or is restricted in context, there is then rapid grammatical and semantic **structural divergence**.

This account explains why linguistic diversity in places with egalitarian multilingualism is apparent in lexical forms rather than structural features.

## 1. Lectal Variation

Lectal variation arises when social groups undergo fission, with an earlier shared lect dividing into distinct varieties. Early stages of social fission may involve social or geographic separation (Trudgill 1986: 39); but distinct lects may also arise while the social group is in close contact (Labov 1963; Nettle & Dunbar 1997; Stanford 2009; Roberts 2010; Mansfield et al 2021). A shared Norman French variety on the isle of Jersey split when in the 1500s, forty families moved to nearby Sark. This social fission and the new local identities lead to lectal variation between Sark and Jersey dialects (Liddicoat 1994: 6).

## 2. Form Differentiation

Ellison & Miceli (2017) describe the anti-doppel bias (ADB) as a psycholinguistic process in which bilinguals prefer vocabulary not shared between their languages (i.e. non-doppels) where available. In contexts allowing both words, Dutch/English bilinguals prefer the English-only *picture* to the

doppel *photo* in comparison to monolingual English speakers. The ADB seems likely to also apply in bilectals generally, including those who use multiple dialects. For example, Kapović (2005) notes that Croatian prescriptivists recommend *ponovo* rather than the common *ponovno* as it is (incorrectly) felt to particularly belong to the mutually-intelligible lect Serbian.

New lectal identities may develop slowly. Once, however, lects are associated with particular synonyms, the ADB can amplify differentiation, at least in the speech of bilectals. So long as many are bilectal, lexicon differentiation will increase. Mutual intelligibility will eventually break down.

### **3. Structural Stability**

The next stage occurs while much of the population remain bilectal and the shared vocabulary has been substantially reduced (by Form Differentiation). The lects are no longer mutually intelligible and individuals identifying with one lect, learn the other as a foreign language. The cognitive load using two lects, and monitoring for intrusive forms, facilitates cross-lectal structural priming, maintaining and stabilising structures shared between the lects. At this stage the lects essentially share one grammar but have distinct pools of lexical forms.

### **4. Structural Divergence**

Where the social conditions promoting bilectalism weaken, or are lost completely (e.g. trade networks or marriage patterns change), contact between the lectal communities will be reduced or end. Without contact, there is no brake on differentiation of linguistic structures.

Because the lects by this stage have substantially distinct vocabularies, accidental similarities between lexical forms and semantics occur between different sememes. Analogical extension of constructions thus takes different paths in the two lects, leading to distinct morphological generalisations, and thus grammatical constructions peculiar to the lects, which are now different species.

### **5. Discussion**

The above account of language speciation offers a number of advantages. It explains the shift from lectal differentiation to speciation in a known effect of human language processing, the ADB. It sees the structural uniformity but lexical form diversity seen in places like Vanuatu (François 2011) and Australia (Miceli 2019), as a natural consequence of egalitarian multilingualism never breaking down - the final stage of structural divergence is therefore never reached. Although we do not explore it here, it is possible to incorporate contact with distantly related or unrelated languages as part of this speciation model.

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