

Certification course for Myanmar Language Studies:

“Language and society in Myanmar and beyond”

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Lesson 8: Multilingualism and language contact - general

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Keywords

Monolingualism vs. Bilingualism vs. Multilingualism

Native speaker

L1 and L2

Dominant language vs. Subordinate language

Language contact

Source language, target language

Code mixing

Borrowing

Matter borrowing, Pattern borrowing, convergence

Multilingual speakers and multilingual communities

- Most speakers and communities use more than one language in their everyday communication. **Monolingualism is the exception, rather than the rule.**
- The languages used by individual speakers and communities may be similar to each other (related languages, dialects) or very different.
- In a multilingual community, different individuals may have knowledge of different subsets of the languages spoken in the community.
- In each case, speakers try to make themselves understood in a given speech situation.
- Speakers may mix the languages they have access to in different ways and to varying degrees.

Why is it interesting to study language contact?

- The results of language contact can tell us something about the history of the speakers of the languages involved.
- The language contact scenarios can tell us something about the different groups in a society and their relative positions.
- Language contact can tell us something about how the society functions.
- Language contact can tell us something about how we use language and how our brain works with language.

Where does language contact occur?

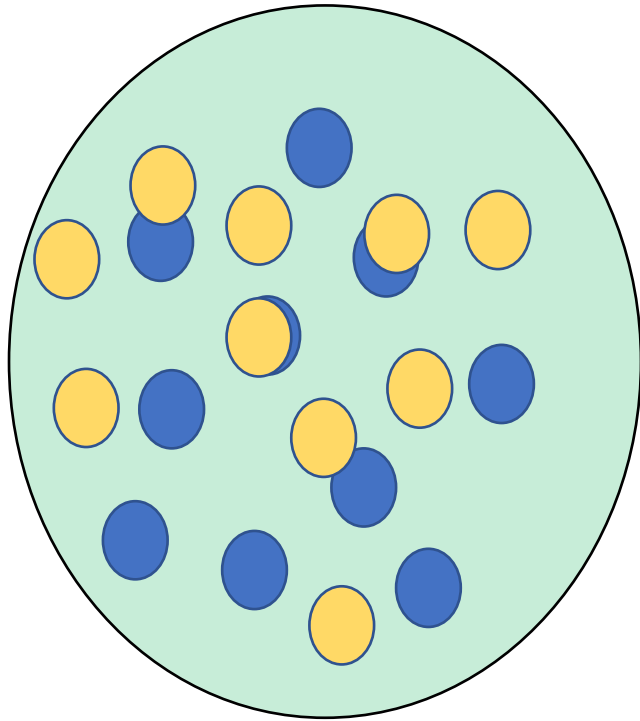
- Language contact can be described at two levels: **society and individual**.
- In both cases, two or more languages are involved in communication.
- Language contact can be only virtual, e.g. non-English speakers watching English movies or using English websites.
- The languages may influence each other in a way that some elements of language A (“source language”) are transmitted to language B (“target language”). **This transmission often happens unconsciously.**
- In all cases, it is the individual speakers who are the motors of language contact and language change through contact.

Multilingual individuals

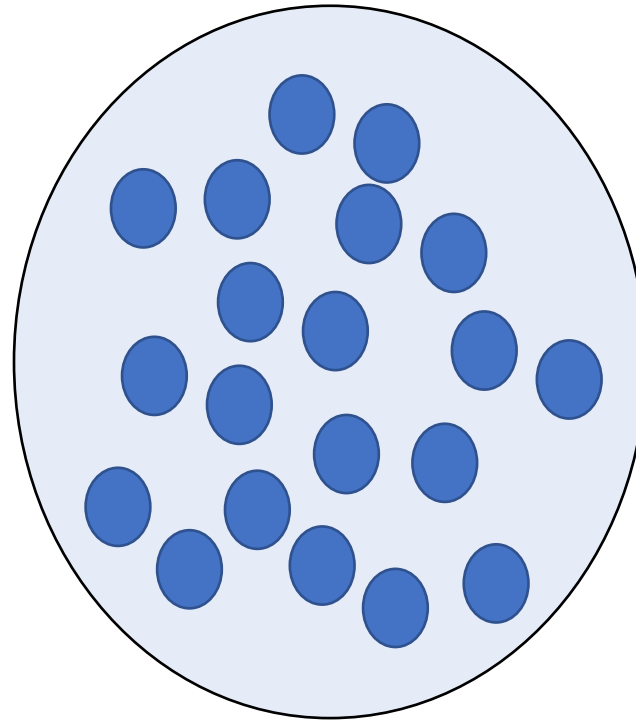
- Multilingual individuals have access to more than one language system in their brains. This does not mean that they have to be fluent in all these languages.
- These are not separate pockets in the brain, but big inventories containing all linguistic knowledge of the speaker: lexicon, phonology, grammar, and pragmatics of all languages they know.
- Often, one of the languages is **dominant** in the brain of the speaker. The dominant language may not be the same at all time, but may change according to the context.

→ Language contact happens right in the head of the multilingual speaker.

What happens in language contact?



Speaker A: French and English



Speaker B: English

Communication will be in English, but Speaker A may have some French in her English. → **The English of Speaker A is influenced by French.**

- Speaker A wants to transmit her ideas/thoughts as precisely and easily as possible to speaker B → **the language of choice here will be English.**
- Sometimes, she may not think of an appropriate English word or construction quickly enough.
- She might then use a French expression, perhaps without being aware of it. This expression can be a whole word with its concrete sounds (“MATTER REPLICATION”), or only a way of putting words together (construction; “PATTERN REPLICATION”). Including expressions of a language other than the language of conversation is called **CODE MIXING.**
- If French is the dominant language in speaker A’s brain, there may be more French expressions in her English. **Speaker B may take over some of these expressions over time.**
- The dominant language can be the one the speaker speaks best, uses most often, or it can be the one she has spoken more in the time just before the conversation.

What parts of a language can be affected by contact?

Language contact can affect the involved languages in all domains:

Phonology/phonetics: the sounds and sound systems may change

Morphology: the structure of words may change

Syntax: the way words are combined may change

Lexicon: words or meanings may be borrowed

Pragmatics: language use in communication may change

Usually, loan words (“lexical borrowing”) and loan constructions (“pattern borrowing”) occur rather easily, morphology is the most stable part.

Multilingual societies

- A society uses more than one language, often with **asymmetric status**.
- If in a society there are many multilingual speakers, their ways of speaking may **spread to monolingual speakers** (MONOLINGUAL = “speaking only one language”).
- Remember Speaker A above - she speaks English but also has French in her head.
- Sometimes she may pronounce an English word with a French accent (making it sound like French). **If she does this often and/or many other bilingual speakers do this, Speaker B may copy this way of pronunciation** (usually unconsciously).
- The whole community in which some people speak French and English may end up speaking English with a French accent and use French expressions in their English.

This is what happened in the 11th century when Normans from France conquered England:

The Old English language became more similar to Norman (Old French):

- The sounds /z/, /dʒ/, and /v/ became phonological
in earlier English, they were in complementary distribution
- Case endings and verb endings were simplified or lost
- English word order became SVO (Subject - Verb - Object)
in earlier English, the verb always came in second position
- Many French loanwords came into English: beef, pork, mutton, ...

What factors are relevant in language contact?

The linguistic structure of the languages:

If they are more similar to each other, influence is easier.

The transparency of the expression

Transparent expressions are more easily borrowed than opaque ones.

Similar sounding expressions in the target language.

If there is already a word with a similar sound and meaning,
it is easier to borrow an expression from the source language.

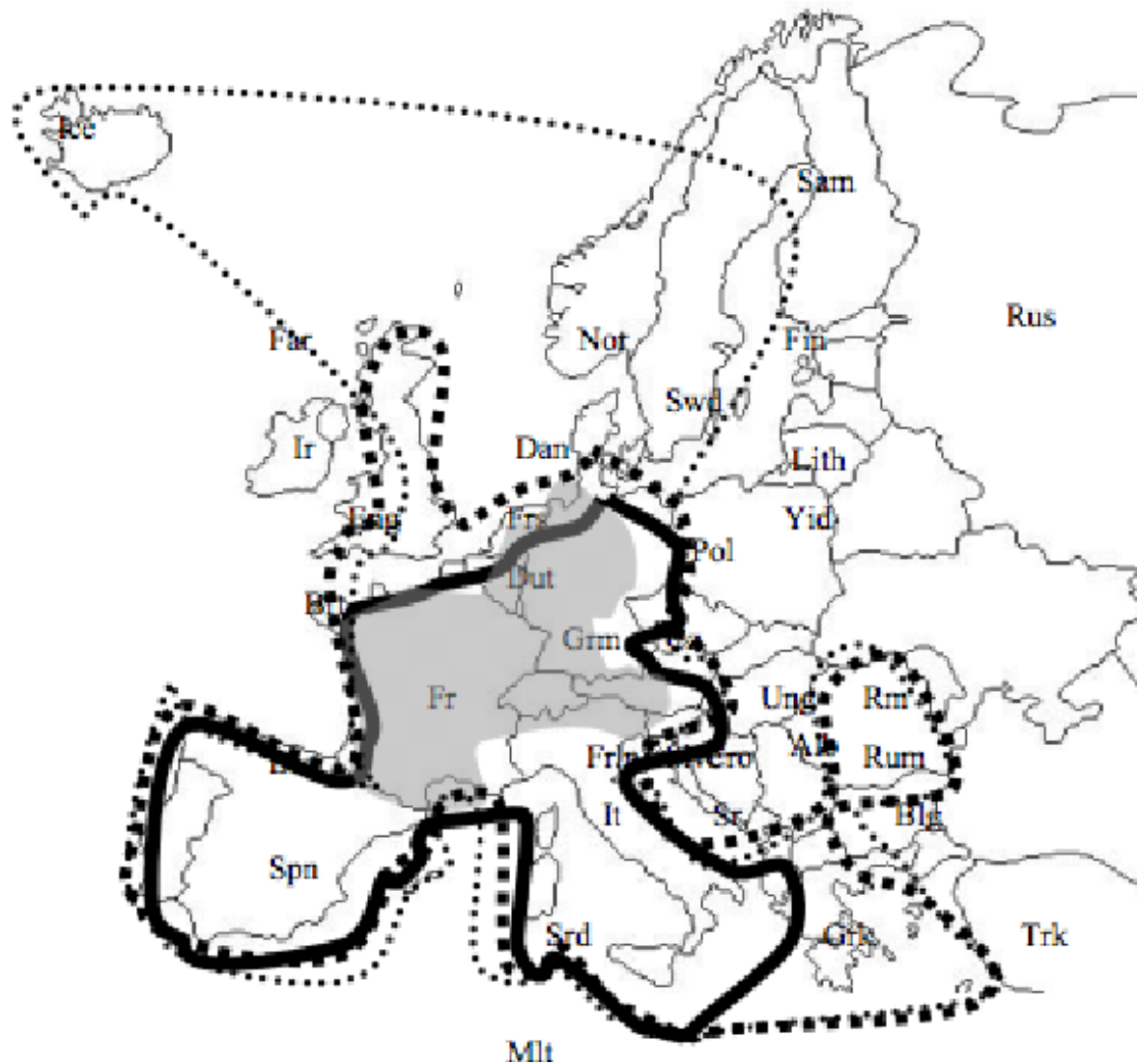
The prestige of the source language and its speakers

One borrows rather from a language that is felt to be superior,
or if there are influential speakers of the source language.
(This is relevant especially for **matter replication**)

On the other hand:

- High prestige languages usually have many second language speakers (L2) who don't speak the prestige language completely correctly.
- This may change the prestige language towards the subordinate language.
- For example, if many people in a country with English as official language speak some other language more fluently, their English will be different from Standard English in the US or UK.
- The high prestige English (dominant language) becomes similar to subordinate local languages.
- This happened for example in India, where Indian English is recognized now as a distinct variety of English.

In some cases, different languages in a region converge (= become similar to each other): Areal convergence - for example Standard Average European



Loanwords (“matter replication”)

<i>Telefon</i>	<i>Automobil</i>	<i>Kaiser</i>	<i>Keller</i>
<i>cool</i>	<i>out</i>	<i>downloaden</i>	<i>scannen</i>

Calques (“pattern replication”)

<i>Vorsitzender</i>	<i>unterhalten</i>	<i>Unternehmung</i>	<i>überleben</i>	German
<i>président</i>	<i>entretenir</i>	<i>entreprise</i>	<i>survivre</i>	French
<i>president</i>	<i>entertain</i>	<i>enterprise</i>	<i>survive</i>	English

Convergence (sprachbund phenomena)

English	German	French	Sorbian	Albanian
<i>I have said</i>	<i>ich habe gesagt</i>	<i>j’ai dit</i>	<i>mam kazane</i>	<i>unë kam thënë</i>

Mixed languages (Pidgins, Creoles)

When people with different native languages and no shared language have to communicate with each other, mixed languages may arise.

These are called PIDGIN or CREOLE languages. Creoles usually are fully developed systems and in some cases serve as official languages of countries, e.g. **Tok Pisin** of Papua New Guinea:

Em i man bilong mi.

‘He is my husband.’

Wanpela man i kam.

‘A man is coming/came.’

Dispela man i laikim dispela meri.

‘This man likes this woman.’

Em i no save kaikai mit.

‘He doesn’t eat meat.’

→ vocabulary mostly English, grammar Oceanic/Papuan

Summary

- Most individuals are exposed to more than one language to some extent.
- All societies experience language contact at some point in their history.
- Language contact is an important factor of language change.
- The outcome of language contact depends on linguistic factors, but more importantly on social factors.
- Language contact can result in changes on all levels of the involved languages and can work both ways.
- Drivers of contact induced change can be **high prestige groups/individuals** as well as **imperfect L2-speakers** in sufficient numbers.

In the next lesson, we'll have a look how languages influence each other in Myanmar.