Chapter 9 Sociolinguistics
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"Delving Deeper"

Language influence: Vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar

In the sociolinguistics chapter, we briefly discussed the notion of linguistic borrowing. Let's now consider the extent to which one language can be influenced by another. Does this only involve vocabulary, or do languages borrow sounds and grammar as well? This question comes up any time two languages in contact share an unexpected feature. However, linguistic analysis has shown that borrowing of the latter type is often overstated (for a different perspective, see Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Thomason, 2011).

In terms of vocabulary (or lexical borrowing), it's easy to find examples of one language taking words from another language. For example, English has borrowed thousands of words from French, particularly during the Norman conquest. In theory, any word can be borrowed. That said, core vocabulary like numbers, days of the week and kinship terms are less likely to be borrowed (though there are many exceptions, for example the Spanish word for "left", *izquierda*, was borrowed from Basque; Tagalog days of the week were borrowed from Spanish). In general, though, the borrowing of words is a relatively common and uncontentious phenomenon.

Let's now turn to the question of phonological and syntactic borrowing, focusing on a well studied situation, the contact between English and French in Canada. After this we will show another example, less well studied: the contact between Nahuatl and Spanish in Mexico.

If we exclude second language learners and focus on monolinguals and fluent bilinguals, the evidence for phonological and syntactic borrowing is very limited. The borrowing of sound by one language from another is particularly rare. Even in cases where two languages in contact share a sound, one must exercise caution before accepting an influence claim. Consider the presence of centralized lax vowels in Canadian French. For example, unlike the French spoken in France, Canadian French makes extensive use of the vowel /ɪ/ in words like *site* and *petite*. This is more or less the same vowel that is found in the English word *sit*. Still, it is probably not the result of contact with English. A better explanation would be that it reflects a general tendency in French phonology to use more centralized vowels in syllables that end in a consonant (this tendency is known as the "Loi de position"). For example, a mid-high vowel is used in words like *beau* "beautiful" and *tôt* "early" that end in a vowel, whereas the mid-open (lax) vowel is found when the last sound is a consonant, as in *botte* "boot" or *bol* "bowl". Since the use of /ɪ/ is only found in syllables ending in a consonant, the most reasonable explanation is that it is an extension of this general rule. The takeaway here is that a simple parallel between two contact languages isn't proof that one language has influenced the phonology of another.

What about syntax? For the most part, the syntactic rules of a language constitute a cohesive system that is resistant to external influence. As in the pronunciation case mentioned above, there are instances when languages in contact appear to share grammatical structures and where the question of grammatical influence might be considered. For example, speakers of English and

speakers of French in Canada can sometimes end a sentence with a preposition (though this is not characteristic of French in most of France). For example, look at (1) and (2).

(1) *The woman I go out* ***with***.

(2) *La femme que je sors* ***avec***.

Should we therefore conclude that this structure was borrowed from English? It turns out that the two languages don't really follow the same rules in this regard since there are many examples where you can end a sentence with a preposition in Canadian French, but not in English, for example: *Elle était contente* ***avec***. One would not say "She is happy **with**" in English (and the opposite is also true, i.e.: there are many cases where you can end a sentence with a preposition in English, but not in Canadian French). The simple conclusion this leads us to is that the two languages have very different rules that were developed independently.

In some cases, it is impossible to determine whether or not a non-standard structure is the result of borrowing. Consider for example the use of pronouns after the verb in Ontario French, for example, *elle a parlé* ***à nous*** ("she spoke **to us**"). The primary way of saying this in French is in fact *elle* ***nous*** *a parlé* (with the object pronoun before the verb). Since English also uses pronouns after the verb, one might consider this an example of syntactic borrowing. The challenge posed by this structure, however, is that it lines up with a very common structure in French, namely Subject-Verb-Object, which is always found when the object is a noun rather than a pronoun. As such, the grammar of French already provides a model for the structure in question (so both explanations might be relevant).

Can we conclude that one never finds examples of borrowed structures? Consider the use of *regarder pour* ("to look for") in Ontario French. Again, we have a structure that exists in English, but not in varieties of French that are not in contact with English. This probably is a true case of structural borrowing since it is used by those francophones that speak English frequently and can't be explained by making reference to a common tendency in French.

Let's take a look at the contact of Nahuatl and Spanish. The Spanish arrived in present day Mexico in the early XVI century where they found the Aztecs, a powerful empire that had conquered, in its own, many groups of peoples who spoke different languages. The Aztecs spoke Nahuatl, and this language has survived to the present day, with around a million and a half speakers in different communities in central Mexico. This is therefore a contact situation that has lasted many centuries.

Nahuatl is a language that differs in important ways from Spanish. Classical Nahuatl is classified as a type of language that allows the formation of very complex words made up of a verb and many morphemes representing different grammatical functions. In fact, a single word can represent a whole sentence. Furthermore, classical Nahuatl is very free regarding word order. It has no articles such as *the* and *a.* Has Nahuatl changed as a result of contact?

On the surface, it seems that present-day Nahuatl tends to use subject-verb-object like Spanish, that it may use the numeral *one* as an article, and that verbs have lost many of the possible morphemes. However, if we dig deeper, we find that speakers still allow free word order if the

context is appropriate. The development of articles happened in all the languages derived from Latin, a language with no articles (Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian, etc.). The same can be said for morphological simplification, something that happens continually in many languages, and which has happened in English. It is difficult, therefore, to show that there has been syntactic change due to contact with Spanish.

But what about vocabulary? Spanish has borrowed a bit from Nahuatl (our word for chocolate, for example, comes from Nahuatl through Spanish). In fact, Nahuatl has borrowed thousands of words from Spanish. Borrowing verbs is so common there is a special ending, *–oa*, to accommodate the new verbs. For example, the Spanish verb *trabajar* 'to work' is used as *trabajaroa* in present-day Nahuatl.

So as you can see, while phonological and syntactic borrowing might exist, they are rare and one should consider a number of linguistic facts before arriving at the conclusion that similar structures in contact languages are the result of borrowing. On the other hand, the case for the borrowing of vocabulary is more straightforward.

References

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