Chapter 3

Towards a Usage-Based Account of Language Change: Implications of Contact Linguistics for Linguistic Theory

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1 Introduction

When I was younger, I would indicate my choice from a menu in a restaurant with the Dutch phrase ‘ik neem de steak’ (a more or less literal rendition in English would be ‘I’ll take the steak’). Nowadays, I may or may not use the same expression, but if I don’t I’m likely to say ‘ik ga voor de steak’ (‘I’ll go for the steak’). What has happened in between is that my Dutch has adapted to what I hear being said around me in the Dutch speech community, and the Dutch nowadays routinely use the expression ‘go for X’ to convey having made a choice from among a selection of options. The construction is most likely a loan translation from English. It has made its way into Dutch, presumably first in the speech of bilinguals such as myself, and then got dispersed throughout the speech community. This way of conceptualizing the way a language changes is associated with what is often called a ‘usage-based approach’, as the state of the language is presumed to be a direct consequence of how it is used. At the very beginning of this process, I may have picked it up from other Dutch speakers, or I may have introduced it into my own Dutch because of interference from English. In this particular case, as well as in most others, we will never know the answer. Contact-induced changes are easy to spot once they have taken hold, but for most of them the moment of birth has been forever lost. In the present chapter, I attempt to shed some new light on how and why languages change, and examine what the implications are of adopting a usage-based approach to language contact data.

For many linguists the goal of linguistic theory is to characterize the nature of human linguistic knowledge. There is much less agreement, however, about the best way to describe this nature, about what constitutes evidence, and about how best to investigate the issue. Until fairly recently, the consensus was that linguistics should find out what exactly the innate language faculty consists of. The last few decades, however, usage-based linguistics has introduced a rival approach which suggests that the question has to be pushed further...
back, as it were. It urges us to look not for a purely linguistic basis of linguistic knowledge, but for the ways in which linguistic knowledge reflects the interaction between linguistic experience and innate cognitive skills that are not language-specific but ‘domain-general’. The central hypothesis is that language evolved as a response to the increasing communicative demands that were themselves the result of the increasing use of cooperation to achieve basic survival goals. The cognitive architecture upon which language relied was already in place, and involves skills such as categorization, the ability to schematize over recurrent experiences, and the human ability to achieve joint attention, itself pressed into service of the goal to cooperate with others. Language, it is suggested, is essentially the product of regimenting those skills into the service of fulfilling the communicative demands triggered by our social goals (e.g. Tomasello, 2008; Christiansen and Chater, 2008).

Starting out from these assumptions, usage-based linguistics puts forward a view of linguistic competence that is radically different from the generative view that has dominated linguistics in the 20th century. Most important for our current concerns, a usage-based approach entails that change is a design feature of language (Bybee, 2010). If competence is usage-based, it must continuously respond to usage, and usage, as we know since the early days of generative grammar, constantly exposes us to new and creative ways of conveying meaning. In addition, while some things get rehearsed often, others sink into oblivion for lack of use. In usage-based accounts, the most common effects of usage are fluctuations in degrees of entrenchment: the degree to which a form-meaning unit is known by a speaker. That is, competence is less a matter of whether you know a particular word or structure, but of how well you know it.

This chapter is an attempt to review where we are now in constructing a usage-based theory of language change, with special consideration for contact-induced change. Postulating that mental representation must be dynamic is one thing, actually demonstrating it is quite another. For that reason, there will also be a quite extensive methodological discussion. The next section lays out the usage-based account of language change; following that I will zoom in on how contact issues can be approached from this same perspective. The second half of the chapter will then discuss the methods and results of a number of recent studies on Dutch Turkish which attempt to apply a usage-based perspective to contact-linguistic research questions, an attempt that includes the use of methods not common yet in language contact research. The theme of the current issue, limitations of contact, is addressed in two different ways throughout the chapter. First, though many changes have their origin in language contact, their diffusion through the speech community follows