Introduction:
Contact Among Genetically Related Languages

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Guest Editors

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The study of language contact has blossomed in the last several decades, especially since the publication of Uriel Weinreich’s ground-breaking Languages in Contact 60 years ago (Weinreich, 1953). Linguists have come to see contact as one of the most important mechanisms of language change, with some going so far as to suggest that contact is the principal catalyst for change (e.g., Dixon, 1997).

While the extent to which language contact should be given primacy in models of language change is debated (see, e.g., Bowern, 2010 for discussion), there is no question that the effects of contact are of critical importance to our understanding of language change and relationship, and that they provide intriguing insights into past interactions among peoples. The relevance of contact has been recognized by linguists for well over a century—the German linguist Hugo Schuchardt famously declared in the 1880s that there is no language completely free of foreign influence (Schuchardt, 1884). However, the scientific study of language contact gained its most solid foundation considerably later, with the publication of Weinreich’s (1953) seminal book; this work treated contact-induced change systematically according to the grammatical categories involved (lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.) and the probability of transference within them, i.e., movement of features

1 “Mit mehr Recht als Max Müller gesagt hat: ‘es gibt keine Mischsprache’, werden wir sagen können: ‘es gibt keine völlig ungemischte Sprache’. Wenn überall bei innigem Verkehr verschiedensprachiger Menschengruppen auch die Sprachen aufeinander wirken, so wird umgekehrt da wo eine physische Kreuzung, die ja den allerinnigsten Verkehr voraussetzt, nachgewiesen ist, auch eine Kreuzung der Sprachen sich vermuten lassen.” (Schuchardt, 1884: 5)
from one language to another. Thomason and Kaufman’s (1988) publication was a second major contribution, and brought the relevance of social factors into focus. Over the last few decades, a remarkable flow of studies has been published, new case studies have come to light, and new theories have been proposed and examined. Conferences probing the topic from various aspects are conducted regularly and with impressive attendance.

The most important shift in this field has been the attempt to identify and isolate what motivates and facilitates the transfer of linguistic features in the languages or speaker populations involved. One of the major issues discussed in the context of contact is the question of linguistic structure and what influence typological and structural similarity has on the extent of borrowing. The assumption that similar structure is an essential factor in borrowability (i.e., a ‘structural compatibility requirement’), which was common early on (Weinreich, 1953; Moravcsik, 1978), has been largely abandoned (see Thomason and Kaufman, 1988); however, recent studies suggest that there is some correlation between structural similarity and structural changes, although this may hold only as a tendency (e.g., Haig, 2001).

Additionally, sociolinguistic factors have been recognized as essential to the understanding of the dynamics of transfer in contact situations. Myers-Scotton (2002) has shown that the level of speaker proficiency in two (or more languages) has crucial relevance to the degree of transfer of linguistic features. Others argue that a complex interplay between linguistic constraints and social constraints shapes the results of contact (Sankoff, 2001). Thomason, however, has argued in a number of publications (most recently Thomason, 2008) that social factors are more predictive than linguistic factors in contact-driven change. She has shown that there are no absolute linguistic constraints on language change, and while not every change is equally probable, any change seems to be possible (and, in fact, attested).

These considerations highlight the two-fold problem raised by the issue of contact among genetically related languages: on the one hand, how are we to distinguish between the outcomes of inheritance and contact; on the other, how might the dynamics of contact-induced change actually vary according to the degree of language relationship? In fact, if we trace language relationships far enough back in time, we find that the distinction between internally and externally motivated change essentially disappears. The spread of innovations is carried out via individual speakers, and the dynamics of spread—whether this occurs within or across speech communities—are shaped by these speakers’ social affiliations and practices. Work by Milroy and Milroy (1985), Milroy (1992), Trudgill (2011, inter alia), Ross (1997), Rampton (1995), and others explores many of these fine-grained, speaker-to-speaker interactions and their relevance to language change.