Parallel meanings, divergent forms in the north Vanuatu Sprachbund

Diffusion or genetic inheritance?

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Areal studies and language families

- Linguistic areas
  - “A linguistic area is generally taken to be a geographically delimited area including languages from two or more language families, sharing significant traits.” [Dixon 2001]
  - “The central feature of a linguistic area is the existence of structural similarities shared among languages of a geographical area, where usually some of the languages are genetically unrelated or at least are not all close relatives.” [Campbell 2006]

- Most areal studies involve distinct language families:
  - Balkans, Mesoamerica, Ethiopia, SE Asia, India, Siberia…

- Another type:
  - Contact situations involving languages which are genetically closely related.
    - e.g. Heeringa et al. 2000 for Germanic lgs; Chappell 2001 for Sinitic lgs…

- Structural similarities < common ancestor or diffusion?
- This case study: the 17 languages of north Vanuatu.
The 17 languages of north Vanuatu

- Close genetic relationship
  - Austronesian > Oceanic
  - North-Central Vanuatu [Clark 1985]
  - North Vanuatu [François 2005]

- Sustained language contact and plurilingualism through trade, exogamy, shared cultural events... [Vienne 1984]

- Little mutual intelligibility

- Modern vehicular language: Bislama (Eng-lexifier pidgin)

Negative existential
- "not be there, be absent"
- "have not; lack"
- (sentential) "no"
- "it’s alright"
- "(try) to no avail"

Adverb "properly"
- "(do s.th.) properly, correctly"
- "(eat, drink+) completely"
- "(speak) sincerely"
- "nicely (fat+)"

Qualitative restrictive adverb
- 'just, only'
- restrictive with adjectives pragmatically oriented negatively
- used with small numbers
- used with recent past
- 'just (fine)'

Negative existential
- tatyce
- mep
- taʃeyeh
- niβ
- yitay
- eney
- odiag
- tateh
- tayai
- iβ
- bek
- ebek
- trų
The case of Bislama

- **Bislama**
  - English-based **Pidgin** with various Oceanic languages as its substratum (XIXth century) [Tryon & Charpentier 2004]
  - **Bislama** is the Vanuatu variety of Pacific English pidgins. (The variety here discussed is the one spoken in North Vanuatu)

- **Relexification**
  - About Haitian Creole, Lefebvre (1998: 9) defines relexification as “a process of vocabulary substitution in which the only information adopted from the target language in the lexical entry is the phonological information”
  - **Pre-existing functional moulds** (lexemes, constructions...) were re-lexified with “phonological” (formal) material from the lexifier language.
  - **Bislama = Oceanic structures x English forms**
    - [Camden 1979, Keesing 1991]

The model of areal convergence

- Another case where languages with different forms come to share parallel structures:

- **Metatypy**
  - Ross (2001) compared **Papuan Waskia** and neighbouring **Oceanic Takia**.
  - As a result of contact, Takia has kept its forms unchanged but has entirely remodelled its structures following the Papuan model.
  - Sustained contact between lgs A and B results typically in A undergoing “**metatypy**” under the influence of B:
    - “the reorganization of the language’s semantic patterns and ‘ways of saying things’
    - the restructuring of its syntax.”
  - In both cases (relexification & metatypy), contact phenomena are defined by their ability to **disrupt genetic inheritance**.
The model of areal convergence

Is areal convergence the right model?
- Oceanic vs (Pidgin) English (relexification)
  - Before | After
  - Forms  | different | different
  - Structures | different | same
- Papuan vs Oceanic (metatypy)
  - Before | After
  - Forms  | different | different
  - Structures | different | same
- Oceanic vs Oceanic (North Vanuatu)
  - forms have changed
  - structures have either been retained or changed and reconverged
  - Before | History | Present
  - Forms  | same | ? | different
  - Structures | same | ? | same

A polysemous term: "heavy"

Language-internal relexification

*Proto-language* → *Pre Mwotlap* → *Modern Mwotlap* → Neighbouring languages

- The meaning of the new word has been "forced" into the pre-existing mould.
- Because languages change one at a time, generally, the semantic structure that is thus being retained is indirectly inherited from earlier stages / from the common protolanguage.
- Change of form, retention of meaning.
  - Hybrid Micro-perspective: contact phenomenon
  - Macro-perspective: genetic retention

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Neighbouring languages

- Areal pressure

A polysemous term: "heavy"
**Conclusion**

- **The paradox of language contact**
  - Language contact is generally observed insofar as it *disrupts genetic inheritance*.
  - But contact can sometimes act as a *conservative force*: it tends to *preserve original functional patterns* even when *original forms* have long been forgotten.
  - This *resistance to change* induced by language contact can be of great help to the historical linguist.

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**References**


