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

- Hiw
- Lo-Toga
- Lehali
- Löyöp
- Volow
- Mwotlap
- Mwesen
- Lakon
- Nume
- Olrat
- Mota
- Veraa
- Vurës
- Mwerlap

**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)
Parallel meanings
divergent forms
in the north Vanuatu Sprachbund
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+)”…

Adverb “properly”
Qualitative restrictive adverb

- 'just, only'
- restrictive with adjectives pragmatically oriented negatively
- used with small numbers
- used with recent past
- 'just (fine)’
“just tell the truth”

Speak well only

Structural isomorphism

- on the paradigmatic axis (semantic structure of lexicon)
- on the syntagmatic axis (syntax)

“One grammar, 17 lexicons”
[cf. Friedman 1997]

... or 18 counting Bislama!

BISL tok gut nemo
< *talk good no-more
The case of Bislama

**Bislama**

- English-based *Pidgin* with various Oceanic languages as its substratum (XIX\textsuperscript{th} 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]
Negative existential

- “not be there, be absent”
- “have not; lack”
- (sentential) “no”
- “it's alright”
- “(try) to no avail”

BISL nogat
< Engl. *no-got
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*)
  - Forms: different, different
  - Structures: different, same

- Papuan vs Oceanic (*metatypy*)
  - Forms: different, different
  - Structures: different, same

- Oceanic vs Oceanic (North Vanuatu)
  - Forms: have changed
  - Structures: have either been retained or changed and reconverged
A polysemous term:
"heavy"

Proto-form *mamaβa

adjective "heavy"
- "heavy"
- "weighty, important"
- "solemn, respectful"
- "taboo"
- "elaborate"…
*dew* (?
heavy, solemn...

**mamaβa**

semantic shift +
lexical competition between 2 forms
(partial synonymy)

**mamaβa**

heavy, solemn...

**mamaβa**

taboo
Language-internal relexification

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*
Noun "tree stump"
- "stump, base of tree"
- unit in counting plants
- "beginning (song, month+)"
- "origin (family, custom+)
- "cause, reason (event+)"

Proto Oceanic *puqun
Proto North-Vanuatu *X

INHERITED POLYSEMY
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.
Tankyu tumas!

jöwja ti kəmi

lowiə luwo e kəmi

bap yəwe kimi

bap yəwi kimi

bap yəwi kimi gb°e nyelwo

biri kimi a nilwo

biri kimi gb°e nyelwo

biri kimi a nilwo

bireən ye ləwo

bireən ya ləwo

bireən ya ləwo

bireən ya ləwo

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bireən yə lĩwo

bireən belseaβ

bireən ya riy

bireən sasa mun kimi

bireən bluwo

bireən bluwo

temtem nulap


