

# Language Learning and linguistic Change

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## I. Introduction :

Although historical linguists have excelled in describing the changes that a human language may undergo, they have paid little attention to explain the causes of those changes. It is true that those linguists have succeeded in establishing the genetic classification of human languages, reconstructing protosystems, and setting up the historical processes involved in linguistic changes, but they have relatively done unsatisfactory job with regard to the causes of linguistic changes. It is ironic that linguistics was established, in the first place, as a historical science by the neogrammarians in the second half of the last century by focussing on linguistic changes, especially sound changes. Nevertheless, not all historical issues relevant to this discipline has been dealt with adequately throughout this long period. The purpose of the present study is to examine the imperfect learning of native language by children which has become to be known as the so called imperfect learning hypothesis as one cause of linguistic change.

## II. On the Causes of Linguistic Change:

There is no doubt that investigating the real causes of linguistic change will contribute to a better understanding of human language and how it functions. It will also help in making accurate predictions about the course which a language may take in the future. In fact, all sciences do focus on explaining the causes of the phenomena that are relevant to those sciences. It is no exaggeration to state that almost the whole notion of the term science is based on answering the question "why?". However, it is not the case with regard to the causes of linguistic change. Reflecting the general view of most linguists, Goyvaerts (1975:87) says that "Instead of looking for the causes of linguistic change, it seems more profitable to my mind to simply accept linguistic change as an inherent factor of natural language".

Many linguists have expressed pessimistic views toward explaining the causes of linguistic change. Sapir (1921:183) asserts that "It is much better to admit that we do not yet understand the primary cause or causes of the slow drift in phonetics, though we can frequently point to contributing factors". Bloomfield (1933:385) declares that "The causes of sound change are unknown". Postal (1968:550) concludes that "There is no more reasons for languages to change than there is for automobiles to add fins one year and remove them the next, for jackets to have three buttons one year and two the next". King (1969:189) expresses doubts about any serious achievement in this regard by saying that "We know no more about 'why' than did Hermann Paul". Harris (1969:550) is content that "The explanation of the cause of linguistic change is far beyond the reach of any theory ever advanced". For Palmer (1972:228) "The causes of sound change are obscure". Finally, Fromkin and Rodman (1978:293) point out that "the exact reasons for linguistic change are still elusive". Overall, this is a defeatist position.

This defeatist position has not, however, hindered some linguists from speculating about the causes of linguistic change. Apart from some classical and somehow ridiculous views which ascribe linguistic change to racial, psychological, geographical factors as well as wars, invasions, famine, pestilence, colonization and urbanization (Jespersen, 1969), three main hypothesis have been put forward to account for linguistic change. They are (1) Languages Contact, (2) Structural imbalance, and (3) Imperfect learning of native language by children (Lehmann, 1972).

The first two hypotheses are convincing, well argued theoretically and empirically, and they have strong historical evidence, whereas the third one is ill argued and it suffers from a serious shortcoming, namely it lacks sufficient historical evidence. One is tempted, in the light of so called evidence advanced

in support of this hypothesis, to reject it once for all simply because there is no single historical evidence which supports it.

### III The Imperfect Learning Hypothesis:

The imperfect learning hypothesis states that when a child learns his native language he, sometimes, fails to learn it perfectly and that results in deviated linguistic forms which may be described as linguistic changes. The proponents of this hypothesis such as Kiparsky (1970), Anttila (1972), Arlotto (1972) and, Fromkin and Rodman (1978) argue that the learning process does contribute to linguistic change and some of them have advanced so called examples to support their views. Before we discuss their examples on this issue, it would be better to review what has been said about native language learning. That is, how does a child learn his native language?

With the introduction of the transformational generative theory by Noam Chomsky (1957, 1965) in the second half of this century, many linguistic and psycholinguistic ideas have been revised. Native language learning, for example, is no longer viewed as a result of imitation, repetition and reinforcement as the proponents of structural linguistics and behaviourist psychology such as Skinner (1957) claim. Instead, language learning is believed to be achieved through biological and innate processes (Chomsky, 1959). The child, with the help of the language acquisition device, constructs hypotheses about the structure of the language to be learned, modify and revise some when necessary, and cancel others. He continues this process until he masters the adult grammar. Every thing that does not conform to this grammar will be eliminated. The child will attempt to construct the generative grammar of the language he is exposed to. It is expected that the child will end up in violating none of the linguistic rules of the adult grammar. Furthermore, it is unexpected that the child will introduce new elements to this grammar because he attempts to follow the model. His grammar will eventually match the adult one. That is why you and I have the same grammars of our models. It is noteworthy that this is not necessarily done through the behaviouristic strategies mentioned earlier. Supposedly, we accept the arguments of the proponents of the imperfect learning hypothesis, the following question is, then, to be raised here: How does native language learning contribute to linguistic change? In other words, what type of influence does the process of learning exert on the adult grammar?

Anttila (1972:194) who enthusiastically argues in favor of the hypothesis by saying that "The contribution by children to linguistic change may be quite considerable" seems to be incapable to provide one piece of sufficient relevant and convincing evidence". Although he lays down the biological and psychological grounds for his argument, the argument itself is hypothetical. So, according to him if the child fails to approximate the adult speech and come closer to it, change results. He then, cites the case of the devoiced [d], such as that in German, which has occurred in the Appalachian dialect in the United States. Our comment on this example goes as follows: Why did this devoicing rule occur in that area in particular? It is known that this is a natural rule which may apply anywhere. But if it were true that children were the source of this type of change in that area, why didn't it happen in other areas in the United States and in other English speaking countries? It is likely that some influence from some German immigrants or others whose languages have similar rules has played an important role in creating the aforementioned rule. If that is the case, it can't be claimed that the change has to do with imperfect learning. Rather, it has very much to do with external linguistic influence.

Kiparsky (1970:312) argues that "Child language is ... the most likely source of analogical change". We think that it is not safe to attribute this type of change to child language because it is a universal strategy indowed in human being to draw analogies and to transfer experience from one situation to another. The analogical change observed in child language remains a characteristic of that language. There is no evidence that such change extends to adult grammar and influences it. It is rather one example of change which demonstrates how the child language develops through stages. This is on one hand.

On the other hand, the example advanced by Kiparsky concerning the sounds [θ] and [ð] being replaced by the sounds [F] and [V] because they are late acquired sounds seems to be hypothetical. As



he put it "SUPPOSE now that [θ] in some cases is not learned at all, and that this comes to be accepted usage. The result would be a sound change of the common type termed merger" (1970:312). The question is: In which language or speech community did that happen? The author has failed to provide one historical case to support his argument. Therefore it is an untenable argument.

Fromkin and Rodman (1978), too, follow the same line of hypothetical argumentation in discussing this issue. They cite the two constructions "It's I" and "It's me" to support the imperfect learning hypothesis. According to them, children use the latter construction. So, they predict that "the next generation MAY use only the 'me' form of the pronoun in this construction. In such cases the grammar will have changed" (1978 : 291). But it is likely that children will learn the other form and they will use both; each in a certain situation, just as adults do. Therefore, the above argument can't be taken as sufficient evidence for imperfect learning hypothesis.

Lehmann(1972)has fairly dealt with this hypothesis. Although he lists it besides other hypotheses, he raises some reservation about it. He says that the change of the American [t] into [ d ] intervocalically in the forties of this century was carried over by young speakers but was no initiated primarily by children. As he put it "The spread of phonological changes is affected by the learning of language among children. But the initial cause of phonological changes cannot be ascribed to language learning" (1972:176).

In fact, the imperfect learning hypothesis is not new but it goes back to the end of the last century. Regarding the results of the learning process, Sweet asserted in 1899 that they "Are always imperfect ...IF languages were learnt perfectly by the children of generation, then languages would not change". Quoted in Jespersen (1969:161). A year later he, however, changed his mind with regard to the imitation process by pointing out that "The main cause of sound change must therefore be sought elsewhere". Quoted in Jespersen (1969:162).

#### **Conclusion:**

It should be clear from the previous discussion that the imperfect learning hypothesis is weak and it does no hold. It is a hypothetical hypothesis in the first place. The changes that occur in the child language have probably tempted many linguists to consider them as a basis for similar changes in the adult language. The fact of the matter is that the two languages, through they constitute one in some sense, fall in two dimensions with regard to linguistic changes which occur in both of them. In a word, children do contribute to linguistic change only and only as carriers of this change whenever and wherever it occurs, but not as a source of the change itself.



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