Syntactic Change in Progress?[1]

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For several years I have been recording examples of what appeared to me to be syntactic change in progress in English. This paper is a report on the examples collected.

I group the examples into three categories: inflectional forms of verbs, grammaticalization (or semantic bleaching), and verb recentralizations.

The principal conclusion is that it is very difficult to determine whether a particular case does indeed represent syntactic change in progress. In fact, there seem to be no clear criteria to establish (1) whether or not a given instance of language use represents a linguistic change at all, (2) whether a particular change has already occurred or is still in progress, and (3) just which changes should be counted as syntactic. But this is not a satisfactory situation. How can there be a science of linguistic change which does not attempt to explain how the transition from one discrete language-state to another is accomplished?

Several years ago I began an attempt to collect examples of syntactic change in progress in English. In the past two decades, of course, there have been an increasing number of studies of *sound* change in progress, and I felt that they had contributed a great deal to our understanding of sound change in general. I had hoped that similar elucidation of syntactic change might be possible. In fact, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with theories of linguistic change which do not attempt to explain how the transition from one discrete language-state (=linguistic description) to another is accomplished. I therefore began to collect what I took to be

1 It is with pleasure that I dedicate this paper to the memory of my long-time colleague, Fang-kuei Li. His broad knowledge of and keen interest in the phenomena of human language, both synchronic and diachronic, was an inspiration to many.

examples of syntactic change in English. However, there are problems in determining whether these are actually examples of syntactic change in progress or of something else, problems which themselves seem deserving of some discussion.

Let me begin by showing some of what I collected. The cases which I recorded can be grouped into three categories, which I label, respectively, "Inflectional forms of verbs", "Grammaticalization" (or "Semantic Bleaching"), and "Verb recentralizations". (Emphases in the examples, unless otherwise indicated, are mine).

I. Inflectional Forms of Verbs

The first, and probably most undisputably syntactic category involves verb form. The alternatives given in brackets and labeled "expected" are just what I personally would have expected, of course. These are offered to explain why I included the particular examples.

One subcategory involves conditions contrary to fact:

(1) "The FBI in the fall of 1963 was already showing intermittent interest in Oswald and *may* or *may not* [expected: might or might not] have intensified that interest if it had been told of Oswald's connections."

(2) "Without his father's accomplishments, Haley said that he... *may* [expected: might] have grown up in a family of tenant farmers... and the impetus for "Roots" might [NB might] have been lost."

I am not sure whether the next series of examples involves the same phenomenon or something different. Tense seems to be involved in all.

(3) "It would have been better for Penn if the game *were* [expected: had been] postponed at that point."

also,

(4) "If I *knew* [expected: had known] then what I know now, ..."

(5) (On the future of Gramm-Rudman after the Supreme Court had struck down one key provision) "what finally *happens* [expected: will

happen〕on this issue is far from certain. But, as with tax reform, public opinion and pressures will be 〔NB will be〕vital."

Finally, a use of present tense to indicate a past contrary to fact contingency (although this is the only example I have gotten down on paper, this seems very common in sports-discourse),

(6) (About University of Hawaii football linebacker Pete Noga blocking a field-goal attempt in a game played the night before) "If we *don't block* 〔expected: hadn't blocked〕it, we *may lose* 〔expected: might have lost〕."

II. "Grammaticalization" (or "Semantic Bleaching")

These examples all seem to involve reduced independence for a word or expression. Labels such as "grammaticalization" or "semantic bleaching" fit at least some of the time.

(7) First, a French example to introduce the next English one. In French, there are two common words, *genre* and *espèce*, meaning something like "kind" in expressions like "a kind of _____". *Genre* is masculine, while *espèce* is feminine. However, one often hears *une genre de* (where the following noun is feminine) or *un espèce de* (where the following noun is masculine). Evidently, the article is, as it were, looking beyond the first noun (*genre* or *espèce*) to agree with the second noun. Or rather, I think, the strings are being re-analyzed so that *genre de, espèce de,* are treated as modifiers.

Now the English example: Something similar seems to have happened in English, except that the agreement is of number, rather than gender. An editor recently suggested that I had made an error in writing: "〔the author〕sets up three ideal types of communicative system". She felt that *system* should be made to agree in number with "three...types". And one does quite regularly see such agreement observed. In fact, one of the more commonplace kinds of "grammatical error" in American English today is pluralizing a demonstrative before a word such as "kind", "type", "sort", followed by "of" and a plural noun (e.g., "those sort of guys").

(8) (Grammaticalization of "the fact that"):

"I will present preliminary arguments in support of *the fact that* [expected e. g. : the claim that] [language name] is becoming more and more an SVO language."

"I'd stake my soul on *the fact that* he never committed a dishonest act in his life."

(If "the fact that" were intended to carry its full unbleached meaning in these cases, they would be clear cases of the author assuming that which was to be proven.)

(9) (Grammaticalization of "such that"):

"We could adjust the reconstructions *such that* [expected: so that, in such a way that] *ŋk > k and *k > gh."

(This has become very common. My guess is that it has developed through a re-analysis of strings such as: "make a reconstruction such that..." where "such" was originally intended to refer to "reconstruction", but came to be reinterpreted as referring to "make").

(10) (Grammaticalization of "more so"):

"He has the confidence of Republicans *more so* [expected: more, or more than RR does] than Ronald Reagan."

It seems that any sequence of morphemes (and sometimes even a canonical sequence) which recurs frequently is likely to become known holistically (i. e., as a single unit, with less attention paid to its composition) by the speakers. (On knowing holistically and analytically, cf. Grace 1981). This apparently leads to a general tendency to such conventionalization and "bleaching". [2] Examples of bleaching or conventionalization which I have

2 However, I have noted two cases where a morpheme has become *more* independent. One is the Hawaiian "passive suffix", *'ia*, which can now have free morphemes inserted between it and the root. The other is the English genitive suffix, which can be separated from its noun as in the famous example, "The King of England's hat".

noted which do *not* appear to qualify as syntactic are: "want your cake and eat it" (for "want to have your cake and eat it, too"), "teach someone right from wrong" (for "teach someone to tell/know right from wrong"), "They may be missing the forest for the trees." (for "not seeing the forest for the trees"), "As far as X (for "as far as X is concerned", "as far as X goes"), "I could care less" (for "I couldn't care less").

III. Verb Recentralizations

(For the concept "recentralization", see Starosta 1985). Some may not regard these changes as syntactic, but in any case I see them as having syntactic effects since they change the structural options available for representing particular information. I. e., if they do not themselves constitute syntactic changes, I think they are one of the instrumentalities through which syntactic change occurs.

(11) "forewarn" with non-animate object:

"Each sentence was *forewarned* with a slide containing XXXXX and followed by a 2-second interval."

(12) "intervene" as a transitive verb:

What would a comparable group of non-*intervened* youngsters have managed by way of police arrests during the same six months?"

〔It has been pointed out to me that the fact that the verb is actually a participle used adjectivally may be significant〕.

(13) "talk" with unusual object:

"We're *talking* "I Spy" (name of TV show)" 〔in response to a question in the game, Trivial Pursuit〕

(14) "terminate" with animate object:

"A second failing performance results in *termination* from the program."

(15) "agree" as transitive verb:

"...statement that has been fully tested and is universally *agreed.*"

(16) "compel" with non-animate object:

"... his ... view... does not *compel* his skeptical conclusion..."

(17) "enable" with a non-animate object:

"... to *enable* large pitch changes."

"Working in terms of prototypes *enables* the location and..."

Discussion

These examples may have been sufficient in themselves to convince the reader that the attempt to identify cases of linguistic change in progress is, indeed, beset by difficulties. The difficult questions that may be asked of the examples above include such fundamental ones as (1) Are they examples of linguistic change at all? (2) If so, is it change which is currently in progress? (3) In any case, is it syntactic?

It is not easy to determine how any of these questions is to be answered. If it can be shown that one of the uses cited is not new—that it has been part of the language for a long time—then presumably it is disqualified as a case of change in progress or even of recent change. On the other hand, if it can be shown that it is still *not* a part of the language, then it can be dismissed as an error not to be attributed to the language at all—past, present, or future. That, in fact, is one objection that has been made to some of the examples given above—that they are simply errors, that they do not represent changes in the language because they do not represent anything legitimately *in* the language now or at any time in the past. (I should emphasize, however, that I did not collect examples unless I *thought* they were intentional; many were instances of something I had already noticed frequently, others were new to me but appeared in published material which otherwise gave evidence of careful editing).

Certainly, there are many things which occur in the course of language use which should be regarded as errors and not attributed to the language. But (as I have often complained elsewhere) we have no clear criteria for determining just what should and what should not be attributed to a

language. Still, something which the speaker him/herself recognizes as a slip of the tongue—anything he/she would choose to edit out—presumably should not be attributed to the language. We would likewise (I presume) want to allow for simple mislearning on the part of the speaker—cases where an individual has somehow acquired an idiosyncratic pronunciation of a word or a misconception of its meaning. There should also, one would suppose, be analogous syntactic misconceptions (mislearnings). I assume we would not want to attribute such misconceptions to the language. But beyond that, in cases where the speaker is uninclined to repudiate his/her actions, and they are not universally repudiated by others, how is the decision to be made?

Of the examples given above, those representing verb recentralization are exceptional in that we have the possibility of appealing to authority for a ruling as to whether they are or are not properly in the language. The authorities are, of course, the dictionaries of the English language. The Webster's Third New International, for instance, appears to accept nos. 13–17, but not 11 and 12. Presumably, that would mean that (according to Webster) 13–17 are part of English. Therefore, unless they were always part of English, they represent linguistic change, but already-completed change rather than change in progress. Nos. 11 and 12, on the other hand, are not yet in the language (or were not at the time the preparation of that edition was completed), and therefore they can *only* represent change in progress if they represent change at all.

Thus to sum up, we may say that 13–17 cannot represent change *in progress*, but that they may represent completed change (they do if there was ever a time when they weren't part of the language). On the other hand, 11 and 12 may represent change in progress (they do if they represent change at all, which they presumably do *just if* they are destined to be successful in establishing, themselves as part of the language). Whether the change that either represents (in the event that either represents change at

all) qualifies as specifically *syntactic* change is another matter which I do not know how to approach.

But some other questions remain: For example, since nos. 11 and 12 are not recognized by the dictionary, should they be regarded simply as errors? If they are not simply errors—if they possess some kind of legitimacy—what kind of legitimacy is it? Is there some variety of English within which one or the other is legitimate?

And why, we may ask, if nos. 13-17 are well enough established to be in the dictionary, did I take them to represent innovations? Is that to be attributed simply to inadequacies on my part, or is it a matter of chance that they have just now come to my notice? The latter seems likely in the case of 15, which, according to the dictionary, is a mainly British usage. But that is just to say that it was unfamiliar to me because it occurred mainly in a variety of English to which I had relatively limited access, and it is possible that that is true of the others as well. It is also possible that the reason I finally did notice them was that they had passed, or were passing, from varietally limited use to more general use, or at least to use in varieties to which I had greater access.

Let us suppose for a moment that some or all of these usages had been in existence for some time before I noticed them (a not-unlikely supposition, certainly) but that their use *was* varietally limited in some way. Suppose further that the reason why some or all of them eventually did come to my attention was that they had come to be used more frequently in varieties to which I am more exposed. Is this intravarietal diffusion to be regarded as constituting a linguistic change?

The answer is no *if* the only two conditions we consider are occurrence and non-occurrence in the system (i.e., we do not consider a change in varietal distribution a linguistic change), and if the only kind of system which comes into consideration is the language (in this case, English) as a whole. But if we were to take the *variety* as our focus, then the introduction

of a linguistic usage, whether it diffused from another variety or was plucked out of the air, would constitute a linguistic change. In this connection, by the way, it should be pointed out that the practice of treating intra-varietal diffusion as linguistic change is well established in much of the literature on *sound* change in progress (but that does not mean that any of the kinds of confusion that we have been discussing have been resolved with respect to sound change).

As I said at the beginning, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with conceptions of linguistic change which focus upon successive language-states, each of which is conceived of in terms of what Martin Joos called the "discrete mathematics" of linguistics, and which do not attempt to explain how the transition from one discrete language-state to another is accomplished. Therefore, in my view of things if we are to study change at all, it will be necessary to concern ourselves with change in progress. I hope that this brief sally into the realm of syntactic change in progress has given some indication of the extent of the obstacles to be overcome.

References

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