

Is Language Change only in the Past?

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For more than 25 years, ever since I was exposed to Latin in high school and then to Ancient Greek while an undergraduate at Yale, I have been fascinated by language and more particularly by the ancient languages of the wide-ranging group of languages known as the Indo-European family (to which English, French, Spanish, Lithuanian, Russian, Hindi, etc. all belong). This early enthusiasm deepened into a general interest in the ways languages change--a branch of linguistics known as historical linguistics--during my junior year in college, when I spent two semesters as a student on a junior year abroad program in Athens, Greece and began learning Modern Greek while at the same time continuing my studies of Ancient Greek.

Gaining a perspective over more than 2500 years of linguistic development through my study of Ancient Greek and Modern Greek simultaneously heightened my awareness of the fact that languages do change over time and fueled my interest in this phenomenon.

It soon became clear to me that similar observations of change through time are possible with all languages. To demonstrate this with an example from a familiar language, consider this brief excerpt from the Old English Bible:

And him wæs mycel m"enegu t̃o gegaderod, sw̃a
and to-him was great multitude to gathered, so
ƿæt h̃e on scip ̃eode and on ƿ̃ære s̃æ wæs (Mark 4.1-2)
that he on boat went and on the sea was
'And a great multitude was gathered to him, so that
he went on a boat and was on the sea'.

A comparison of the Old English with its Modern English translation equivalent reveals numerous differences: spelling differences that reflect differences in pronunciation (e.g. *wæs* for modern *was*), words found at one stage that do not occur at the later stage (e.g.

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ϋode 'went'), differences in preferred order of words (e.g. *on πϋare sϋe was* where later English has *was on the sea*), etc. These differences make it evident that English has undergone numerous changes within the past 1000 years.

But is it necessary to examine languages over long periods of time, for example, texts that are at a millennium's distance from one another, to see the effects of language change? Even without detailed examination of the facts, it would seem that the answer has to be "No!", because every linguistic innovation, be it a new word or a new word order or whatever, must have been introduced by some speaker or set of speakers at some specific point in the development of the language--at some point, that is, at which the language was being spoken by people. Interestingly, however, it is possible to back up this claim with some empirical facts, for there are changes that can be documented to be occurring right here and now, before our very eyes, so to speak, simply by observing a language as it is being spoken by speakers today.

Two examples will make this point clear. Two years ago, I noticed that my then 10-year-old son and the members of his baseball team used the expression *being beaned* to refer to being hit by a pitched ball anywhere on their body, whereas I myself at a comparable age 30 years ago, used it in a more specific sense to refer only to being hit on the head; moreover, this apparently older, more general sense accords with the etymology of this usage, from the slang use of the noun *bean* to mean 'head'. Since I am from out of state, I questioned a local father my age who grew up in the same town we now live in, and found that his usage of *beaned* agreed with my own. Thus, it seems that the youth of at least a subset of the communities of Central Ohio now use *bean* in a more generalized sense than it was used in the past. Similar specific-to-general shifts in meaning can be observed between Old English and Modern English in a number of words, e.g. the Old English verb *flicorian* seems to have been used of the rapid movement of a bird's wings, but its Modern English counterpart *flicker* now can be used in a more general sense to refer to rapid movements of light (as with candles) or fluctuating emotions (as in *flickering interest*).

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Another example involves a change in grammatical selection in the choice in what linguists call "verbal complements", i.e. the choice of subordinate verb forms and clause-types that "complete" a main predicate. I have noticed in recent years that my now 7-year-old son and his friends (like his brother before him and his friends) use an *-ing* form of a verb as the complement to the verb *allow*, e.g. *You're not allowed doing that*, where I, and other adults as best I can tell, would use the infinitival form as complement, i.e. *You're not allowed to do that*. While this may have a wider distribution than just occurring with the youth of Central Ohio, what is interesting is that similar shifts in verb-complement selection have occurred throughout the history of English. A sentence from the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* in Old English has: *ic ne eom wyrðe ꝥæt ic ꝥ~~ī~~in sunu b>eo genemned*, literally "I not am worthy that I your son be called", where Modern English would use a *to*-infinitive or *of* with an *-ing* form as the subordinate complement of the main predicate *be worthy*: 'I am not worthy to be called your son' or 'I am not worthy of being called your son'. Thus again, the same type of change that is evident over long periods of time in English can be seen to be happening right now. Presumably, then, each of these changes in the long history of English--in the meaning of *flicker* and in complement selection with *be worthy*--must have begun with innovations in usage that were noticeable to speakers, just as my sons' usage, innovative from my perspective, is noticeable to me.

My research, then, in general is focussed on describing and explaining the changes that particular languages--especially Greek, but also to a lesser extent, Sanskrit, Latin, English, and Hittite--have undergone over the years, while at the same time working towards the development of a general model of language change.

My recent investigations, begun when I was a Fulbright Research Fellow in Greece in 1987, have led me to an examination of the ways in which Modern Greek combines its verb with various small modifying elements that indicate such important verbal notions as tense, mood, and negation, and serve as markers of the participants in a given action (especially the direct and indirect objects). I have approached this study from three perspectives, and will

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illustrate these approaches by reference to the element *qa* (pronounced "tha"), which marks future tense on verbs in Modern Greek.

First, there is the purely analytical issue of how best to describe and explain the properties shown by the combination of verb plus modifiers as far as the modern language itself is concerned. For instance, it is impossible to use *qa* as a separate word, whereas its apparent English counterpart *will* can stand alone without a verb next to it (e.g. *Will you help me? Yes, I will.*), and this fact needs a principled explanation. Linguistic theory here allows for such an explanation if we posit that *tha* is not a separate word like *will* in English but rather a prefix, a piece of a word, so to speak. Certain other properties of *qa* correlate with its being a prefix, and would be unexpected if *qa* were treated as independent word like *will*. For instance, *qa* undergoes special contractions with the verb 'to be' that independent words do not, e.g. *qa + ei%onai* 'is' (i.e. *tha + íne*) becomes *qa%onai* (i.e. *tháne*) '(s)he will be', whereas an independent word, such as the adverb for 'well', *ka%ola* (pronounced *kala*), when combined with *ei%onai* to mean '(s)he is well', does not yield *kala%onai* (i.e., *kaláne*).

Second, there is the question of the historical development of *qa*. In Medieval Greek of the 12th to 16th centuries, one finds that the future tense is marked by an invariant form of the verb 'want', *qe%olei* (pronounced "théli") together with a marker of subordination *na* (pronounced "na") plus a subordinated verb; it is this combination of words, *qe%olei na* (i.e. *théli na*), that gives rise ultimately to Modern Greek *tha*, so that Greek shows the development from a future indicated by a phrase (a grouping of words) to a future indicated by a single complex word, composed of a grammatical prefix and the root verb. This type of development of pieces of words from what were once independent words turns out to be a fairly common historical development. For instance, the French adverbial suffix *-ment* derives from the ablative case form of the Latin word for 'mind', *mente* (so that doing something 'obstinately', for instance, was originally doing it 'with an obstinate mind'). Thus this Greek example offers the opportunity for further insights into a general process of language change.

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Third, the development of a future tense from a form of the verb 'want' together with a subordinating marker is found not only in Greek but in most of the languages geographically contiguous to Greek as well. The Tosk (southern) dialect of Albanian, for instance, marks its future with *do*, from the verb *dua* 'want', with the subordinator *të*, and Bulgarian uses *çste*, from the earlier Slavic verb stem *x∞utÇe-* 'want', together with the subordinator *da*. In fact, Greek and the other languages of the Balkans show a number of shared features--the future tense formation being just one--that have been passed around, as it were, and adopted by these languages as the result of intense contact, mostly in the Medieval period, among speakers of these different languages. Thus, the development of the Modern Greek future tense marker is an important piece of evidence concerning the effects that contact between different speech communities can have on the form and structure of a given language or set of languages.

To a large extent, any examples of language change are grist for my mill, whether from the observation of the 3500-year span of the the history of Greek or the much shorter span of my own children's language use. However, as I have noted above, I have come to specialize in Greek, and to concentrate my energy on elucidating the history of Greek, especially the more recent history of the language, largely because I feel that the best results in the general enterprise of understanding language change come when one works with languages one knows best. As for the question of "Why Greek?", I can only say, "Why not?", and note that what we can learn from an examination of this language in detail generalizes well to other languages; so too would the intensive study of other languages serve to illuminate our understanding of Greek and the phenomenon of language change in general.