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Contact & Syntax Change

Robin Meyer explores how the structures of one language can be influenced by another

The use of idiomatic and fixed expressions - think of '*between the devil and the deep-blue sea*' or simply '*to catch a bus*' - is among the more advanced skills that language learners have to master. These expressions are rarely self-explanatory and, not uncommonly, bizarre. In Tsez, a Northeast Caucasian language spoken by perhaps 15,000 people in southwestern Dagestan, for instance, the expression *ziru λuλa boqxo* literally means 'A fox began to give birth'; what is actually meant, however, is 'A sunshower began'.

Such expressions do not only pose difficulties for language learners; they can be equally tricky for fully competent bilinguals. This is because they do not straightforwardly translate, and any attempt at translation can backfire. An English-German bilingual, for example, might be tempted to translate the German *jemandem Honig ums Maul schmieren* literally as 'to smear honey around someone's mouth', when the appropriate equivalent would be 'to butter someone up'. In turn, translating that English phrase as *jemanden einbuttern* might cause rather strange reactions in Bavaria, where it can mean 'to impregnate someone'.

Bilingualism everywhere

It rarely happens with such extreme examples, but bilingualism and prolonged contact between languages can lead to the adoption of an expression from one language by another. The ubiquity of English in Post-War (West) Germany, for instance, has not only led to a large number of English loanwords in German (*cool, relaxen, chillen*, etc.) but also to more and more advertisements that are, essentially, in English.

On a structural level, calques of certain English phrases have also made it into German, much to the chagrin of some purists. English 'to make sense' has been calqued as *Sinn machen* in German and, in the mid-to-late 1980s, overtook the earlier standard *Sinn ergeben* ('to return/result in sense') in frequency of use. Similarly, the use of 'in'

with a year is well on its way to replacing the older standard *im Jahr* ('in the year'), owing to the influence of English.

Even the English language itself, however, is not immune to such external influences – and never has been. One well-documented instance of such a change is the so-called after-perfect in Irish varieties of English. In a memorable scene from the sitcom *Father Ted*, set on an Irish island, the titular character announces “Oh God, I’m after falling down the stairs”, a sentiment that would be expressed as ‘I have fallen down the stairs’ in other varieties of English. This after-perfect is a direct structural borrowing from Gaeilge, the Celtic language spoken in Ireland, where a tense close in meaning to the English present perfect is expressed by combining a form of the verb ‘to be’ (Gaeilge *bí*), a word or phrase meaning ‘after’ (Gaeilge *tar éis, i ndiaidh, iar*, etc.), and a verbal noun not dissimilar to the English gerund in *-ing*.

Similarly, in the variety of English spoken in Singapore (at times referred to as Singlish), a sentence like ‘The wall white already’ is considered grammatical. It also has a perhaps unexpected meaning for speakers of other varieties, as it means ‘The wall has turned/become white’. This is a result of influence from Mandarin Chinese as spoken in Singapore, where the marker *le*, which signifies a completed action (here the change of colour), has been calqued as ‘already’ and grammaticalised, that is adopted as part of the regular structures of the language.

When the English spoke French

But even beyond modern varieties of English spoken in specific countries or regions, English as a whole has, over the course of time, adopted elements from a great number of languages, be it from German (*zeitgeist, doppelganger, schadenfreude*, etc.), Greek (*cephalopod, hyperbole, hoi polloi*), or French (*croissant, je ne sais quoi, pied à terre*). While some of these loanwords are patently non-English, this is not always the case for calques. In words like ‘heir apparent’, ‘court martial’ or ‘letters patent’, we recognise English words, but they are in an unusual order: the adjectives (‘apparent’, ‘martial’, ‘patent’) follow the nouns that they describe (‘heir’, ‘court’, ‘letters’) rather than preceding them as would be expected – we say ‘fluffy bunny’, not ‘bunny fluffy’. The reason for this unexpected order is quite simple: many of these terms date back to the period following the Norman Conquest of Britain in 1066, when Norman French was the

language of the ruling nobility. Over the centuries, French left its imprint on English, including these noun–adjective pairs that follow French, rather than English, word order.

It turns out that if we want to see what kinds of effects one language can have on another, we don't even have to leave our house. In language contact, anything is possible – under the right circumstances. It may come through increasing bilingualism and a superstrate shift, as in the case of the Norman nobles in mediaeval England, who adopted English as their main means of communication over the course of time; or through substrate interference, as in the case of Singlish or Irish English, where the socio-economically less dominant language has left its traces in the more dominant one.

According to Sarah Thomason, one of the most prominent language contact researchers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it is the individual combination of linguistic and extralinguistic factors - such as historical, political, and socio-economic circumstances, degree of bilingualism, and speaker community cohesion, to name but a few - that together determine what is and is not shared or copied between languages in contact.

Something borrowed...

The lexicon is at the lower end of the spectrum of what languages can share. It doesn't take any bilingualism in order for a few words to be borrowed here and there, especially if it is in order to label notions or things previously unknown in a language. Loanwords like *shampoo* (from Hindi) or *boomerang* (from Dharug, a Pama-Nyungan language spoken in New South Wales) do not indicate that bilingual speaker communities existed. By contrast, the complete revamping of the way in which nouns are inflected according to their position and function in Turkish-influenced varieties of Greek spoken in modern Turkey attests to the opposite extreme: a community so bilingual that, over time, they adapted one of the languages spoken (Greek) to resemble more closely the other (Turkish).

The observation that the results of language contact are at least partially motivated by non-linguistic factors is doubly useful, especially for historical linguists: it allows us to help explain such changes in the context of what we know about the historical background of the languages we study; equally, it can help us better understand their history, where our sources are less clear or absent. In other words, in the same way that

history can make us understand language change caused by contact, we can use contact-induced changes to paint a more precise picture of history by comparing linguistic and extra-linguistic data from the languages in question with similar, already established scenarios in other languages and historical contexts.

The exciting upshot of this comparative methodology is that it allows us to develop well-reasoned and data-driven hypotheses about contact scenarios (even those in the distant past), in languages which at the time of contact and change were as yet unwritten, and of which only later sources are attested. These hypotheses are, inevitably, difficult to verify beyond reasonable doubt - at least without the invention of a time-machine - but can be tested against all the available information about a language and its history, and judged by the principle of economy: given all that is known, is the proposed hypothesis the simplest possible that explains all the data?

The case of ancient Armenia

Let us consider one such scenario in more detail. Among the languages of the Indo-European family - to which belong English, German, French and Spanish, but also Greek, Farsi, Hindi, Russian, and many others - the Armenian language has a special place. Firstly, because it has undergone so many and such unusual sound changes over time that it has earned the byname of 'horror chamber of historical phonology' (in the words of Birgit Anette Olsen, a respected Danish linguist and armenologist). Secondly, because it was so heavily influenced by its Iranian neighbours that, until the end of the 19th century, it was thought to *be* an Iranian language itself – a misconception disproved and righted by the German linguist Heinrich Hübschmann. Armenian is an Indo-European language without any close 'relatives', and was historically spoken in the southern Caucasus and all over the Armenian highlands, a region that includes parts of modern Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey. While the name *Armenia* is mentioned in Old Persian inscriptions as early as the end of the 6th century BCE, the Armenian language isn't attested in writing until almost a millennium later, in the 5th century CE when the first short inscriptions in Armenian writing are found; the first longer documents like manuscripts date from the 9th century.

Situated in a geopolitically and strategically crucial region in antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Armenians have often been caught between two different forces,

between East and West: the Persians and the Greeks, the Parthians and the Romans, the Sasanians and the Byzantines, etc. Almost inevitably, these empires - and their languages - have left linguistic traces, in rather diverse ways.

Iranian in Armenian

The strongest and most indelible of these traces are the loanwords, calques, and other borrowings in ancient Armenian from Parthian, a West Middle Iranian language spoken by the Iranian nobles who ruled over the Kingdom of Armenia between the 1st and 5th centuries CE. Far beyond the occasional loans for hitherto unknown things or concepts, Parthian loans in ancient Armenian are found even in closed word classes like numerals, prepositions and conjunctions, which are not subject to regular new creations or additions; some examples include *hazar* ('one thousand'), *vasn* ('because of') and *spitak* ('white'), which all have unequivocal Parthian origins. On the level of calques, we find words like *jerbakal* ('prisoner'), a morpheme-by-morpheme translation of Parthian *dastgraß*, meaning 'taken/seized by the hand'.

The sheer number of these loanwords and calques is staggering. Statistics done on one of the earliest etymological dictionaries of Armenian indicate that more than a third of the words included therein are of Iranian origin. This is not a perfect measure, of course, given the limited scope of such dictionaries, but it gives a clear indication of the significance and intensity of the contact between these two languages.

Many of the discoveries and realisations concerning contact between the Parthians and Armenians were made by previous generations of scholars between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. Linguists like Heinrich Hübschmann, Antoine Meillet and Giancarlo Bolognesi have helped to establish our knowledge of the interactions between these languages and have asked questions for future generations to address. The simplest, but by no means least, of those questions was: Is there anything more? Did the contact between Armenian and Parthian result in changes beyond the lexicon?

Structural changes in Iranian-Armenian

Fortunately, the answer seems to be a resounding 'Yes'. Far beyond the words already mentioned, Armenian has copied structures from Parthian that it would have been unlikely to develop otherwise. Like the Irish after-perfect, Armenian too has modelled

one of its past tenses on how things are done in Parthian. In both languages, these past tenses follow ergative alignment, at least to begin with; in practice, that means that Armenian and Parthian both use different forms for the subjects and objects in intransitive and transitive clauses to what we, as speakers of English, might expect – a bit like saying ‘He has swum’, but ‘Him has seen I’ (instead of ‘He has seen me’). While these expressions get even more unusual in Armenian over time, other parallels between the languages remain – for instance, the use of complementisers (words like ‘that’ in ‘He thought that she was brilliant’) to introduce indirect wh-questions, effectively like saying ‘He asked that what she wanted’ instead of ‘He asked what she wanted’.

Why, we might ask, did the ancient Armenians do this? Why adopt structures from a different language like that? The answer, in a nutshell, revolves around prestige - the idea that one variety of a language, e.g. the Armenian spoken by the Parthian ruling class, is ‘better’ than other varieties, thus leading to emulation by other speakers. That prestigious variety, in turn, was in all likelihood replete with influences from - or, if you want to look at it differently, errors made by - Parthian speakers. It is impossible to say whether this Parthian variety of Armenian would have been spoken by everyone, from nobleman to farmer, or whether it would have been restricted to more limited circles, since our written sources are exclusively literary and thus provide only an imperfect insight into what language use was really like at that time.

Linguistics informs history

The insights we can glean from these Parthian structures in Armenian extend into the domain of history. It is well established that the Parthians and Armenians were closely associated for the better part of the first half of the 1st millennium CE: they converted to Christianity together at the beginning of the 4th century CE; they defended themselves and waged war against the Sasanians together repeatedly in the 4th and 5th centuries; Armenian and Parthian nobles exchanged their sons as wards and married their daughters to one another to cement the integration of both peoples. What is more, by the 4th century, the Parthian language effectively disappeared from the map, as no new written sources appear.

Taken together, the linguistic and historical data suggest a situation very similar to that in Britain in the 13th and 14th centuries: a superstrate shift, whereby the speakers

of the socio-economically dominant language abandon their mother tongue in favour of the language spoken by the majority of the people around them. In the process, their own language leaves traces in the newly adopted one, which in turn become the community standard. In mediaeval Britain, as in late antique Armenia, it is the combination of social, political, historical, and linguistic factors that allowed this particular situation to develop.

The study of language change, especially in the context of language contact, allows us to gain insights not only into the behaviour and structure of bi- or multilingual speech communities, but also into the extra-linguistic relationship between them. The same is true the other way around: non-linguistic factors can play an important role in language change and in determining what is possible or likely to change. In this context, changes that transcend the lexicon - like the structural changes we have discussed - are particularly interesting, as they occur more commonly in very intense and long-lasting contact situations.

Historical linguistics and contact linguistics are two linguistic subdisciplines that highlight why it is important to research and understand languages and their development. Linguistic research is useful not only to linguists who are trying to find answers to their own questions, but also to other fields like history, sociology, and even politics, since languages - and how or why they change - can help us unearth and understand broader historical and societal shifts and developments.

Key terms

Calque – a loan translation; a word or phrase adopted from another language by translating its component parts literally.

Ergative alignment – a set of grammatical marking systems where the subjects of intransitive verbs and objects of transitive verbs are marked identically, but subjects of transitive verbs differently, e.g. ‘She ran’ and ‘Her saw he’ (rather than ‘She saw him’).

Etymology – the study of a word’s roots and development over time, including its shape, sound, and meaning.

Grammaticalisation – a set of processes by which lexical words (referring to things or actions, etc.) become functional words indicating, for example, the future, the past, or a state of things.

Inflection – the process whereby words change to express different grammatical functions, e.g. by adding *-s* (‘run’–‘runs’, ‘dog’–‘dogs’) or *-ed* (‘look’–‘looked’).

Intransitive – verbs, and by extension sentences, without a direct object, e.g. ‘She laughs’, ‘It growls’, ‘He slept’.

Morpheme – the smallest meaningful element in an expression; it can provide a lexical sense (‘cold’, ‘dog’, ‘run’) or a functional one (*-ness*, *-ish*, *-ed*).

Prestige – the esteem given to a particular language or variety within a speech community as compared to others; prestige varieties are often considered ‘good’ or ‘standard’, and thus emulated.

Substrate interference – the influence that a non-dominant language can have on a dominant language in a multilingual speech community.

Superstrate shift – the abandoning of a socio-politically dominant language by its speakers in favour of another, non-dominant language, often with more speakers, in a multilingual speech community.

Transitive – verbs, and by extension sentences, with a direct object; e.g. ‘She loves books’; ‘The cat scratched the sofa’; ‘He saw the walrus’.

Find out more

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