

4 Language in use: temporal variation

4.1 Short-term variation

When language is used in real situations, it varies. I group these variations into four main categories: temporal, regional, social and personal.

Variation over time has two dimensions: long-term (over centuries) and short-term. Short-term change refers to the development of language over a person's lifetime – the study of child language acquisition, later language development, and possible language deterioration in senescence. The field as a whole is best described as developmental psycholinguistics, the 'psycho' element relating to the intimate interaction between language and psychological processes, as shown in the diagram.

The study of child language is often thought to begin with the arrival of the first word, at around 12 months of age. This is 15 months too late, as a great deal of preliminary language awareness takes place in the 3 months before birth, as shown by experiments in infant perception (such as maternal voice recognition). The womb is a noisy environment, but external speech can be dimly heard, as can the mother's voice, with intonation and rhythm especially marked.

The first year of life must not be ignored. There is no real evidence of language learning in early cries, cooing or babbling; but at around 9 months, language-specific rhythm and intonation begin to be apparent in child vocalization. At the same time, listening comprehension is developing, as is pragmatic awareness (eg of turn-taking, prerequisite for conversation). The crucial role of language play is in evidence from the very beginning, illustrated by the distinctive character of baby-talk, with its lip-rounding, wide pitch range and repetitions.

The stages of language acquisition over the first 5 years or so of life have been very well studied, and some have already been illustrated in these lectures. Later life periods have been less explored, from a linguistic point of view, such as the teenage years, and the processes involved in language maturation and decline. Some features of language, notably

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vocabulary and stylistic awareness, continue to grow. New linguistic skills will be acquired in the workplace (law, science, religion, journalism, acting, etc) and at home (such as telephone-answering, form-filling and Internet interaction). The onset of old age can bring both enhancement (eg in story-telling skills) and decline (eg in vocal power, memory loss). At all points, we need to bear in mind the factors that promote or retard language learning.

4.2 Long-term variation

Long-term language change is the province of historical linguistics (in earlier schools of thought, philology). In principle, the study has no limitations, and could take us as far back as the origins of speech, and there is much speculation about how speech began in the human race. In practice, it deals with periods for which there is linguistic evidence, including the earliest evidence of writing around the world. It is usual to divide the history of a language into periods, such as Old, Middle, Early Modern, and Modern English. I will illustrate from English, but all languages display similar historical trends.

There is a history behind every feature identified under the categories described above. In pragmatics, we find changes in patterns of interaction, such as terms of address. English no longer routinely contrasts *thou* and *you*, but this was important from the Middle Ages until around Shakespeare's time. A pronoun switch always conveyed a change in the nature of the relationship between the participants. An illustration is the dialogue in Act 3 Scene 1 of *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet moves from *you* to *thou* and back again to *you* in addressing Ophelia.

A glance at any historical dictionary shows that every word of any age has changed its meaning. The concept of 'false friends' was first used to describe the relationship between apparently similar words in different languages (such as French *demander*/English *demand*), but it applies just as clearly to different periods of the same language. Shakespeare provides many examples. When, in *King Lear*, Gloucester describes Regan as a 'naughty lady', he means 'wicked'. To read in the modern meaning in such cases would be highly misleading.

Grammar changes, too, as is evident from older word orders and word endings. In Early Modern English we find, from the King James Bible, such sentences as *I laughed not*, and such verb forms as *digged* and *builded*. The endings *-eth* and *-est* were common, as in *goest* and *goeth*. Go further back, and we find even greater differences, with Old English using a grammatical system that is radically different from what is in use today.

Changes in graphology can be illustrated from the development of the English alphabet, where some letters in Old English were lost (such as thorn and eth) and new distinctions

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introduced (*i* versus *j*; *u* versus *v*). Old texts are likely to show changes in capitalization, punctuation and spelling.

The above are relatively easy changes to study, as they are visible on the page. It is much more difficult to establish changes in pronunciation, which have to be deduced indirectly, taking into account the evidence provided by rhymes, spellings and comments from contemporary writers. An illustration of Shakespeare in modern and original pronunciation shows the kind of reconstruction that is possible.

Change is ongoing, and is the source of many of the controversies over what counts as correct usage. Some complain about change and try to work against it, but Dr Johnson saw the futility of such an exercise: you can't 'enchain syllables', he said. It is like trying to 'lash the wind'. For the linguist, contemporary change is one of the most interesting and difficult things to study, requiring large collections of data to see trends. An example is the use of the present continuous form of the verb, which has been increasing since the 1960s. We would have said 'I like it' then. Today, thanks to McDonald's and many others, people are saying 'I'm liking it'.

For me, language change is the most fascinating of all aspects of language study, because it is so unpredictable. Linguistics could never possibly get boring, because with language, tomorrow is always another day.