

Social Factors Influencing Language Change

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ABSTRACT

A Language is a set of sounds which serve social functions like communication. It is born, matures, and changes in different communities. It also signals people's membership of a particular group, social status, ethnicity, occupation and sex. These signals refer to language variation in communities.

Language variation may move towards change in the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of the language as the change spreads from group to group, style to style, or word to word. This article reviews these changes in terms of social status, age, sex and interaction between speakers.

Dildeki Değişiklikleri Etkileyen Sosyal Unsurlar

ÖZET

Dil iletişim gibi sosyal işlevleri yerine getiren sesler bütünüdür. Doğar, gelişir ve farklı toplumlarda değişiklikler gösterir. Dil, aynı zamanda, bir bireyin mensup olduğu grubun, sosyal statüsünün, etnik grubunun, meslek grubunun ve cinsiyetinin göstergesidir. Bu göstergeler, toplumlarda meydana gelen dil değişikliklerinin habercisidir.

Dildeki değişim gruptan gruba, şekilden şekile ve kelimedenden kelimeye yayıldıkça, bu değişiklikler ses bilimi, şekilbilimi, sözdizimi ve anlambilimi olarak kendini gösterir. Bu makale dilde meydana gelen bu türdeki değişimleri sosyal statü, yaş, cinsiyet ve konuşmacılar arasındaki etkileşim açısından ele alır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil, Dildeki değişim, Sosyal Unsurlar

Since this Nature's Law to change

Constancy alone is strange.

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester

A dialogue between Strephon and

Daphne

On a personal level, in today's communication, the language change may not be easily apparent or obvious since we are so intimately connected to our language. It is just like the relations between the parents and their children. Parents' closeness to their children obscures the perception of their development.

However, it is an accepted fact that there is change taking place in every language. While some of the languages flourish and expand, some may die. These facts bring a number of questions like "how" and "why". The question how language changes has been under investigation for more than a hundred years. On the other hand, the question 'why' was not investigated as well as the question 'how' by linguists for a long period of time. However, in recent years, the linguists again began asking for the 'why' of language change (McMahon, 1994).

Language change, which "is only initiated when the new variant is adopted by a group of speakers" (McMahon, 1994, p. 248), is a gradual process (Aitchison, 1991; Fromkin & Rodman, 1993; Holmes, 1992; McMahon, 1994; Shapiro, 1991). As the speakers use their language, they may consciously or unconsciously affect the developmental process of the language. Language variation may move towards change in the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of the language as the change spreads from group to group, style to style, or word to word. This process, which as Aitchison (1991) says, can be seen as "progress or decay" (p. 210), may be due to regional and/or social factors, which are related to the social status, age, and sex of the speakers and the interaction between the speakers.

Different kinds of change can be observed in the language, which are phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic changes. In discussing sound changes, McMahon (1994) points to the effect of change on "single sounds, or vowel or consonant segments" or "larger units, such as clusters of consonants, or diphthongs; and supra-segmentals such as rhythm, stress and intonation" (p. 14).

Morphology, which is the study of structure of words, is another area of language change. McMahon (1994) explains that because morphology is related to phonology and syntax, one "area of internal morphological change, namely analogy," (p. 69) can be discussed as a separate issue. Analogy can be defined as "the tendency of items that are similar in meaning to become similar in form" (Aitchison, 1991, p.146). As Nerlich (1990) states, analogy is the way to solve the problem of irregularities in language. Analogy helps speakers understand the conveyed messages and express themselves more easily by simplifying and clarifying the language in use (Aitchison, 1991; McMahon, 1994).

Change in syntax, which is the part of grammar that represents a speaker's knowledge of the structure of phrases and sentences" (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, p.73), is again due to variation (Aitchison, 1991). Nerlich (1990) explains that in the frame of a sentence "words contract affinities with other words..., and these affinities gradually gain an obligatory character, so that in the end, certain words can no longer be used without certain others" (p. 125). Aitchison (1991) describes the process of syntactic change as a "snowball-like progress" (p.98) because the change starts slowly, but over time the 'snowball' gets bigger as more and more people start to use the new form due to interaction between individuals.

Semantics, which is concerned with "meaning patterns" (Aitchison, 1991, p. 16), is another area for language change. McMahon (1994) states that change in meaning happens more easily and rapidly compared with the other three areas and adds that speakers of many languages can see the different meanings attached to the same word in their own lifetime. Most words have "a whole range of shades of meaning" (p. 176) beside their "central meaning" (p. 176) and the fact that a certain word goes through a semantic change does not require the omission of the

previous meanings it had. Nerlich (1990), in agreement with McMahon, makes her point clear by saying:

“No act of speech leaves the old material unchanged. This does not do any harm to the meaning of the words used. ... The variation introduced by the speaker is not disturbing, rather it redefines the boundaries of the word’s territory in accordance with the communicative context.” (p. 117)

It is also possible for children to comprehend the meaning of a word in a different way than it is actually used due to misinterpretation of their parents’ speech (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993; McMahon, 1994). Another factor that plays a role in semantic change is Saussure’s doctrine of the arbitrariness of sound and meaning (as cited in McMahon, 1994). Considering the signifier and the signified as two separate ideas makes semantic change much easier because they are no longer identified with one another. Explaining the arbitrary nature of language, Nerlich (1990) states that “there is neither a natural tie between word and idea, nor a relation of representation between language and world,” and adds that due to this fact “both words and languages as a whole can be formed and shaped according to the changing needs of the speech community” (p. 111).

Holmes discusses how these changes spread through a community. She argues that changes may spread from group to group, from style to style, or from word to word. “The metaphor of waves” (Holmes, 1992, p. 218) has been used to describe how change spreads from one group to another. The people who interact with people from different groups are usually the “linguistic stockbrokers or entrepreneurs” (p. 218) as they make it possible for the change to spread. When the language used by an individual is examined, change spreading from style to style can be observed. For example, one can use a form previously preferred only in formal speech, in casual speech as well. In this case, language change is completed when all members of the speech community use the introduced form “in all their speech styles” (p. 221). Lexical diffusion, which is the spreading of sounds from one word to another, is the third way for the spreading of language change. It has been difficult to distinguish the different vowels in “word pairs like *beer* and *bear*” (p. 222, 223) in New Zealand.

Aitchison (1991) divides language change in two categories considering the way it spreads through the speech community: “outwardly through a community and inwardly through a language” (p. 76). She explains language change through a community as changes spreading from person to person and from group to group. Since “changes are not, for the most part, comparable to meteorites falling from the sky” (p. 76), there is someone who starts the process. Aitchison argues that “a change occurs when one group consciously or subconsciously takes another as its model, and copies features from its speech” (p. 75). Explaining how changes spread from group to group, she uses the metaphor of “disease” (p. 74) and states that speakers of a language are influenced

by the language, the people they interact with use and they carry the new forms to their friends in their speech, which can be seen as a “contagion-like spread by exposure and imitation” (Deumert, 2003, p. 18). What Aitchison means by ‘inward change through a language’ is that if the environment of a word is appropriate for the change to take place, the word can be affected by the spreading change.

Language variation in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary makes it possible to distinguish one speech community from another in the same way different languages can be identified by their unifying and separatist functions (Holmes, 1992). “Variation is not random but strictly controlled, often by extra-linguistic factors, and the specification of these factors may help us account for change” (McMahon, 1994, p. 226). Variation stems from the differences between regional and social characteristics of the speakers of the language. The fact that different grammatical rules and words are preferred by people of separate geographical regions and variety in social class along with other social sources of influence have an effect on the language patterns people have is natural (Aitchison, 1991).

Language used by a community in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation may vary due to different geographical regions people are living in. The fact that certain language changes in one region cannot be seen in other regions shows that there is a specific dialect spoken in this part of the country. Regional dialects are “mutually intelligible forms of language that differ in systematic ways from each other” (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, p. 275). Factors, such as urbanisation and labour movement, have been seen influential on the formation of regional dialects (Meshrie, Swann, Deumert & Leap, 2000; Shaphiro, 1991). However, regional factors will not be reviewed in detail because social factors influencing language change are the focus of this paper.

Even when the speech of people who were born and grew up in the same geographical region is examined, certain differences have been seen due to social status, sex, and age of the speakers, and interaction between the speakers (Holmes, 1992).

SOCIAL STATUS: “Status refers to the deference or respect people give someone –or don’t give them as the case may be” (Holmes, 1992, p. 148). The social prestige, prosperity, education level, and family background determine the social status of people. Holmes (1992) uses the term “social class” to refer to people who have common socio-economic characteristics.

Differences in social classes have been proved to be significantly related to differences in speech (Holmes, 1992). Upper-class English people have been claimed to use *sitting room* rather than *lounge*, which was used by lower class English people in research done in 1950’s. Similar to this example, *lavatory* was preferred by upper-class people rather than *toilet* in speech.

Because in countries like England, the communities are not caste-based, as it is the case in Indonesia and India, it is possible for different classes to start

using the vocabulary mostly used by one particular class as a result of the spread of the usage. Although there may be individual differences in every group, upper-class people tend to pronounce [h] less than the lower classes do whereas they tend to pronounce [r] more often when it comes after a vowel because it is seen prestigious. The diversity in pronouncing post-vocalic [r] was examined by Labov (as cited in Holmes, 1992) in New York City department stores. By asking questions whose answers required the pronunciation of [r], he compared the relation between social classes and pronunciation of [r]. Labov concluded that the more luxurious the store was, the more clearly people pronounced [r].

People who have high social status use standard forms rather than vernacular dialects (Holmes, 1992; McMahan, 1994), which are characterised by particular variants, such as multiple negation, use of -ed in simple past tense, and -s in simple present tense verb forms. McMahan (1994) explains that because the spoken language is not always governed by the variants having overt prestige, language forms having covert prestige may determine the language of lower-social classes. The fact that men belonging to lower classes generally prefer using the vernacular form has been seen in the Milroy's (as cited in McMahan, 1994) study in Belfast. Bright (1997) highlights the importance of social networks:

“The Milroy's research suggests that strong ties within communities result in dialect maintenance and resistance to change; but individuals who have large numbers of weak ties outside the community tend to be innovators, and to serve as instigators of language change.” (p. 91)

Bright, here, does not aim to show that it is the social networks that play an important role and not social class. He believes that the effect of social class on language change needs to be taken into consideration together with the effect of social networks.

SEX: Holmes (1992) explains that the community people are living with affect the distinguishing speech features between males and females. In hierarchical societies, because women can be seen belonging to a lower class, the differences between men and women are easier to be recognised than it is in Western societies, where the frequency of using certain forms varies. In Montreal, “[l] in phrases such as *il y a* and *il fait*”, is generally pronounced by neither sexes, but it is men who delete [l] more frequently. This is an example that can be given to women's standard language use. It has been observed that men generally prefer using vernacular forms independent of the social class they belong to (Holmes, 1992). However, Trudgill's (as cited in Holmes, 1992) research in Norwich reveals that social classes may play a more important role than gender. The study showed that the speech characteristics of women were more similar to those of men from their own class than those of women from other social classes.

Women generally use standard language, which is the more prestigious form, in their speech. Holmes (1992) lists the four claims made to explain the use of standard form by women:

1. Women are more status-conscious and they connect high social status with the standard form. However, Labov (as cited in Wodak & Benke, 1997) stated that the "higher prestige consciousness" (p. 134) of women is related to their place in the society. He reported that in parts of India and Iran women did not use standard language as much as the women in the Western world did. In a study done in eastern Australia, where there is a population of peasants and workers speaking either Hungarian or German or both, it has been observed that women generally choose to marry workers who speak German (Gal, 1997). Because these men are employed and have a higher income level than the peasants, the language they speak is seen prestigious and has a higher status than Hungarian. It is also interesting that "the effect of this is to force bilingual peasant men also to marry German-speaking peasant women from neighbouring villages. The offspring of both kinds of marriage are German-speaking children" (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 204).
2. Because women have been seen as the "guardians of society's values" (Holmes, 1992, p. 172), they are inclined to use the standard form. Holmes claims that the inappropriate behaviours of boys are tolerated whereas girls are warned not to act in a 'wrong' manner and told to be 'a nice girl'. The fact that different responses are given to boys and girls hold true even for adults. Society is generally more strict towards women when there is a "rule-breaking" (p. 172). However, Holmes points out that it is difficult to explain women's standard language use during their conversations with their children by considering only the role given by the society.
3. Women are supposed to speak with care when they talk with men because in some societies women are seen "as a subordinate group" (Holmes, 1992, p. 173). The study done by Brown (as cited in Mesthrie et al., 2000) showed that women were more polite as they showed more "concern for people's 'face'" (p. 235). However, it may be hard to see the relation between being polite and using standard language as Holmes claims. Yet, this is clearly a way to avoid "offence to others" (Holmes, p. 173). Trudgill (as cited in Wodak & Benke, 1997) looks from a different perspective and argues that women attempt to have a more secure place in the society by using the standard form more than the men who have a high social status.
4. Because vernacular forms, carrying "macho connotations" (Holmes, 1992, p. 174), reflect the toughness of men, it is logical that men prefer using vernacular forms and women prefer standard form for the same reason as they would not want to sound like men. The study in Norwich done by Trudgill (as cited in Wodak & Benke, 1997) show how inclined women and men are to speak in different ways. Because vernacular forms act as markers of solidarity, identifying them as a member of the group, men tend to "stick to

their low-prestige non-standard variety” (Wodak & Benke, 1997, p. 135). It is interesting that male participants underreported whereas female participants over-reported their use of standard forms of language (Fasold, 1990).

AGE: Different language features can be seen at different ages (Holmes, 1992; McMahan, 1994). There are “age-graded patterns” (Holmes, 1992, p. 183) that emerge and disappear at certain ages. Life span has generally been divided into four stages by researchers: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age (Eckert, 1997).

Holmes explains that young people use vernacular forms and slang in their speech more than the older, who stick to standard forms because of the pressure of the society. “In New Zealand young people currently use the terms *wicked*, *choice*, and *rad* (from radical) to describe something they approve of.” (p. 183) Young people show their membership to the group of the young by using vernacular forms and slang as markers of solidarity.

“Community studies of variation frequently show that increasing age correlates with increasing conservatism in speech.” (Eckert, 1997, p. 152) Researchers have found that people use less vernacular language over years. Adults tend to adapt to the speech norms of the society and use more standard forms (Holmes, 1992). However, Holmes claims that vernacular forms are mostly used by not only adolescents but also the old because at their age “social pressures reduce as people move out of the work place and into a more relaxed phase of their life” (p. 184).

Labov’s (as cited in McMahan, 1994) study on Martha’s Vineyard shows that the younger the islanders were, the higher the levels of centralisation for the diphthongs (ai) and (au) were with the exception of the youngest group. Labov argues that the middle aged is the group introducing the change and the younger people supported the change. The middle aged people on Martha’s Vineyard had chosen to come back to their island after college years spent away from home although there were occupational problems in terms of income level on the island. This fact may show how loyal they were to their island. McMahan (1994) points to the logic behind their choosing the language variables used by the fisherman living in the rural parts of the island. He states that this usage again shows their “positive commitment to the island” (p. 243). It is Chambers and Trudgill’s (as cited in McMahan, 1994) claim that middle aged people, having high expectations about future like climbing up the career ladder, may try to speak the language approved by the society. Despite the fact that the reason for the middle aged people’s choice of using certain language forms seem to be their loyalty to the island as claimed by McMahan (1994), the need for approval by the society may have also played a role.

INTERACTION: Language change starts if there is “interaction and contact between people” (Holmes, 1992, p. 235). Milroy (as cited in Deumert, 2003) claims that language change should be examined by “a speaker oriented and interactional approach” (p. 12) and highlights the importance of acceptance by the community after the exposure to the new form for its spread. At this point,

face-to-face interaction is regarded vital since speakers may or may not agree on the implementation of the change.

The fact that language change cannot take place without interaction is clear in the example of Icelandic. Holmes (1992) gives two reasons for the lack of changes and the presence of only few dialects of Icelandic. Its geographical isolation is the first reason, but this does not explain why there are few dialects. Because communities living far away from each other had the opportunity to come together during "regular annual assemblies" (p. 235) due to "kinship and friendship links" (p. 235), yet, Icelandic has not developed varieties.

McMahon (1994) explains the situation in Iceland looking from quite a different perspective. He claims that linguistic nationalism is the key factor in the lack of change in Icelandic.

"In Iceland, for example, borrowing is actively discouraged as it is thought that this might alienate speakers from their much-revered naive culture and literature, and the speech of Reykjavik, which as the capital is inevitably more cosmopolitan, is frowned on as 'corrupted' by loans." (p. 205)

Whether the reason is geographical isolation and close ties between communities despite the difficulties in interacting with one another or linguistic nationalism, or both, Icelandic is an exceptional language that has changed very little.

There have been controversial views among sociolinguists about the role face-to-face interaction and exposure to media play in language change (Holmes, 1992). Some see face-to-face interaction as a prerequisite for language change while others believe that it is possible for pronunciation varieties to spread among the speech community after "frequent exposure to a pronunciation on television" (p. 236). Most researchers agree that language users may feel easy when they hear somebody using a form previously introduced by their favourite "pop stars or TV personalities" (p. 236) and that they may as well start to use the particular form. Christenson and Roberts (1998) claim that music media is more influential on the young people than television because the adolescents spend more time listening to music than watching television. They also add that the adolescents do not only listen to the sound but also they generally think about the meaning conveyed by the words and memorise the lyrics. Since one of the uses of listening to music is to establish "social unity" (Christenson & Roberts, 1998, p. 43) and to provide "something to talk about with friends" (p. 44), we can claim that the language used in songs will probably be used by the individuals while talking about music. This possibility is important because especially the lyrics of some pop, rap, or heavy metal music songs involve vernacular language, slang, or different word choices and forms that the older people may have difficulty in even understanding the meaning.

Holmes (1992), however, shows evidence for the significant relation between face-to-face interaction and language change. Young people around London started to pronounce “glottal stops in words such as *bit* and *bitter*” (p. 237) before the young living further from the city. If it were by exposure to the media, the residences of the young would not make a difference. Holmes argues that media may affect how fast a language change spreads through the community although face-to-face interaction is probably the key factor for people to start using new forms in their speech.

There are contrasting views also about language change. Whether it is “progress or decay” (Aitchison, 1991, p.210) has been an issue debated. For Douglas (as cited in Thomas, 1991), purity, which is “an attitude to language which labels certain elements as ‘pure’ (therefore desirable) and others as ‘impure’ (therefore undesirable)” (Thomas, 1991, p. 19), is an action against change. Trask (1994) sees the “hostility to language change” (p. 73) in vain. Because the new generations are generally open to language change and the old, trying to conserve the standard forms, pass away, the language spoken by the young will be carried to the next generation. Only if there is a change that makes communication between parents and children impossible, the change is unnatural (Aitchison, 1991; Trask, 1994) and “socially undesirable” (Aitchison, 1991, p. 216).

To conclude, “language, then, like everything else, gradually transforms itself over the centuries. ... In a world where humans grow old, tadpoles change into frogs, and milk turns into cheese, it would be strange if language alone remained unaltered” (Aitchison, 1991, p. 4). Aitchison describes language change as being “like a road accident” (p. 106) with its various causes. Although these causes can be studied separately, it is clear that social status, age, and sex of the people and the interactions they have with the members of the community are all related with each other as they are all present in each person. “An integrated view of variation over the life course” (Eckert, 1997, p. 154) is essential to draw valid conclusions about the causes of language change.

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