

Language ecology: Historical perspectives

Preliminaries: On ecology

- 1 Ecology (OED): ‘The science of the economy of animals and plants; that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and modes of life ...’
- 2 *Economy* = the management (*nomos* ‘custom, law, practice’) of the house (*oikos*)
Ecology = the study (*logos*) of the house (*oikos*)

When languages collide

- 3 Es inglien. “He’s fussy about mud.”
Es kyuten, es wawen. “She’s shy, she’s well-dressed.”
Es stauten. “He’s well-made.”
- 4 Ai gwen it ælen fa brekfaf, hem plan es taitaien, es meme’en.
“I’m going to eat badly for lunch, those bananas are tasteless, they’re wilted.”

Language ecology wars

- 5 In no language ‘do we find any but superficial morphological interinfluencings ... We may infer ... that ... we have not the right to assume that a language may exert a remolding morphological influence on another ... [Language is] probably the most self-contained, the most massively resistant of all social phenomena.’ (Sapir 1921)
- 6 a ‘Considering these data as a whole, we may say that in a considerable number of [unrelated] native languages of the North Pacific Coast we find ... similarities in particular grammatical features distributed in such a way that neighboring languages show striking similarities ... It seems ... almost impossible to explain this phenomenon without assuming the diffusion of grammatical processes over contiguous areas.’ (Boas 1929: 6)
- b Kroeber (1941) argues against the ‘usual dictum’ that ‘words can be borrowed freely between distinct languages, but grammar with difficulty if at all.’
- 7 Summer 1901 Departments of Anthropology and Linguistics established at Berkeley
Fall 1901 first Linguistics course taught at Berkeley (by UC President Wheeler)
Spring 1902 first Anthropology course taught at Berkeley (by Kroeber)
1906 Mrs. Hearst withdraws most of her financial support for anthropological research
shift to state support, small battle between Linguistics and Anthropology
- 8 M. B. Emeneau: ‘India as a linguistic area’ (1956)

Shift vs. maintenance

- 9 a The Farming + Language Model:
Diamond & Bellwood 2003 (on Blackboard); also Renfrew 1987, Bellwood & Renfrew 2002
- b A couple of recent critiques: Campbell 2002, Hill 2002 (on Blackboard)
- c A key issue: ‘Discordance between language and genes may arise when an expanding language is imposed on or adopted by a peripheral population, with only a minor contribution of expanding

genes. This situation differs from the situation of clinal gene dilution, in which invaders constitute a majority at every step ... However, though such replacements can be attested, under pre-state **pre-literate** conditions they were over only short distances compared with the spreads of many of the major agriculturalist language families over thousands of kilometers.’

(Diamond & Bellwood 2003: 599, **emphasis** added)

- 10 According to Colin Renfrew and those of his school, Proto-Indo-European [PIE] was ‘a language of Neolithic Anatolian farmers who carried Fertile Crescent domesticates west into Europe, east into the Indus Valley, and north and then east across the Central Asian steppes beginning around 7000 to 6000 B.C. ... [O]bjections include that the reconstructed [PIE] lexicon has a strong bias toward domesticated animals rather than crops and that reconstructed [PIE] words relating to wheels and wheeled vehicles suggest (some would say “prove”) late Indo-European origins around the time of the invention of the wheel (~4000 B.C.).’ (Diamond & Bellwood 2003: 602)

11 Verbal root ***k^wel-** ‘turn (around)’

12 Nominal derivative ***k^we-k^wl-o-s** ‘wheel’

Indo-Iranian: Sanskrit *cakras* ‘wheel’, etc.

Greek *kuklos* ‘wheel’

Germanic: Old English *hweowol* > Modern English *wheel*

13 Possible alternative explanations

(1) the noun was independently created, based on the verb, in the three language families

(2) the IE noun meant ‘that which turns’ and came to mean ‘wheel’ independently

(3) the noun was borrowed across IE languages (Renfrew)

- b ‘[S]ociolinguistic “stance”, the position taken toward the role of language in identity (and, thus, in access to resources), is to some degree shaped by the attitude that human beings assume toward resources. People who believe that they possess primary claims on those resources necessary for subsistence are likely to adopt “localist” stances, which yield relatively homogeneous linguistic communities and resistance to innovation and shift. People who believe that their claims on those resources necessary for subsistence are only secondary are likely to adopt “distributed” stances, which yield heterogeneous linguistic communities that are very open to innovation and shift if this will strengthen some secondary claim. The model suggests that the kinds of marginal populations that occupy the relatively unpopulated ranges into which hunter-gatherer expansions move are very likely to exhibit a “distributed” stance toward language variation, making a shift to the language of the newcomers a very likely strategy for them.’ (Hill 2002)

References

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