Historical Linguistics: How Languages Change Through Time

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Abstract- ***Language plays a central and crucial role in human communication, culture, and society. One of the remarkable features which has been observed about languages is their ability to change over a period of time. Unlike other social human establishments like culture, taboos, game rules, and use of non-verbal signs among others, languages undergo changes. The rate at which languages keep evolving is such that even linguists can be caught off-guard by the changes. Citing examples from the English language, Mithun (2014: 265-266) identifies phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic as the different layers of change that a language exhibits when its present form is compared with ancient forms. These trajectories are identified by Kiparsky (2014: 8) as contact-induced change, sound change, analogical change, grammaticalization and semantic change, and syntactic change.***

Indexed Terms- ***Historical linguistics, Language change, human communication, Language contact, Social differentiation.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central and crucial role in human communication, culture, and society (Genetti 2014: 3). Genetti (2014: 5) notes also that "language is one of the defining traits of humankind" and it is intrinsically knitted with the human capacity to think, reflect, and build civilizations. This assertion aligns with Noam Chomsky's claim that "when we study human language, we are approaching what some call the 'human essence,' the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man" (Noam Chomsky, quoted in Fromkin et al 2010: 3). Bauer (2007: 3) argues that language is "a social fact which exists not in an individual but in a community" while Harya (2016: 104) states that "language is a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate." Since "even the non-linguistic concepts of life are taught, understood, and interpreted by means of language" (Genetti 2014), one can then posit that language is an essential tool of human interaction and relationship which is used to shape, communicate, and interprete daily human experiences.

One of the remarkable features which has been observed about languages is their ability to change over a period of time. Unlike other social human establishments like culture, taboos, game rules, and use of non-verbal signs among others, languages undergo changes. Mmelo (2012) defines the phenomenon of language change as "the phenomenon where phonetics, morphological, semantic, and syntactic and other features of language vary over time" (https://darisoanj.wordpress.com/2012/02/14/what-are-the-causes-of-linguistic-change-2/). Similarly, Mithun (2014: 295) posits that "all living languages are dynamic, constantly being reshaped by their speakers." This submission was upheld by Brian (2017: 299), who submits that "the mutability of languages can be demonstrated empirically through a comparison of single language at different stages in its history."

The claims above demonstrate that change is a constant variable in human language. This concept of change in language has lent itself to academic investigation through the field of historical linguistics. Joseph (2017: 15) defines historical linguistics as the branch of linguistics which "is concerned with language change in general and with specific changes in languages, and in particular with describing them." Aside from investigating the changes in language, historical linguistics also describes the processes and stages involved in the

development of particular languages. These, as Mithun (2014: 262) observes, "are so gradual that they go unnoticed."

The rate at which languages keep evolving is such that even linguists can be caught off-guard by the changes. Citing examples from the English language, Mithun (2014: 265-266) identifies phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic as the different layers of change that a language exhibits when its present form is compared with ancient forms. These trajectories are identified by Kiparsky (2014: 8) as contact-induced change, sound change, analogical change, grammaticalization and semantic change, and syntactic change.

Sound Change: This layer of change was described as phonological change by Mithun (2014: 261). According to Hock and Joseph (2009: 105), phonological change refers to the changes in the pronunciation of the same word in a language over a period of time. Harya (2016: 112) adds that "sound change has to do with an increase or decrease in sonority." Many authors agree that the most pronounced feature which distinguishes Old English from Modern English is that they are pronounced differently (cf. Hock and Joseph 2009: 107; Kiparsky 2010: 7; Sloos 2013: 27; and Mithun 2014: 264). While the differences are minor in some cases, they are major in others. As observed by Mithun (2014: 266), "as sounds changed over the course of the development of English, spelling practices changed too, but not as quickly as pronunciation." Consequently, Mithun (2014: 267) identifies lenition, loss, excrescence (consonant addition), prothesis and epenthesis (vowel addition), fusion, breaking, assimilation, and palatalization as the common types of sound change in English language.

Kiparsky (2014: 6) argues that for any work on historical phonology or sound change to be impactful and objective, such must consider the questions of constraint, regularity, and implementation. To address the problem of constraint, Kiparsky (2014: 8) posits that historical phonologists must ask: "are sound changes always natural or can they be arbitrary? Is the direction of sound change predictable?" In other words, his argument towed the path of Blust (2005: 112) who opines that "to be convincing, the sound changes posited in historical analyses should be natural" although this is often difficult to accomplish (Kiparsky 2014, cf. Blevins 2007a).

Kiparsky (2014) further posits that sound changes must be regular for them to be true. He asks," Is sound change always regular, or can it be sporadic?" (Kiparsky 2014: 8). Quoting Bloomfield (1946), Kiparsky (2014) observes that if sound changes are not regular, "then languages would have huge incoherent phonological inventories, littered with sounds and clusters left over from sporadic or non-phonetically conditioned sound changes at various stages of their history." His position is that "phonemes don't split spontaneously. Rather new contrasts arise when the conditioning environment of allophones is obscured by other sound changes" (Kiparsky 2014: 10).

Kiparsky's (2014) third question focused on implementing phonological changes. He asks, "Is sound change abrupt or gradual? What is the role of lexical frequency in sound change?" (Kiparsky 2014: 11). On this he states that "structure-preserving processes can yield apparent counter examples to the neogrammarian hypothesis because their isolated outputs can become lexicalized" (Kiparsky 2014: 12). Furthermore, Phillips (2001: 28) argues that there are some phonological variations which affect the less frequently used words first, and there are those who affect members of certain word classes. Changes like diatonic pairs and accent retraction are typical examples of this process. According to Mithun (2014: 268), "sound change can have more profound effects; it can result in the remodelling of the sound system"

Grammatical Change: According to Kiparsky (2014: 12), "grammaticalization is morphosyntactic and semantic change that is endogenous, but which, unlike analogy, is not based on any pre-existing patterns in the language and gives rise to new grammatical categories." Although the grammar of languages appear to have seemingly rigid rules, grammar is also in constant evolution. Mithun (2014: 271) observes that "the grammatical morphemes that arise in languages are not random. They grow out of what speakers choose to say most often on an

everyday basis." She defines grammaticalization as "the development of lexical forms to grammatical forms and from grammatical forms to even more grammatical forms" (Mithun 2014: 272). This echoed Kurylowicz' (1965: 55) earlier assertion that "lexical categories become grammatical and grammatical categories become more grammatical" and form the premise for cascading grammaticalization into two namely: functional enrichment and formal renewal (Narrog & Heine 2011: 88).

Functional enrichment refers to the expression of functional attributes that were previously not exhibited in a language (Kiparsky 2014). These include creation of new tenses or moods which hitherto were not expressed in the language. According to Roberts and Roussou (2003), functional enrichment has the capacity to reduce the "semantic and interpreted features" of lexical items to "purely functional elements with only uninterpreted features" (Kiparsky 2014: 12).

Formal renewal, on the other hand, refers to the generation of new categories for the "old functional content" of a language (Narrog & Heine 2011: 89). Examples of this include conversion of post-positions to case endings, and replacement of morphology by a fixed word order to accentuate grammatical connections. Kiparsky (2014) notes that "formal renewal results in reduced segmental content and/or tighter prosodic bonding."

In the light of these change types across world languages, Mithun (2014) submits that "the frequency of such grammatical morphemes points to certain universal human concerns, and to concepts that people tend to express often." Such concerns and concepts have contributed to the continued sustenance of many of the languages in the world. Since the primary purpose of language is to communicate, language speakers have over the years invented innovative ways of expressing their thoughts, thus leading to change in how the grammar of languages behave over time. Kiparsky's (2014: 15) submission that languages "seem to undergo a cyclic development from isolating to agglutinating to fusional morphology, and from there back again to isolating morphology" is an apt summary of the process of grammaticalization.

Syntactic change: Hock and Joseph (2009) note that, aside from the changes experienced at the phonological, morphological, and semantic levels, languages also experience changes in their syntax. The syntax of a language is the manner in which the constituent units of the language are combined together to form larger structures, that is, how words become phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. Harya (2016) admits that the concept of syntactic change is a vast one which "tends to be the domain of linguists with a formal orientation." Changes in languages at the syntactic level are more probable to be shaped by the internal linguistics of a language system, and often rest on style and context (Harya 2016). According to Kroch (1989: 199), "contexts change together because they are merely surface manifestations of a single underlying change in grammar. Differences in frequency of use of a new form across contexts reflect functional and stylistic factors which are constant across time and independent of grammar."

Demonstrating syntactic change noticed between Old and Modern English, Hock and Joseph (2009: 12) illustrated using the example below:

> Take, for instance, the order of subject, verb, and object in sentences like *The dog (subject) bit (verb) the man (object).* In Modern English, the normal order places the verb between the subject and the object, not only in sentences like *The dog bit the man* but also in more unusual sentences like *The man bit the dog*. By contrast, "verb-initial structures" like *Bit the man the dog* or "verb-final" ones like *The man the dog bit* do not qualify as well-formed complete English sentences (although they may be part of well-formed sentences, as in *The man the dog bit is getting rabies shots).* Old English had a much greater freedom of word order, and the Old English counterpart of *Bit the man the dog* was perfectly acceptable. The most unmarked sentence structure, however, would have been closest to the verb-final type *The man the dog bit*.

Among other things, the above case study was to demonstrate how the English language had syntactically changed from a verb-final syntax

structure in Old English to a verb-medial one in Modern English.

Hock and Joseph (2009) also note that this kind of verb-final to verb-medial syntactic change is not limited to English language but also exhibited by German, which is closely related to English. They note, however, that the change in the German syntactic structure did not continue all the way but stopped midstream. In German,

> Only those verb forms which have personal endings (such as Engl. third person has vs. non-third person have) appear in medial position. If the verb consists of more than one word (as in Engl. has gone: have gone), the elements without personal endings stay at the end of the sentence. To make matters even more complicated, German verb-medial syntax is limited to main clauses, dependent clauses are verb-final (Hock and Joseph 2009: 12-13).

This pattern invariably is responsible for the "curious mismatch in word order between English and similar languages (such as French) with more or less solidly medial verbs on one hand, and German on the other" (Hock and Joseph 2009: 13). Consequently, this mismatch results in complications for English speakers when they have to relate or work with the German language.

Semantic change: As languages grow over a period of time, it is possible for some words in the language to acquire a meaning different form or in addition to what they meant before. This is called "Semantic change" and is notoriously unpredictable and "fuzzy", probably because of the way in which we readily stretch and extend the meaning of words to cover new situations" (Hock and Joseph 2009: 10). This results in a situation where meaning of words become inconsistent across linguistic domains. Juxtaposing between Old English (OE) and Modern English (ME), Hock and Joseph (2009) submit that:

> One of the consequences of the fuzziness of semantic change is that semantic flip-flops may occur. As noted earlier, OE *hlaf* 'bread' corresponds to Mod. Engl. *loaf* through sound change, but the modern word designates a narrower semantic range, namely a certain quantity of bread. Exactly the opposite happened in the case of the modern word bread. This word can be traced back to OE *bread* (probably different in pronunciation); but the meaning of the Old English word was more narrow: '(bread) crumb, morsel' (11).

The implication of the above is that several other unpredictable outcomes may result from semantic changes in a language. For instance, the word "grammar" originated from a Greek noun which initially means "to scratch." Over time, the word gravitated in meaning to mean "write," "learn" at various stages of the English language development. In Modern English, "grammar" has come to mean "instruction in linguistic structure, often with emphasis on 'correctness'" (Hock and Joseph 2009: 12). Semantic change is usually step-by-step and typically involves one or more of the following:

Semantic broadening: The process whereby "the meaning of a word becomes more general or more inclusive than its historically earlier meaning" (Mmelo 2012).

Semantic narrowing: The process through which "the meaning of a word becomes less general or less inclusive than its historically earlier meaning" (Mmelo 2012).

Amelioration: This is the process through which "the meaning of a word becomes more positive or favorable" (Mmelo 2012).

Pejoration: This is the process by which "the meaning of a word becomes negative or unfavorable" (Mmelo 2012).

Morphological change: Languages also tend to change in their morphological derivations. Altintas et al (2007) is of the opinion that "Morphological reanalysis often involves an attempt to attribute a compound or root affix structure to a word that formerly was not broken down into components morphemes." While scholars like Blust (2005), Blevis (2007), Mithun (2014), and Harya (2016) among others refer to this level of change as

morphological, others like Garey (1959), Leed (1970), Albright (2008), Hock and Joseph (2009), and Kiparsky (2014) refer to it as analogical change. According to Mithun (2014), "sound change can create irregularities in morphology." Harya (2016) remarks that morphology plays a mediating role between "syntactic case and surface realization" in several linguistic milieus. Kiparsky (2014) argues that this kind of change is "a process which eliminates arbitrary complexity from grammar" and the kid of change at this level "occurs when some aspect of the language is never acquired" (Kiparsky 2014: 10-11).

Morphological changes have been known to occur at different layers of language's structure and the resulting remodelling often results in a word belonging to a different word class or sometimes a completely morphologically unrelated word. Accordingly, Mithun (2014) submits that:

> Whether the remodeling occurs when children are first acquiring their language or later in life, once it has occurred, the result simply becomes part of the language. Have you ever thought about the past tense of the verb *dive*? The original form is *dived*, but for many speakers, it is now *dove*. This might at first seem surprising: the most common past tense marker in English is *-ed*. But English also contains robust sets of what are called strong verbs. These verbs form their past tenses with a vowel change, a pattern called ablaut. One such pattern can be seen in *drive/drove* and *ride/rode*. The past tense of *dive* was apparently remodeled by analogy to such verbs (Mithun 2014: 306).

The above aptly illustrates how a generation of past tense forms came to originate from the traditional -ed form.

Employing data from OE and ME, Hock and Joseph (2009) argue that analogical or morphological change is often irregular; "and Modern English has retained many irregular plural forms such as men, women, children, feet" (9). Analogy and morphology often come in different patterns which eventually result in the creation of new words or altered forms of the same words. Hock and Joseph (2009) further note that "the early Modern English plural of cow was kine, a form still found in nineteenth-century poetry. The present-day plural cows came about in the seventeenth century under the analogy of the most common, productive mode of plural formation, as in pig: pig-s, horse: horse-s." Aside from pluralization, other processes of morphological derivation identified are blending; for example, generating "brunch" from "breakfast" and "lunch," and "modem" from "modulator" and "demodulator" (Albright 2008; cf. Garret 2008, and Hock and Joseph 2009).

II. CAUSES OF LANGUAGE CHANGE

Language change has been attributed to a number of factors by different scholars. Mark Liberman (2020) identifies language learning, language contact, social differentiation, and natural processes in usage as the primary factors responsible for language change. Varying slightly, Octavian Mantiri (2020) identifies political, social, cultural, technological, and moral factors as the underpinning causes of language change.

Language learning: According to Liberman (2020), "Language is transformed as it is transmitted from one generation to the next." Every speaker of a language tend to invent some words or other constituent structures based on what was transmitted to them by "parents, older siblings and other members of the speech community" (Liberman 2020). However, what each person experiences differ significantly, hence, the process by which changes are replicated is not perfect, and the outcome is different from person to person. Liberman (2020), however, notes that "a bias in the learning process…for instance, towards regularization…will cause systematic drift, generation by generation."

Language contact: As people move from place to place, especially from the rural settlements to urban settlements or from less developed communities and countries to highly developed ones, they go with their languages and mix up with the language of their host community. According to Aitchison (1991: 109), "when people move to a country and learn a new language, they learn their adopted language

imperfectly. They then pass on these slight imperfections to their children and to the people in their social circle, and eventually alter the language." Likewise, Liberman (2020) argues that "Migration, conquest and trade bring speakers of one language into contact with speakers of another language." This consequently leads to some, especially children, becoming bilinguals and some acquire a second language. Contact between languages often results in borrowing and domination of the less "glamorous" language by the more glamorous language.

Social differentiation: Language is not only a means of identifying with a linguistic community, but also a means of social identity. Mantiri (2020) observes that social changes often result in language change. This implies that changes in the society or individual social status invariably generates a concomitant change in the linguistic milieu of such society or individual. This position resonates with that of Finegan and Rickford (2004: 62) who hold that the difference in the social status of people determines their responses to issues, perception of concepts, and their wealth and choice of vocabularies in conversations. Also, through social interactions, people acquire new vocabularies which gradually become their speech pattern and eventually diffuses into the population thereby altering the language of the community.

Natural processes in usage: As noted by Liberman (2020) "Rapid or casual speech naturally produces processes such as assimilation, dissimilation, syncope and apocope." Also, some words and cliches become conventional parts of a language as speakers repeatedly use them. Languages change as people acquire new words and repeatedly use them in a particular way until such usages become conventional. For example, Duffy (2003) notes that words like the verb "to google", "to facebook" "whatsapping" etc. that have gained popular usage may eventually become conventional entries in future English language dictionaries. As noted by Kleinman (2010), internet users display their brilliance through manipulation of network languages thus promoting the fast spread and development of computer slangs beyond wildest imaginations. Buttressing this under what he terms "technology factor," Mantiri (2020) states that "the text messaging language is something new. Abbreviation such as LOL, BFF, IMHO, and OMG (that's laugh out loud, best friends forever, in my humble opinion and oh my God) have recently been added in the Oxford Dictionary, legitimizing the terms used by millions in texts, emails and instant messages" (Mantiri 2020: 3; see also Yoskowitz 2011).

Political factor: Often times, language change has been found to be politically rooted in such phenomenon as migration, invasion, and colonisation. Mantiri (2020) remarks that politics plays significant roles in the way languages evolve and its effects are felt and seen quicker than most other phenomena. He notes for example that, "increasing environmental awareness and environmental policies in recent decades has led to a number of new words and phrases such as "tree-hugger", "eco-friendly", "carbon footprint", "greenwashing", "locavore", "eco-terrorism" and "green collar jobs"" (Mantiri 2020: 3; cf. Powell & Cooper, 2008). Also, the campaign for feminine emancipation and the struggle for gender equality has contributed in no small ways to language change. As noted by Powell & Cooper (2008), the use of "gender-neutral" and "gender-inclusive" word classes is being encouraged among academic writers and speakers in the public domain to encourage treating men and women with some degree of equality. For instance, the pronoun "they" is being promoted over "he/she", "chairperson" for "chairman" and "humankind" for "mankind."

Foreign Influence Factor: Due to contact and interfaces with one another, languages have been known to borrow words from other linguistic communities and then localize such words. For instance, the word "Mola" is the Yorubanised form of "Mallam", a Hausa word meaning "Mister". It is, however, used in Yoruba to refer to every Hausa-speaking person, regardless of gender. Also, the word "riba" is a Hausa word which has become part of the Yoruba vocabulary, and many young speakers of the Yoruba language do not know that the word is a foreign one that has been domesticated. The Yungur-speaking tribe of Adamawa in Nigeria is another example of foreign influence on language change. The traditional word for "prison" in Yungur is "garuwa" but the present generation of Yungur

speakers are familiar only with "pusena" which is Hausa. These are just a few examples of how foreign influence can result in language change. Although borrowing from another language is a common phenomenon where languages interface, it should be noted that not all borrowed concepts can be domesticated or incorporated into the language and vocabulary of the borrowing language. Aitchison (2001: 31) notes that many of such words are used only temporarily and will soon phase out. He, however, notes that borrowed words become incorporated into the borrowing language mainly if there is no suitable equivalent to depict the concept being conveyed in the borrowed word (Aitchison 2001: 32).

CONCLUSION

No language in the world is at the same level as it was 20 or 30 years ago. English language, especially, keeps changing almost daily and in alignment with the locale where it is being used. Consequently, there is American English, British English, Nigerian English, and other forms of nationalized and localized English. Language change is inevitable as long as people migrate from one place to another and their languages interface. Also, languages will continue to evolve as long as new inventions and technological advancements take place. There are lots of technological products yet to be produced and when they eventually are produced, they will go by a name which each language will find a local term for, thus adding another word to the vocabulary list.

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