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Some Diachronic Implications of Fluid Speech Communities

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HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS VERSUS GLOTTODYNAMICS

As linguistics on the American scene is passing, at this very moment, through one of its most violent convulsions, there is every reason to expect that the long-endangered balance between the static and the dynamic approaches to language will in the end be restored. In their quest for a fairer hearing, students of evolutionary, especially of genetic, linguistics must remind themselves that, almost by definition, they have tended, to their own lasting detriment, to scatter their talents and energies on factual details devoid of broad implications. While the complexity of historical processes, by its nature, demands unremittent attention to minute intricacies, the recognition of major trends—mutually interwoven, hence, as a rule, difficult of strict isolation and direct inspection as they are—seems no less imperative. There may be some point in drawing a line between, on the one hand, free-wheeling and adventurous glottodynamics, if we agree so to label the study of constants or even universals abstracted from concrete speech developments, and, on the other, straight historical linguistics, firmly tied to painstaking (if need be, downright pedestrian) philological inventories. Unavoidably, the former, if it is to be proffered in a persuasively realistic key, must feed on the accurate findings of the latter. The present considerations may seem and are, in fact, intended to be glottodynamic in essence and tone, but happen to rest on scrupulous sifting of diversified specimens of Romance material known for their comparative abundance and reliability.

RIGID AND FLUID MODELS OF THE SPEECH COMMUNITY

Though on the theoretical plane no linguist would seriously question the agency of such processes as borrowing and diffusion, or of such widespread situations as bilingualism and fluctuation, the practice of his day-to-day research has forced many an analyst to operate, wittingly or unconsciously, with the rigid concept of a virtually invariant society, in synchronic terms, or its frequent diachronic counterpart of an outwardly almost immobilized society developing from within. Even such sets of familiar labels as Old French → Middle French → Modern French, or Old High German → Middle High German → Early Modern High German → Contemporary High German conjure up the image of a fundamentally undivided speech community bequeathing, from one generation to another, a certain cultural heritage, subject to gradual modification only within narrow limits (cf. such characteristic terms as Germ. Sprachgut, Span. voces patrimoniales). Though, beyond dispute, the areas assignable cross-temporally to a given language may vary considerably at successive stages of the development, through expansion (as with Old and Middle vs. Modern English), contraction (as with Old vs. Modern Basque), or radical displacement.
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(as seems to be true, at least in part, of Rumanian), the average linguist, unless he specializes in piecing together territorial shifts of linguistic features, will in his actual operations tend to belittle the importance of these areal discrepancies.

While ideal instances of almost perfect territorial continuity, over centuries and millennia, may be on record, they have hardly been common. Cases of radical reapportionment of dialectally colored zones, on the other hand, have been by no means unusual. Consider the following propositions, outlined in terms of a hypothetical chain of events.

A HYPOTHETICAL CASE OF REAPPORTIONED DIALECT ZONES

Stage I: An Initial Pattern of Stable Dialects

There existed—say, in some roughly square-shaped peninsula—at a moment identifiable as Phase I, four sharply profiled sectors, to be known as A, B, C, and D, whose administrative, cultural, and linguistic centers (a, b, c, and d) were located on opposite seashores, i.e., at a considerable distance from one another, a geographic configuration favoring a steadily rising degree of differentiation between the respective dialects \( \alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta \). These dialects, let us further assume, pertained to the same language (originally transplanted onto peninsular soil from some other territory not necessarily contiguous) and remained, to the end of Phase I, mutually intelligible.

![Fig. 1. Phase 1.](image)

![Fig. 2. Phase 2.](image)

Stage II: The Shift to a New Center

Let us next suppose that centuries later, through some cataclysmic events, the political, socio-economic, and ecclesiastic quadripartition of the imaginary peninsula was eroded and eventually collapsed, and that there arose—marking the advent of Phase II—a new, vigorously thriving unit E, encompassing the "backwoods" districts of the four original sectors, and governed from a new capital city e, in roughly this fashion:
The question is: What will the gradually emergent dialect e, peculiar to the territory newly carved out from the shambles of Zones A, B, C, and D, probably look like?

The Determinants of Dialectal Leveling

Much as a new society was bound to evolve, through conflation in those four mutually abutting corners of the original sectors A, B, C, D which came under the sway of the new political entity E, so the subdialects pertaining to them reversed, through the interplay of new pressures, the previous course of gradual differentiation and began to coalesce. (These corners shall be known as \(A', B', C', D'\), and their respective subdialects as \(\alpha', \beta', \gamma', \delta'\).) In many respects these subdialects, at the critical moment of reorientation, were still identical or, at least, very much alike; the analysis revolves far less around these features of identity than around the leveling of the relatively few discrepancies.

In this process, seldom brought to any successful, definitive conclusion, one can isolate several determining factors. First, granted the new capital city e lay in the territory \(C'\), the prestige value of that area's subdialect \(\gamma'\) is likely to have risen commensurately, and its speakers may have imposed certain idiosyncrasies of their speech, especially those of the phonological and inflectional order, on their less highly regarded neighbors, by virtue not of linguistic superiority, but of sheer external supremacy. Second, certain characteristic ingredients of the lexicon (e.g., such as relate to the configuration of the terrain, to agricultural products, to plants and animals restricted to sharply bounded habitats) may have been exclusively peculiar to, say, the underprivileged Zone \(B'\), while the inhabitants of the other zones at issue, familiar with the words and their referents only from hearsay, may have, without any inhibition, adopted those initially local forms for use on a larger scale. The less operative these factors rooted in the speakers' status and in the geographic spread of certain things spoken of, the better the chances for purely linguistic considerations to come into play. If subdialect \(\delta'\) boasts the tightest sound system, then this dual advantage of economy and symmetry may give it a decisive edge over the remaining subdialects, regardless of all other factors.

Retardatory Factors in Leveling

On close inspection, dialectal leveling turns out to operate with varying speed and efficiency; under certain circumstances it even threatens to come to a complete standstill. The retardatory forces are in part narrowly linguistic, in part broadly societal (sparseness and superficiality of contacts, and the like).

To revert to our model, let us assume that within the incipient unit E, the inhabitants of Sector \(A'\) use consistently one phoneme (for instance, \(/\tilde{z}/\), where those of Sector \(B'\) favor another (say, the palatalized lateral \(/\lambda/\)). Such a one-to-one correspondence is likely to ensue where all respective occurrences of \(/\tilde{z}/\) and \(/\lambda/\) are traceable to a single source in the ancestral language. Under these sharply profiled circumstances, the chances for \(/\tilde{z}/\), as a result of dialect mixture, to yield to \(/\lambda/\), or the reverse, are excellent. The specific direction of
the shift may, in the last analysis, be subliminally determined by the phonological advantage of one phoneme over the other (thus, the pre-existence of /s/ all over the territory of E would invite the rapid spread, over the same expanse, of its voiced counterpart, /z/; contrariwise, widespread coexistence of /n/ and would favor the sweeping generalization of /h/ alongside /l/). Or again, /p/ the direction may be conditioned by the social inequality of the groups of speakers involved, the rule being the adoption, by the lower classes, of the greatly admired middle-class or upper-class standard. Most intricate is the case of a decision resting on a hidden phonological foundation, but lending itself, at the same time, to a social rationalization on a higher level of awareness. But, whichever particular course the events may follow, the general prospects for the final attainment of complete uniformity remain excellent throughout. Here indeed it would be legitimate to expect a perfect display of Ausnahmslosigkeit.

By way of contrast, imagine, under the joint “roof” of E, the following relation between subdialects β' and γ' at the outset of Stage II: The former had by then lost its primary intervocalic /d/, whereas the latter had preserved it. At first contact between the two subdialects, deflected from their earlier course of reciprocal aloofness, a certain degree of intermingling of rival forms must have ensued, a process which in this case—quite unlike those just adduced—fell short of disclosing any clear-cut prevalence of one mode over another. The reason for this atypical behavior: Though subdialect β', as here visualized, lacked, I repeat, any trace of primary /d/, it nevertheless included—a new assumption on our part—numerous examples of secondary /d/ (derived from, say, the intervocalic /t/ of the parent language), so that all over the territory of B' indigenous /-d-/ (from /-t-/) and imported /-d-/ (acquired through infiltration from Zone C') became inextricably enmeshed. There occurred, then, no subsequent recoil from the initial confusion at first contact.

**Dialect Mixture and Weak Phonetic Change**

Any clashes between parallel sound developments left unresolved (for purely linguistic reasons) in the wake of some dialect mixture (itself essentially a demographic process) are bound to lead to a state of extra-low predictability for any specific development involving the feature left in abeyance. For this situation the label “weak phonetic change”—by no means incompatible with the assumption of regular phonological change in a stable, homogeneous society—has lately been proposed; the situation of insecurity may be aggravated by several concomitants. For it is highly probable, though the hypothesis has not yet been statistically underpinned, that in an area permeated by such currents of flux—set in motion by an unstable population—certain forces normally held in check are unleashed and thus tend to add to the confusion. Possibly as many as four discrete categories of such interferences with normal sound development can be set off:

(a) Morphological, especially inflectional, impingement on regular sound change. The interference can be either retary or accelerative, depending on whether the paradigm of a noun or of a verb produces a blocking effect on an
impending sound change or, inversely, sets a precedent on which a sound shift (typically one of minor scope) can be modeled;

(b) So-called sporadic or saltatory sound shifts, whose character and status in the hierarchy of linguistic changes is notoriously controversial. Thus, it has been remarked that almost all instances of dissimilation lend themselves, on second thought, to some different diachronic interpretation, no less cogent. A slightly divergent way of describing this indisputably disturbing state of affairs is to affirm that dissimilation is most clearly observable where its agency coincides with some pre-existent disturbance, ordinarily traceable to phonic fluctuation;

(c) Lexical contamination (through folk etymology, blend, etc.). The flux helps speakers to overcome the restraint that ordinarily hampers the workings of their imagination;

(d) Such elusive processes as flight from homonymy, avoidance of polysemy, expressive orchestration, and the like. The stumbling-block here consists in the fact that certain languages, or certain phases in the evolution of a single language, are far more resistant to this search for increased effectiveness, or for escape from ineffectiveness, than are others. If one risks the contention that phonetic flux, attributable to demographic displacements, acts in such contexts as a catalyst and stimulates retreats from harmful homonymy, polysemy, or semantic voidness, then the hidden factor spelling the difference between the success of these efforts in some languages and their relative failure in others may very well have been identified.

Under the circumstances it should cause little surprise to discover that in the newly constituted Zone E, predictably rich in not-fully-reconciled "drifts," the incidence of morphological intrusion, saltatory sound shift, lexical merger, and therapeutic reaction to homonymy were much higher than in the original sectors A, B, C, and D.

**Stage III: Fanlike Expansion of the New Center**

Pursuing further the imaginary course of events in our model peninsula, we can posit as the third evolutionary stage the fanning-out, in all directions, of the aggressive political entity confined originally to Zone E. Through this new explosion, the speech habits of that central zone, including the traits assignable

![Fig. 3. Phase 3.](image)
to subdialects $\alpha'$, $\beta'$, $\gamma'$, $\delta'$, are now bound to filter through into those territories (to be tagged henceforth as $A''$, $B''$, $C''$, $D''$)—initially parts of $A$, $B$, $C$, and $D$—which have not meanwhile been absorbed into $E$. The subdialects corresponding to these residual zones shall be known as $\alpha''$, $\beta''$, $\gamma''$, and $\delta''$.

To reduce the development to a geometrically regular design, let us (unrealistically) assume that the speech forms of $\alpha'$, in flowing back from their doubt in the mountainous center toward the coastal lowlands, will reach solely the territory of $\alpha''$, etc.; in other words, that $\alpha'$, despite the likelihood of powerful lateral pressures, will be prevented from establishing any direct contact with $\beta''$, and the like. During the gradual rise to hegemony of $A'$, as part of the nascent unit $E$, $A''$ may have politically or economically stagnated, or may have succumbed to military occupation by some invader from across the sea, or else may have fallen under the cultural spell of some foreign, extrapeninsular power. Accordingly, the so-far-neglected subdialect $\alpha''$ may have become shot through with lexical or even phonological and grammatical borrowings. But once the analyst has removed that misleading veneer, the dialect's kernel clearly recognizable under the motley surface may reveal the very same archaic features that were so characteristic of Stage I, whereas subdialect $\alpha'$, through the interplay of forces already isolated, may very well show an incomparably livelier, less predictable development. As $\alpha'$ and $\alpha''$, here chosen as mere representatives of the four matching pairs, relentlessly converge and blend through the dynamics of new events, the various innovating features of $\alpha'$ (including secondary and tertiary reactions to them, such as dissimilation, escape from harmful homonymy, etc.) and the archaizing features of $\alpha''$ jointly form a bizarre tapestry of incongruities. In much the same way the corresponding societies of the coastal strips included descendants of long-time local dwellers who had never bothered to move away, not even under catastrophic conditions, and the children of "re-migrants" (=Rück wanderer)—undeniably an odd and highly explosive ethnic amalgam.

**Chains of Internal Upheavals Versus Successions of External Interference**

This very schematic presentation of an, all told, single episode—the collapse of a rigidified pattern of neighboring cognate dialects and its subsequent replacement by a dynamic, multipronged movement spreading from a new center born in an area once underprivileged—may appear to abound in subtleties and otiose, artificial complications. Actually, the reconstructed sequence of events involves a **crude oversimplification** of a typical chain reaction in real life.

In terms of linguistic processes, no mention at all has so far been made of the crucially important morphological adjustments, brought about in the wake of sound shifts, through the workings of analogy; and severe restraint has been exercised vis-à-vis certain processes recalcitrant to rigorous analysis or presumably marginal to the main stream of transformations (sound symbolism, hypercharacterization). In terms of social phenomena, one can readily imagine the motley societal and linguistic pattern of the hypothetic peninsula if its development were to be pictured as a long succession of such jolts and subsequent at-
tempts at territorial reapportionment, with yesteryear’s no-man’s-lands emerging periodically as new centers. One fact would particularly add to the variegated effect of the cultural "surface": as the rezoning would repeat itself over and over again, in cycles as it were, there would scarcely be any need for the peninsula to remain consistently quadripartite in its broad social architecture and for its rapidly changing centers either to dot monotonously the coast-lines or to be hidden away in the heartland of the interior. In both respects, all manner of intermediate solutions are possible and, indeed, likely, so that the succession of superimposed patterns would tend to produce the impression of rough-edgedness and irregularity.

But quite apart from this incessant variation upon the intrinsic geometric design one must reckon with altogether different categories of tremors and of subsequent attempts at reshuffling property and at gerrymandering boundaries. Our peninsula, by definition, is accessible to peaceful infiltrators and warlike conquerors alike, who may be expected to come by land or by sea; and the impact of their external infringements will of necessity differ vastly from any effects of purely domestic upheavals. We incline, in fact, to appeal to this category of concussion to justify the assumed initial differentiation—not yet accounted for—of the peninsula’s four congener dialects $\alpha, \beta, \gamma,$ and $\delta$.

Whether or not our peninsula had been inhabited from time immemorial (the presence of homogeneous and especially of heterogeneous groups of aborigines would only increase, but not necessarily create, the complexity of the situation), we are free to posit its conquest and settlement, before the dawn of history, by colonizers coming from some other country, to be operationally identified as $X$. If this is so, the quadripartite social structure of the peninsula at the earliest stage amenable to observation might be traced to several neatly isolable causes, or, far more plausibly, to one out of several conceivable combinations of such causes. The differences acting as determinants may have lain in (a) the varying occupation dates (the language of $X$, like any other, being itself steadily on the move); (b) the dissimilar length and safety of communication lanes between the metropolis and the colonies; (c) the divergent status of the peninsula’s moribund or extinct indigenous languages and other social institutions; (d) the noncomparable social classes and degrees of literacy of the settlers attracted; (e) the irreconcilable characters of the several administrative machineries set up (military vs. civil; with or without the participation of the natives or of their descendants); (f) the spectrum of attitudes of those conquered and possibly enslaved toward their new masters, on the local scene and in the far-off metropolis of $X$; (g) the degrees of proximity (in terms of geographic distance and of cultural affinity) of some rival magnets, e.g., the insular outposts of a certain sea power then in the ascendant; (h) the extent of social and linguistic cohesion of the occupying forces, as distinct from their military amalgamation.

**Intricacies of Social Stratification**

We have so far been chiefly concerned with large-scale shifts of the population, of political frontiers, of administrative centers, and the like, without paying
close attention to the internal stratification of the hypothetical society. Yet the patterns of such layers can play a decisive role, especially where a certain linguistic feature, or an ensemble of such features, spread without concurrent demographic displacements.

Let us assume that at some point postdating the events previously described, the peninsula, on one count of its linguistic behavior, splits into parts. Let the west favor word-initial /ɛ/ where the east steadfastly maintains the /pl/ cluster (bequeathed by the ancestral language), while a corner of the extreme north stands alone in preferring /ʌ/. Let us next argue that, through a turn of the wheel of fortune, the /ʌ/ pronunciation, once deemed strictly provincial, pushes back the /pl/ zone and drives a deep wedge into the /ɛ/ territory, with all upper and middle classes, from the ducal court down, succumbing one by one to the lure of the elegant /ʌ/ where it lends itself to easy substitution for the rejected /ɛ/. Only the utterly illiterate groups of sheepherders, fisherfolk, and farmhands may be expected to show such a stubborn indifference to socio-linguistic self-improvement as not to heed the advantage of a speedy switch from /ɛ/- to /ʌ/-.

Is it not likely, under these circumstances, that certain words known almost exclusively in these underprivileged milieus (for species of small fish used as bait, for unmarketable herbs, berries, and similar items of rural economy, for inconspicuous tools, especially if crude and self-made) should here survive for centuries with the indigenous /ɛ/, originally restricted in their scope to low-class speakers? In some cases the words bearing this imprint of rusticity will eventually seep back into the surrounding standard language (especially if that language has a /ɛ/ of its own, extracted from some different source), destined to confuse the future students of historical phonology. The temporary shelter of an isolated social dialect has exempted them from immediate participation in a linguistic fashion, but more often than not only the trained analyst, not the ordinary speakers, will recognize their quaintness in retrospect and will set them apart, at first blush, as “exceptions.”

What complicates immeasurably the diachronic study of social dialects is the fact that of the most noteworthy among them we lack records and cannot expect to discover any, simply because the spontaneous utterances of those untutored speakers fell short of the long-obligatory standard of conventionality—the steep price that had to be paid for costly perpetuation of fluid speech through written records.

**TWO FUNCTIONS OF SCHEMATIZATION**

What is the advantage of the schematic, quasi-mathematical approach here advocated? To begin with, let me emphasize that this approach is not at all recommended as a substitute for the time-honored historical reconstruction, but as a mere adjunct or concomitant. By virtue of the abstractness inherent in it, it can perform two rôles for which the more circumstantial kind of full-fledged historical inquiry seems to qualify not nearly so well.

First, schematization can feed back the gist of methodological information obtained by dedicated language historians into the pool of ever mobile lin-
guistic theory. Experience teaches us that, unless bold countermeasures are taken, historical research, left to itself, tends spontaneously to become ponderous and cumbersome, simply because there is no limit to the accumulation of factual details, directly or indirectly useful, short of the actual absence of requisite raw data; and, where fluctuation is studied, the observer's concern with every minute departure from the expected standard threatens to swell the material doubly and triply. Ironically, not to say pathetically, the small dosage of fresh information that students of general linguistics have of late absorbed in their slow advance along the line of diachronic inquiry has been from sources known for offering only fragmentary, sorely deficient documentation. Conversely, the storehouse of splendid Romance monographs has left a disappointingly weak impact on general linguistics, chiefly (one gathers) as a result of these studies' almost excessive specificness and of their authors' well-nigh irritating meticulousness—features which make it painfully difficult even for the highly trained outsider to extrapolate such nuggets of information as transcend the scope of the particular problem at issue and might be applied to other, utterly different collections of data. Controlled simplification, achieved by an expert, enables the sophisticated non specialist to recognize at a glance the configuration of the chosen problem and the bare contour of the novel solution proposed.

Second—and, on balance, probably more thought-provoking—, schematization may be heuristic. Acting as an eye-opener, it can help the analyst to identify, on the purely theoretical plane, evolutionary problems not yet recognized by the teams toiling in archives or laboratories, and may induce the detailliste, heavily armed with erudition, but notoriously exposed to the hazards of shortsightedness, to probe with a fresh supply of zest these issues newly isolated and labeled.

The working with models temporarily relieves the explorer of certain onerous obligations (e.g., of the need to pay constant attention to distracting details characteristic of societies in flux or to engage in time-consuming bibliographic research); for a while it frees his mind and channels his cognition in the direction of, dynamically speaking, essentials. In this manner, hidden possibilities of interaction between discrete forces can sometimes be visualized for the first time. At a later date, the wisdom of such assumptions can be tested by application of the schema to ensembles of interlocking circumstances operative in actual linguistic change, i.e., to a set of situations necessarily far more complex than are the initial schemata.

NOTE

Though the imaginary peninsula—both in its static geographic configuration and in the dynamics of its demographic and linguistic evolution—unmistakably bears a measure of resemblance to the Iberian Peninsula, it can at best pass off as its idealized or stylized version. One of the salient differences between traditional historical grammar and glotto-dynamics, a discipline whose potentialities we have just begun to adumbrate, lies precisely in the fact that glottoynamics, as the more abstract and general variety, leaves ample room for imaginary trajectories. To this extent it resembles studies and exercises in descriptive
linguistics that operate with nonexistent languages. As it grows in sophistication, it may also develop a certain affinity for the kind of models dramatized by the latest vogue of logico-mathematical linguistics.

The following bibliographic hints, referring to some of my own monographic studies, must consequently be taken with a grain of salt. On the problem examined in the section *The Determinants of Dialectal Leveling* see Malkiel 1962; on the evidence of homonymy, Malkiel 1952; on hypercharacterization, Malkiel 1957 and 1958; on morphological interference with the regularity of sound change, associated with a situation of fluid speech communities, Malkiel 1960, especially pages 345-346 in relation to the present paper; on numerous other problems here touched upon, Malkiel 1964.

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