Spatial and social separation of speech communities and language change

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The consideration of real-world situations of interaction among language users is integral to the study of language contact and change. The geography of an area has potentially significant effects in shaping such interactions, as do social features of the groups interacting, such as marriage patterns and degrees of political centralization and complexity. There is a specific subset of real-world situations that has recently received increasing attention, namely situations where speech communities are characterized by a relatively high degree of geographical and/or social separation from other communities. These include, for instance, mountainous landscapes where villages lie at different elevations, small island communities, and endogamous communities.

There have been claims that, as a result of distinctive scenarios of language change, language varieties used in spatially and/or socially separated communities show a higher degree of grammatical opacity, more elaborated grammatical paradigms, and rarer sounds as compared with closely related neighboring language varieties that have been less spatially and socially separated (Trudgill 2011). This effect has been observed in different regions of the world, such as the Caucasus (Nichols, 2013, 2015, 2016), the Andes (Bentz, 2018), as well as in different dialects of German (Baechler 2016), and it has been surveyed in Urban 2020. As for strictly social concerns, it has been proposed that the strongly endogamic nature of some Caucasian speech communities is a relevant factor in the languages of such communities developing distinctive patterns from their neighboring language communities (Pakendorf et al. 2021, Dobrushina et al. 2020, Kirby et al. 2016) and similar patterns have been reported in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mve et al. 2019).

The impact that geographic proximity among language communities has for language change has largely been viewed as in line with the widely held assumption that language contact normally leads to convergence. A number of studies (e.g. Thurston 1989), however, have raised doubts about the universal validity of this assumption, stressing that there are situations in which contact may in fact lead to divergence. This perspective implicitly foregrounds the possibility that language communities deliberately manipulate their language in order to foster its distinctiveness and, hence, divergence from neighboring languages (e.g. Evans 2019). Mve et al. (2019) proposes, for example, that a language community associated with a single village in the Grassfields region of Cameroon deliberately manipulated its system of gender agreement to

make it harder for outsiders to completely master, and they note that these grammatical patterns were associated with other social markers of separation, such as practices discouraging men from outside the village from marrying women from the village. Phenomena of this kind are still rarely discussed in the literature, but studies of cases potentially instantiating such phenomena and of their possible social correlates will be crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of contact-induced language change.

In this workshop, we aim to investigate whether the claims made by Trudgill, Nichols, and others hold across a wide range of spatially and socially separated language communities and to also consider cases where linguistic complexity appears to have arisen as result of contact in the absence of social and spatial separation. The main focus is on societies where traditional, pre-colonial cultural traits are still observable, especially those characterized by small-scale multilingualism (i.e. widespread multilingualism in local languages), though work considering this topic from a more global perspective where sociolinguistic information is not available at a high level of detail is included as well. Our goal is to stimulate discussion on the ways in which separation of speech communities from each other—whether this is due to spatial factors, social factors, or a combination of the two—shapes patterns of language change and whether this is associated with a distinctive profile from language change in other contexts, as claimed by the authors mentioned above.

The workshop will include papers that study how spatial and social separation influence language change and shape language structure. We are especially interested in bringing together empirical and theoretical linguists working at different scales of granularity, such as small-scale, areal, and global studies. The possibility of cross-cutting discussion between scholars adopting micro- and macro-level perspectives do not seem to be widespread in workshop formats these days. However, we believe that the synergy between these two approaches is exactly what is needed to advance our understanding of whether (i) there are indeed specific/distinct mechanisms at work during language change processes under spatial and social separation and (ii) if so, how they differ from other processes of language change.

The range of proposed presentations reflect central topics of the overall theme of our workshop:

- Studies comparing outcomes of language contact in landscapes where settlements exhibit significantly different degrees of accessibility or connectedness (e.g., mountainous landscapes where villages can be at very different levels of elevation, small island communities, and similar situations).
- Work on the relationship between marriage patterns and linguistic variation, in particular in contexts where some communities show greater degrees of endogamy than others.
- Studies of language complexity as conditioned by social and spatial separation.

- Studies of language divergence under contact, including deliberate linguistic distancing from neighboring varieties.
- Typological and quantitative studies correlating social and linguistic factors.
- The emergence of language varieties in scenarios of linguistic convergence.

Furthermore, the planned presentations cover a wide range of contact scenarios and associated language ecologies and are also drawn from a number of distinct macro-areas, including Eurasia, Africa, the Pacific, and South America. They also adopt both language specific and comparative perspectives.

We propose a 13-paper (1.5 day) workshop, including a final discussion session, possibly with an invited respondent/discussant. The convenors will give an introductory talk to summarize the state of research and to contextualize the papers to be given, as well as lead the discussion session.

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