

Handle with care: the dangerous relations between language contact and linguistic theory

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Language contact has always played a central role in linguistic research, at least since the late 19th century. However, the relationship between linguistic theory and the role of contact has always been controversial. The pendulum has shifted from attributing greater influence to contact on theory to considering contact largely irrelevant, or even misleading. In recent decades, two themes have gained prominence in research: the ubiquitous role of multilingualism in shaping speakers' behavior in everyday interactions and the sociolinguistic typology that profiles the role and status of individual varieties in a speaker's repertoire. This talk will focus on two small villages located in the heart of Europe. They are characterized by a highly multilingual setting because they stand on the ridge of Romance-Germanic contacts and exchanges in the Alps. Despite their proximity, the two villages have very different sociolinguistic histories, reflected in significant differences in their varieties. A mixed society in which there is a significant number of bilingual adults favors processes of simplification, while in a society in which bilingualism is clearly polarized in a diglossic distribution, it enhances internal structural characteristics, even pushing toward processes of complexification. This divergent history is independent of the richness of the multilingual context and rather requires a precise understanding of the individual status of different varieties in the speakers' repertoire. It should be emphasized that this background also sheds light on the kinds of simplification processes that occur when a variety is strongly weakened within a multilingual repertoire and that are likely to be distinguished from the contact-induced simplification that results from bilingual interaction in a mixed society. This will allow us to draw relevant consequences for linguistic theory for this wide range of phenomena.