

**Poplack, Shana & Levey, Stephen. 2009. Demythologizing contact-induced change. OCLU. November.**

### **Abstract**

A ubiquitous assumption in the literature is that language change is an almost inevitable outcome of contact between languages (Appel & Muysken 1987; Bynon 1977; Campbell 1999). Reports of dramatic cases of structural convergence in language contact situations involving extensive changes in word order; wholesale addition or replacement of morphological categories; as well as the attrition of grammatical features in one language prompted by the absence of structural counterparts in another are pervasive. In stark contrast with the orthodox view that grammatical structure is particularly impervious to contact-induced change, recent ideas emphasize that under the right social and linguistic conditions, even core features of grammar are susceptible to external influence, suggesting that there are no purely structural constraints on what may be transferred from one linguistic system to another (Thomason 2001).

Closer scrutiny of such claims reveals that they inadequately address a number of salient conceptual, methodological and analytical issues. Foremost among these shortcomings is the fact that change is often inferred to be the result of contact without first ascertaining whether a presumed change may alternatively be the product of internal evolution, or even whether a putative change has been confounded with the inherent variability endemic to spoken language. A second and equally important issue pertains to the nature of the data on which reports of contact-induced change are founded. Inspection of the literature reveals that claims are not infrequently based on exiguous speaker samples; individuals of unspecified bilingual competences; behavior that is experimentally induced; as well as isolated and exceptional examples that are not situated with respect to community norms. Failure to contextualize change in relation to natural language data collected from speakers representative of the major social axes of their respective communities can potentially generate any number of spurious results associated with atypical or perhaps idiosyncratic behavior (Poplack 1993, 1997, Poplack & Levey *in press*). In short, empirical corroboration of contact-induced change appears to be beyond the reach of anything but systematic corpus-based research carried out within bilingual speech communities.

In this presentation, we detail an empirically accountable methodology combining the machinery of variationist sociolinguistics with the comparative method of historical linguistics, which is capable of discriminating between internal and contact-induced change. Drawing on large and representative bodies of bilingual speech, we exemplify with case studies of language contact between French and English in Canada where typological similarities between the two languages, widespread bilingualism, as well as length and intensity of contact are widely believed to be propitious to structural convergence. Systematic quantitative comparisons of appropriate reference varieties indicate that potential candidates for contact-induced change are illusory, turning out to be either cases of long-standing (albeit unacknowledged) variability, or explicable in terms of internal evolutive processes. The results of our investigation confirm that even when the commonly invoked social and linguistic prerequisites of contact-induced change are met, structural convergence is not an inevitable outcome.

We conclude by reviewing the utility of a rigorous and empirically accountable quantitative framework for illuminating contact phenomena, and foreground the strengths of the variationist paradigm for assessing contact-induced change, and distinguishing external from internal motivations.

## References

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