

The universality of language change

- ✓ This fact is quite surprising (given, e.g. modern literate societies with schools, media, etc. which militate against change and invariably fail).
- ✓ Language would most certainly function better as a medium of communication if it didn't change over time.
- ✓ Why? AND How? (how changes originate, how they develop over time)

Potential sources of language change

- ✓ Contact with other languages (borrowing), or dialects of one's own language
- ✓ Deliberate manipulation of one's language (brand names, coining of new words)
- ✓ Language acquisition (errors made in learning a native language). A major source of change in the generative tradition

But! The thing is not that easy, i.e. the identification of the potential sources of change does not mean that the source of any particular change may be easy to find. Why?

- ✓ The past changes that historical linguists study are visible in the historical records that survived. These records show what changes occurred but they almost never provide evidence for *how* they occurred or *how* they started.
E.g. the English 3rd pers. Pres. 's' (OE 'eþ'). No language that OE had contact with had such an ending. The change eþ --> s is not a regular sound change, perhaps a learner's error?
- ✓ Because of that linguists apply the so called *uniformitarian principle* and study the origins of current linguistic changes to learn about the properties of change in general. Unfortunately, the problem with identifying the source of change remains. If we assume that most changes begin as idiosyncrasies in the speech of an individual (or a group of several individuals who innovate) identifying the individual who first innovates is virtually impossible.
- ✓ In some cases (the trivial ones at least) it is not a problem (think about a recent borrowing into Polish '*celebryta*', we know the source language and we know the sociocultural context in which the change occurred).
- ✓ Other instances of change are much more intriguing. Think about Am. vs. UK English, '*Did you find the answer yet*' vs. '*Have you found the answer yet*' or '*I already found the answer*' vs. '*I have already found the answer*'. Differences like [pɑ:s] vs. [pæs]. Such changes must have clearly started as innovations (by individual speakers) but at the moment when they are reported (noticed) by linguists children are learning these innovations natively. Obviously, borrowing is not the answer (we are talking about native words/constructions), so it must be concluded that it is usually too late to discover the source of change by DIRECT investigation.
- ✓ For this reason we have to INFER the origin of changes (both the ones in the past and the ones in progress) but to do so we have to construct them in the context of a **detailed realistic model of how languages continue to exist through time.**

- ✓ A language continues to exist as long as it is used by a community of native speakers. Speech communities replicate by a mechanism known as NLA (native language acquisition) with properties which are crucial for understanding of language change.
- ✓ NLA is developmentally driven, we acquire language without being taught, we don't learn language by imitation but by constructing subconscious grammars on the basis of the input we hear, at first children's grammars are unlike adult ones until they become more or less indistinguishable from other native grammars. There exists a 'critical period' for NLA, which closes around the age of 8-10. Why this is so is not entirely clear. Also the system of phonological rules and contrasts, inflectional morphology, basic syntax all resist modification later in life (post NLA). Only vocabulary continues to be easy to learn throughout one's life.
- ✓ All this points to an important conclusion: lexical innovation can enter a language by practically any route, but a significant innovation in the basic phonology or morphosyntax is overwhelmingly likely to be a learner error. This is because the possibility of an adult successfully borrowing a non-native contrast or phonological rule are very small (usually being confined to contexts of bilingualism).

What has to happen for a native speaker error to develop into a historical change?
 = the evolution of errors into linguistic changes

- ✓ The native-speaker error has to remain uncorrected throughout the period of NLA → it becomes a stable feature of adult speech → part of normal variation in speech community → spreads through the community.
- ✓ Since children's errors are normally corrected → this scenario has to be pretty rare
- ✓ But rare is relative, there are tens of thousands of children (c. 370.000 born in Poland), if one in a thousand persists in an error
- ✓ What's more, children may learn from in large part from slightly older peers, learning one another's errors → reinforcing them
- ✓ We can study the types of errors made by children in the process of NLA and compare these with the types of sound change observed in the historical development of languages
- ✓ All this leads to a (typical) linguistic situation in which in the adult language of a speech community there are multiple linguistic variants in competition. As the new forms enter the language they compete with older variants.
- ✓ The spread of innovation is then controlled by sociolinguistic factors → the innovations characteristic of dominant social groups are borrowed by other groups that desire acceptance
- ✓ Apparently, many changes are implemented first by women