CAN WE DETERMINE THE FACTORS THAT CAUSE LANGUAGE TO CHANGE?

INTRODUCTION:

Languages are always changing, as everything in the world is continually remaining in a state of change. Language change has been induced by several factors over the centuries, being the manner in which the phonetic, morphological, semantic, syntactic and other particular features of languages have been modified by the passage of time. However, it is known that Language change is a continuous but a slow process which is a difficult task to detect when and how it is produced. Many years ago, the study of Language change was basically focused on a huge and confusing number of factors which emphasized almost every aspect of human life, like environment and physical, social and mental state. Even nowadays, there are a great number of possible causes which may be taken into account, although the problem is that it does not only exist in language as a whole, but in any one change. Therefore, I must say that Language change is likely to be caused by a combination of factors which make the language to progress and to be adapted to the necessities of each time.

It is the aim of my paper to look for any factor and cause that determine language change and to organise them in a meaningful order by means of defining the main fields of change. I will begin presenting a general overview of the reason of language change, following it with the two main fields of factors which affect language change. On one hand, Internal and Inherited factors; and, on the other hand, External causes of language change. I will present the most typical causes in both categories, before focus my last point on the progress of language through time and by means of changes.

AN OVERALL EXPLANATION OF LANGUAGE CHANGE

According to National Science Foundation (web source), it is surprising that languages change, due to the fact that all of them have been passed down through generations from parents to children with the purpose of communicating with each other. But language change for a variety of reasons, often due to historical, social, economic and political pressures, and often due to the natural evolution of the language.
In order to the change is produced, first people have to assimilate the new vocabulary, sounds, sentence structures, etc. and then to transmit them throughout the community and the following generations. Many linguists consider children as agents who, once the learning process is concluded, internalize it with some differences and changes and transmit their new variation of their language. So, they are seen as the main connectors of language change. Anderson, J.M. (1973) supports that sciences and studies of language acquisition have to provide an insight view about the evolutionary changes referred to man’s linguistic capacity.

Many scholars thought that languages were in decline because they lost progressively their old word-endings. Languages are reliably involved in a state in which it survives the fittest language with other languages which are adapted to the needs of the times. (Aitchison, 2001). From 18th century, the theory of language decay and decadence exist, and it is mainly supported in the idea of the old Indo-European language’s decay, such as Latin or Greek whose declinations have been almost lost in modern Indo-European languages (Ancient scripts, web site).

As James M. Anderson says in his book Structural aspects of Language Change (1973), there are many views and considerations about the role of explanation in language change concerning internal and external information, integration of social and structural aspects and historical approaches. Historical linguistics based his study on how and why languages change. According to Anderson, the linguist must use proper linguistic theories concerned on descriptive studies of language with the aim of analysing changes according to the frame in which language is accepted, and, moreover, to describe changes from a linguistic point of view. He supports that historical studies are mainly focused on characteristics of change which are common to language and are related to the main conceptions of language change.

INTERNAL AND INHERENT FACTORS OF LANGUAGE CHANGE

As William Croff (2000) maintains in his book Explaining Language Change, an evolutionary approach, there is a great relationship between language change and biological evolution. It is a matter of study since the emergence of linguistics as science in the nineteenth century. He exposes three different points according to the way in which biological evolution is related to linguistic evolution. Firstly, he supports that evolution of language is closely linked with the evolution of human linguistic capacity which is, at the same time, a biological process concerning on the creation of a
cognitive capacity or a language-like system for communication. Secondly, there is a raised interest in genetic origin of contemporary human language; therefore, there is a connection between evolution and historical association. And, thirdly, the adoption of the theory of biological evolution to get an evolutionary theory of language change.

According to Aitchison (2001), one of the broadest categories referring to the causes of language change covers the internal psycholinguistic factors. Those linguistic and psychological factors reside in the language structure and in all speakers’ minds. These tendencies and factors of language change are inevitably built due to the psychological, anatomical and physiological nature of human beings. Focusing on some of these natural developments and, therefore, changes in language, we may point out dropping of consonants due to the fact that the weakness and gradual lost of final consonants is made by a weak articulation, and also by an accelerated and compounded process because of the difficulty of such sounds in hearing them. Therefore, it is a process in which, by the passage of time, consonants tend to disappear. Another natural aspect is the linking of sounds together, because when speakers are learning a new language, they become more fluent, some separate words and sounds are linked together into a soft style of speech. It may be caused by assimilation (when two sounds are adjacent) or by omission (group of sounds clustered together). Other natural speakers’ tendency is the process by which people manage to understand one another because they mentally normalize or correct what they hear; it is produced by the great variation of sounds spoken by different speakers. Also, like sound changes, there are parallel syntactic changes. Therefore, we can say that universal mental tendencies are parallel to physical ones. (Aitchison, 2001)

EXTERNAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS

Language change is produced by social, political and technological issues which take an important role when language is used for communication. (Beard, A. 2004)

External changes are those changes caused by contact. They involve the relationship between the speaker and the society to which s/he belongs. Society is normally defined as geographical regions and ethnicity or nationality, but its language also defines it, even society plays an important role in the study of language evolution and change. (Croff, W. 2000)

Anderson, J. M. (1973) presents an approach which try to integrate social and structural aspects into language change, focused on the social environment. He affirms that social
influence on language is not well determined for historical periods and must be reconstructed by observations from past stages to present-day. Origins of social motivation of change are found within speech communities focusing on internal social situations. Internal lexical changes can have correspondence with changes in the social values within society, for this reason it occurs some loss or addition of vocabulary items.

Concerning Aitchison’s distinction (2001), he deals with three proposed sociolinguistic causes of language change: fashion, foreign influence and social need. First, focusing on fashion and random fluctuation, he affirms that fashion and social influence have to be taken into account because a person’s speech can gradually alter over the years in the direction of the fashion around the time. However, he also assumes that fashion is not one of the most important factors when studying language change because language is well-organized and never is disintegrated by random fluctuation theories and if it was basically governed by fashion we do not expect so many different languages. Second, foreign bodies, which are mainly produced by the substratum theory, that is, when immigrants come to an area and learn the language with imperfections, they hand on them and eventually alter the language.

When we talk about foreign bodies, it is important to emphasize the role played by borrowings in external factors of language change. According to Trask, R.L. (1994), speakers of some languages inevitably come into contact with others of other languages. This contact has important consequences because one language may borrow large number of words, even in pronunciation and grammar.

Another sociolinguistic cause of change is the social need which is mainly focused on a functional view of language change. It can be produced that new words are coined as they are required, when old words become over-used and lose their impact; new ones are introduced in their place. (Aitchison, 2001)

Finally, as Croff (2000) supports, a society can alter its language by the use of calques, borrowings, or even the creation of new words and constructions in order to develop the language to new domains or stylistic registers.
PROGRESS OF LANGUAGE

“A closer look at language change has indicated that it is natural, inevitable and continuous, and involves interwoven sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors that can not easily be disentangled from one to another.” (Aitchison, 2001. pp. 249)

The term ‘progress’ implies a movement towards some desired endpoint, although it can not be specified what we mean as a perfect language get by the evolution of it. We only can say that over years certain parts or aspect of languages has been developed to a simpler way and maybe a better than another ones. (Aitchison, 2001)

Trask (1996) supports that in every time and place there has been a conservative opinion about language change which maintain that language reached some kind of perfection, but now is loosing rapidly the prestige by the new usage in nowadays. He recognises that this hostility is not wrong enough, because it is not good that language change so fast that the communication between following generations makes it impossible. On the other hand, Trask (1996) says that through the language contact, it can occasionally result the creation of new languages by the process of pidgin formation or simply by a great change of the language.

Changes can affect the language system or can enrich it, but what it more important is that it is in no sense wrong for human language to change. Therefore, we must say that language is in a permanent ebbing and flowing like the tide, but not specifically progressing or decaying, simply changing. (Aitchison, 2001)

Historic Linguistics has been concerned with language changes from the early times and nowadays goes on with the study on how and why languages change.

Once looking for factors which affect language change and dividing them, we distinguish between external and social factors and internal and inherited factors.

When a change enters in a language and is assimilated, it can be accelerated, slowed down or even reversed by both linguistic and social factors.

Speakers from different languages come into contact, and such contact has considerable consequences due to the partial or complete assimilation of the language through the social contact and need.
Language change is not caused accidentally, but it conveys a number of factors which are indeed very related to each other and each of them represent an important part of the evolution and development of the study of Language change. Therefore, I conclude with the affirmation that language change conveys a number of combinations of factors which make the language to develop and to be accommodated to the necessities of each time.

Language is always changing in grammar, vocabulary, meaning, pronunciation, and even, in spelling. These changes are an unavoidable and constant fact of life. Language has been changing in the past, is changing nowadays, and it will be surely changing in the future.

References:


Web sources:
