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A critical review of Peter Trudgill's sociolinguistic insights in
Millennia of Language Change

Abstract: The following article examines the impact of sociolinguistics on the evolutionary phenomena of historical and modern languages within the framework provided by British dialectologist Peter Trudgill, who challenges the world of mainstream linguistics with his fascinating perspective on word formation and language contact. The sociolinguist's studies hinge on the innovative concepts of language "complexification" and "simplification", two diachronic processes which are inherently determined by a set of social factors in linguistic communities that will be listed and thoroughly explored in the contents of the article. In my review, I will try to offer a broad overview of the eight chapters in the book and highlight the singular instances of sociolinguistic mutations occurring in the analyzed languages. Afterwards, I will express my personal insights on Trudgill's sociolinguistic theories and briefly call attention to some of the problematics in his academic thesis.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Historical linguistics, Diachrony, Dialectology, Language Evolution

Millennia of Language Change: Sociolinguistic Studies in Deep Historical Linguistics is a collection of scholarly articles centred on the diachronic mutations of several language families around the world. The book is concerned mainly with evolutionary linguistics and proposes to supply systematic explanations for the occurrence of mutational processes in a number of historical contexts which were subjected to linguistic transformations over the span of the millennia. The considerable factors which are responsible for these evolutionary processes allow the

speakers to adapt their languages to their social climate, as we will see in my summary of the contents of the chapters. In assessing the dynamics of language contact and accounting for the attitudes of the human speakers, Peter Trudgill's aim is to challenge the established perception of linguistic mutations using a sociolinguistic perspective to shed light on the events and phenomena which inevitably shaped the social contexts of their speakers. The academician begins his laborious research in the preamble to the book by evaluating the pros and cons of the theses of some renowned linguistic researchers who have attempted to elucidate certain aspects and functions of the "pre-historical" and "hunter-gatherers'" languages that have aroused the curiosity of historical linguists in the last decades of the previous century. Such languages, according to the linguistic typology specialist Bernard Cormie, tend to differ wildly from their modern counterparts chiefly for the lack of complexity that is heavily featured in the attested languages we have extensive knowledge of. In the wake of the aforementioned author and several other distinguished linguists as Vennemann, Trudgill applies the criteria of linguistic "simplification" and "complexification" to reconstruct a hypothetical history of languages from Paleolithic and Neolithic to our modern age. The first chapter in the book deals with the language processes that qualify prehistoric societies as small, stable and low-density communities. This blend of social factors allowed the intimate speakers in these isolated pre-historic communities to develop unconventional linguistic phenomena which are seldom found in our modern languages. Following the brief explanation, in order to substantiate the proposed argument, a set of assorted cases of linguistic complexifications observed in culturally uniform and tight-knit societies are referenced, among which we have a remarkable instance of a development of complex grammatical categories revolving around generational affiliation (in Onya Darat, a West Malayo-Polynesian language spoken in the interior of southwestern Indonesian Borneo.) and a (now extinct) language called "!Ora" whose personal pronoun system could boast nearly 31 pronouns. The extent of the complex structures in these languages can be explained by the low density of the

speakers who are able to preserve the original languages across the generations and introduce new "marked" and innovative features that occur at a high frequency in such communities, thus preventing simplification and providing a social matrix for a wide range of language innovations which are added to the original language strata. The stability of the isolated communities coupled with the lack of contact between different tribes in prehistoric Europe played a significant role in these "face-to-face" societies with high degree of communally shared information, and over time these factors paved the road to the development of a convoluted proto-language akin to the complex Austronesian languages mentioned throughout the whole chapter. In the second chapter, we are presented with an in-depth insight of the types of contact leading to simplification or complexification processes in Dutch variations. Upon examining the social backgrounds of Afrikaans and Northern Dutch dialects, it is speculated that the analogous simplifying mutational processes these two variations underwent can both be ascribed to the large presence of adult learners in contact with the Dutch-speaking people. As an adult or an adolescent past the age of optimal language learning, Trudgill argues, mastering the complex structures of a foreign language can be a challenging feat that few members of the community will manage to accomplish, thus giving rise to systematic simplification marked by an increase of regular forms in the L2 language. Conversely, complexification occurs when the majority of learners acquire the L2 language during childhood, resulting in a situation of stable bilingualism which creates the conditions for a development of elaborate grammatical structures, semantic redundancy and irregular forms that become established in the spoken language. These complex features are exemplified by the dialects spoken in the France-Netherlands border, where the local Dutch variation was enriched by grammatical devices typically found in modern French. By drawing comparisons between ancient Greek and Apache, as well as referring to some other non-european languages, the author claims that highly polysynthetic languages are gradually developed in an isolated and stable community exclusively if the diachronic evolution of the languages isn't interrupted by episodes of adult

language contact whose predictable outcome would be a process of continuous simplification of the linguistic structures.

After an examination of the contact types involved in the mutations of the preceding languages we can turn to the various Indo-European branches and probe into their diachronic evolution from the earliest settlers to modern Europeans, a subject that will carry on up to chapter 6. Vennemann's theories about the migration of Indo-European peoples and their subsequent contact with Pre-Indo-European societies are expounded in chapter 3. In accordance with his hypothetical historical reconstruction, around the 2nd millennium BCE the first European settlers identified as Celtic peoples would have established a stable contact with the indigenous "Vasconic" speakers, and the remnants of this phase of linguistic exchange may be evidenced by the presence of two distinguished types of copula in the languages spoken in the Iberian peninsula which influenced the IE languages that were subjected to a long-term contact with the Celtic variations spoken in pre-anglo-saxon England. In a remote past, the Vasconic language substratum would have given rise to a complexification process, providing the Celtic speakers of the Brittonic and Iberian languages with an innovative "habitual" verb copula and a "non-habitual" one used to denote a temporary status of affairs in sentences. This grammatical paradigm is still very much alive in modern Spanish, where "ser" (to be) and "estar" (to stay) are used in everyday speech to differentiate between the two states, and its impact would have been considerably significant in the areas of England where Latin speakers settled around the first millennium CE. During the 600 years of contact between Romans and the Celtic speakers, a new Vulgar Latin with double copulas would have been hypothetically adopted by the bilingual inhabitants of Southern England. The complexification process is again attributed to a stable and long-term contact where social conditions on the territory were ripe for the acquisition of the language innovations by bilingual children whose L2 language (Latin) gradually came to replace the original Brittonic language. Unfortunately no written records of this Vulgar Latin variation has come down to us, but we can suppose that the

language would have in turn influenced the language of the latest Anglo-Saxon, Nordic and Norman settlers that would have preserved the double paradigm until the late middle ages, where Middle English became the official language of England and the habitual copula merged with the non-habitual copula to form a mixed verbal paradigm. The loss of the grammatical distinction was certainly caused by the rapid and unstable influx of new settlers and the confusion generated by the mutually unintelligible languages which would have naturally led to a simpler outcome that satisfied all the speaking parties on the Anglo-Saxon territory. The double copula feature still survives in some Welsh variations, but is already showing signs of loss of the system, as highlighted by Trudgill. The development of a double copula system in the through contact with the speakers who inherited the Vasconic innovations in the early middle ages is only one of the major linguistic mutations that affected the grammar and syntax of the English language over the course of its life span. Trudgill stresses the flexibility of English and highlights its openness towards linguistic exchange to back up his academic thesis in several chapters of his work, but it is on the fourth chapter that he focuses on the language events which have extensively transformed and restructured its morpho-syntactic system over the 3 millennia. From the split of Proto-Germanic to its latest stage, English underwent countless transformation that simplified or complexified its grammatical structure: the first major linguistic phenomenon we have knowledge of is the Proto-Germanic's First Consonant Shift, which according to sociolinguists has controversially occurred due to an episode of stable contact of the Germanic tribes with Finnic speakers. Finnish had already undergone a sound shift by the time the Germanics settled in their areas, and the interaction between those two communities had substratum effects on the early Germanic language. By comparing PIE to its Germanic offshoot, we can assume that following the consonant shift, Proto-Germanic has been subject to several contact-induced simplification processes which are visible in modern English, such as the loss of PIE subjunctive and the development of a predictable word stress. Evidence of language contact can also be detected in the lexical stratum of

Proto-Germanic, which features at least one third of non-PIE words, many of these words belong to the daily life vocabulary (sea, ship, boat, sword, lamb to name a few examples).

Vennemann argues that the mysterious origin of these words can be traced back not to Vasconic, but to an Afro-Asiatic language known as "Semitidic", whose seafaring speakers settled in Southern Sweden, became a minority ruling class and during the assimilation process contributed to the development of a mixed vocabulary. Summing up, we can list three contact episodes in the pre-history of the Germanic language: phonologically speaking, the contact with Finnic tribes has led to a total reconstruction of the Germanic sound apparatus, while we can ascribe the lexical and grammatical innovations to Afro-Asiatic and Vasconic. The next contact-induced mutation occurred due to the migration of Germanic tribes into Celtic-speakers areas. As we saw in chapter 3, this resulted in the development of a double copula paradigm in Old English. Moreover, in the English peninsula, it's interesting to note that a turbulent period of linguistic exchanges gave rise to both simplification and complexification processes in the span of a mere couple of centuries: in 5th century England, the small Anglo-Saxon population coexisted with the Celtic inhabitants, this brief period of peace became a breeding ground for language complexification and child-bilingualism, and as a consequence the grammatical structure of the Ancient English language absorbed Celtic grammatical categories. But by the late 6th century and early 7th century, the Anglo-Saxons came to dominate the peninsula, enslaved the local Celtic populations and established themselves as the ruling class. The apartheid-like situation was responsible for the subsequent simplification of the morphological, grammatical and phonological stratum in the spoken English language, whose first recorded attestations can be found in the early Middle English literature. Other complexification processes in the history of the English language may be uncontroversially related to the contact between Anglo-Saxon and Norse speakers, the mutually intelligible nature of the two Germanic languages allowed the English to conveniently borrow grammatical

pronouns and post-verbal particles among many other innovations from their Ancient Nordic cousins.[1] The last contact episode occurred between the French-speaking Normans and the English. Trudgill isn't particularly exhaustive in this section of the book, and claims that the grammatical influence of French on Old English was minimal. I will take care to argue against his assertions and demonstrate the impact of French on English by providing examples of morphological and phonological alterations in my critical apparatus found at the end of the review. The fifth chapter still revolves around the sociolinguistic aspects of the innovations perceived in the English language, this time however Trudgill examines the past tense forms of the verb "to be" with their subsequent developments in the pidginized English variations around the world and in the local dialects of England. The aim is to refute the commonly accepted claim that in the English language, the verb form "was" is the "standard singular" form found universally in the worldwide English varieties. Once again we are reviewing the history of English and accounting for its Proto-Germanic roots: in the reconstructed language, Verner's Law produced an alternation between the final consonants -s and -z in the past tense of the verb forms, the -z sound underwent a further mutation called "rhotacism" in western Germanic languages which established the final -s/-r alternation we can see in the English language. Setting aside the diachronic phenomena of English, a closer look at the verb paradigm allows us to assert that "was" is far from being the singular standardized form of the verb because the predominant form "were" occurs with more frequency than its -s counterpart. While English still maintains the consonant alternation due to it's chiefly conservative nature, the verbal paradigms of other Germanic languages have evolved to develop a standard pattern where either -r or -s became the generalized form of the whole paradigm. The key to the confutation of the "standard singular" argument advanced by linguists de facto lies in the references to the various paradigms pertaining to Scandinavian languages and some English

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[1]   Johanna Nichols, "Modeling ancient population structures and movement in linguistics" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 359–84.

dialects, where the predominant generalization appears to be the "were" form. In conclusion, we can safely assert that the prevalence of the standardized "was" form in the verbal paradigms of the pidginized English variations around the world is to be ascribed to the social prestige of this singular form which was spread by the wealthy English speakers of Southeast England (where the -s form prevailed) in colonial times rather than the "unmarked" status of the singular form. The sixth chapter addresses a distinct instance of simplification at odds with the usual norms of sociolinguistic mutation. Trudgill has strenuously argued in favor of complex linguistic development in isolated and close contact areas in the previous chapters, but the Austronesian language family constitutes an exception to his systematic theory. What's providing food for thought in this case is the gradual loss of several phonemes in the sound inventory of the Austronesian people during their migrations in the islands and the territories of the Pacific: if Proto-Austronesian could boast a staggering 23 phonemes, the Hawai'ian phonetic repertoire preserves only 8 consonant sounds. It is interesting to note that in the classification of these languages, the further the speakers spread into the Pacific and distanced themselves from their homeland, the less they preserved their phoneme inventory[2]. Why did such a small and close-knit community undergo the opposite process of linguistic change instead of becoming more complex in accordance with the sociolinguistic norms? The exception can be explained by the complexity of the Austronesian languages, which feature several "neighboring words", words which differ from each other only by one phoneme or a syllable. The convoluted lexical inventory and the length of the words of these languages give rise to memory load problems in the minds of the adult speakers, resulting in a direct reduction of the phoneme inventory. The Isolation and absence of contact with other speakers might as well have had effects on the evolution of the Austronesian languages, as the necessity of preserving the original

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[2] André Haudricourt, "Richesse en phonèmes et richesse en locateurs", *L'Homme* 1 (1960): 5–10.

languages became less prioritized over time, the loss of consonants and the overall simplification of the language appeared inevitable.

Chapter 7 deals with the formation of Koiné languages out of an admixture of dialects spoken by people from different homelands in the colonized areas. This process has been subjected to several incorrect examinations which led its researchers to wrongly assume that:

A) The colonial varieties are chiefly a transplanted version of their original counterpart (Monogenesis fallacy)

B) The sense of common identity of the speakers plays a major role in the formation of these new varieties overseas (Identity fallacy)[3]

A brief inquiry into the structure of the first historical Koiné provides us with a patent denial of the monogenesis argument: from a linguistic standpoint, it would be improper to categorize the ancient mediterranean lingua franca as a homogeneous duplicate of Attic Greek due to the impressive amount of admixture of the Aeolic and Doric dialects. On the other hand, we cannot use identity as an explanatory factor for the development of colonial dialects because history bears witness to the formation of Koiné language regardless of the shared identity of its speakers, as illustrated by the catalog of historical contexts which led to the formation of these varieties in the pages that follow the counterarguments to the two fallacies. The progressive formation of new dialects is thus mainly tied to the collective social habits of human beings and their unconscious commitment to conform to the speaking rules of their linguistic community. Beyond this unsurprising habit of behavioral coordination found in primates, the formation of new Koinés also hinges on the selective preservation of numerically superior forms occurring in child-bilingualism. The eight and final chapter of the book is focused on another Germanic innovation: the loss of grammatical gender and its consequences on the pronominal aspects of the affected language. It is important to consider that in the

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[3] Max Wagner, "Amerikanisch-Spanisch und Vulgärlatein", *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 40 (1920): 286–312, 385–404

same vein as Sanskrit, the earliest instances of Indo-European did not have gendered grammatical cases, but employed an animate/non-animate dichotomy to denote the nature and function of nouns in sentences. The development of gender appears in PIE as an innovative grammatical system only after the split of the Iranic branch somewhere along the centuries, and it is commonly hypothesized by linguists that its catalyst was the growing exigency of the speakers to denote female subjects within the body of simple and complex sentences. As novel as the grammatical mutation might sound, this system was rather short-lived, and several PIE descendants have done away with either the neutral (romance languages) or the female distinction (Germanic languages). Setting aside the natural evolution of the romance languages, the loss of the feminine gender in some Germanic variations, namely Swedish, Dutch, Bergen Norwegian and Danish has constituted an impenetrable riddle for the linguists across the world, which Trudgill proposes to solve with a sociolinguistic analysis of the migratory events that occurred in the history of these countries. All of the listed languages feature a reduction of the initial three-gender system, an instance of simplification which replaced the previous grammatical system with a "common" gender to design both male and females, and a "neutral" gender for inanimate objects, the original articles have also disappeared from the language, but the third-person pronouns is still being used to denote female living beings. Against the arguments posed by the other linguists, the phenomenon can be surely ascribed to the population shifts that took place in the late middle ages in these countries: for instance, the loss of the female gender in Danish may be described as nothing more than as the result of reaching a compromise between the Swedish and German dialects spoken in Copenhagen around the 16th century, while the simplification process of Bergen Norwegian was unquestionably caused by the growth of non-Norwegian (High German) speaking population in the course of the centuries. The loss of the female gender in Standard Dutch, whose areas did not (apparently) witness an influx of foreign speakers has been used as an argument to deny the sociolinguists' claim, however, upon a closer examination of the historical events, it

becomes clear that the phenomenon can be explained by the sudden inflow of Southern Dutch dialect speakers following the surrender of Antwerp in 1585. The phenomenon can be summarized as a four-phase process beginning from the simple loss of feminine gender with the maintenance of the female pronouns usage for animals and humans in the Bergen dialect to the total loss of feminine pronouns and the usage of two distinct classes of inanimate nouns supported by demonstrative pronouns in the West Jutland Danish dialects. Geographically and chronologically speaking, Trudgill concludes that the system shift might have been triggered by the English language which initiated the gender-loss process in its early developmental phase. The trade routes, notably the maritime ones may have significantly contributed to the spread of the simplification process all the way to the Scandinavian countries, which experienced gender reduction by the time Middle English became the official language of England.

Critical reflections & commentary on the problematics:

Dr. Trudgill has provided a tour of evolutionary linguistics from an angle which has been far too long overlooked by linguists across the world. The edifice of his theories is based principally on the application of sociolinguistic research to diachronic linguistics, supplying both the inexperienced readers and the researchers with a well-grounded knowledge in the field thanks to a wide range of hypotheses that have proven his marvelous insights to be profoundly innovative and unquestionably illustrative of an unexplored perspective on historical linguistics. Throughout his scholarly work, he has accounted for several factors involved in the development of complexification and simplification of the structure and aspects of spoken and written languages, and his brand new linguistic framework has opened the gates to a broader view of the world of language research, thus I believe his laborious efforts will lead academic sociolinguists to further fascinating findings which will revolutionize the scholarly field in the near future. The complexification-simplification dichotomy that has been proposed and put to test in

the various chapters of the book can be remarkably applied to any period of history to explain the grammatical, phonological and lexical innovations pertaining to a language or a dialect spoken in a circumscribed area of a country, and despite its weaknesses, it can be said to be nearly indisputable in the face of traditional linguistic approaches. What are the weaknesses of Dr. Trudgill's thesis? From my standpoint, I believe he omitted a set of specific cases in which linguistic taboos have played a substantial role in the relationship between bilingual speakers in a linguistic community. A compelling counterargument to the proposed framework might be exemplified by the linguistic influence of the Jewish communities inhabiting the territories of the Rhine in the early and high middle ages: the jewish presence along the river has been documented ever since the 4th century CE, and there is no reason to deny that in nearly 7 centuries Rhineland would have favored the flowering of a co-territorial and stable community of Jewish speakers where child-bilingualism and intermarriages between Germans and Aramaic speakers abounded. The rising of Yiddish, a western Germanic dialect that has been subjected to influences from Aramaic and Hebrew corroborates the stability of the Jewish communities which inhabited the lands of the Upper Rhine until the expulsion and massacres of the Jews at the hand of the crusaders in the late 11th century. The first recorded attestation of Yiddish dates from the 13th century, however, it is safe to assume that the language traces its origins as far as back to the first jewish migrations. Jews in Rhineland were effectively trilingual, and the tolerant attitudes of the Merovingian and Carolingian rulers alongside their vital function as merchants and moneylenders has definitely encouraged the growth of their communities, while Yiddish appears to be almost mutually intelligible to modern German speakers. So why has the influence of Aramaic and Hebrew been limited to lexical borrowings, and why didn't a complexification process occur in the vernacular language of Rhineland? We can speculate that the social bias and the religious differences between the Germans and Ashkenazi Jews has inhibited the development of linguistic innovations in the Rhineland dialects spoken by the local German population. This viewpoint is

emphasized by the prevalent negative connotation of the words that penetrated into German forming the Yiddish/Aramaic adstratum. The example furnished by a couple of loanwords which penetrated in the German language will illustrate the situation: According to an article on the Deutsche Welle website[4], "Ische" actually means woman, but in common German usage, the word refers to a woman with a dubious reputation, and the Yiddish term "Mischpoke" simply refers to a family — but when German speakers use the term, they mean shady characters. The negative historical image of jews in the German territories is reflected in the loanwords that have been introduced to vernacular German during the middle ages. Another problem of the book is highlighted by the downplaying of the influence of French on modern English. Dr. Trudgill gave little weight to the impact of the Gallo-Romance language on the morphological and phonological aspects of medieval English. Herbert Schendl, in his work "Middle English: Language Contact" (2012), has provided sufficient evidence to assert that the Norman conquest of England was instrumental in the development of the modern English language. Among the examples of French on English pronunciation we can name the use of non-word-initial stress patterns in some loan words of French origin, the phonemisation of the voiced fricatives /z/ and /v/, and the development of the diphthongs /ui/ and /oi/. Finally, the morphology of Middle English bears the consequences of a French/Norman contact represented by the introduction of new suffixes (pre-, -ous, -ity, -tion,-ture, -ment, -ive and -able).

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