6
Language contact

One of the main reasons why languages change is that they come into contact with other languages. This contact typically involves bilingual speakers, i.e. people who speak the two (or more) languages involved, at least to a certain extent. The languages of such individuals may act upon and influence each other in a wide range of ways: in the adoption of features of pronunciation, the borrowing of words, or the modification of grammar. From a purely linguistic point of view, language contact phenomena are neither good nor bad, but the attitude of speakers to such phenomena is frequently not as neutral (cf. Chapter 1). Since languages and speakers in contact are rarely of equal political, economic or social status and power, the less powerful or prestigious group is frequently disadvantaged. This often leads to language conflict between the speech communities.

Borrowing from other languages

The most frequent and obvious instances of linguistic borrowing are loan words, which enter a language as a result of various political and cultural factors. As discussed in Chapter 3, English started out with a predominantly Germanic vocabulary, but has integrated a huge number of loans in the course of its turbulent history. Similarly, the vocabulary of Romanian, which ultimately developed from Vulgar Latin, has become strongly influenced by Slavic, though Romanian has kept a basically Romance grammar. Such widespread replacement of native vocabulary has occurred in numerous languages of the world.

Lexical borrowing is often triggered by a perceived gap in the vocabulary of the recipient language, particularly with respect to cultural phenomena associated with the source or donor language. Well-known examples of such cultural borrowings in English are *thug* (from Hindi), *sherry* (from Spanish), *waltz* (from German), *ski* (from Norwegian), *sauna* (from Finnish) and, more recently, *glasnost* (from Russian) and *sushi* (from Japanese). This kind of cultural borrowing is abundantly evident in other languages as well, and seems to have greatly increased in modern times with developments in communication.

However, speakers may feel the need for borrowing not because their own language does not have a word for a particular object or concept, but because they think that the equivalent word in the donor language is somehow better or more prestigious. Many indigenous languages in former colonies have adopted large numbers of loans from the formerly more prestigious colonial languages such as French or English. Finnish has borrowed extensively from Germanic and Baltic languages even in such central fields as kinship terms and body parts (e.g. the terms for 'mother', 'daughter', 'sister', 'tooth', 'neck', etc.), though it had corresponding native terms. Loan words can also reflect the predominance of different languages in specific domains of use at particular periods of time. This accounts for the prevalence of French loans in English in such fields as the law (*crime*, *judge*), warfare (*officer*, *enemy*), government and administration (*reign*, *court*), fashion and food (*mirror*, *mutton*). And, as a glance at a fashion magazine or menu will reveal, French still provides English speakers with much of the vocabulary of *haute couture* and *haute cuisine*.

One influence on the extent of borrowing, then, is the perceived prestige of the donor language. Other factors are the length of language contact, the extent of the communication between different speech communities, and the number and status of their bilingual speakers. Borrowing also varies across different word classes. Nouns tend to be the most frequent, followed by adjectives and verbs. It would appear that it is mainly in the naming of objects rather than attributes or processes that people find most deficiencies in their own languages. Pronouns and conjunctions, on the other hand, form closed sets of words

and are therefore only rarely borrowed. But even within these word classes borrowing does occur, as the Scandinavian loans *they*, *their*, and *till* in Middle English illustrate.

Loan words tend to be adapted in varying degrees to the target language, especially if the two languages differ substantially in their phonologies and morphologies. Finnish, for example, does not have initial consonant clusters, so that Germanic *stranð* 'shore' (cf. German *Strand*) has been borrowed into Finnish as *ranta*. Japanese has mainly open syllables, i.e. syllables of the form 'consonant + vowel' (CV), so that English words with closed syllables, i.e. with the structure (C)VC(C) are restructured to fit into the Japanese phonological system, giving, for instance, *futoboro* 'football', *besuboru* 'baseball'.

Lexical borrowings can be subclassified in different ways according to the degree of formal adherence to the foreign model. While loan words are both semantically and formally borrowed from the source language, there are also different kinds of loan translations, i.e. more or less literal translations of complex foreign words into the target language; French *gratte-ciel* and German *Wolkenkratzer*, for example, are loan translations from English *skyscraper*.

Massive borrowing may substantially change the lexical structure of the target language. For example, only the first of the following six English verbs of thinking is Germanic and goes back to the Old English period, while the others are from French ('F') or Latin ('L'), and were introduced only from the fourteenth century onwards, providing the language with a number of stylistically differentiated near-synonyms: *think*; *reflect* (F/L, 15th c.); *meditate* (L, 16th c.); *ponder* (F, 14th c.); *consider* (F, 14th c.); *cogitate* (L, 16th c.).

Less obvious than lexical borrowing is structural borrowing, i.e. borrowing on the phonological, morphological, or syntactic levels. Some additions to the English phoneme inventory, such as the voiced fricatives /v, z, ʒ/ in words like *very*, *zeal*, *measure*, were obviously backed by the enormous intake of French words with these consonants, though native factors have also played some role. There are a number of syntactic constructions in English which are claimed to be due to structural borrowing, such as the 'progressive' form (*I am writing*) from Latin, and the

'empty' do in questions and negations from Celtic, though these claims are controversial (see also Text 13). Changes of the basic word order SVO as discussed in Chapter 4 may also be due to structural borrowing from neighbouring languages and language families.

Extensive structural borrowing on the different linguistic levels can result in linguistic **convergence**, i.e. in increased structural similarity even of genetically unrelated languages.

Convergence and linguistic areas

In situations of long and rather stable language contact, bilingual speakers tend to make their languages structurally more similar to ease communication and the acquisition of the other language(s). Unlike the piecemeal process of borrowing, this mutual convergence of different linguistic systems typically involves languages of similar social status, and brings about changes in all the languages involved. A famous case of mutual convergence is found in the multilingual Indian village of Kupwar, where two Indo-Aryan languages, Urdu and Marathi, and one unrelated Dravidian language, Kannada, are spoken by ethnically and socially different groups. Practically all inhabitants have known and used all three languages in their daily communication with members of the other groups over several centuries. As a result, the originally very different grammatical structures of the three languages have converged to such a high degree in Kupwar that they are now largely identical. On the other hand, the vocabularies of these languages have remained largely different, guaranteeing the linguistic independence of the speech communities.

Linguistic convergence may also occur over extended geographical areas and involve larger numbers of genetically related and unrelated languages, though it may be restricted to a number of linguistic features. Such **linguistic areas** have been found in India, Africa, the north-west coast of North America, etc. The most famous linguistic area is formed by a number of Balkan languages belonging to different language families or branches, such as Albanian, Slavic (varieties of Bulgarian, Macedonian, and to some extent Serbian), Romance (Romanian), and Greek. These languages share a great deal of vocabulary and a number

of grammatical features, for example the placement of the definite article after the noun, the replacement of the infinitive by a different construction, and the specific formation of the numerals from 11 to 19 of the type 'one on ten'. The number and combination of these features vary for the individual Balkan languages, but the important point is that these shared 'Balkanisms' often do not occur in other members of the same language families or even in the same languages spoken outside the Balkan linguistic area. The source of a particular feature is often not clear, but it has been claimed that a language will only adopt features which correspond to a basic developmental tendency in the recipient language.

In Chapter 2 we saw how the family tree model tries to account for the rise of new languages from a common parent or proto-language. (For a further explanation see Text 14.) However, the family tree model cannot account for the fundamental changes which languages may undergo through close language contact. In some cases heavy borrowing and structural convergence have changed a language to such an extent that a genetic relation to parent and sister languages is no longer clear. Genetic relationship is particularly problematic in the case of the two types of contact languages discussed in the next section.

Language birth: pidgins and creoles

In the previous section we saw how languages in contact may become structurally more similar while still remaining separate languages. Under particular circumstances, however, intensive language contact may result in the birth of new types of contact languages, **pidgins** and **creoles**. A pidgin is an auxiliary language with a reduced structure and lexicon which develops to meet the communicative requirements of speakers of mutually unintel-ligible languages, mainly for certain rudimentary transactions in trade, seafaring, or the management of labour in general. This language expediently brings together the elements of the two disparate languages to the extent necessary to fulfil its restricted range of functions, most of which have to do with recurring and predictable situations in the here and now. A pidgin therefore has a highly elementary grammar and vocabulary designed to make