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Conversational priming in language change

The core-function of language in a human society is transmitting information, which is encoded and decoded by means of lexicon and grammar. Ideally, a code should be uniform and consistent in time. Yet, it is an empirical observation that all natural languages change.

In recent years a considerable progress has been achieved in our understanding of the principles underlying grammatical change. What remains to be understood is how the innovations, once emerged, are implemented in the grammar of a language. Since language use presupposes the existence of a language in the minds of its speakers, any grammatical innovation necessarily starts with an individual speaker. However, languages are typically used by communities of speakers to which hundreds, thousands or even millions of individuals may belong. It follows that understanding grammatical change presupposes a model of how grammatical innovations spread among the individual speakers and become the new norm in a language community.

This problem has been traditionally approached in different ways, depending on which part of a language community is assumed to generate the innovations. A family of theories attribute grammatical change to juvenile speakers and their incomplete learning of their first language. Another family of theories sees the locus of grammatical change in adult learners using the language in question as their second or third language system. Both positions presuppose that grammatical innovations – such as new past tense forms of verbs or new case forms of nouns – are capable of spreading from innovating to more conservative speakers, being ultimately adopted also by the latter.

We hypothesize that this transfer of new grammatical forms from innovating to conservative speakers proceeds by means of a phenomenon which may be called conversational priming through repeating responses (cf. Gipper 2020). Having to verbatim repeat a part of the question in order to give an answer, a conservative speaker is not merely passively exposed to new grammatical forms in the speech of others but has to actively use such forms in her or his own utterances. Using new forms in one's own speech may greatly facilitate their integration into one's own grammatical system as admissible variants which can ultimately replace their inherited predecessors.

This hypothesis is supported by synchronic evidence, but it is notoriously difficult to show that particular events of language use have long-term diachronic effects. In our talk, we intend to approach this problem by investigating the implications of our hypothesis for particular types of grammatical constructions in different languages. The key-concept to be used is the notion that repeating responses often yield asymmetrical behaviour of particular grammatical forms. In the talk, we will introduce several different kinds of such asymmetries and discuss the prospects of identifying the hypothetical effects of conversational priming on the diachrony of the relevant constructions.

Gipper, Sonja. 2020. Repeating responses as a conversational affordance for linguistic transmission. Evidence from Yurakaré conversations. *Studies in Language* 44(2). 281–326.