Three Metalinguistic Factors in Linguistic Change: Lexicosemantic Relations, Folk Etymology and False Friends

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Abstract: Linguistic change is caused by a variety of reasons that are generated by the linguistic and cultural particularity of the community of speakers. Generally, the phonological basis produces changes upon the formal unity, while the psychological one affects mainly the semantic unity. The situations in the title are metalinguistic aspects of a particular language or of different languages in contact, in which words define each other due to their formal or semantic similarity; such relationships can cause various types of linguistic changes.
Keywords: *analogy, complementarity, folk etymology, false friends.*

During their history, languages have the tendency to undergo changes in all their compartments, for languages are social activities that are subject to internal and external influences; linguistic changes usually emerge out of the necessity for an easier and more effective communication. But this is not always the case: sometimes change is due to other types of factors and they may lead to a higher degree of ambiguity.

Linguistic change may occur for a variety of reasons, but such reasons are usually connected to what we call the ethnolinguistic factor. In the history of a language we will find a succession of layers called *strata*. When speaking of a family or subfamily of languages, the stratum is usually rather uniform, in spite of its geographical variations, so it is a cohesive factor between the languages of that families, it is the main reason for the similarities that exist between such languages. Nevertheless, the substratum and the adstratum or adstrata are diverse, so they are the main reason for the differences between related languages.

The ethnolinguistic factor is a sum of social, cultural, mental, psychological and linguistic characteristics of the substratum. This factor contains two main aspects: the psychological basis and the phonological basis.

On the one hand, the phonological basis concerns the auditory and articulatory habits of the speakers, so it usually causes linguistic changes of the formal unity of words.

On the other hand, the psychological basis refers to the way speakers of an ethnic group perceive and adapt linguistic reality to the extralinguistic one, thus causing changes in language so that it matches the cultural approach of the community. The psychological basis is responsible mostly for semantic changes, but it may also affect the form of the words.

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Human psychology affects language in a variety of forms, but it mostly refers to *analogy*, i. e. to the changes caused by the necessity of logic and order. Technically, any form of linguistic analogy is a metalinguistic process, and we dare make this assertion based on the fact that analogy refers a linguistic structure to another, which will serve as a pattern.

If we consider, for example, the readjustment of the nominal paradigm in Vulgar Latin, we will notice that many nouns either changed their form or their declension, so that they could match the perception the speaker had on the realities they named. Tree names were feminine in Latin, but they were 2nd declension nouns in *–us*, while fruit names were neutral. A structure such as *prunus alta* would have sounded "wrong" to the Romanized populations, so there were two possibilities: to change the gender of the noun or to change its form (declension). Since the 1st declension was populated mainly by feminine nouns in *–a*, they represented a pattern, and so did the adjectives such as *bonus, -a, -um*. In this particular case, the tree names became masculine, while the plural of the neutral fruit names became a feminine singular in *–a*.

In other cases, changing the gender of a noun would have been impossible, since grammatical gender is sometimes correlated to biological sex. The Latin word for "mother-in-law" was *socer*, a feminine noun in the 2nd declension. For more than one reason, a structure such as *socer bona* would be perceived as unacceptable, so there was a readjustment of this noun, i. e. it split into two different (but related) words: *soc(e)rus*, "father-in-law", and *soc(e)ra*, "mother-in-law". This is one situation where the **lexicosemantic relation** between two linguistic elements determines a linguistic change.

Furthermore, the relation of meaning between two words may produce isolated phonological changes. The same word *socer* we mention above establishes a relation of complementarity with the word *nurus*, "daughter-in-law". Basically, both words can only be defined in relationship with each other, especially the second one (since *socer* can also relate to *generus*, "son-in-law"). In the same way as specified above, *nurus* will become *nura* in Vulgar Latin, and this is the form that was inherited by Romance languages. Still, the most interesting part of how complementarity affects related words is visible in Spanish and Italian, where this semantic relation caused a formal change in *nura*. According to the phonetic laws in these two languages, we would expect the result of Lat. *nura* to be *nora*, yet in both languages we find a diphtongized vowel whose only explanation is the parallel with its complementary word: Sp. *suegra-nuera*, It. *suocera-nuora*. A similar transformation occurred in Portuguese, where both nouns, *sogra* and *nora*, are pronounced with an open vowel [ɔ], while the masculine form *sogro* is pronounced with a closed vowel [o]. This did not happen in Romanian, where Lat. *nora* did not undergo the diphthongization: *soacră-soră*.

Folk etymology, on the other hand, is one of the most common cases of linguistic changes, and it happens due to the ignorance of the speakers. Nevertheless, this too is a form of analogy, as the speakers need to relate to what they already know, i. e. to their lexical "comfort zone". Folk etymology occurs mostly with loanwords, foreign words that bear a certain resemblance in form and/or meaning with an autochthonous word. In this process, the unknown word is defined in relation with a known word, though such a relation is usually an artificial one.

For example, the English word *cockroach* comes from Sp. *cucaracha*; the speakers perceived it as a compound word, formed by *cock*, a bird, and *roach*, a fish, so its form in English defies any law of phonetic change. It is not unusual for insect names to contain references to birds or mammals, such as the *horse lubber* grasshopper or the *crow/ peacock/ owl* butterflies; therefore, the reason for changing *cucaracha* into *cockroach* does not seem that far-fetched. Furthermore, it appears that colloquially, in American English, the noun *roach* is

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understood mostly as "cockroach", so its original meaning remains in a secondary position. Nevertheless, this is an extreme case of folk etymology, and it is not very common.

Sometimes we see folk etymology affect the same word in different ways in different languages, albeit related or not. The Latin word *veruculu-*, "a small iron bar", became *cerrojo*, "latch", in Spanish, by contamination with *cerrar*, "to shut" or "to lock", and *ferrolho* in Portuguese, with the same meaning as in Spanish, due to its contamination with *ferro*, "iron". In both cases the analogy is obvious, since the above-mentioned iron bar was used to lock a door or block a gate.

Finally, the third phenomenon we need to discuss is also a form of analogy due to the ignorance of the speakers. The so-called **false friends** are usually defined as similar words that exist in different languages, but have different meanings. In our opinion, there is a certain ambiguity regarding this concept, as many times scholars illustrate the category of false friends by citing cognate words that may just preserve a certain semantic similitude. Perhaps we should speak of *false friends* when similitude between the two words is fortuitous, and of "*false brothers*" if the two words share a common etymology, but their semantic evolution is divergent. Such distinction could be useful to our discussion, as most of the time fortuitous homonyms do not generate linguistic change. For example, *cutie* means "box" in Romanian; there is no genealogical relation to the English word, neither is there a semantic compatibility, so we consider it impossible for the English word to affect the Romanian one or vice versa, not even in a concrete situation of communication or translation. In our opinion, the "false brothers" are the ones that trigger most linguistic changes, and this happens precisely because of their common origin, which leaves traces of common semantic contents in the two words.

In the last decades we have witnessed an avalanche of English words in Romanian. Some of them are necessary loans that entered our language along with the new technological realities they denominate; they have the advantage to be more precise that, let's say, their translation or approximation in Romanian, and they are international words, so they facilitate communication with people or entities from other cultures. But on the other hand there is a trend to use English words in situations where they are not necessary, especially in corporatist communication or in motivational speeches.

We have noticed that analogy based on "false brothers" can affect words in more than one way, but its main forms are the semantic calque (loan translation) and morphological derivation.

For the first situation, the premise requires the existence of compatible cognate words in both languages, i. e. words that share a common etymology and a grammatical category (same part of speech). Let's take, for example, the Latin verb *applicare*; both in English and in Romanian, the cognate verbs are loanwords from French (although some Romanian dictionaries point to a multiple etymology). But while the Romanian word means "to lay, to attach, to adhere" or "to put to work", the English word has more meanings than those, including "to devote oneself, to work hard", and also "to submit a request for a job". The last meaning has become more and more common in Romanian in the past few years, as it fills in a terminological void left by the communist regime, when nobody "applied" for jobs, but instead were assigned jobs by the administrative apparatus.

The second situation refers to the creation of new words by derivation from stems that share a common etymology with the foreign word. For example, the noun *focus* is a technical word in Romanian, and it refers strictly to the focus of a lens or mirror or another optical device. Its relation with the English noun and verb is undeniable, so lately we have witnessed the creation of a new verb in Romanian, *a focusa*, a copy of its English

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cognate that is used mostly in corporatist and motivational discourses. Most young speakers prefer this new verb instead of the old one, *a focaliza*, which they consider too obsolete or too technical to use in reference to people instead of lenses.

The problem of the false friends (or "false brothers") is usually approached as a major issue in teaching foreign languages, for the students to be aware of the linguistic "traps" in the use of that foreign language they study; yet the linguistic changes caused by this phenomenon are considered to be mistakes – and treated as such – and so are the changes caused by folk etymology that happen at present. But, after all, any linguistic change, independently of its reasons or moment in time, is due to a certain type of "mistake". Phonetic changes that transformed ancient languages into modern ones were due to the impossibility of hearing and pronouncing accurately the sounds of a foreign language, yet no linguist seems to mind them. Surely, languages are created by speakers, not by linguists, but the changes that were acceptable two thousand years ago are less acceptable today, when we benefit from organized educational systems, from mass access to books and from various types of media that should contribute to the development of languages while preserving their individuality.

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