# LANGUAGE CHANGE AS A MATTER OF FACT

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**Abstract**

All physical aspects of the universe and all aspects of human life are subject to change, and languages are no exception. Indeed, "one of the eternal truths about living languages is that they all change" (Winkler, 2007, p. 197). Individual changes can be quite abrupt and obvious, as when new words make an appearance and become popular. Normally, however, language change is gradual, almost imperceptible. In fact, its speakers are usually unaware of the changes as they are occurring, as with the slow alteration in pronunciation when one generation speaks slightly different from another. In light of this, in the majority of cases, language change is the consequence of changes in the socio-political structure of a particular population.

**Key Words:** language, change, socio-political structure

All physical aspects of the universe and all aspects of human life are subject to change, and languages are no exception. Indeed, "one of the eternal truths about living languages is that they all change"[1]. Individual changes can be quite abrupt and obvious, as when new words make an appearance and become popular. Normally, however, language change is gradual, almost imperceptible. In fact, its speakers are usually unaware of the changes as they are occurring, as with the slow alteration in pronunciation when one generation speaks slightly different from another. In light of this, in the majority of cases, language change is the consequence of changes in the socio-political structure of a particular population.

The process of language change does not happen overnight. A number of linguists have tried to seek the mechanisms of language change in order to explain the reasons why languages change. In this regard, this essay will discuss two examples of linguistic change in terms of phonological change  in light of a language change

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[1] Cited in Winkler, E. G. (2007). *Understanding language.* (New York: Continuum), p. 197.

perspective that is suggested by Holmes[2] which is that language change - variation over time - has its origin in spatial (or regional) and social variation. There is further discussion of this, which presents some perspectives why the knowledge of language change is important for both teachers and learners.

All language change has its origins in variation. Fromkin et al.[3] state that "many modern languages were first regional dialects that became widely spoken and highly differentiated, finally becoming separate languages". The possibility of a linguistic change exists as soon as a new form develops and begins to be used alongside an existing form. If the new form then spreads, the change is in progress. If it eventually displaces the old form, the change has become a 'fait accompli'-it has gone to completion.

A number of linguists have asserted that all languages have undergone changes in the lexicon, phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic components[4]. Historical change can affect all of these components of language. Phonological change is the area of language change that has received the most study. In light of phonological change, it shows that "a sound change occurs when one sound is replaced in people's speech by another over a period of time"[5]. The principle of the regularity of phonological change has been particularly important to linguists when comparing different languages for genetic relatedness.

By establishing that the sound differences between similar root words are the result of regular sound changes that occurred in the languages, linguists can support the conclusion that the different languages descended from the same original language. In this respect, sound change is caused by a number of factors such as geographical and social status differences in a society. In terms of the geographical factor, Labov (as cited in Wardhaugh, 2006)[6] points out that the expansion and homogenization of the mass media effects linguistic change and the process occurs at a rapid rate.

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[2] Holmes, J. (2008). *An introduction to Sociolinguistics.* (3rd ed.). (London: Longman-Pearson Education), p. 205.

[3] Cited in Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., Hyams, N., Collins, P., Amberber, M., & Harvey, M. (2007). *An introduction to language.* (6th ed.). (Melbourne: Nelson Thomson), p. 448.

[4] Fromkin, *op.cit.*, p. 447.

[5] Cited in Holmes, *op.cit.*, p. 206.

[6] Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An introduction to sociolinguistics.* (5th ed.). (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell), p. 195

Phonological change in terms of variation over time has been evident in the English language. This type of change can be seen in one of the processes of phonological change called consonant deletion, which is a phonetic process that deletes a consonant. For example, Holmes[7] illustrates this process by use of the word-initial cluster [kn] found in Old and Middle English such as in knight and knit. In Old English and Middle English those words were pronounced with the word-initial cluster [kn], in other words, [k] was not silent. However, by an ongoing process, the [k] sound was subsequently lost and gave way to the modern English pronunciation. From this example, it can be seen that phonological change does not take place overnight.

In fact, people do not go to sleep, and then wake up the next morning changing the way they pronounce certain words. Variation exists whether the change involves a gradual, imperceptible shift in the phonetic value of a vowel within a continuum of phonetic space or whether there is an abrupt, readily transparent change involving a major syntactic realignment of phrasal constituents[8]. As it has been noted that linguistic changes do not happen abruptly, changes are more gradual, particularly changes in phonological and syntactic system.

Contemporary linguists in general hold a neutral or even positive attitude towards change. On the positive side it has been claimed that changes are necessary to make languages more communicatively effective as they become attuned to changing social needs[9]. Variation is in fact essential for language change, since it provides the material upon which social processes operate to produce significant social dimensions and categories, such as ethnic identification and stratification. The effect of social factors are most pronounced in periods of rapid social and linguistic change as is found in occurrence of pidginization and creolization[10]. Based accounts of

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[7] Holmes, *op.cit.*, p. 206.

[8] Wolfram, W. (n.d.). Variation and language, an overview in encyclopedia of language and linguistics. (2nd ed.). Retrieved May 6, 2010, from http://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/docs/pdfs/walt/Language_variation-sgl.pdf

[9] Winkler, *op.cit.*, p. 198-199.

[10] Holmes, *op.cit.*, p. 83-88.

language change documentation of variation have become an essential research task in sociolinguistics[11].

With regard to the sound change, social factors also contribute to this linguistic phenomenon. Language change typically originates as variation often conditioned by a number of social factors, such as age, gender, social status, ethnic identity, religion, education. Some generalizations about socio-linguistic factors in language change can be classified into: linguistic change originates in the intermediate social classes; innovators of change are people of high status who are looked up to by the speech community; innovators have a lot of social interaction; and Milroy & Milroy[12] assert that women are accounted as the ones who lead most linguistic changes.

An example of phonological change based on social factors is the use of post-vocalic accents [r] which is called 'rhotic', regarded as rural and uneducated accents in large parts of England[13]. However, Holmes further explains that this accent in a large part of America is alive and well and used extensively. Moreover, post-vocalic [r] is used by almost all New Yorkers in their most formal and careful speech. Deriving from the examples mentioned, it can be clearly noted that the pronunciation of [r] in English speaking communities shows rich examples of the complexity of linguistic variation and language change in terms of geographical differences[14]. Change may radiate outward geographically so that the change is less firmly entrenched the further one gets from the origination point of the change. Similarly, a sound change occurs when one sound is replaced in people's speech by another over a period of time, or when a sound disappears as will be illustrated below. On this  account, Milroy and Milroy (1992, cited in Milroy & Gordon, 2003)[15] suggest that the dynamics of language change which assumes that mobile middle-class

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[11]  Blount, G.B. & Sanches, M. (1977). Introduction: Sociocultural dimensions of language change. In B. G. Blount & M. Sanches (eds.), *Sociocultural dimension of language change*, pp. 1-18.

[12] Milroy, J. & Milroy, L. (1993). Mechanism of change in urban dialects: The role of class, social network and gender. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 3*(1), 57-78.

[13] Holmes, *op.cit.*, p. 207.

[14] *Ibid*, p. 223.

[15] Milroy, L. & Gordon, M. (2003). *Sociolinguistics: Method and interpretation.* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 130

speakers are particularly likely to contract loose-knit ties and are thus likely to be important agents of change.

It has also been asserted that a linguistic change originates in the intermediate classes. In regard to sound change, it is contended from social perspective that innovators of change are people of high status who are looked up to by the speakers of the community. As Labov (as cited in Wardhaugh, 2006)[16] found out "the speakers who are most advanced in the sound changes are those with the highest status in their local community". For example, their advanced social position and the high esteem they held in by the local community rule out the traditional charge of careless ignorance of the norms of society.

The knowledge of language change is considered essential for language teachers and learners to understand. By having the basic knowledge of linguistic change, both teachers and learners will be aware that the form of a language is subject to change and it is a natural part of human languages.  In all the languages of the world, some words are lost and others acquired, while others change their meaning or gain additional meanings. Having said this, the teachers and the learners will not be surprised if in the future they find changes in linguistics aspects such as phonological and lexical. They might rather understand that this is a normal change taking place in living languages.

In conclusion, considering the notion that language change as a variation over time has its origin in regional and social variation, it is evident that any language is subject to change. Indeed, a lexicographer, Martin (as cited in Fromkin et al., 2007)[17] points out that "no language as depending on arbitrary use and custom can ever be permanently the same, but will always be in a mutable and fluctuating state; and what is deem'd polite and elegant in one age, may be accounted uncouth and barbarous in another". One of the most common linguistic changes is phonological change which is related to how certain words are pronounced. The example of consonant deletion [kn] in Old English in words knight, knee, knot and such like, which gave way to modern English pronunciation, shows evidence of language change over time. In this regard, the knowledge of language change is considered imperative for both language teachers and learners to be aware that one form of a language is likely to undergo

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[16] Cited in *op.cit.*, p. 194.

[17] Cited in *op.cit.*, p. 446,

change. This awareness will help them to be flexible in teaching and learning a language.

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