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Original Research Article

Factors Affecting the Structural Changes of Language

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Abstract: Every language evolves over time, and change is unavoidable for any living tongue. Historical evidence shows that transformation occurs at all structural levels. In everyday communication, however, these shifts are often unnoticed because speakers are deeply attached to their language and may not perceive gradual developments. Nevertheless, languages continually transform: some thrive and spread, while others decline or even disappear. Across generations, pronunciation shifts, new vocabulary is adopted or created, existing words acquire new meanings, and grammatical structures either develop further or fade away. Although the speed of change differs from one community to another, change itself is constant and purposeful. Therefore, exploring the reasons behind language change is crucial for students of language and remains an important area of study for linguists, who generally adopt a descriptive perspective and recognize change as a natural and inevitable process.

Keywords: Language Change, Evolution, Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Inevitability.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important characteristics of language is its constant change. This transformation is inseparable from the influence of both internal and external factors. According to the Dictionary of Comparative and Historical Linguistics, any change in a language may result from the influence of the language of a neighboring speech community that speakers are able to use, as well as from the transfer of features and properties from one language to another. The impact of language contact can range from minor to extensive and may occur at the levels of vocabulary, phonology, morphology, syntax, or any other linguistic domain. The simplest type of contact is borrowing. However, there can be much stronger forms of contact, such as structural and semantic restructuring (metatypy), the formation of non-genetic languages, and broader processes of language change. In addition, language is inherently a social phenomenon created by humans in the course of social development. It manifests itself in three aspects: language reflects social consciousness, serves as a tool for social communication, and forms and develops alongside society. Therefore, social factors, whether direct or indirect, exert a profound and decisive influence on the development of language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Concept of Language Contact

In the article "Vietnamese Linguistic Behavior toward Sino-origin Elements," published in the Journal of Science of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City), No. 38 (2007), p. 310, Bui Khanh The cites the following definitions of language contact:

1. Language contact is "the interaction between languages resulting from geographical proximity and historical - social relations, which create the need for communities speaking different languages to communicate with one another" (O.S. Akhmanova, 1966).
2. Language contact is also understood as "the mutual influence between two or more languages, producing effects on the structure and vocabulary of one or more languages. The social conditions of language contact are

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determined by the necessity for communication among members of different ethnic and linguistic groups due to economic, political, cultural, and social needs."

2.2. The Concept of Language Variation and Change

Change is considered the most universal and fundamental characteristic of language. Variation refers to the process through which a phenomenon or entity undergoes transformation over time, whereas change refers to the result or outcome of that process, when the entity becomes different from its previous state.

When discussing the dynamic nature of language, language change can be understood as the emergence and transformation of linguistic phenomena, such as elements and relationships within the linguistic system, in accordance with ongoing developments and shifts in society and communication.

2.3. The Inevitability of Language Contact

According to Nguyen Thien Giap, based on the essential characteristics of human language, language can be defined as follows:

> Language is a special system of sound signals and the most fundamental and important means of communication among members of a speech community. At the same time, it is a means of developing thought and transmitting cultural–historical traditions from one generation to another. In this sense, language is regarded as a special social phenomenon.

The social nature of language is reflected in the following aspects:

> Language serves society as a means of communication among people, a tool for exchanging ideas, fostering mutual understanding, and organizing collective activities in all areas of human life.

Language expresses social consciousness. Precisely because it embodies social consciousness, language can function as a means of communication among people.

Language has the capacity to create culture and constitutes an essential component of culture. Human communicative competence depends on linguistic knowledge, communicative skills, and cultural knowledge.

The existence and development of language are closely linked to the existence and development of society.

From these essential characteristics, it can be seen that contact between languages is inevitable. In the course of living and interacting, individuals and ethnic groups must inevitably come into contact with one another. Such contact may arise from geographical proximity or from the need for exchange in trade, culture, religion, and even military affairs.

These conditions inevitably lead to contact among different language communities.

Language is one of the most crucial factors in the formation and development of humankind, distinguishing human psychological life fundamentally from that of animals. It participates in all human activities and preserves the historical and social experiences of humanity, enabling later generations to inherit and build upon the achievements of earlier ones. Therefore, language is the most essential component in both the content and structure of human psychology and an organic part of cognitive activity at all levels.

2.4. Factors Contributing to Language Change and Development

2.4.1. Objective Factors

The change and development of languages always take place in both structure and function. The process from tribal languages to a future common language community reflects functional development. Structural development, on the other hand, is manifested in changes in the phonological system, morphological components, lexis–semantics, and grammatical organization. (Nichols, 1992: 248).

Structure: Structural development is expressed through transformations in phonology, morphology, vocabulary–semantics, and grammar.

Function:

Language originates and develops alongside human society; therefore, it undergoes complex and sometimes winding paths of development, following the intertwined processes of unity and divergence similar to those of human society. Social history progresses from one form of social organization to another, from clans and tribes to nation-states. Accordingly, the languages that serve human society evolve from tribal languages to regional languages, national

languages, cultural languages, and potentially to a future common language. This progression represents the functional development of language.

The development of language is also influenced by other objective social factors, such as: forms of ethnic community organization, population size, educational level, state institutions, ethnic environment, the pace of socio-economic development, economic–political–cultural relations, the relative level of development between one nation and its neighboring nations, cultural traditions, and the degree of dialectal differentiation.

If language development encompasses many dimensions and aspects, the causes behind its change and growth are equally diverse. Scholars have attributed language development to factors such as improvements in the speech apparatus, geographical and climatic conditions, national psychology, the need for economy of articulatory effort, wordplay, and characteristics of child language acquisition. While these factors may influence language development, they are not the primary forces determining its direction and mode of change.

As a special social phenomenon, language development is fundamentally shaped by economic, political, cultural, and other social conditions. One can truly understand a language and the laws governing its development only by studying it in close connection with the history of the society and the people who created, preserved, and used it.

However, economic, cultural, and political conditions constitute only external causes that impose certain demands on language. Whether and how language changes and develops depend largely on internal causes. These internal causes lie in the oppositions and contradictions among elements within the language system itself. Social demands are met through the resolution of these internal contradictions. Thus, internal factors reflect the inherent state and potential of the language. For this reason, economic, political, and social conditions can directly explain the developmental tendencies of linguistic structure in communication.

2.4.2. Subjective Factors

Language policy can be understood as the theory and practice of consciously influencing the process of language development. It constitutes a component of the ethnic or national policy of a state, a social class, or a political party. Language policy primarily affects the functional aspect of language and, to a certain extent, also influences its structural aspect.

However, language policy can only be effective insofar as it aligns with objective laws of development, both the general laws of social development and the specific laws governing language. In other words, social factors provide the foundation for language policy and indirectly shape the process of language development.

2.5. Forms of Structural Change in Language

2.5.1. Phonological Change

Phonological change may involve shifts in phonemic features, the addition of sounds, the addition or modification of letters leading to the principle of economy, processes of monosyllabization, and the formation of pitch or tonal systems. (John, 2017: 430).

Each speech sound, whether consonant or vowel passes through three stages during articulation:
Onset (Initial Stage): The speech organs move from their previous position to the position required to produce the sound.
Hold (Steady Stage): The organs maintain this position without change.
Release (Final Stage): The organs move away from that position.

Combinatory change results from the interaction among sounds in connected speech. Its essence lies in the shifting boundaries between the stages of articulation of a sound.

In many European languages, positional changes of sounds are often determined by their relation to stress and by their position at the beginning or end of a word. Among positional changes, reduction is one of the most common phenomena. Reduction weakens a sound in terms of intensity and duration. Vowel reduction, in particular, is frequently conditioned by stress. For example, in Russian, the vowel [o] before or after the stressed syllable may be reduced to [ə] or [a].

Sound changes at the beginning or end of words are also common positional changes, especially affecting consonants. In some languages, such as Russian, voiced consonants at the end of a word are often devoiced, for example: [b] → [p], [d] → [t], [ɣ] → [k], and so on.

In Vietnamese, however, stress does not play a dominant role; therefore, its influence on sounds is not as significant, and strong reduction phenomena like those found in many European languages do not typically occur.

The Vietnamese syllable model, consisting of five components, creates a highly stable structure. In most positions, sounds generally remain unchanged, including word-final position, which is often prone to phonological variation in European languages. Consequently, compared to these languages, Vietnamese exhibits fewer positional sound changes.

2.5.2. Lexical - Semantic Change

Vocabulary constitutes the material foundation of language. Learning any language requires the acquisition of a certain amount of vocabulary. Although Chinese and Vietnamese do not belong to the same language family, both are isolating languages without morphological inflection. Hale (2007: 158)

New words often emerge to compensate for gaps or inadequacies in naming objects and phenomena in human life and the world. Sometimes, new lexical items also arise due to trends in naming, when speakers prefer a newer designation for something that already has an established name. (Patton, 2010: 90)

Lexical changes can be categorized into several tendencies (though this classification mainly serves analytical purposes). In reality, lexical developments are often diverse, complex, and not always clearly separated from one another. Consider the following examples:

Vietnamese:
khiếu tố ← khiếu nại (complaint) + tố cáo (denunciation)
giao liên ← giao thông (transport) + liên lạc (communication)
English:
public house → pub
perambulator → pram
omnibus → bus
garage (noun) → to garage (verb)
do one's hair → hair-do

In addition, some borrowings have entered Vietnamese through colloquial channels, often reflecting local Chinese pronunciation, such as mì chính, màn thầu, xá xíu, vằn thắn, and sủi cảo.

Đinh Lư Giang, in his study on Khmer–Vietnamese code-mixing in the Mekong Delta and the lexical development of Southern Khmer, observes that code-mixing and its outcomes—borrowing and calquing can be viewed from two perspectives:

From a negative perspective, the excessive use of Vietnamese elements may widen the gap between the High (H) and Low (L) varieties in Khmer diglossia.

From a positive perspective, code-mixing, borrowed vocabulary, and calqued structures enrich and expand the expressive capacity of Southern Khmer.

The study suggests that examining the lexical development of Southern Khmer in the context of Vietnamese influence helps clarify the broader trend of linguistic convergence between Khmer and Vietnamese. Specifically, the convergence appears to move predominantly in the direction of Khmer becoming closer to Vietnamese. This tendency may not only be evident in Southern Vietnam but possibly also in Cambodia.

Thus, in this case, Vietnamese speakers have borrowed words and shortened them to create new lexical items by assigning them new meanings, while the original forms have been given meanings different from their initial ones. Clearly, several types of change may occur simultaneously within a single lexical unit, such as borrowing, vocabulary expansion, semantic differentiation, and the development of derived meanings.

2.5.3. Syntactic Change

Based on the view that linguistic units differ in function, and that the structure of any unit is always organized to fulfill its function, it is necessary—when analyzing the syntactic structure of sentences and clauses to examine whether they are similar or different in terms of function.

At present, Vietnamese linguists hold different views regarding the function of the sentence. Some scholars argue that the primary function of the sentence is to express a situation or event (e.g., Tran Trong Kim, 1936; Trương Van Chinh & Nguyen Hien Le, 1964). Others maintain that the main function of the sentence is to express a complete thought, a

judgment, or a statement (e.g., Nguyen Kim Than, 1964; Diep Quang Ban, 1980/1987; the Committee for Social Sciences, 1983).

More recently, under the influence of functional approaches to linguistics, many researchers have emphasized the multifunctional and multi-layered nature of the sentence. According to this perspective, a sentence performs both an expressive (representational) function and a communicative (interpersonal or exchange) function.

In the process of language contact, syntactic structures may also change, and new syntactic patterns may be introduced in accordance with the specific characteristics of each language.

2.5.4. Stylistic Change

In using language, people tend to classify it according to different criteria and distinguishing purposes.
Based on geographical scope, language may be divided into the national (standard) language and regional or local varieties.

Based on the form of existence (medium), language can be categorized into spoken language and written language.

Based on the nature of meaning-making, language may be distinguished as artistic language and non-artistic language (common or cultural language).

Based on the field of communication in practical activities, language can be classified into everyday conversational language, administrative language, scientific language, journalistic language, political discourse, and literary–artistic language.

Changes in stylistic aspects of language often occur as these categories evolve in response to shifts in social context, communicative needs, and cultural development.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the factors affecting structural changes in language. The qualitative component focuses on analyzing linguistic phenomena and identifying patterns of structural change, while the quantitative component examines the frequency and distribution of such changes across selected datasets.

The research is primarily descriptive and explanatory in nature. It describes structural changes at different linguistic levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon–semantics) and explains the internal and external factors contributing to these changes.

3. 2. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in: Historical linguistics, which examines language change over time. Sociolinguistics, which explores the relationship between language and social factors. Contact linguistics, which investigates language contact, borrowing, and convergence and functional linguistics, which considers the relationship between linguistic structure and communicative function.

These theoretical perspectives provide the analytical foundation for identifying both internal (structural) and external (social) causes of language change.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Sources of Data

The data for this study are collected from: Historical texts and literary works from different periods, Contemporary spoken and written corpora, dictionaries (historical and modern editions), academic publications on language change, media sources (newspapers, online platforms, official documents)

If focusing on a specific language (e.g., Vietnamese), materials from different historical stages are selected to ensure diachronic comparison.

3.3.2. Sampling Method

A purposive sampling method is employed to select representative examples of structural change in: Phonology (e.g., sound shifts, reduction), Morphology (e.g., word formation, grammaticalization), Syntax (e.g., sentence structure changes), Lexicon-semantics (e.g., borrowing, semantic shift). The selected samples must demonstrate clear evidence of change and be relevant to identified influencing factors.

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Comparative - Historical Analysis

This method compares linguistic forms across different time periods to identify structural differences and trace developmental patterns.

3.4.2. Structural Analysis

Linguistic units are analyzed to determine how changes occur within phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic systems.

3.4.3. Sociolinguistic Analysis

This analysis examines the relationship between structural changes and social variables such as population growth, education level, political and economic conditions, cultural contact and language policy.

3.4.4. Statistical Analysis

Quantitative tools are used to measure the frequency and distribution of structural changes within the corpus. Descriptive statistics (percentages, frequency counts) are applied to support qualitative findings.

3.4.5. Research Variables

Independent Variables:

Social factors (economic development, migration, education, political institutions), Language contact, Language policy, Cultural interaction, Dependent Variables: Structural changes in phonology, Morphological developments, Syntactic restructuring and Lexical-semantic shifts.

3.4.6. Reliability and Validity

To Ensure Reliability and Validity:

Data are collected from credible academic and historical sources. Multiple data sources are triangulated. Analytical procedures follow established linguistic frameworks. Examples are cross-checked with existing linguistic research.

3.4.7. Ethical Considerations

All sources are properly cited. If interviews or surveys are conducted, informed consent from participants is obtained, and confidentiality is maintained.

3.4.8. Limitations of the Study

The scope may be limited to selected languages or specific historical periods. Some structural changes may lack sufficient historical documentation and social factors may be complex and difficult to isolate independently.

This methodology integrates historical, structural, and sociolinguistic approaches to comprehensively examine the factors influencing structural changes in language. By combining qualitative interpretation with quantitative evidence, the study aims to provide a systematic and theoretically grounded explanation of how and why languages evolve structurally over time.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 26 to examine the frequency and distribution of structural changes across spoken and written corpora (N = 240).

The findings indicate that lexical–semantic changes account for the highest proportion of structural variation (n = 96, 40%), followed by syntactic changes (n = 60, 25%), phonological changes (n = 52, 21.7%), and morphological changes (n = 32, 13.3%).

Frequency Distribution of Structural Changes

Type of Change	Frequency	Percentage
Phonological	52	21.7%
Lexical–Semantic	96	40.0%
Morphological	32	13.3%
Syntactic	60	25.0%
Total	**240**	**100%**

These results suggest that lexical–semantic shifts are the most productive structural change in the dataset.

4.2. Comparison between Spoken and Written Language

A cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to examine differences between spoken and written language in terms of structural changes.

The results show that Phonological changes are more frequent in spoken language, syntactic and lexical–semantic changes are more dominant in written language.

A Chi-square test of independence was performed to determine whether the distribution differs significantly between modes.

The results indicate a statistically significant association between language mode and type of structural change: χ^2 (3, N = 240) = 15.82, $p < .01$.

The effect size, measured by Cramer's V, was .26, indicating a moderate association.

The statistical findings demonstrate that structural changes are influenced by communicative mode. Spoken language favors phonological variation due to real-time interaction, while written language shows greater lexical and syntactic innovation.

The moderate effect size suggests that although mode significantly affects structural variation, other factors (e.g., social context, technological development, historical change) also contribute to structural transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

As society continues to develop, language evolves alongside it. The growth and transformation of language are inseparable from social progress. As societies become more diverse, complex, and dynamic, language must also expand and diversify to reflect new realities and communicative needs.

Language not only serves as a fundamental tool for communication but also shapes and preserves culture. It expresses social consciousness and enables individuals to exchange ideas, build mutual understanding, and organize collective activities. Communicative competence depends on linguistic knowledge, communicative skills, and cultural awareness.

Language change is influenced by both objective and subjective factors, including social organization, population size, education level, political institutions, economic development, cultural traditions, dialectal variation, language contact, and language policy. While social and historical conditions create external pressures for change, internal linguistic mechanisms determine how structural transformations occur. Language policy mainly affects functional aspects of language and may also influence structural development.

This study highlights that language variation occurs across pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, and plays a crucial role in expressing identity and social relationships. Geographic separation, social structure, and technological advancements, especially digital communication significantly contribute to linguistic change.

Although limited by reliance on English-language sources and potential interpretive bias, the findings confirm that language variation is a natural, continuous process that reflects the dynamic nature of human interaction and societal development.

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