Why are languages so different?

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Why is related to *how*

Related questions, therefore:

Why and how do languages *change*?

    (becoming *different* from earlier stages)

Why do they change in particular directions?

How is this related to language *variation*?

    (cross-language and within-language)

What does 'Universal' mean?

What could it mean to have a universal language?

There hasn't been much systematic study of dialects of Esperanto – but international languages like Latin (or English or Spanish) show clear evidence of developing varied forms as they spread. Hence we now talk about "World Englishes" rather than pretending English is invariant or even has one invariant standard version. Somehow, variation is the norm – how?

Side note on visual languages

This is just as true of signed languages as spoken languages.

ASL is descended from French Sign Language, but it is not identical to it.

Signed languages are typologically less diverse (it seems) than spoken ones, but still (1) varied and (2) changing!

Standards, change, dialects

So why don't we speak Shakespearean English, or Ango-Saxon, or Indo-European?

And if (despite not being identical to earlier forms) our present "Standard" is acceptable ("right"), then how can we say that other non-standard variants are "wrong"?

E.g. complete loss of *thee/thou*; increasing loss of pronominal inflection…

Is AAVE just ahead of the curve in further reducing verbal inflection?

Lects

So – within our dialect, do we all speak the same way?

NO. (Just ask any beginning linguistics class for grammatical judgments.)

PLUS, individual people use differing forms in differing circumstances, for the same meanings.

E.g. *Professor Slobin/Dan*

Or written Do you want to go out for sushi?

Spoken: *Wanna go out for sushi?*

THUS...

Variation is everywhere; we each have multiple grammars, some more active and some more passive. (Most American English speakers have little trouble understanding other American English dialect speakers.)

Language change – that is, a new range of variation from the earlier one – does *not* mean sudden replacement of one form by another, but *coexistence* of different forms (variation), and then possible eventual preference for one rather than the other.

What are the options?

As Dan pointed out:

Not every possible language structure is possible, and even among possible ones some are far more common than others – seemingly preferred.

Constraints on processing are real. For example, word order variation is extreme BUT if you have a really free word order, you need some way other than order to decide how the words are related – like morphological marking (more on this).

Variation in contextual interpretation

You say and "hear" one thing, I "hear" another.

Latin intervocalic ss vs s – still alive in Italian

French s vs z (*mission* vs. *musique*)

Intervocalic voicing!

An apron < a napron

An orange < borrowed Spanish *naranja*

Grammatical reanalysis

Latin *salv-o* "I save"

      salv-am "I will save"

      salv-ere habeo "I have to save"

Serments de Strasbourg (842)

salvar-ai "I will save"

prindr-ai "I will take"

(Modern French *sauver-ai, prendr-ai, & ai*)

Cycles of grammatical change?

One of the many typological differences in language: cline from "agglutination" to "isolation."

Chinese – highly isolating: no inflections, one word is one or two morphemes.

English – low level of inflections

Turkish - high level of inflections

Atsugewi – one multi-morpheme word is a sentence.

BUT

English, which now says **he (wi)ll go** *to Berkeley,* is a descendent of Indo-European, which looked a lot more like Latin, and therefore would have had an inflected verb form like Latin **vadet** "go-3sg-fut", with no separate subject noun or auxiliary verb.

How does this happen?

Look at the French data.

Grammatical competition

Phrasal *prendere habeo* won over inflected *prehend-am* in late Latin.

And by phonological reduction and reanalysis, it became the inflected future *prendr-ai*.

Now that form has competition from a French phrasal GO-future, as English *I will take* has competition from I'm going to take.

Je vais prendre vs *Je prendrai*.

Footnote: what about those French subject pronouns?
(Fleischman 1982, Lambrecht 1981)

Cycle

Salv-am "I will save"

Salvere habeo

Salvarai > sauverai

Je vais sauver

Or even *Moi j'vais sauver*

Loss of affixes, replacement by lexical auxiliary or lexical pronoun, reduction of that auxiliary or pronoun to an affix - and start over.

So – difference is?

Closely related languages could be at different points in this cycle – and thus look different in what kind of morphology they have.

COOL THING:

There are very orthogonal ways to be different, as there are orthogonal ways to change.

Your language could be extremely isolating or very agglutinative – and that doesn't tell me things like whether it's a classifier language, or has a complex color term system, or…

Sociolinguistics

Who copies whom?
How do standards coexist with dialects and registers?
How are you showing social identity by use of the different codes you use?
And how do multilingual situations affect grammar?

Multilingualism

Coexistence of languages, and shared speakers, generally brings about change in at least one.

Super-stratum, sub-stratum (Anglo-Saxon, Celtic languages, and Norman French)

Pidgins and creoles.

Multilingualism

Close multilingualism may result in:

(1) Grammatical convergence (Kupwar: Gumperz and Wilson 1971) – Kannada, Urdu, Marathi, Telegu.

No one language dominates: local Kannada has adopted the Marathi/Urdu use of accusative case for "dative" uses of human objects, while local Urdu and Marathi have adopted the Kannada "semantic" gender system.

Sprachbund phenomena – e.g. the Balkans

(1) More rarely, a "mixed language"

Mitchif (Métis) has essentially French nouns and Cree (Algonquian) verbs.

ASL/English bilingualism

ASL grammatical topic marking – raised
    eyebrows.

American English speakers - ~80% of the time.

CODAS – 100% of the time in English as well as
    in ASL.

(Vs. ASL questions...)

(Jenny Pyers Berkeley diss, Pyers and Emmorey
2008.))

Word order competition and change

Breton: *Lenn a   rae   Mona al levr.*

    Read part. do-imp3sg Mona the book.

    Mona a   lenne   al levr.

    Mona part read-imp3sg the book.

    Al levr a lenne Mona.

French: Mona lisait   le livre.

    Mona read-imp.3sg the book

"Mona was reading the book."

Sociolinguistics, cont.

Competition between registers coincides with typological forces.

English loss of *whom* and reduction to *who*?
Colloquial register eventually makes it up to the higher level (everyone was using both).
And English is moving solidly towards *even* less inflection (cf. Jespersen!)

How do words change meaning: MORE variation in contextual interpretation

Changing LEVELS of category

girl used to mean "young person"

dog used to mean a specific kind of dog

and, well, *hound* used to mean "dog"

(cf. German *Hund*)

Well, when the same DOG could be called *the dog* or *the German shepherd* or even described as a *mammal* or an *animal*.

More about common directions?

"Basic level" of categorization (Mervis and Rosch 1982) – historically first, acquired first, used most... (*Dog, mammal, retriever*)

From there, "broadening" and "narrowing" to superordinate and subordinate levels.

OAK, COTTONWOOD > TREE

DEER (vs. "cotton deer") > "ungulate" > SHEEP (vs. "forest deer") (Mayan, Berlin et al. 1973)

How else do words change meaning?

Borrowing – which is not quite borrowing…

French *porc* means "pig (animal)" and "pig meat"

Pork only means the meat.

(cf. *Beef , veal*)

Alto means a particular musical voice range.

Italian *alto* also means "high (pitch or height or price), tall, loud, deep, upper, northern"

When things change, words change?

Car comes ultimately from Latin *carrus* "chariot, cart" via Old French.

It has stuck with its meaning of "wheeled vehicle" but as the vehicles changed, so did the word meaning – now it cannot refer to a cart or a carriage, only to an automobile.

Pen comes from Latin *pinna* "feather" since that's what ink-writing pens were made from. It never meant "feather" in English and I'd now have to say "quill pen" to mean a feather pen.

Adding new vocabulary

When a language needs to cover some thing in the world which is new to the relevant culture, often it *borrows* (or coins a semi-borrowing) – sometimes it *calques*.

English *oxygen*, French *oxygène*

German *Sauerstoff*

English *kimono, shofar, whisky, orange…*

German *Apfelsine* "China apple" = "orange"

Color terms

Terry Regier will tell you more about this.

But no language has a single simple "basic" color term for PINK or PURPLE or GRAY if it does not also have terms for RED, YELLOW, BLUE, GREEN, BLACK and WHITE. (Berlin and Kay 1969, Hardin and Maffi 1997, Regier)

Once added, basic color terms are rarely lost.

And possible drivers of increasing color term system complexity are *cultural contact* (e.g. *turquoise, orange*) and *technology (e.g. purple)*.

How are new senses motivated?

Frame metonymy.

Word meanings extend this way all the time.

Sometimes the new extensions outlive the original meanings.

Suit meaning "business person," *breastie* meaning "(fellow) breast cancer patient"

The Cadillac is looking for parking.

The cheeseburger wants another soda.

(Fauconnier 1997, Dancygier and Sweetser 2014)

Metonymy part 2

Crown in British English now legally means the institution of the monarchy (not the person of the monarch). (*Crown vs X* in legal cases.) It still means the royal headgear as well.

Paper does refer to the material – but also can mean a document, even a digital one; a conference presentation,...

Book comes from the root meaning "beech tree" whose bark was used for carving inscriptions in Northern Europe. Now means "book" – see also v. *book* (ticket, police) and *by the (rule) book*.

Metaphor

All over, in all languages (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999).

English *see* means "know/understand" as well as "see."

Wit, wisdom and *witness* come from the Indo-European root *weid-* meaning "see" (same root as Latin *visio* "vision"). But *wit* and *wisdom* only refer to intellectual ability, while *witness* refers specifically to a visual event.

(Sweetser 1990)

Why metaphor and metonymy?

Frames – we're always using some particular aspect of a frame to refer to others (e.g. food ordered for diner, substance for object as in *paper).*

Primary Scenes – correlations between frames.

VISION and KNOWLEDGE (Grady 1997, Johnson 1997)

Pragmatic "subjectification"

Forms move from meanings related to CONTENT to ones related to Speaker's epistemic states to the Speaker-Addressee interaction.

E.g. THIS/THAT > definite article

WANT > future (*will*)

ABILITY > POSSIBILITY, PERMISSION

(Problematic: PERF > simple past)

(Traugott 1989)

Iconicity

Onomatopoeia, sound symbolism

Meow, bow-wow, purr, cockadoodle-do

"tame" vs. "wild" iconicity

Language change moves towards taming iconic structure and moving it into the established units of the linguistic system.

Signed languages – newer signed languages are more regularly iconic than established ones; they lose iconicity, move towards "arbitrariness" or at least towards systematic "phonology." (Taub 2001)

Arbitrariness and sound change

It's easier to learn "motivated" forms. One kind of motivation might just be by the linguistic system.

e.g., past or third-person form of a new verb *gleep*.

Yet irregular verbs persist, especially if common!

And nice regular verb endings were lost by the sound systems of Latin and of English, just by sound reduction of unstressed final syllables.

Arbitrariness and sound change

Same with signed languages. A form may be originally mimetically motivated and relatively clear – but tradeoff between ease for addressee and ease for speaker/signer!

Highly iconic forms tend to get reduced over time to less iconic but also less elaborately articulated forms.

(Emmorey, McNeill)

And so?

Basically, there's no single principle for how language change happens.

This is because language is such a complex network of cognitive and social interactional structures. It has to use FORMS which can be reinterpreted in context, to express MEANINGS which can be reinterpreted in context.

And since it's also an identity marker, multiple systems in our daily interactions are all important in different aspects of identity expression - one system isn't enough.

And so?

Basically, there's no single principle for how language change happens.

All the ways that REINTERPRETATION can happen are relevant, and all the ways that our minds can link meanings as RELATED are relevant, and all the ways COMPETING systems can affect our linguistic system are relevant.

If it can affect thought and context and communication, it can affect language and cause change.

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