CONSERVATION AND CHANGE IN LANGUAGE (2004)
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1. The Basic Tendency of Languages: Change or Conservation?

Historical linguistics has always focussed on linguistic change[1]. It certainly cannot be criticized for that, because it is a phenomenon of the greatest importance, which forms the basis of all our historical linguistic knowledge. Besides, the experience that the scholar of comparative and historical linguistics derives from the study of languages is precisely that of a universe in constant becoming: Latin seems 'to become' Romance languages, classical Greek seems to transform itself into modern Greek, Old French into Modern French, Old English into Modern English, Old High German into modern German, Old Irish into modern Irish, Old Slavonic into modern Slavonic languages, etc. The comparatist's approach is by definition that of comparing the various forms of languages and dialects which can be traced back, through regular changes, to a single common matrix. It is on change, therefore, that his attention must be focused.

At the time of the formulation of its first theoretic premises, however, historical and comparative linguistics was so strongly influenced by biological evolutionism that it came to regard linguistic change as having the absolute value of a biological law, named 'phonetic law' (*Lautgesetz*). This is how August Schleicher (1821-1868) - the scholar who codified linguistic evolutionism, formulated the theory of 'phonetic laws', and founded the school which came to be called 'neo-grammatic' - expressed himself in a work significantly entitled *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft*: "Languages are natural organisms which are born... grow up and develop according to fixed laws, and in time grow old and die" [1863, 7].

We should pause to consider this philosophy of language because it has not been completely discarded, in spite of the fact that historical linguists of the present day refute, at least perfunctorily, the organic type of the evolutionist model of the past century. All the handbooks of linguistics, general or historical, give some sort of endorsement to this 'law of change' because it has been, in fact, the central thesis of historical linguistics from its beginning to the present day. Heraclitus's saying - *panta rei* 'everything changes' - can well represent the essence of this philosophy of speech. Even Hugo Schuchardt (1842-1927), the most distinguished opponent of Schleicher's theory of 'phonetic laws' and one of the most original of 19th century linguists, accepts this view: "Like all the organisms, language is subject to the law of differentiation, based on two factors: eternal change (Heraclitus) and universal diversity (Leibnitz)" [1866-1868, I 76].

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[1] For the bibliography on this and the following chapters I confine myself to a list of the principal works, from which I omit 19th century works, articles and principal manuals of historical linguistic concerning particular European areas: Alinei (1974b), Ambrosini (1976; 1985), Anderson (1973), Anderson & Jones (eds.) (1974), Anttila (1989), Bartoli (1925, 1945), Battisti (1959), Benveniste (1966), Berruto (1974), Bloomfield (1933), Bolelli (1965, 1971), Bonfante (1986-1994), Bouvier (1976), Breivik & Jahr (eds.) (1989), Bynon (1977), Chomsky & Halle (1968), Coseriu (1974), De Mauro (1963), Deroy (1980), Durante (1981), Gusmani (1973, 1981), Hjelmslev (1966), Hock (1986), Hoenigswald (1960), Jakobson (1958), Katičić (1970), King (1969), Lazzeroni (ed.) (1987), Lehmann (1962), Lehmann (1993), Lehmann & Malkiel (eds.) (1968), Malkiel (1983), Martinet (1955, 1975), Mazzuoli Porru (cur.) (1980), Meillet (1921- -1936, 1925), Mounin (1967), Pagliaro (1930), Palmer (1972), Pisani (1959, 1969), Quattordio Moreschini (cur.) (1986), Robins (1971), Sapir (1921, 1949), Saussure (1916), Schneider (1973), Silvestri (1977-82), Simone & Vignuzzi (ed.) (1977), Tagliavini (1963), Terracini (1949, 1957), Troubetzkoy (1939), Ullmann (1959, 1962), Varvaro (1968, 1984), Vendryes (1921), Vidos (1965), Wandruszka (1969), Weinreich (1953), Wilbur (ed.) (1977). See also n. 3.

In discussing the current view I shall take as an example the recent book of James Mallory [Mallory, 1989], who is, as we know, an archaeologist much involved in the defence of Gimbutas's theory, and who has made a remarkable effort to elaborate and clarify historical linguistics in its most recent and updated versions. Here are a few representative statements of a very widespread view of this phenomenon: "The one constancy of language is that it is always changing" [ibidem, 22]; "We may expect that the amount of change will be partly dependent on the extent of time that has elapsed in the linguistic continuum"; and an even more radical stance, "linguistic differentiation is a product of time" [ibidem, 23, 152-3]]. As it can be seen, linguistic change is here understood as something responding to a veritable 'biological clock'. Languages are still regarded as 'organisms' which are born, develop and die as time goes on. The role of other factors of change - such as space or contacts with other languages (substrate, interference) - is conceded, but as regards these and other factors, "We have no more right to assume that interference is the prime cause of language change than the other factors upon which solutions have been constructed" [ibidem, 158]. Actually, as all the linguists admit today, language is not a biological organism. Consequently, the law of change has become in fact a metaphysical law.

In one of the next chapters I will try to reconstruct the historical context in which these basically erroneous ideas of the 'organic evolution' of language were born. But even without such a reconstruction, which will focus on the *mistakes* made by linguists in their intepretation of Darwinism, no linguist would deny today the enormous *influence* exercised by biological evolutionism on historical and comparative linguistics. At the moment, therefore, I prefer to address the problem in another way, starting from the experience of language common to all of us.

In our everyday life, we do not experience language as a changing phenomenon; on the contrary, we think of it as stable and conservative. What we do observe in the course of our lifetime is that our language is being conserved virtually intact, apart from an occasional introduction of new words, which, however, never change its functioning and structure, i.e. grammar. No speaker has to learn again the grammar of his language once he picked it up as a child. No individual, in normal conditions (i.e. in conditions of social stability), experiences grammatical change in the course of his life. In normal conditions, on the contrary, each of us experiences that her/his language is the same of her/his grand-parent, and is the same spoken by her/his grandchildren. Each of us experiences, in short, the continuity and the conservation of language through five generations: two before and two after ours. The only *law* inherent to language is *conservation*: a law comparable, to a certain extent, to Newton's law of inertia.

In periods of social upheaval, on the contrary - as for example the writer himself experienced in Italy at the end of Fascism, with the beginning of democracy and the resulting formidable social adjustments - grammatical change *can* be observed. In that specific context it took the form of low-class or dialect features, until then refused by the previous norm, suddenly becoming part of the new norm. To understand how this works, of course, one has to recall the nature of stratified societies, and their inevitable sociolinguistic reflexes, as illustrated, for example, by Labov's seminal work (e.g. Labov 1965a; 1965b; 1966).

Naturally, linguists, too, have been aware of this for a long time. Some of the most eminent 19th century linguists, who opposed the theory of the organic development of language already at that time [cf. Nerlich 1990, 28-29], regarded the tendency towards conservation as *one of the two fundamental trends of language* (the other being that of change). The French scholar Arsène Darmesteter, one of the earliest students of semantics, after having stated "Toute langue est dans une perpétuelle évolution" added that each language is "dans un état d'équilibre ... entre deux forces opposées qui tendent: l'une, la force conservatrice, à la maint énir dans son état actuel; l'autre, la force révolutionnaire, à la pousser dans des nouvelles directions" [Darmesteter 1987, 6]. The American scholar William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894), one of the most original linguists of the 19th century, spoke of a 'conservative' and an 'alterative force', both dominating dialectically the two opposed tendencies [Whitney 1875, Ch. 3]. And even the English expert on geological evolutionism Charles Lyell, who devoted much time to linguistics and who had a great influence on

the 19th century linguists (I shall discuss his work in detail in a later chapter), opposed a 'force of inheritance' to an 'inventive force', the latter concerning lexical innovation [Nerlich 1990, 64]. A few decades later, in the early 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the founder of semiotics and structuralism, also saw in language - probably following and elaborating upon Whitney - "deux forces [qui] agissent sans cesse simultanément et en sens contraire: d'une part l'esprit particulariste, l' «esprit de clocher»; de l'autre, la force d' «intercourse» [English term, presumably borrowed from Whitney], qui crée les communications entre les hommes". He also noted the dialectical relationship between the 'immutabilité' and 'mutabilité' of the sign, although he argued that - within the framework of an "évolution ... fatale" and of the "nécessité du changement" (111) - "le principe d'altération se fonde sur *le principe de continuité*" (109). This more comprehensive view of language has not been, however, the winning view. The dominant opinion has become the one already mentioned, according to which *there are not two dominant laws or two dominant trends, but a single one: that of organic change*. We shall now try to find out whether one of these two tendencies is fundamental and the other marginal, or whether both are fundamental and, if so, how they are reconciled.

1.1. The Conservatism of the Languages of Emigration

We can take first an example familiar to all, that of the three great European languages, Spanish, Portuguese and English, which migrated to other continents in the course of the past five centuries and became the languages of South America, North America, Australia and New Zealand. In spite of the distance in time and space, in spite of the diversity of contexts and types of linguistic contacts with the native peoples, it can be affirmed without hesitation that these three languages have remained virtually the same to the present day. In recent times this 'stability' may have been strengthened by the influence of the 'literary' model, by the effects of education, mass culture, radio and television, but that kind of influence did not exist at the beginning.

Not only this: modern research has shown that the differences, known to all of us, between British English, American English and Australian English, or between Castilian Spanish and American Spanish, or again between Portuguese and Brazilian, are not the results of an evolutive process of the organic type, but that they sprang originally from the dialectal traits of the earliest or most important colonies of emigrants [Tagliavini 1964; Varvaro 1968, 189-191; Viereck 1975]. In the Spanish-speaking America, for example, typical traits, such as the *seseo*, the *yeismo*, the *voseo*, are of a predominantly Andalusian origin. Similarly, some of the main features of American English can be traced back to regional English and to the dialects spoken by the members of the earliest English colonies, who settled in the area of New York and New England from 1600 to about 1760 and who had come for the most part from the south of England and from the 'West Country'. The characteristics of Australian English derive from the «cockney» speech of the convicts in the first penal colonies of the 18th century. They are, accordingly, original differences or differences stemming from hybridization processes subsequent to immigration, and not an outcome of the processes of organic evolution.

1.3. The Conservatism of Icelandic

Island, the earliest republic in Europe, was first colonized by the Norwegians in the late 9th century. Since then Icelandic has not substantially changed. Old Icelandic or Norse of the *Edda* and the sagas, in which the mythological and epic heritage of the Germanic world has been transmitted, is still easily understood by the Icelanders of today: "die Unterschied zwischen Alt- und Neuisländisch sind dermassen geringfügig, dass die Sprachträger beides als eine Sprache empfinden" [Hutterer 1990. 149; cf. Ramat 1986, 249; Francovich Onesti 1991, 86]. There is no handbook on Germanic languages which does not contain a similar statement. This extraordinary conservatism of Icelandic should be certainly ascribed to the history of the island, which has never known invasions or other events which affected its anthropological and cultural picture. As opposed to that, we may note the substantial changes that have taken place in Norwegian, which in the 9th century must have been very similar to Icelandic.

More than a millennium, therefore, has not sufficed to make modern Icelandic different from Old Icelandic. If there existed an 'organic law' of linguistic change, would it be not bound to manifest itself regardless of isolation and the absence of external factors of change? Instead, it is only these factors that can explain the difference in the development of Icelandic and Norwegian.

1.3. Conservatism of Italian Dialects

Italian dialects can be taken as the third example. They begin to appear, with authentic, though short texts, in the 10th century A.D. [Migliorini 1960; Tagliavini 1964; Castellani 1973; Renzi 1985, cap. 11] Among the earliest (first decades of the 10th century) is the so-called *Glossario di Monza*, a Romance-Greek Byzantine word-list which must have been used by a clergyman travelling to the East. It contains the names of the days of the week unmistakably close to those still in use in a large part of northern Italy. Extensive texts, which already show not only the presence of dialects, but also their importance in social and cultural life, appear in the early 12th century with the so-called *Carta Pisana*, written in a dialect which is also remarkably similar to the modern Pisan dialect. In the 13th and 14th centuries the number of texts vastly increases; they come from various regions, although those from Tuscany predominate, and they already deal with almost all the spheres of human knowledge. The literary ones include Dante's Divine Comedy, Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. Dante was born in 1265, and his Divine Comedy presupposes the existence of an already extremely supple and rich linguistic instrument, which was the idiom developed by the Florentine citizens of the preceding generations. In all the mediaeval dialectal texts - no matter whether they are Venetian or Tuscan, Lombard or Genoan, Friulian or Emilian, Sicilian or Sardinian, Campanian or Umbrian - the dialects are substantially the same as we know them today. Whoever reads Dante's *Commedia* for the first time is surprised by the striking similarity between the 13th century Florentine and the Italian of the present time. Naturally, when we read these mediaeval texts, it is necessary to bear in mind that at the moment of their appearance they were no longer dialectal, in as much as they were *written* texts, representing the idiom of groups potentially homogeneous or aspiring to homogeneity, and that as such they obeyed the rules of the formation of common dialects (*koiné*) typical of written languages. This conclusion is corroborated by the recent studies of the provincial and regional mediaeval *scriptae* in the entire neo-Latin area [Varvaro 1968, 305-316]. The Latinizing patina of many of those texts and the presence in them of features alien to the local dialect are not considered as genuine aspects of the territorial linguistic picture, but as a result of the selection of elements characteristic of the formation of a written language.

If we therefore ignore these spurious elements, the dialects of the earliest mediaeval Italian texts are substantially those still spoken in Italy, which is one of the 'paradises' of dialectology, because of the number and variety of its dialects. Of course, it would be absurd to consider these mediaeval texts as marking the real beginning of the dialects, because written evidence reflects a preceding reality. But even if we assume that their beginnings date only from the appearance of the earliest texts, the span between the first attestations in the 10th century and the present time would be more than a millennium. For more than a millennium the Italian dialects have not substantially changed.

This is perhaps more remarkable than the case of Icelandic. In Italy Italian dialects have been conserved in spite of innumerable local and national wars, in spite of invasions and colonial occupations succeeding one another until the Risorgimento and the national unification of 1870, in spite of the radio, compulsory education, newspapers, television, mass media, the process of social levelling. More than a thousand years of turbulent history, from the end of the 1st millennium to the threshold of the 3rd millennium, have not been sufficient to transform the dialects. And the changes which began to manifest themselves after the war and have continued to take place at an ever increasing rate are all of one kind: they are the outcome of the levelling effect of the national language or of regional standards, i.e. of the norm socially marked by the dominant groups, and not of an organic evolution, the laws of which are supposed to be immanent in each dialect and therefore independent of external influences.

1.4. Conservatism of Alloglottic Enclaves

The fourth example can be used to illustrate the conservatism of dialects in even more difficult conditions: the so-called 'enclaves', or alloglottic linguistic colonies, which speak dialects and languages different from the surrounding territory. I shall concentrate again on the Italian dialects [Tagliavini 1964, 334-336; Merlo 1937], which are sufficiently rich and representative (but those of other countries could be used to illustrate my point just as well) and I shall limit myself to: (A) the Albanian and Greek alloglottic enclaves of central and southern Italy; and (B) allodialectal enclaves, such as Faeto in Apulia, where a Franco-Provençal, i.e. western Alpine dialect, different from the central southern dialects surrounding it, is spoken; and such as Guardia Piemontese in Calabria, where a Provençal dialect, also western Alpine and also different from the circumjacent southern dialects, is spoken. According to the prevalent opinion, these linguistic enclaves date from migrations which took place in the Middle Ages. In the case of some of them, however, this opinion is not generally accepted. Gerhard Rohlfs, one of the greatest authorities on Italian dialectology, for example, argues that the Greek linguistic enclaves date back to the colonies of Magna Grecia. If this is true, these enclaves have preserved their speech for almost three millennia. But even if we accept the mediaeval dating, we shall have a 'duration' of seven centuries, which is - if we bear in mind their migratory character - roughly the same timespan as that suggested by our calculation for Italian dialects in general. Only, in the case of these enclaves speech has been conserved in conditions much more difficult than in the case of dialects spoken in the territories of their origin. It is worth while to stop for a moment and consider this point.

In order to explain the conservatism of alloglottic colonies in the strict sense, i.e. those in which a completely foreign language (German, Greek, Albanian or Slavonic) is spoken, we can surmise a strong sense of ethnic identity derived from their link with a distant 'motherland'. Even in a specific case, such as Guardia Piemontese in Calabria, in which the population of Valdesian religion left the valleys of western Piedmont because of the persecution of the Catholic Church, the absence of an ethnic identity is compensated by the no less potent religious identity. But what can we say of the situation of dialect-speaking communities of the Faeto type, whose dialects, different from the surrounding ones, are completely deprived of the sustaining factors noted above? In order to appreciate better this conservatism it is necessary to recall also the negative attitude which the authorities and the dominant culture had had until quite recently to dialects and dialect-speaking people. This is why this example reveals, perhaps better than the others, the conservatism of the linguistic phenomenon in all its astonishing force.

1.5. The Conservatism of Greek

A last example, qualitatively different from the preceding ones, can serve to sum up, within an even broader chronological span, what has been said so far: the example of Greek. We have seen that the language called Linear B, used in Mycaene from the early 14th century BC, was an archaic form of Greek. This example does not only illustrate the uninterrupted continuity of a language for almost four thousand years - from the Bronze Age to the present day -, but it also shows that the differences between it and the Greek dialects spoken in the same territory at present are incomparably smaller than those existing between Latin and Romance dialects.

If then linguistic evolution is an inevitable law determined by biological time, as the traditional historical linguistics maintains, it is a mystery why Greek has changed so little in the past four millennia, and to such an extraordinary extent in the two or three millennia separating it from proto-Indo-European!

1.6. The Linguistic Identity of a Community and Its Consequences on Conservatism

To conclude these considerations, which are commonsense rather than scientific, it is also worthwhile to recall that each community, of whatever historical and cultural level, identifies itself strongly with its own language, and that this identification is, consciously or unconsciously, transformed into a strong attachment to and respect for it. Only when a community of speakers feels 'inferior' because its environment considers it as such, this could make it wish to abandon its

own speech in favour of that of the dominant groups of invaders. But this is an exception, springing from social, not linguistic motives. Normally, a community's identification with its own language makes it want to conserve it, and not to change it. Otherwise, it would be as if someone wanted to change the form or function of his own hand while using it. By constantly using and re-using a linguistic medium we do not change it; on the contrary, we make it ever more precious to us, in so far as we are continually putting into it, even if unintentionally and unawares, all that we know, do and experience; and by doing it we transform it into our mirror, into our individual and collective identity. On the other hand, linguistic identity is endocentric by nature. So great is the regard which a community has for its own language, so small is the respect which it has for the languages of others, even when they are similar, that when it imitates the latter ones it is often in order to mock them, and when foreign languages are spoken, they are spoken very badly and without any scruples. That is why it happens that when a linguistic community finds itself in unforeseeable circumstances of influencing and changing a foreign language, it may do it, as we shall see in a moment, with the effect of a corrosive acid.

In conclusion, we may say that in normal circumstances a language tends towards inertia and conservation, not change. Neither is there a chronological 'threshold', beyond which the molecular clock begins to tick and make languages change obeying some inexorable 'law' of organic evolution. This is confirmed by all the examples that I have adduced. Changes, as we shall see, are a result of extra-linguistic and not organic causes. Nevertheless, this fundamental tendency of languages, though attested by undeniable evidence, has been virtually ignored by historical linguistics, which has directed its entire attention to the phenomenon of change.

2. Linguistic Change

We should now enquire if and where the traditional theory has erred in its assessment of linguistic change[2]. In summarizing, elaborating and adapting to this discussion the results of recent research on linguistic change, I shall seek again to present a notably complex phenomenon, making reference to our experience as speakers in order to explain it as simply and clearly as possible.

First of all, it should be pointed out even before we proceed to an analysis, that the fact that languages may change at various times and in various ways, as even the traditional theory has to admit, shows that change is a variable, and not an invariant of language. An invariable law would have to operate in fact in times, if not ways, that are constant.

In the second place, it is necessary to distinguish between two fundamentally different types of linguistic change, which are usually grouped together and confused even in recent studies:

(A)   changes which *do not have an impact on the grammar* of a language, and which affect solely or primarily its semantics (new meaning of old words) and vocabulary (new words);

(B)   changes which *do have an impact on grammar* in its various aspects, i.e. on phonology, morphology or syntax.

Changes which do not have an impact on grammar are much more numerous. They are usually studied by historical semantics and by lexicology and form the basis of what I shall call the *cultural-linguistic renewal* of a community. In the course of our discussion, I shall also refer to them as 'cultural-linguistic changes'.

As I have noted above, changes which have an impact on grammar can be observed only in certain historical periods, and occur only over long chronological stretches. They are therefore much rarer than the former ones, but when they do occur, they involve radical changes of the grammatical structure of the language. I shall call them therefore *structural* or *grammatical changes* and, since recent research has shown that these structural changes are of an exclusively sociolinguistic origin (in a broad sense of the term, as we shall see), I shall also call them

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[2] I have used primarily Labov (1965a, 1965b, 1966, 1981, 1982, 1994), Weinrich, Labov & Herzog (1968), Lehmann (1993), Lehmann & Malkiel (1968, 1982). See also note 1.

sociolinguistic changes when I want to emphasize their origin rather than their outcome.

Let us now have a closer look at these two categories of linguistic change.

2.1. Cultural-Linguistic Renewal

Cultural-linguistic changes operate on the interface between the linguistic system and culture, and consequently involve primarily the vocabulary, the meaning of words, and the iconymy (motivation) which transmits it [Alinei 1979, 1980b, 1982, 1994, 1995a, 1996, 1997, 2001]. They consist, therefore, of the introduction of new words, coined by the refashioning of old terms or words from dead languages (Greek and Latin in Europe); of the introduction of loanwords from foreign languages or from the dialects in its own territory; of *calques* (i.e. of the translation of the iconym of foreign expressions into their own language); of spontaneous changes in meaning; and of the abandonment of words designating obsolete objects and concepts. In short, these changes are a reflex of the innumerable changes of the geo-historical universe in which we are living. As a result of this type of change, the English vocabulary of the Pilgrim Fathers is changed in respect to present American, the vocabulary of the Edda in respect to modern Icelandic, and that of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio in respect to the Italian of today, but the language has remained basically the same.

All of us observe and sometimes participate in this cultural-linguistic renewal, not only during the longer span of our lifetime, but also in our day-to-day linguistic experience. In fact, it is the only change that can be considered constant and regular, at least in so much as it is possible to predict a certain measure of change and development in each particular historical community which is not living in conditions of total stagnation and which can be observed over a sufficiently long period. In the case of languages spoken by very numerous communities, which are at a more advanced stage of development than the others, this process of renewal can be strikingly rapid and evident in our particularly tumultuous epoch. From the theoretic point of view, however, neither in this case can we speak of a linguistic 'law of development', and even less can we speak of an 'organic' change controlled by an internal clock, since nothing excludes even very long periods of stagnation. Besides, - and that is very important to stress in our discussion of the traditional theory - semantic change does not belong to the sphere of structural changes, but to that of renewal. The cultural-linguistic renewal, no matter whether it is rapid or slow or temporarily suspended, *does not affect the linguistic system as such* and therefore has nothing to do with the type of linguistic change which interests primarily the traditional theory and which lies at the base of historical-comparative linguistics.

Even though the cultural-linguisitic renewal may appear at first sight as an aggregate of changes, *it is in fact one of the principal forms of linguistic conservativism, precisely because it is realized through the medium of language and following its rules*. New words are in fact formed according to the rules of grammar. Their pronunciation, even in the case of foreign borrowings, follows grammatical rules or is adapted to them. Besides, it operates in an infra-communal way, within the linguistic community, neutralizing, even where it does succeed in penetrating, social differences. Even if the innovations are per definition individual, the lexical renewal depends on collective consensus, which is essential if cultural-linguistic innovations are to be adopted.

Even if we take into consideration the numerous 'innovation movements' in the broad sense of the term (i.e. political, artistic, cultural), which enrich the history of all the countries of Europe and the world, we can say that in the majority of cases their real influence, as far as language is concerned, is limited to semantics and vocabulary. When these movements are innovative, or even revolutionary, they are generally limited to the introduction of a number of lexical or semantic innovations; in some cases they are manifested in the adoption of previously criticized popular or dialectal forms. But in respect to the structural (systemic) aspects of language, they prove to be conservative (even unintentionally so) in so much as language is the vital vehicle of culture, even of innovative and revolutionary culture, and they consequently need the system of language to express themselves.

The conservative character of cultural-linguistic changes is manifested in another

phenomenon. It is on the basis of these changes, in the complex play of recycling of old words for the expression of new notions (the iconymy mechanism) [see my studies cited above], that we find in each language - deposited in its vocabulary as in a sequence of geological sediments - the entire history of the society which makes use of it. Semantic changes make each language a veritable 'living museum', a priceless repository of our historical and cultural heritage, although this treasury has remained almost completely unexplored. And it is precisely because of this that we, too, shall focus on semantic changes when trying to explore our past and to deal with the most important problems of the chronology of our cultural history and the demonstration of linguistic continuity.

2.2. Socio-Linguistic / structural change

While the cultural-linguistic renewal operates in the sphere of mutual influences of language and culture, the sociolinguistic or structural change operates directly on the linguistic system and changes it in a more or less substantial way. Besides, cultural-linguistic change operates on an infra-communal level, it is sanctioned by collective consent and neutralizes social differences, while socio-linguistic change takes place *because and on the basis of* ethno-social differentiation. It does not operate in fact within a sole linguistic system, but it contributes to the interaction of two or more linguistic communities that do not have equal respect for their own and for other people's linguistic systems. Because of these reasons, structural change is also (as it were) 'violent', since it 'violates' the structure which it acts upon, penetrating into its core and transforming it.

Two sub-types can be further distinguished within sociolinguistic change, depending on whether it is caused by elements of a predominantly *social* character, which involve small or large-scale internal restructuring of the society (socio-linguistic change in the strict sense of the term), or by developments involving restructuring with a strong *ethnic* component. Even the latter sub-type can be, in the long run, assimilated into the former. In fact, a foreign language cannot influence structurally (i.e. not merely culturally) another language, unless ethnic interaction is combined with social interaction. An invading ethnic group, for example, cannot influence the language of the dominated group unless it ceases to be an alien body and begins to interact with the society it dominates and to play an integrating role in it. And this social interaction cannot be achieved through inter-ethnic contacts only; it must also include other factors, such as numerous mixed marriages and other forms of ethnic and social integration. Without a transformation of the *ethnic* into the *social* there would be in this case no structural change, but merely cultural influence in an innovating environment.

It is therefore not entirely appropriate to make a neat distinction, even as regards the terminology, between sociolinguistic and inter-ethnic change. If we were to assume that the change of the Neo-Latin languages in respect to Latin is primarily sociolinguistic, we would unjustly neglect the powerful ethnic element which was definitely combined with the social component. If we were to assume that the differences between modern English and Anglo-Saxon were of a primarily inter-ethnic origin because they took place after the Norman Conquest, we would ignore the sociolinguistic aspects of these differences, which result from the relationship between the dominant élite and the subordinate groups. The most important fact is that sociolinguistic change is the only one that can transform radically a language in its phonetic, morphological and syntactic aspects, which are the ones studied by the traditional historical linguistics.

Structural/sociolinguistic changes are also specific in the sense that, being a variable and not an invariant, they are not always observable, because they occur only, or mainly, in particular periods. Even when they are observable, they cannot be studied from beginning to end. In the course of a generation it is possible to observe a few stages at the most, which represent only either the premises, or partial results, or final adjustments. The phases that have been observed and studied by the scholars of this century confirm, nevertheless, the socio-linguistic character of this phenomenon.

Yet, it is necessary to clarify a point which seems to me very important, but which has not received sufficient attention in the researches so far. There is a fundamental difference, in substance and, consequently, in frequency, between structural changes in the dominant linguistic

norm and those in the subordinate linguistic norms, i.e. in the dialects. The former changes are much rarer and therefore more difficult to perceive. The latter ones are more common and therefore easier to study. It is easy to comprehend the causes and the consequences of this difference. In the case of a national norm, to change a linguistic norm would mean in fact changing the existing social order. Obviously, that would imply nothing less than a revolution, or at least a revolutionary episode. In the case of a dialect, the change of the norm is a natural consequence of the dynamics of the current social structuring. The dialect, precisely because it is the expression of subordinate social groups, is permanently exposed - in a greater or smaller measure, according to time and place - to the influence of the national or regional norm, and its speakers are equally susceptible to change in the context of modern stratified societies. The consequences of these differences are also clear. The traditional historical linguistics has studied linguistic change mainly on the basis of written languages, which means those belonging to the dominant norm, and they are precisely the languages least subject to change. Consequently, since it could never observe this phenomenon, and since it has completely ignored, as a model, the process of the destruction of dialects by dominant norms, the traditional historical linguistics has never grasped its mechanism and has devised instead a fictitious, organic law, which escapes all control. On the other hand, it is also clear why sociolinguistics was the first discipline to understand fully the mechanism of linguistic change: because only sociolinguistics has been able to study structural changes, tracing their course in dialects, and not in languages. Even before that, some pioneers of the sociolinguistic approach to structural change, who worked at the beginning of the present century - i.e. before sociolinguistics as such came into being - scholars like Louis Gauchat (1866-1942) [Gauchat 1905; Hermann 1929], concentrated on the study of the development of rural microdialects over a number of years. Needless to say in egalitarian societies sociolinguistic change would take place in the conditions of the dominant norm of stratified societies, and not in those of subordinate dialects, and that it would be consequently equally rare as in the case of dominant languages.

Having clarified this, we should add that in spite of the difficulties which have been mentioned it is possible to form - on the basis of empirical observation and using an appropriate theoretic approach - an idea of the material base, the potential, and the drift of structural change even in the case of a national linguistic system. Whatever strikes us as 'anomalous' in our environment with relation to our national norm, though not constituting in any way a change of the norm, represents nevertheless a potential 'carrier', if not a symptom or even a threat of change. These variations from the norm may range from the speech of single individuals, who, for example, have a different 'accent' because they are of different regional origin, to genuine and authentic dialect speakers, either local or from other regions, to different groups of foreigners, more or less integrated into our society, who have picked up our language. In order to project important future or past structural changes of the dominant norm on this basis we would have to assume the political, economic and social ascendancy of one of these groups - 'bearers' of anomalous linguistic variations with relation to the prevailing variant - which would spark off the process ultimately leading to the (partial) abandonment of the prevailing norm and to the adoption of a (partially) new norm in one of the many possible forms of hybridism. Historical linguistics, for example, makes distinction between the *substrate*, as the influence of an autochthonous language on an intrusive language, *superstrate*, as the influence of an intrusive speech on an autochthonous language, and *adstrate*, as the influence of a surrounding language.

In order to confirm the validity of this analysis and to make it more specific it is sufficient, as I have already said, to place oneself on the other side of the social diaphragm. Dialect speaker can also observe a linguistically 'anomalous' world around them. That world is no doubt less rich in variations than that of the educated speaker, but it poses - instead of simple potential and possible 'bearers' or indications of the change of the norm - a real and formidable 'threat', if not a veritable 'declaration of war' (felt in many dialectal areas) manifested unequivocally by the crushing advance and the overbearing power of the national linguistic norm or of its regional version. While the educated speaker or even the linguist who observes the linguistic variations in his environment

usually has not the slightest idea of the possible bearers of structural change in the distant future, any dialect speaker knows a priori the 'terminators' of his dialect: he already knows that structural change is coming from the dominant group through the national linguistic norm. A change which is constantly in progress and which is always just round the corner. It is in fact the dominant norm in the linguistic sphere which is destined to eliminate dialects, or at least to change them radically, bringing them more and more into line with itself. It is not a metaphysical 'law of organic change' of language, dependent on time and other factors, but a very concrete and specific social force, which assumes the form of a sociolinguistic phenomenon.

The case of dialects is therefore the simplest and clearest example of structural linguistic change and of its sociolinguistic origins, and it provides a model for the study of the changes of the dominant norm which have taken place in the past.

In order to understand, therefore, how change of a dominant linguistic norm functions it is necessary not only to start from the reality of social stratification, but also to concentrate first on the weak part of sociolinguistic structuring, where the phenomenon is most constant and apparent, and only after that on the strong part, where the phenomenon is more difficult to observe. Otherwise, it would be like going to seek the causes of water pollution among the mountainous springs instead of in the discharge of industrial plants and in the river waters.

The conversion of the model of change seen 'from below' into the model of change seen 'from above' is, however, not simple and it requires a detailed discussion, which I cannot enter upon here. I shall only point out that 'national languages' trace their origin to the socioeconomic and political-cultural success of a group, whose dialect was subsequently 'promoted' into a language. This process is exactly opposite to that which I have just outlined for dialects, and it is also its most outstanding and frequent form. It does not make the subordinate groups abandon their dialectal norm under the pressure of the dominant groups, but, on the contrary, it makes the old dominant groups lose their power to a new social hegemony and a new linguistic norm. The adoption of a new linguistic norm implies the defeat of the preceding norm, and when this norm is that of the dominant group, the underlying political changes take place in the tumult of history, under bright spotlights and are usually called 'the winning of independence', or 'renewal', or 'revolution' and the like, precisely because of the exceptional historical significance of the event. On the other hand, the changes of the subordinate linguistic norm, that of dialects, by the dominant groups usually take place in the silence of history and it is only recently that sociolinguistics has begun to study them.

Therefore, the work to be done now is to re-examine the changes of the dominant linguistic norms as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, and not a mysterious organic process, as it was done until recently. Among the observable models the one closest to that of the change of the dominant linguistic norm is certainly the model of the formation of a norm. It can be observed in the struggle, now in progress in various parts of Europe, of certain minority groups for independence and sometimes for the recognition of a new linguistic norm. Other aspects - marginal, but relevant to the sociolinguistic study of the structural change of the dominant norm - are manifested in phenomena such as the rejection of dialectal or popular traits, the acceptance of previously rejected dialectal or popular traits, the restoration of a former recommended norm. The swinging of the pendulum in the history of all the languages is in fact determined by the bipolarity of the social stratification in modern societies.

2.3. Structural Adjustment

In analyzing structural or sociolinguistic change we can further distinguish an initial stage and a stage of adjustment. The initial stage of structural change has those sociolinguistic origins which I have just described, while the subsequent stage consists of a process of adaptation and adjustment, which may take place even after the original sociolinguistic circumstances have ceased to exist. Hence, if the sociolinguistic characteristics of the primary causes of the phenomenon are not identified, and if we pause to consider only their impact on the system, we can mistake the consequence for the cause and arrive, once again, at the conclusion that linguistic change is organic. Martinet's theory of linguistic change [1955], as a process which follows internal structural laws, as

well as the notion of the *inner drift* of a language, which is still current, are examples of the failure to distinguish between the external, sociolinguistic initial stage and the stage of internal adjustment. Structural adjustment is also an important aspect of linguistic change, which tends to adapt the new to the old and to fill in the gaps of the various sub-systems, making them more symmetrical and regular or more economical. But it is secondary, and it is associated with *psycholinguistic* mechanisms, which induce the speaker to render uniform and re-establish the balance in the linguistic system according to the new rules which have been sanctioned or are being sanctioned, extending and generalizing them in ever broader parts of grammar. There are no 'organisms' in this stage of change either, and if there are 'laws' they are the laws of psychology, not of the linguistic system as such.

Besides, even structural adjustment is observable in our experience of language, although only in facts of minor importance. The most evident example is perhaps that of the morphological analogy, which is manifested in children learning to speak, but which can be also noted in the speech of adults learning a second language or an unfamiliar norm: for instance, a child, a dialect speaker or a foreigner might say *sleeped* instead of *slept* in English, or *andiedi* instead of *andai* in Italian, by way of analogy with the regular conjugation in the former and irregular conjugation in the latter example. In these cases, too, we are not dealing with an ongoing organic linguistic process, but with a psycholinguistic process.

2.4 'Rules', not 'Laws' of Structural Change

Once structural changes have occurred, we can easily identify the 'rules' which have governed them, and we shall see later by which methods the traditional theory achieved this fundamental result, which represents one of the chief merits of the historical linguistics of the 19th century. It is necessary, nevertheless, to distinguish between the 'rules of change' and the 'law of change'. The former should be retained, and the latter should be discarded. The rules are determined *a posteriori*, they take into consideration only changes that have taken place, and they do not represent a 'law' existing prior to change itself, independent of it and therefore foreseeable. Although this may seem obvious, and perhaps it is for the majority of linguists today, this point should be insisted on because historical linguistics, as we have seen, continues to make use of formulations and interpretations of the evolutionist type.

2.5. The Relationship Between the Two Types of Change

The two types of change, cultural-linguistic and sociolinguistic, are, naturally, not without certain mutual relations. If certain cultural linguistic changes are particularly frequent, they can be transmuted into a structural change, though of slight importance. A suffix of foreign origin, for example, adopted in an increasing series of borrowings may acquire an autonomous value and be adopted even in the grammar of the language of adoption. Many European languages have suffixes of foreign origin of this type.

Conversely, a process of social or inter-ethnic restructuring resulting in a series of structural linguistic changes entails always, automatically, a component of cultural renewal, which is automatically reflected on the lexical and semantic levels as well. But they are two fundamentally distinct aspects which should not be confused.

The difference is apparent even in concrete microlinguistic analyses. Let us take as an example the transition from Lat. *ego* 'I' to It. *io* 'idem': this is a structural change of sociolinguistic origin, without semantic, i.e. cultural linguistic reflexes. That the change is structural is shown by the fact that there exist numerous other traces of the same change; *viginti > venti* 'twenty), *triginta > trenta* 'thirty', *quadraginta > quaranta* 'fourty', *regale > reale* 'royal', *regionem* 'region' > *rione* 'district, quarter', etc. are all transitions which show the dropping of the internal velar *-g-*, exactly as in *ego > io*. In none of them, with the sole exception of *regionem > rione*, the meaning is changed. The transition from **eo* (after the dropping of the *-g-*) to *io* is a structural change, which can be also seen in the transition from *meus* 'my' *deus* 'god' *reus* 'guilty' to *mio dio rio*, these, too, without a change of meaning. In the transition from Lat. *alibi* to It. (and international) *alibi*, there is

only semantic change, i.e. cultural linguistic, without structural change. In the complex transition from It. *schiavo* 'slave' to the It. greeting *ciao* 'hi' - to which I shall return later - there are both cultural linguistic and structural changes. In the transition from Lat. quando to It. quando 'when' there is neither. Thus, just as cultural linguistic change does not entail automatically a sociolinguistic transformation, a sociolinguistic transformation does not necessarily involve a cultural linguistic renewal. To stress once again, we are dealing with two different phenomena which should be studied independently of each other.

3. The Myth of the 'Duration' of Phonetic Change

Since the traditional conception of linguistic change is, as we have seen, that of 'organic' change, structural changes such as those cited (-*g*- which is dropped, stressed -*e*- which becomes -*i*- before certain vowels) may give an impression that linguistic change has also a certain 'duration'. Where there is duration there is a process, and that process should be the mysterious and unfathomable one of the growth and decay of organisms. It is necessary, therefore, to discuss this point in detail and see what is the correct interpretation of this phenomenon.

In this case, too, I shall use examples of change observable 'in the field'. We shall begin with a recent term such as the standard It. *televisione*, which can be dated with certainty into the second half of the present century. In various regions of Italy it is pronounced differently at the dialectal level: from the north-western approximately /televizj'un/ and the north-eastern /televizj'ɔn/ to the southern /t elevisj'ɔnə /. These phonetic changes do not have a measurable duration; they are instantaneous in the sense that as soon the word became current, its dialectal variant was created.

Let us take a more complex example, the details of which I shall omit: the phenomenon of the addition of a vowel (usually -*e*) to a final consonant, typical of all the south-central Italian dialects, of the Tuscan dialects, and, via Florentine, even of standard Italian. This phenomenon is amply documented by historical evidence: we find it in Biblical names, datable to the early centuries A.D., such as *Davide* (from *David*), *Giuseppe* (from *Joséph*) and *Raffaele* (*Raphaél*); we find it in an analogous context, within consonant groups, for example in the old variant -*esimo* in *battesimo*, *Cristianesimo*, *Umanesimo*, *Protestantesimo* (as opposed to the modern and very common -*ismo*), in words from the Renaissance as *lanzichenecchi* (from Germ. *Landsknecht*), and we can observe it continually in the substandard or dialectal pronunciation of English or German words ending in a consonant, such as *filme, golfe, giukebocchese* (jukebox), *Èkkese* (*ex*), even *Màrkese* (for *Marx*). In Holland, where I taught almost thirty years, Italian workers immigrants from the south spoke of the local *Stichting*, which dealt with their problems, as the *Stecchetto*! This bird's eye view of a phonetic change makes it quite evident how unreal is the idea of its 'duration', which in this case would extend over two millennia, from the beginning of the Christian era to the present day. But reality is different. It is not that this phonetic change lasts at least a millenium, but rather that the conversion mechanism present in each speaker in central-southern Italy has been transmitted from one generation to another, from some indefinite moment in the past to the present day, while the application itself of the rules of conversion has always been instantaneous and direct each time. In fact, both the transmission of the conversion mechanism from one generation to another and the instantaneity of its application are two sides of the same medal, i.e. of the conservatism of language!

There is another type of phonetic change which corroborates this analysis: that which can be observed in the speech of adults learning a foreign language. Given the same mother tongue, the changes of this type are within certain limits regular and automatic, so that usually a trained ear can immediately recognize the Italian, the Frenchman, the Dutch, the Swede or the Russian behind the English language spoken by members of these nations. That is what is called 'accent' in common speech and it is manifested in all forms of imperfect bilingualism. Phonetic change is in fact the result of a 'filter', which comes into operation automatically, and it is not the result of a 'durable' process, a product of time.

I shall not stop to consider another aspect of structural change - that of its gradual diffusion

in the vocabulary. This process is the only one which seems to have a duration (as the sum of various instantaneous changes), but it does not alter the substance of what I have said concerning this phenomenon. Phonetic change, critically examined, is always instantaneous. The reasons for the impression of duration should be sought in the extralinguistic processes which underlie and determine instantaneous linguistic change, in the (apparent) duration of conversion mechanisms passed on from generation to generation, and in the mechanisms of adjustment and diffusion.

4. Conclusion

In the traditional historical linguistics linguistic change came to be seen as a metaphysical law operating within the framework of an outdated evolutionist theory of language.

According to this view, each speech, each linguistic geovariant or sociovariant is a separate and distinct organism, obeying the same evolutionary law of change in its development from a common 'mother tongue', although with different modalities for each organism. The principal merit of historical linguistics, the achievement which transformed it into a science, was the identification of the various 'rules' according to which each language has changed. But not having understood that the only linguistic law is that of conservatism or inertia, and having turned change into an organic law of development, which eludes any type of cognizance, it made it possible for its supporters to speed up at pleasure the time spans necessary for change in order to make the imaginary and arbitrarily created dates of the presumed origins of spoken languages fit with the real dates of their earliest written evidence. As we shall see, neither the ones nor the others are of any value for the determination of the absolute chronology of languages. Besides, by restricting itself to the study of change solely on the basis of written old and modern languages, and by completely ignoring the sociolinguistic aspect of structural change, historical linguistics has deprived itself of the main instrument for the understanding of the phenomenon of change, and, consequently, for the reconstruction of the historical process of linguistic evolution.

Finally, structural or grammatical change should not be seen as altering the continuous and steady line of language conservation, resulting from the above mentioned inertia principle of language stability, but as a dramatic and rapid episode, connected ultimately with a kind of social *earthquake* (the causes of which can be multiple), which results in a greater or smaller measure of psycholinguistic remodelling, and is eventually followed by the resumption of the normal stability pattern. A view of language evolution, incidentally, which seems to me perfectly in line with Gould's *punctuated equilibrium* of biological evolution.

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