Linguistic supertype and the English grammar: a historical perspective

Junichi Toyota
Lund University/University of Belgrade

The way we communicate can be classified into different types according to different disciplines. In semiotics, stemming from the Saussurian tradition of *langue* and *parole*, the principle of a ternary distinction of languages based on a semiotic triangle has been used, first proposed by Bühler (1934) and recently revised by Durst-Andersen (2011). According to this triangle, world languages can be classified into a situation-oriented type, a speaker-oriented type and a hearer-oriented type. These types are termed linguistic supertype by Durst-Andersen (2011). According to this classification, English is considered as a hearer-oriented language. What is unique, and often overlooked from a typological perspective, is that English grammar is full of peculiarities, in a sense that the formation of the English grammar is so unique that it is rarely found elsewhere in the world (cf. Toyota forthcoming). In this presentation, it is argued that the grammatical peculiarities in the English grammar are largely due to its historical development through contacts among mutually intelligible languages, including dialects. Contact-induced replications have been claimed to be a crucial force behind grammaticalisation (e.g. Heine and Kuteva 2005, 2006), but mutual intelligibility is also an important factor in contact, which can turn a language into a grammatically unique form.

Languages spoken in Europe have gone through dramatic changes after the 15th century. This is largely due to the social changes, initially triggered by the Renaissance and in the 15th century and followed by the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century (e.g. Heine and Kuteva 2006; Toyota 2010; p.c. Bernd Heine). This is because such social changes created a ground where people interacted more frequently, largely through trading but also intellectual exchange after the invention of mass printing. Like other European languages, English saw many grammatical changes after the 15th century, which seems to suggest that Great Britain also underwent the influence from the continental Europe. However, this timing is deceptive and it is a mere coincidence. Great Britain had its own social events, such as Enthronement of James I and Richard III and the Industrial Revolution, and did not experienced much effects from the continental Europe. Such events caused migration of people within Great Britain and as a consequence, mixing of dialect. Throughout the history of English, important contacts have been made among the mutually intelligible languages, e.g. Old Norse and different dialects. It can be stated that the formation of the Present-Day English grammar is a result of mixing different dialects, including Old Norse.

This is in part similar to koineisation, and some previous works have dealt with Middle English or Early Modern English as a type of koiné, dialect levelling or a standardised language (e.g. for instance, Wright 2000, 2005). However, dialectal levelling may not suffice to explain the whole developmental pattern found in the history of English. What is important is that the grammar was altered so that hears can understand a statement better. This lead to simplification of grammar in many parts (such as the loss of cases and gender, the fixation of word order, reliance on tense, not aspect, etc.), but some parts became more complex, e.g. the articles. All these shifts were made so that hearers can retrieve messages more easily. Thus, there is not much use in using articles from a speaker's perspective, but it is very useful for a hearer to decode a reference to a specific object in discourse. Thus, English grammar is not a simple dialect levelling, but historical changes were directed to turn the grammar into a hearer-friendly system.

The grammar of earlier English was more speaker-oriented, i.e. the system was better suited to express subtle differences in a speaker's mind. This required a more complex

system, as observed in the Old English grammar. After the Middle English period, this speaker-oriented grammar started to turn into a hearer-oriented one. In the whole sequence of changes in the history of English, it is clear that the underlying function of grammar has shifted. This is one of the major factors often neglected in explaining the historical changes of English, i.e. English has shifted the linguistic supertype. In order to achieve this, contacts among mutually intelligible languages or dialects are required, and this partial intelligibility made speakers aware that they had to express themselves clearly discarding subtle differences, which may not be so crucial in conveying an overall statement. The shift of the linguistic supertype is also responsible for grammatical peculiarities in English, since not so many languages have the hearer-orientated grammar. There are similar cases in the rest of the world (e.g. Malay in South-East Asia, Swahili in East Africa, Quechua in the Andes region of South America and Scandinavian languages in Northern Europe, cf. Toyota 2010), and such cases all demonstrate a similar developmental pattern and they normally went through contacts among different languages, most of which are mutually intelligible. It is also suggested from these languages that the grammar has shifted into the hearer-oriented type in these languages. Thus, the linguistic supertypes and shifts among them seem to be a very crucial, but normally neglected, factor in the historical linguistics. By incorporating the shift of orientations, it is easier to explain the history of the English grammar more comprehensively.

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