Published in: Bilingualism: Language and Cognition 14.2.156-158 (2011)

PEER COMMENTARIES

Children rule, or do they (as far as innovations are concerned)?

(Received: XXXX)

BRIAN D. JOSEPH
The Ohio State University, Department of Linguistics, 1712 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210–1298, USA
bjoseph@ling.ohio-state.edu

Meisel (hereafter, M) has offered a well-argued and tightly structured piece, discussing in a clear and compelling way a crucial topic in the understanding of language change. I applaud him for both the content and the presentation.

Q1 Much like Kazazis (1976, p. ■■■), who in his review of Newton 1972 says that while reading the book, "I caught myself more than once silently cheering for N[ewton]'s uncanny ability to unravel a maddening maze of dialectal data", I too found numerous times in reading M's paper when I put exclamation marks or happy faces in the margins, indicating my agreement with and delight at what he wrote, especially when it came to both his laying out of the generative paradigm for language change and his criticisms of it. It was hard for me to find fault with statements like "both child and adult learners can be agents of morphosyntactic change" (Meisel, this volume,
Q2 p. ■4), "one may reasonably question the assumption that all children facing this kind of learning context will be induced simultaneously to reanalysis" (Meisel, this volume, p. ■5), or "the assumption that child L1 learners are the principal agents of grammatical change is not warranted" (Meisel, this volume, p. ■19).

M makes it clear that a key issue here is whether adults can be linguistic innovators. The generative paradigm by contrast makes the assumption that children are the innovators in grammatical change. The notion of "grammatical change" as opposed to (mere?) language change is important, as the generative view is that change in the underlying structure of the language – the grammar – is something that happens only in the generational gap in transmission, and is different from the emergence of new forms or constructions in the language, something that adults do.

For me too, that is a crucial question we all need to confront – no one doubts that change happens ("shift happens", as Hans Henrich Hock (p.c.) has put it), but why it happens needs explaining. But before addressing the matter, I must say that I was struck, seeing the generative viewpoint presented so clearly, by the considerable number of assumptions and conditions needed to make it work. To illustrate, I ask the reader to note how many conditions (underlined) lead up to the point about an "erroneous setting of a parameter", a hallmark
Q3 of grammar change (Meisel, this volume, p. ■7):

> If ambiguous data of the sort illustrated . . . above do occur in the child's linguistic environment, it is, in principle, possible that the child learner arrives at only one of the possible analyses. If this happens to be one which differs from that required by the adult grammar, i.e. in case of reanalysis, and if it contains the structural configuration which functions as the trigger for a specific parameter setting, the result is an instance of an erroneous setting of a parameter triggered by an unambiguous trigger.

Assumptions are certainly needed for any enterprise as removed from direct observation as the workings of a child's mind as (s)he acquires a language natively. But one has to wonder how many of these assumptions are warranted, and how many define conditions that actually arise.

This is especially important, as there is no empirical evidence that change NECESSARILY originates in the generational transmission process, however attractive and widespread that view may be. The following comment, made by Labov in his highly influential 2007 article (Labov, 2007, p. 346, n. 4) concerning this view of language change, is telling:

> Halle (1962) argued that linguistic change is the result of children's imperfect learning . . . : that late additions to adults' grammars are reorganized by children as a simpler model, which does not exactly match the parents' original grammar. Although Lightfoot (1997, 1999) argues for this model as a means of explaining completed changes, such a process has not yet been directly observed in the study of changes in progress.

I admit that seeing children as grammar innovators is certainly plausible, and some innovations surely must originate with children. Still, must all innovative restructuring of grammars be by children? Is it not equally plausible that adults can radically change their grammars? We are told that it is not the surface manifestation of grammar that matters here but rather the underlying form of the grammar – "L1 grammatical knowledge" (Meisel, this volume, p. ■19) – but there are serious questions, I would say, as to how we actually know what this grammatical knowledge is. All we as analysts really see, after all, are the surface manifestations of grammar, the output as spoken by actual speakers in real time and in real interactions.

The view that adults are responsible can be built into an account of change if we say (an assumption, I realize) that children who are surrounded by the results of the radically changed adult grammar end up constructing grammars and having output that reflects what the older

generation has innovatively said (and modeled in its changed grammar). M himself suggests as much, but with the input being "second language learners … at least as far as change via transmission failure is concerned" (Meisel, this volume, p. ■19). But instead, generativists choose to lay the blame, as it were, for grammar change at the feet of children alone.

Ultimately, therefore, M does see child-language-learners as involved in grammatical change, but in an enriched view defined either by "situations where non-native speakers of the language to be acquired by children constitute the predominant group in their linguistic environment" or by "settings where learners acquire one of their ambient languages as a second language, i.e. in successive acquisition of bilingualism by either children or adults" (Meisel, this volume, p. ■21). Admittedly, the issue of who innovates may have to do more with whether one sees change as change in the language or change in the grammar. Nonetheless, the assumption that children learning their language are the innovators in language change is widespread, and almost part now of "received wisdom" about language change. And yet, it must be recognized that it is just an assumption.

With regard to one kind of change, at least, namely morphological change, I can offer an illustrative anecdote showing the way this assumption about children is ingrained in many linguists' consciousness and practice. The first time I heard the gerundial/participial form of *have to* occurring not as *having to* but rather as *hafing to* (as in *There I was, at the checkout counter, hafing to pay for my groceries but without a penny or a credit card in my pocket!*) was in the early 1980s, and I heard it from an adult. I found the form very interesting as an indication of an analogy and/or reanalysis based on the [f] in the surface form of *have to* ([hæftu]), and wrote about it in Joseph 1992. I subsequently heard other adult speakers using that form, too. Of course, I had no access to information about what form those speakers used in their earlier linguistically formative days, but my assumption – and I confess it was an assumption – was that this was an innovation by those adult speakers; there was no evidence to the contrary, though no positive indication either. Interestingly, when I mentioned this form to colleagues, many said that these speakers must have carried out the analogy/reanalysis as children and that the form was never "corrected", as it were, assuming this form to have arisen in the language learning process that speakers engaged in.

Conceptually, though, I see no reason to restrict such innovations to children, even if we can observe them in child language (and indeed, children DO say *hafing to*). That is, adults – and, importantly, MONOLINGUAL (as well as multilingual) adults – are subject to the same pressures as children caused by a network of related linguistic forms (leading to what is generally referred to as "analogical change"); in fact, because they know more words, adults have the potential for greater analogical pressure on particular forms. And, with adults, there are memory issues to reckon with too, as the retrieval of infrequent and/or irregular forms may simply be harder for adults, allowing analogical formations to slip into their usage. Finally, adults' production can be affected also by social pressures associated with using particular forms; moreover they have greater awareness of other dialect and, typically, more exposure to a wider range of styles and varieties than language-learning children. It should come as no surprise, then, that adults can innovate linguistically. In my own usage, after 30 years of living in Ohio, where the positive *anymore* (e.g., *Anymore you see lots of baggy pants*, i.e. "Nowadays, you see …") and the *needs washed* (e.g. *The car needs washed*, i.e. "… needs to be washed") constructions are prevalent, I find these forms occasionally coming out of my mouth. Is there no "grammar" that generates these for me? Assuming there is, must that grammar just be a patchwork with special markings such that it is not a significantly differently structured grammar? If so, on what empirical grounds is that claim made?

Admittedly, my focus here might be said to be only morphological or rather morpholexical change, whereas M aims at (morpho-)syntactic change. Interestingly, he talks (following other generativists) about it in terms of "grammatical change", as if syntax is all there is to grammar, and as if morphology is not part of grammar. Importantly, the morphological/morpholexical side to language can be united with syntax in some theoretical frameworks, though not necessarily one that M would endorse. For instance, in theories like Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG), syntax largely depends on the kinds of selectional, valence, and cooccurrence features that individual lexical items have; that is, HPSG has rich lexical entries that, together with overarching combinatoric properties (generally rooted in logic), yield the syntactic constructions one finds in a language. I mention HPSG because in it, learning lexical information is crucial to learning syntax, and – tangentially here, though M does make language contact an issue by invoking second-language learners – in it too, lexical borrowing and syntactic borrowing boil down to the same kind of process.

M does, further, seem to assume that some form of parameters is important in the theory he ultimately espouses, as he comments "reanalysis affecting parameter settings is much less likely to happen than is commonly assumed in historical linguistics" (Meisel, this volume, p. ■22 – one might want to say instead "in generative historical linguistics"). Yet, it seems that even parameter settings must be sensitive to lexically particular information.

In Joseph 1994, I show that the Modern Greek construction with the predicate *pun* (πο ́ν) "where

Q4 is?" must be followed by an overt subject, most typically the weak subject pronominal *tos* (*–dos* after nasals); that is, *pundos* "where is he?" is quite normal, but Q5 the absence of [dos] yields ungrammaticality: **pun Ø*. What is interesting about these facts is that Greek is otherwise a *pro*-drop language; for instance, *trexi* "he Q6 runs" is perfectly acceptable with no overt subject. I interpret these facts as a lexically particular "switching off" of the otherwise positive setting for the *pro*-drop parameter. Similarly, I argue that the English idiomatic expression *Beats me!*, meaning "I don't know", normally occurs in just that form, without an overt subject, even though English is not otherwise a *pro*-drop language (i.e. **runs*, without a specification of a subject, is normally considered ungrammatical); this English expression thus shows the lexically particular "switching on" of the otherwise negative setting for *pro*-drop. Morin 1985 offers a similar analysis for French *voici*/*voilà* "here it is"/"there it is", treating them as lexically particular allowable *pro*-drop constructions in a generally non-*pro*-drop language.

The significance of these facts in the present context is that if parameter settings are lexically determined and if lexical entries are key to grammatical structure, then one would necessarily have to allow for significant restructurings by adults, as they add to – and thus alter – syntactically relevant aspects of their lexical entries throughout their lifetime.

To sum up, I do recognize that M is critical in many respects of the approach to language change that I myself have been criticizing here. At the same time, though, he frames his discussion around the constructs of that approach so that, even with his penetrating reassessment of that viewpoint and his resulting interesting take on the application of the theory to language change, he is not impervious to some criticism, such as that offered here.

References

Halle, M. (1962). Phonology in generative grammar. *Word* 18, 54–72.

Joseph, B. D. (1992). Diachronic explanation: Putting speakers back into the picture. In G. Davis & G. Iverson (eds.), *Explanation in historical linguistics*, pp. 123–144. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Joseph, B. D. (1994). On weak subjects and pro-drop in Greek. In I. Philippaki-Warburton, K. Nicolaidis & M. Sifianou (eds.), *Themes in Greek linguistics*, pp. 21–32. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Kazazis, K. (1976). Review of Newton, *The generative interpretation of dialect*. *Language*, 52 (2), 514–516.

Labov, W. (2007). Transmission and diffusion. *Language*, 83 (2), 344–387.

Lightfoot, D. (1997). Catastrophic change and learning theory. *Lingua*, 100, 171–192.

Lightfoot, D. (1999). *The development of language: Acquisition, change, and evolution*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Morin, Y-C. (1985). On the two French subjectless verbs *voici* and *voilà*. *Language*, 61 (4), 777–820.

Newton, B. (1972). *The generative interpretation of dialect: A study of Modern Greek phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.