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# Introduction

Historical linguistics seeks to investigate and describe the way in which languages change or maintain their structure during the course of time; its domain therefore is language in its *diachronic* aspect. Descriptive linguistics on the other hand totally disregards time as a relevant factor in its investigations and attributes to the data a uniform status of simultaneity; its concern is therefore language in its *synchronic* aspect. It will thus be seen that it is not simply the greater or lesser extension in time of the data being investigated which constitutes the fundamental difference between synchronic and diachronic analysis, but rather the linguist's attitude towards the time dimension itself.[1]

Justification for the claim to independent status of synchronic description derives essentially from the observation that the speakers for whom a particular language serves as a means of communication are in general quite unaware of its historical dimension. If, then, the linguist is to create a model of the code which the members of a speech

[1] De Saussure is usually credited with having been the first to make explicit this distinction in his *Cours*, published posthumously in 1916 (de Saussure 1964: 114ff.). He saw the history of a language as a succession of synchronic states, each a complete system *où tout se tient* and therefore definable only in terms of the relationships existing between its various opposing elements. Change on the other hand he saw as applying not directly to the system as a whole but only to individual elements of it, and this in a completely unmotivated and fortuitous fashion. As a result, although each individual change will bring about a new synchronic system capable of description in structuralist terms, there is no such meaningful relationship between successive language states and language change is therefore not amenable to description *in terms of the systems*. De Saussure's position with regard to language change was challenged at the First International Congress of Linguists in 1928 when, in a resolution put forward by among others Trubetzkoy and Jakobson, it was claimed that the diachronic aspect of language is just as amenable to structuralist methods as its synchronic aspect and that every change must be treated as a function of the system as a whole (see Jakobson 1972a: 122).



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community share and through which they communicate with one another, this must surely be equally independent of all historical considerations.

But that language does in fact change during the course of time soon becomes evident when documents written in the same language but at different periods in time are subjected to examination. And, once allowance has been made for those orthographic and stylistic conventions which are characteristic of languages in their written form, it may fairly be assumed that such texts are representative samples of the spoken language as it was when they were committed to writing, structured in accordance with the synchronic rules then operating. This means that it is possible to abstract the grammatical structure of the language of each period from the documents and in this way a series of synchronic grammars may be set up and compared. The differences in their successive structures may then be interpreted as reflecting the historical development of the language. In this sense diachronic linguistics may be said to be secondary to synchronic linguistics, since the historical linguist deduces the changes that a language has undergone from the comparison of successive synchronic grammars.

We should beware, however, of confusing the image which must result from such a method with the linguistic reality. The representation of the evolution of a language as consisting in a succession of discrete states is no more a true reflection of the situation than is the representation of a circle by a number of straight lines connecting successive points around its circumference. For, however large a number of such points are taken the resulting figure will never be a genuine circle and, in the same way, however many language states are considered over a given period their succession will never provide a true picture of the unbroken *continuity* of a language in time. It is thus due to the limitations of our methodology that we are faced with the rather absurd situation that language evolution, although observable retrospectively in its *results*, appears to totally elude observation as a *process* while it is actually taking place. We shall see that there are two reasons why this should be so, one relating to certain theoretical assumptions which underlie synchronic analysis and the other to the manner in which language itself is transmitted. Let us consider these in turn.

The first factor which obscures the process of historical change is the fact that the synchronic analysis of a language always requires a certain degree of idealization of the data. For it should not be forgotten



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that when a linguist makes statements about 'a language', be it in relation to its synchronic structure or to its historical development, this is an abstraction from the observable reality, which can never be more than that of individuals employing speech as a vehicle of communication. And this reality as actually observed is never one of complete homogeneity. There will always be found to be differences between speakers dependent upon geographical location and social class, and there are always variations in the speech of the individual speaker dependent upon the formality of the occasion. These differences do not of course prevent communication, although it is true to say that the wider the range of individuals, localities and classes with which a speaker is confronted, the more likely is it that he will experience some difficulty in understanding everything that is said. Correspondingly, the wider the spectrum in social and geographic terms that the linguist attempts to embrace in his analysis, the greater the degree of abstraction that he must operate in order to maintain homogeneity in his data. This he will achieve in practice by eliminating from his account all individual, local and class-related variations, justifying their omission by pointing to the fact that communication is possible in spite of them and that they are not representative of the speech habits of the community as a whole. Depending upon his theoretical outlook, the linguist will therefore either restrict his analysis to a specific language sample (such as the slow careful speech of an educated speaker) and thus exclude from consideration a whole range of alternative speech patterns actually present in the community, or he will claim that his description is of *langue* (or *competence*) and thus only indirectly related to *parole* (or *performance*) to which speech variation within the community properly belongs. Different schools of thought will thus express the convention in different ways, so that for a structuralist 'descriptive procedure establishes the fiction that the various utterances to be dealt with have no temporal or spatial or social order' (Hockett) while for a generative grammarian 'a grammar of a language purports to be a description of the ideal speaker-hearer's competence', the ideal speaker-hearer being lodged in 'a completely homogeneous speech-community' (Chomsky 1965:4,3). But we shall see that, by representing something which is inherently endowed with variation as if it were of uniform structure, such conventional simplification of the data has the effect of excluding from the analysis precisely those aspects of linguistic structure which appear to be most closely connected with the promotion



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of language change. For there is good evidence to suggest that synchronic variation in the speech of a community is precisely the vehicle by means of which language change progresses, the favouring or disfavouring (and thus the survival or elimination) of competing variants being governed by social pressures. The rigidly uniform structures of conventional synchronic description simply do not capture these aspects of linguistic reality.

If the degree of idealization that has gone into the description of a present language state may be checked against the spoken language, in the case of a dead language or of an earlier stage of a living one accessible only through the intermediary of written documents, such verification is of course impossible. In their case we can only guess at the distance separating the form of the language of the texts from the underlying reality. Furthermore, the language of such written texts is as a rule already the product of a considerable amount of formalization so that the linguist is obliged to work with rather uniform data which will inevitably lead to an equally uniform synchronic description. The degree of idealization required in order to achieve descriptive regularity will in fact in such cases usually be smaller than that required in the case of living languages, simply because regularity has already been largely imposed by the constraints characteristic of written style. It will thus be seen that, while synchronic description can within the limits of its own theoretical framework provide a record of the *results* of language change, the investigation of the actual change *process* will require both different data and different methods.

After this brief discussion of the part played by certain theoretical assumptions of synchronic description in concealing all direct evidence of the process of language change, we will now turn to the second factor which prevents this process from being readily accessible to observation, namely the way in which a language is perpetuated. A language only exists through the intermediary of the human beings who speak it and, since the life-spans of these are of limited duration, it must be learned afresh by each new generation of speakers if continuity is to be maintained. It has been suggested that this constantly repeated process of acquisition by young children is likely to be an important factor in language change and we will therefore examine it briefly, although it is still poorly understood in many of its details. It is clear that, while the particular language that a child will acquire is determined by its linguistic environment – it will in fact learn the



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language of the community in which it grows up – every child is born with an innate predisposition towards language learning. The actual process whereby language is acquired is, however, only indirectly accessible to investigation. All that can be directly observed is the model, constituted by the speech of the people around it, and the child's own output. From these it can be deduced that, by subjecting the utterances that it hears to analysis, the child constructs its own grammar. Of the form of this grammar we are however largely ignorant and this is a serious drawback since it is precisely at this stage in transmission that inherited structures are likely to be given a new interpretation differing from that of the previous generation. Glimpses of the child's analysis of the language may, however, be had when it produces incorrect forms. The use of *goed* for *went* would thus imply 'knowledge' both of the category of past tense and of its basic marker but 'ignorance' of the exceptional status of the verb *to go*. Personal innovations of this kind will as a rule quickly disappear from the child's speech under pressure from its environment. It is, however, important to note that certain changes that have actually taken place in languages are essentially of the same nature, for instance the replacement of the older form *holp* by *helped* as the past tense of the verb *to help* in English. On the other hand transformational grammar has shown that the same output may be achieved by means of different grammars, so that even if a child's linguistic output does not observably differ from that of its models, this does not necessarily imply that their grammars are identical (cf. Halle 1962).

It would be a convenient solution if language change could be interpreted simply as the direct result of 'imperfect learning' on the part of children. Such cannot, however, be considered to be the direct cause since it fails to take account of the fact that language change has both persistence and direction. In a less immediate way, however, the assumption may contain some part of truth since the child's emerging grammar, which is after all built on limited data, may well rely more heavily on certain structures of the model, those of higher frequency for instance, than others. This necessarily selective attitude towards the model might account for the fact that, by its persistent and directional nature, language change operates as if its target had in some way been laid down in advance. That adults themselves behave in accordance with certain limited overt targets, at least where careful speech is concerned, is a well-attested fact. Members of a specific group will for instance



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make a conscious effort to avoid such things as 'dropping one's *h*-s', using *aint* for *isn't*, or confusing *us* and *we*. This shows that at all ages people can, and in fact often do, modify their speech habits in conformity with social pressures from within the community.

We have seen that, because it is embedded in variation patterns current within the community, the process of language change lies for the most part outside the individual speaker's awareness; preoccupied with the social significance of alternative forms, he is largely unaware of their correlation with time. Furthermore the maintenance of communication between speakers of different generations imposes a degree of constraint on the rate at which change can take place. His awareness of language change is likely then to be only of an indirect nature, based on what experience he may have of completed change observable from the comparison of documents from earlier periods with the contemporary system with which he is familiar. The historical linguist is in essentially the same situation with regard to his sources. While the present state is the only one which can provide him with full information on all the phenomena, including the embedding of linguistic variation in the social structure of the community, it is only by comparison via written records of different stages of a language that he can obtain an idea of the nature of diachronic rules. It can, in fact, be said that there is an optimal time-lapse of say four or five centuries which is most favourable for the systematic study of change. This is so because on the one hand the differences between successive language states are then sufficiently large to allow the statement in the form of rules of completed changes and on the other continuity is not at stake – one is clearly still dealing with 'the same language'.

It follows from the foregoing considerations that a two-fold strategy for the investigation of language change is necessary: firstly we must study its results as abstracted from the grammatical descriptions of successive language states and, as we shall see later, of related languages; and secondly we must investigate the actual process of change as an ongoing phenomenon through the methods of sociolinguistic analysis. The first of these approaches will occupy us in the first part of this book, which will be concerned essentially with the systematic analysis of completed change, that is to say the nature of diachronic rules. With the insight thus gained we will then turn to the question of the connection between language change and social and geographical space, which will include contact both between varieties of a single



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language and between totally different languages. It is this second, sociolinguistic, approach to language change which will be the subject-matter of the second part of the book.

We may gain a first impression of the sort of thing that we can expect with regard to language change by looking at a few examples from languages which have been written over long stretches of time, since here we have series of datable documents whose succession may be taken to reflect the way in which these languages have changed. A convenient text to take for this purpose is the Lord's Prayer, since it is the text which in the history of mankind has probably been most widely recorded.[1] It will provide us with samples of the English language as it was at the time of Shakespeare, of Chaucer, and of King Aelfric. Although on looking at these the present-day English reader may not recognize or know how to pronounce all the words they contain, he is nevertheless likely to experience a certain sense of familiarity with the language in which they are written. There will, on the other hand, be no such feeling of recognition in the case, for example, of those written in Hungarian or Welsh. This sense of familiarity clearly has to do with the fact that he can readily identify certain segments (formatives, words, phrases) with their counterparts in present-day English.

**The Lord's Prayer**[2]

*Authorized version* (1611)

Our father which art in heauen, hallowed be thy name. Thy kyngdome come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heauen. Giue vs this day our daily bread. And forgiue vs our debts, as we

[1] In spite of its obvious convenience, an objection to this text as a source of syntactic information regarding the earlier stages of a language is the fact that, being the translation of a highly prestigious document, the translators may sometimes have attempted to adhere so closely to the structure of the original that they have forced the translation into a 'foreign' mould. This, for instance, could be the explanation of the treatment of *heaven* as a plural in certain of the earlier versions.

[2] The various English versions, as well as the Old High German one, are taken from Kaiser (1961); the Modern German and Welsh versions are those given in Lockwood (1972), a work which contains nearly a hundred examples of the Lord's Prayer, almost all in Indo-European languages. For the Hungarian text, taken from the Károli Bible, and for its morph-by-morph translation, I am indebted to P. A. Sherwood of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London.



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forgiue our debters. And lead vs not into temptation, but deliuer vs from euill.

*Wycliff's version (late fourteenth century)*

Oure fadir þat art in heuenes, halwid be þi name; þi reume or kyngdom come to þe. Be þi wille don in herþe as it is doun in heuene. ȝeue to vs to-day oure eche dayes bred. And forȝeue to vs oure dettis, þat is oure synnys, as we forȝeuen tu oure dettouris, þat is to men þat han synned in vs. And lede vs not in-to temptacion, but delyuere vs from euyl.

*Old English (West Saxon, ca. 1000)*

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum, si þin nama gehalgod; to-becume þin rice; gewurþe þin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum; urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg; and forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum; and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge, ac alys us of yfele.

*Modern German*

Unser Vater in dem Himmel. Dein Name werde geheiligt. Dein Reich komme. Dein Wille geschehe auf Erden wie im Himmel. Unser täglich Brot gib uns heute. Und vergib uns unsere Schulden, wie wir unsern Schuldigern vergeben. Und führe uns nicht in Versuchung, sondern erlöse uns von dem Übel.

*Old High German (East Frankish, Tatian's version, ca. 830)*

Fater unser thu thar bist in himile, si giheilagot thin namo, queme thin rihhi, si thin uuillo, so her in himile ist so si her in erdu; unsar brot tagalihhaz gib uns hiutu, inti furlaz uns unsara sculdi, so uuir furlazemes unsaren sculdigon; inti ni gileitest unsih in costunga, uzouh arlosi unsih fon ubile.

*Welsh (standard version, sixteenth century)*

Ein tad, yr hwn wyt yn y nefoedd: sancteiddier dy enw.
*Our father, that who art in the heavens, be-hallowed thy name.*
Deled dy deyrnas. Gwneler dy ewyllys, megis yn y nef,
*Come thy kingdom. Be-done thy will, as in the heaven*



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felly ar y ddaear hefyd. Dyro i ni heddiw ein bara beunyddiol.
*so on the earth also. Give to us today our bread daily.*
A maddau i ni ein dyledion, fel y maddeuwn ninnau i'n dyledwyr.
*And forgive to us our debts, as forgive we to our debtors.*
Ac nac arwain ni i brofedigaeth, eithr gwared ni rhag drwg.
*And not lead us into temptation, but save us from evil.*

*Hungarian*

Mi Atyánk, ki vagy a mennyekben, szenteltessék meg a te
*Our father-our, who art the heavens-in, hallowed-be the thy*
neved; jöjjön el a te országod; legyen meg a te akaratod,
*name-thy; come the thy kingdom-thy; be the thy will-thy,*
mint a mennyben ugy a földön is. A mi mindennapi
*just-as the heavens-in so the earth-on also. The our every-day*
kenyerünket add meg nekünk ma. És bocsásd meg a mi vétkeinket,
*bread-our give to us today. And forgive the our sins-ours,*
miképen mi is megbocsátunk azoknak, a kik ellenünk
*in the way we also forgive those-to who against-us*
vétkeztek; és ne vígy minket kísértetbe, de szabadíts meg
*have-sinned; and not lead us temptation-into, but set-free*
minket a gonosztól.
*us the evil(-person)-from.*

These samples are of course not extensive enough to allow us to make a proper analysis of the language of each period, but even without analysis we may note a certain continuity in the lexicon evident in such items as *father*, *heaven*, *name*, *come*, *earth*. We can on the other hand also see that certain syntactic rules, even in the authorized version still in use today, are not the same as those of present-day English. Thus the relative pronoun *which*, reserved in current English for non-humans as opposed to *who* which is reserved for humans, is used in the authorized version to refer to God, and in the earliest version the relative clause is introduced altogether differently by means of the personal pronoun *þu* 'thou' followed by a relative particle since lost, *þe*. But the historical linguist has to do more than merely register isolated similarities and differences, he must show in a systematic way how the rules in the language have changed. Thus, although the native speaker is able to feel the connection in a subjective way, the objective justification for associating the various English versions in spite of their numerous differences, that is to say for claiming that they all belong historically



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speaking to 'the same language', is the fact that *systematic relations* can be established between the grammars of successive stages. This means that the grammar of present-day English is in principle derivable by means of a series of rules from that of the English of Shakespeare's day, Shakespeare's from Chaucer's, and Chaucer's from Aelfric's.

If we now compare the languages in which the two German versions of the Lord's Prayer are written we will arrive at the same conclusion as for the languages of the English versions, namely that systematic relations hold between them and that they also therefore belong historically speaking to 'the same language'. If on the other hand we compare say present-day English and German, it will be found that although there are still a number of obvious resemblances, the relationship between their structures cannot be expressed directly in the form of rules of the type which link the various stages of English or of German. The historical linguist is, however, able to show that there is continuity between present-day English on the one hand and present-day German on the other, but that the link is not a direct one but must be made through the intermediary of an earlier common system underlying both. Diachronic rules of the type with which we are already familiar can then be set up to link that earlier common stage with each of the languages separately. Thus both languages can be shown to have developed from a common source, but along different paths or – to borrow a term from Hoenigswald (1973) – 'channels of transmission', the English of Aelfric's, Chaucer's and Shakespeare's times constituting one channel, the German of Tatian's, Wolfram's and Luther's periods the other. Because of their evolution from a single common ancestor, English and German are said to be *related* languages, and we ascribe their present-day similarities to their common origin, their differences to the fact that they have reached the present through different channels of transmission.

Welsh and English (or for that matter Welsh and German) are also related languages, although casual inspection of our text would hardly convey that impression. This is because they are much more distantly related than are English and German, that is to say they are separated from their common ancestor by a much greater time-depth and therefore by a correspondingly larger number of diachronic rules. The common ancestor of English and German, in fact, is merely an intermediate stage in an overall development which may be represented diagrammatically as follows:



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