

Intentions and Their Role in (the Explanation of) Language Change

DUNJA JUTRONIĆ
University of Split, Split, Croatia

The primary aim of this article is to find out what different linguists say about the role of intentions in the study and explanations of language change. I try to investigate if in the explanation of language change, “having an intention” does any explanatory work. If intentions play a role, how do they do it, at which point it is salutary to invoke them, and what do they contribute to the explanation of language change? My main claim is that speakers’ intentions have a role to play only on higher linguistic levels, e.i., in speakers’ communicative strategies. Since this is a celebration for Kathy Wilkes and her contribution to goal-directed behaviour, in the Concluding remarks I go back to her remarks on language and intentions and see how they fit my discussion in this paper.

Keywords: Language change; speakers' intentions; goals of communication; Kathy Wilkes.

1. Introduction

The primary aim of this article is to investigate if in the explanation of language change, “having an intention” does any explanatory work. What I want to find out is if intentions do play a role, how do they do it, at which point it is salutary to invoke them, and what do they contribute to the explanation of language change.

It is crucial for the discussion to make a clear distinction between: (1) doing A intentionally¹ vs. (2) having an intention to do A. The follow-

¹ Tomasello says: “So why don’t apes point?... they do not understand communicative “intentions” (208: 385); “...only humans have the skills and motivations to engage with others collaboratively, to form with others joint intentions and joint attention in acts of shared intentionality (2008: 387). Tomasello is talking about

ing example shows the difference between the two: He intentionally (1) ran to the station thus causing a heart attack but he did not intentionally (2) cause a heart attack. What is very important in this discussion is that intentionality as intending to do things (no. 1) should not be confused with having an intention to act (no. 2). Namely, intentions in the sense of having a thought to act, or to have a thought about language, to have a thought about reference, etc. are propositions attitudes. Bratman says that one has: to spell out “the relation between intentional action [intentionality no. 1.] and intending to act, i. e. having an intention to act [intentionality no. 2]” (1984: 375). He says: “Intentions are distinctive states of mind” (1984: 376), or as Devitt says: “Intentions, like beliefs and desires are thoughts, propositional attitudes” (2021, on the web). In this article I concentrate on no. 2 intentionality, i. e., on intentions as having a belief/thought about something, here particularly, having a thought about language. I follow the application of this distinction in linguists’ writings about language and language change. I ask if “having an intention” (no. 2) plays explanatory work in language change.

I proceed as follows: In section 2 under the subtitle *Causes of language change* I present some old and some more recent opinions on the causes of language change. In section 3 *What kind of “beast” language is?* I set the scene and restrict myself to the discussion of two models of language: language as autonomous system *vs.* language as the “rational agent” system. The question is: Does language change happen internally by itself or do speakers have an important role in language change? In section 4 under the subtitle *Transferring the evolutionary metaphor to the case of language change*, I discuss the adoption and adaptations of the theory of biological evolution as applied to an evolutionary theory of language change and mostly present William Croft’s evolutionary theory of language change. The role of intentions stays the central issue. In section 5 under the title *On speakers’ intentions* I review what has been said about intentions in language change. Section 6 points to and discusses *Problems with explaining change with speakers’ intentions*. The central part is section 7 *A Proposal* where I present my view that in using language (i.e. speaking) and consequently also in language change, we do not need to help ourselves with intentions. It is the claim that in speaking we do not have to form a thought about language, i. e., we do not have to form an intention when speaking. Consequently this is also true for language change. The strong claim is that speakers’ having intentions do not have an explanatory role in language use or language change. If this is true then a further tentative suggestion is that if the locus of change is not the individual mind (individual intentions), then the driving forces behind language change are/might be social. The intentions might have a role to play

intentionality as a property of doing things in a way that distinguishes humans from the animal world.

on higher levels, that is, in speakers' communicative events/attempts. This possibility is further explored in section 8 under the subtitle *Goals of communication* where I argue for the levels of explanation in language change. Section 9 briefly introduces the emergentist approach in linguistics as another possible theoretical framework for explaining language change and the short attempt is to relate it to the emergentist approach in the explanation of biological evolution as suggested by Denis Noble. In 10 *Concluding remarks*, I relate some of the highlights of this paper to Kathy Wilkes's comments on language and intentions in language.

2. *Causes of linguistic change*

Historical linguists, and linguists in general have always concerned with the question of why languages change. However, most of the explanations and answers provided in the past have been rather fanciful. Jespersen (1922), for example, enumerates a number of them, starting from anatomical reasons ("sound changes must have their cause in changes in the anatomical structure of the articulating organs" (255), then geographical ("the harsh consonants found in the languages of the Caucasus as contrasted with the pleasanter sounds in regions more favoured by nature" (256), to psychological ("since the times of Grimm it has been usual to ascribe the well-known consonant shift to psychological traits believed to be characteristic of the Germans... their progressive tendency and desire of liberty" (258). One of the most popular reasons given for language change was also the breathing efforts in mountain environment. Less outlandish reasons are given, as the imperfect language transmission, ease of articulation, laziness theory, etc. Jean Aitchison says "when we have eliminated the 'lunatic fringe' theories, we are (still) left with an enormous number of possible causes to take into consideration" (1981: 112).

Focusing on current literature, let us look at two models of language where we find reasons given for the explanation of language change. In one of these models, language is seen as an autonomous system (predating the birth of sociolinguistics in the 1960s) where speakers do not play any role in changing the language. In the other model, the so-called "rational agent" model of language, speakers play a role in language change. In this model speakers' intentions become important.

3. *What kind of "beast" is language?*

3.1. *Language as an autonomous system*

Before the 1960s with the birth of sociolinguistics, there was little or no systematic study of the possible roles of speakers (in social interaction) as initiators or carriers of change. The language-internal position was the default position in the explanation of language change (with a relative neglect of contact phenomena). American historical linguist, Roger

Lass, is a good representative of the model of language approached as an autonomous system. His ideas are presented in Lass (1980) and elaborated in Lass (1997).

Lass does not believe “that language change is the result of ‘human action’ except in a very distant, secondary and probably uninteresting way” (1997: 337). Lass is very supportive of Sapir’s idea of language drift. The analysis of a drift, says Sapir, is certain “to be unconscious, or rather unknown, to the normal speaker” (1920: 161). If this is the case then, for Lass, language change cannot be a speaker’s “act”. (1997: 367). Lass believes that one has to include “the ‘geological time’ dimension, where speakers are not conscious of their role in propagating variation, and indeed can’t be... just because a person happens to do something, this is not necessarily an ‘act’ (in the sense of representing a cognitive choice or anything of significance to the person). One can act out of tradition, habit, uncontrollable impulse (endogenous or drug-induced) or for no apparent ‘reason’ at all” (1997: 374).

Lass sees language as “a population of variants moving through time, and subject to selection” (1997: 377). His arguments, he believes, “point the way towards a reasonable, non-individual and non-social definition of what we mean by ‘a language’” (1997: 375), where speakers’ role in language change are totally excluded.² “In this view, language change was seen, like geological change, to be the result of powerful non-human forces, in which human goals and actions had no part” (1997: 387). For the “rational agent” model (to be presented next) Lass says: “The fundamental error of the hermeneutic approach is that it attempts to get ‘inside’ something that because of its immense historical extension may not have an inside at all (1997: 390).³ What I have been trying to do...has been not much more than an attempt to get away from viscera and projections and pseudo-causal mysticism into something more like fresh air” (1997: 390). To sum up, it was believed that change in language is change in linguistic systems, not change in the speakers. Speakers are seen as powerless and insignificant figures.

3.2. *The “Rational agent” model of language*

The “rational agent” model of language is well represented by James Milroy (2003), especially because he goes into open discussion/dispute with Lass. Milroy’s position is in great opposition to Lass. The hypothesis that language is a kind of abstract object that can change within

² “By saying we don’t ‘need’ speakers I am not of course making the *absurd claim that language change proceeds entirely in their absence*” (Lass 1997: 377, note 42).

³ “This dichotomy [between autonomous and agent centered] has been noted before, perhaps most perspicuously by Raimo Anttila (1992); it focusses particularly on that style of linguistic enquiry that rejects hermeneutics and/or neo-Aristotelian ‘finalism’ vs. the one that embraces it. Other names for the dichotomy might be ‘classical’ vs. ‘romantic’, ‘sceptical’ vs. ‘enthusiastic’, even perhaps ‘rationalist’ vs. ‘irrationalist’, ‘agnostic’ vs. ‘missionary’, ‘Apollonian’ vs. ‘Dionysian’” (Lass 1997: 389).

itself or perhaps *bring about* change within itself, is a general nineteenth-century view and Milroy seen Roger Lass as a prominent, but balanced, defender of this traditional view. Milroy says that Lass⁴ has correctly pointed out that in the tradition, it has been assumed that it is languages that change and not (necessarily) speakers who change languages⁵ and that “endogenous change is part of the nature of the beast” (Lass 1997: 208). What is important is that the agency in this approach is language itself, and not the speakers of the language.

For the autonomous view of language change Milroy says a bit ironically: “Good heavens!”, says the language, ‘I’m becoming ambiguous. I’d better use my prepositions to make myself clearer!’” (2003: 151). Milroy argues (as all of the sociolinguists do) that speakers/listeners play a vital role in language change, and that in addition, language changes in response to changes in external (social) conditions (2003: 146). Sociolinguistic or rational-agent model thus makes a necessary contribution to explaining language change *via* the role of the speakers. The promise is that sociolinguistic approach may help us understand how language systems move from one state to another due to the role or intervention of the speakers and social environment.

Milroy-Lass dispute is very interesting in its own right. But why is the above opposition to language and language change important for our discussion? If the model of language is speaker-based, then the role of intentions and speakers’ actions in the explanation of language change becomes quite central. Are speakers doing something intentionally to language, do they deliberately set out to bring about changes in language? General agreement, however, is that speakers do not change their language with the aim of changing the language. Thus, Milroy approves of Lass pointing to “the implausibility of the view that *speakers* take action to *prevent*, for example, ‘dysfunctional’ changes” (1997: 359). Speakers do not care about the language in that way and moreover, we do not see into their minds. If the above is true, then what are speakers doing, what kind of actions should we ascribe to them? Before proceeding let us look into the most recent approaches to language change modeled on the evolutionary theory.

4. *Transferring the evolutionary metaphor language and language change*

The transfer of ideas from biological evolution to language is not a new one. The close relationship between biological evolution and language was noted by Darwin himself in an oft-quoted passage from *The Descent of Man*: “The formation of different languages and of different species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously parallel” (Darwin 1882). During the last few

⁴ Lass (1980: 120).

⁵ Milroy (2003: 143).

decades it has become fashionable in linguistics—and in some other human sciences—to look to the theory of evolution for a new explanatory framework.⁶ A number of books appeared transferring the biological metaphor to language and language change, the most important being Keller (1994), Saliloko (2001), Croft (2000), Givón (2002).⁷

I will discuss in broad outline William Croft's book *Explaining Language Change: An Evolutionary Approach* (2002). The main reason is that since our topic are intentions in language change Croft discusses them more than others do. Croft's approach assumes a usage-based evolutionary model, i.e., language change occurs in language use. Furthermore, variation in language is a crucial factor in language change. The background belief is that there is profound relationship between biological evolution and language change. Croft takes David Hull's application of evolutionary theory to conceptual change. Hull's conceptual system is referred to as the generalised analysis of selection.⁸ Simply put, Croft adopts and adapts the theory of biological evolution in order to construct an evolutionary theory of language change. Language change is an example of the same process, or a similar process as evolution, occurring with a different type of entity, namely language. He tries to show that mechanisms and processes that are postulated by evolutionary theory in biology can be applied to language change. The evolutionary framework requires that the object of the study be a historical entity, i.e. a spatio-temporally bounded token, not an idealised natural kind. In language change, the paradigm interactor is the speaker, or to be exact, the speaker's grammar. *The only real place for a linguistic system to reside is in speaker's head.*⁹

⁶ For example, the writings by Richard Dawkins (1986), Daniel Dennett (1995), David Hull (1988), and Gary Cziko (1995). Anette Rosenbach (2008) has a very thoughtful review of the problems and successes of such views and approaches to language.

⁷ Mufwene (2001) also invokes evolutionary theory in his approach to language change. He calls language a parasitic species, because languages can only exist through their hosts, i.e. speakers. Ritt (2004) on the other hand, although supporting and advocating a Darwinian approach to language change sees speakers as "victims" of language change rather than agents.

⁸ See David Hull (1988). In this work one of Hull's concerns is to define an evolutionary process in a way that could be applicable both to biological evolution and to the development and spread of scientific ideas.

⁹ Here are some basic concepts into which we cannot go in this paper. The counterpart of DNA in biological systems is the utterance in language. *Utterance* is a particular, actual occurrence of the product of human behaviour in communicative interaction. *Language* is defined as the population of utterances in a speech community, the set of actual utterances produced and comprehended in a particular speech community and *Grammar* is the cognitive structure in a speakers' mind that contains their knowledge about their language, the structure that is used in producing and comprehending utterances. In gene-based biological selection, perpetuation of replicators, i.e. genes, is achieved by reproduction by the interactor, i.e. the organism. Reproduction may result in altered replication of the gene. In language change we have a *replicator* which is an entity that passes on its structure

Evolution is a two-step process: there is altered replication of the replicators (innovation), and then selection. The causal mechanism of evolution in language change is also a two-step process: there is *innovation* and then *propagation*.

In *altered replication* or *innovation*, the outcome is different in structure from the original (e.g. *bad* may be pronounced with a slightly higher vowel than one heard before). *Selection* or *propagation* is a process of perpetuation of relevant innovations in a community of speakers.¹⁰ The emergence of new variants is treated differently from their spread through a speech community. In biology, the novelty emerges from the blind recombination and mutation of DNA.¹¹ The question then appears to be: Is the innovation in language also random or not? Opinions differ. Under one view variation in language arises randomly, like variation in biology and it is only the process of selection which brings in “order” into language change (McMahon 1994: 337). On the other view, variation arise non-randomly as, for example, argued by Haspelmath (1999: 192). He says: “I argue against the view that the grammatical constraints could be due to accident” (1999: 180). If errors in linguistic replication are in the same way random and non-optimizing as are errors in DNA replications, then it has consequences for the innovation of a linguistic variable and for the role of speakers’ intentions in the innovation of a new variants. There is more uniformity of opinions about the selection process. Croft (2000) for example argues that it is social factors—and *only* social factors—that drive the selection process. He refers to the main determinants of linguistic choices known from the sociolinguistic literature, such as accommodation (adaptation of one’s speech to that of an interlocutor) prestige (overt and covert), relation to social parameters as class, gender, age, etc.

Evolutionary approach to language changes underwent a number of criticisms. Let me just mention some by Andersen 2006.¹² Andersen claims: 1. That an innovative reanalysis in language is not random but that it is recognizably rational. 2. That there is nothing in the replication of genetic material that corresponds to the *imposition of values* on content and expression elements which takes place in the process

largely intact in successive replications. *Interactor* is an entity that interacts as a cohesive whole with its environment in such a way that this interaction *causes* replication to be differential. Differential replication is an innovation in language system.

¹⁰ The stress on variability in language and the distinction between actuation/innovation and selection/propagation is essential in this theoretical framework. It has been so since the pioneering article by Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968) in their famous statement that “[n]ot all variability and heterogeneity in language structure involves change; but all change involves variability and heterogeneity” (1968: 188).

¹¹ Cziko says: “Darwinian mechanism of cumulative blind variation and selection is the only tenable nonmiraculous explanation for the emergence of any kind of functional complexity” (1995: 300).

¹² See the exchange between Croft and Andersen in Nedergaard Thomsen (2006).

of reanalysis. 3. In actualization speakers “*literally select some variants over others*” (italics mine) but in natural selection there is never any agent purposefully producing an action of selecting something over something else. In other words, in evolution there is blind mutation natural selection while in language change we have rational speakers who make choices. Andersen says that the statement “Danish has adapted to the computer age” is really short for the equivalent that Danish speakers have innovated, adopted, and integrated (a linguistic feature) into their tradition of speaking. In sum, the mechanical replication of genetic material in evolution contrasts with the rational process of reanalysis in language change. “If so, then here is a sharp contrast between evolution and language history: while genetic copying errors result from an underperformance of the mechanisms of replication, the formation of grammar (and other cultural systems) demonstrates an overperformance of human minds, a capacity for forming new symbols for immediate use that surpasses any need to acquire precisely all the details of extant patterns of usage” (2006: 81).

Andersen believes that change in language is produced by its speakers as part of the exercise of their *free will* which, according to him, speaking is. Speakers as free agents (with their human minds) are the agents of change. When one is dealing with structural and developmental tendencies in language it is in the linguistic behavior of speakers that is most important. So why does language change, according to Andersen? Apart from the already mentioned free will, it is “the *creative aspects of practices* and traditions of speaking that matter. The fact that they leap to the eye in every type of innovation that has been described suggests that they are not an accidental, but an essential characteristic of language” (2006: 83).

If speakers are free and creative agents and they are the locus of language innovations as it is claimed in the “rational agent” approach to language and language change, then the talk of intentions becomes very relevant or crucial in the explanation of language change. James and Lesley Milroy (1985) follow the same line of thought. Change begins with variation in the speech of speakers. They affirm that if we are to address the actuation problem (which is “the very heart of the matter”), we must break with tradition and maintain that it is not languages that innovate. It is the speakers who innovate and their role is essential. In the evolutionary model of language change which is supposedly mechanical and blind one would expect that the role of speakers is minimized or non-existent. But this is not the case. On the contrary, speakers are, in this model also, central for the explanation of change which sounds controversial or even contradictory—if the change is blind and random. We examine what has been said about speakers’ intentions in the next section.

5. *On speakers' intentions*

What has been said about speakers' intentions? Apart from some scattered remarks and the stress on conscious or problematically unconscious intentions by the speakers, there is no systematic approach to their discussion in the past. Here are a few examples. Whitney (1848–1916), for example, held the view “that language change is governed by two different forces—conscious intentional action (individual variation) and ‘unconscious’ consequences (social selection)” (Nerlich 1990: 40). Bréal (1832–1915) thought that the language user is the motor of change, that language change is the cumulative consequence of intentional, intelligent, and conscious actions of the speaker. Language change “has to be explained by reference to conscious, voluntary action (Nerlich 1990: 104). Changes are brought about unconsciously, however “by an *unconscious that has depth*, so to speak... consciousness plays a role in language” (Nerlich 1990: 104, italics mine).

What do we find in the authors that were discussed so far, namely, Andersen and Milroy in particular, since they put speaker at a center position for the explanation of language change?

We have already seen that Andersen sees the speaker as a rational agent imposing values on content and expressions and “doing something” in the course of linguistic change. If this is so, one would expect that intentions will be discussed in great details. But then Andersen expresses his doubts about intentionality in a longer passage that I quote:

But such a reference to intentionality is inappropriate for several reasons. For one thing, we rarely know much about the intentions of the speaker(s) that initiated or adopted past innovations. For another, there are evidently several kinds of intentionality. Experience tells us that Adaptive innovations and Extensions can be created with premeditation—consider the Coining of new terminology or metaphoric Extensions in poetry. If Adaptive innovations and Extensions are not premeditated, they can still be made deliberately. But even if an innovation is not made deliberately, but spontaneously and seemingly unwittingly, the speaker may still be able to rationalize it afterwards, that is, it may appear to have been made with unconscious intent. *This fuzziness of the notion of intention speaks in favor of shifting our attention from the innovating speaker's inscrutable state of mind to the purpose or purposes served by given innovations: all Adaptive innovations and Extensions are purposeful* (2006: 68, italics mine).

What has to be noticed in this passage in particular is that Andersen in his hesitancy to speak of speakers' intentions switching the explanatory aim to *the purposes of communication*.

James Milroy mentions speakers' intentions under the subtitle “Intentionality and change” in his article from 2006. All he says is: “It does not follow from speaker-based position arguments that speakers deliberately set out to bring about change in language...we do not see into their minds...they care (not) about the language...Although speakers do not voluntarily engineer changes, it must be speakers who

implement them in ante action and who finally determine, through frequency of use, which changes, out of a very large array of possible changes, are accepted into the system” (2006: 149–150). One can surely interpret that Milroy does not think that in language change speakers “having intentions” (no. 2) play any role. And he is surely right as I shall argue later.

What do we find on intentions where language is approached from the evolutionary model as applied to language change? If the evolution is blind then by analogy language change is blind, it is a result of chance, it is random. So, what is the role of the individual (and his intentions) in the evolutionary based approaches? One would expect that the stress on the individual role in language change should be minimal. But this is not so. On the contrary, the attempts are to show that the individual and his/her intentions are still very central and quite prevalent. Rudi Keller (1990) spends a number of pages on the role of intentions.¹³ For example he says that “the speakers change their language’ only sounds inappropriate because the speakers do not change their language intentionally and systematically but unconsciously” (1990: 8–11). He questions the status of conscious *vs.* unconscious intentions and does not support the claim that unconscious intentions are problematic. Keller sees language change as what he calls a phenomenon of the third kind, i.e., an unintended causal effect of intended human social actions (1990: 57). The phenomenon is said to be of the third kind to distinguish it from the products of intentional design (artifactual phenomena) and products of purely natural processes with no involvement of human intentions (natural phenomena).¹⁴ Language change is the causal consequence of a multitude of intentional actions. Thus, individual intentional actions (unconscious?) are involved in language change (1990: 68). At other places Keller is more outspoken and says: However, “conscious human purpose is always involved” (1990: 86). Furthermore there is no crucial influence on language, without going through the freedom and the intelligence (?) of the speakers (1990: 90). In sum, “there is always a conscious purpose involved, as in any communicative activity, whereas change is its (usually) unintended cumulative effect” (1990: 121). Languages do not change in certain ways because speakers intend them to do so, but they change as a by-product of the speakers’ intentions to attain socio-communicative goals with their language use. We shall comment on these claims in the next section.

¹³ He points out the ambiguity and different meanings of intentions. He finds the problem of terminological confusion of lumping three terms: intentional, planned, and conscious together. Intentional is sometimes confused with planned but these are predicates which are independent of each other. Here is an example: “When I am about to open the door, I moved the thumb from the index finger to grasp the door handle. This action undoubtedly has a purpose. It is goal-directed, but I never planned to do it” (1990: 10).

¹⁴ As mentioned in Croft (2000: 59–62).

Let us return to William Croft (2000).¹⁵ Croft, as we saw, warns against the “reification or hypostatization of languages...languages don’t change; people change language through their actions” (2000: 4). What we find in Croft and not in other linguists who talk about intentions is an attempt to systematize speakers’ intentions into: nonintentional and intentional.

Here is a relevant part of the chart:

	<i>Intentional</i>	<i>Nonintentional</i>
<i>Normal replication</i>	convention (being understood)	entrenchment
<i>Altered replication (innovation)</i>	expressiveness not being misunderstood economy	over/undershoot (hypercorrection hypocorrection) form-function reanalysis [speech errors]

In *normal replication* the *nonintentional* mechanisms are found in entrenchment. What Croft means by entrenchment is the psychological routinization of a behavior, i.e., the behavior of recognizing a linguistic expression and producing it (2000: 236). The entrenchment is the survival of the cognitive structures in a grammar that are used by the speaker in producing utterances of that structure. On the other hand, Croft finds *intentional mechanisms* in language convention which is a common ground in a community. I will later question this decision.

Let us look at the suggestions for altered replication, that is innovation:

Nonintentional mechanisms for innovation are: speech errors, sound changes, hypercorrection and hypocorrection. Croft says: “the speaker aims to produce a particular sound, but overshoots or undershoots the target ...” (Croft, 2000: 76).¹⁶

¹⁵ There is no space to discuss Ritt (2004) but it is interesting to see the difference between Ritt’s and Croft’s approach concerning the role of the speaker in linguistic replication. Ritt (2004) adopts Dawkins’s (1976) notion of “selfish genes” and thus Dawkins’s idea that memes actively replicate and that the organism’s (i.e. the speaker’s) role is simply that of a “vehicle”, i.e. speaker has a very passive role. Croft (2000), in contrast, adopts Hull’s generalized theory of selection and with it Hull’s idea of somewhat more active “interactors” rather than Dawkins’s passive notion of “vehicle”.

¹⁶ An example of hypercorrection would be: *It is I, or seldomly* and of hypocorrection the nasalization of *can (kan)*. An example of form-function analysis would be: *He robbed her of her bracelet* as differently expressed: *He robbed the bracelet from her* showing the flexibility of recombining existing forms-cum-meanings.

Intentional mechanisms of innovation are: expressiveness (creativity), avoiding misunderstanding, and economy. Croft says that one of the chief mechanisms for innovation in lexical change is *the slipperiness of meaning*.

6. *Problems with explaining language change with speakers' intentions*

What possible conclusions can we draw from the writings on intentions as playing a role in language change?

1. One finds the discussion controversial and insufficient to say the least.¹⁷ 2. More specifically, a number of claims on the role of intentions are contradictory. Andersen, for example, says that adaptive innovations (like coinage or borrowing) may be considered intentional, and extensions (application of extant means to new usage, received lexeme to a new referent), unintentional. But later he expresses his doubts and says that if adaptive innovations and extensions are not premeditated, they can still be made deliberately. If they are made deliberately then they cannot be nonintentional. Keller stresses that language change is a causal consequence of a multitude of intentional actions. But then he also says that languages do not change because speakers intend them to do so. So speakers change the language intentionally but then it seems that they do this unconsciously. In other words, Keller allows for unconscious intentionality. He also talks about the power of “free will and necessity” as a cause of language change, which, he claims, should correspond to the interaction of the factors like “chance and necessity” in the evolution of animate nature. Frequently people assume that chance allows for free will, while in fact it is difficult to see how random, chancy phenomena allow for free will. 3. Thirdly and possibly most importantly, when linguists are using intentional it is not clear if intentional is used as “doing A intentionally” (1) or it is used as “having intentions to do A” (2). In his hierarchical view of intentions Croft says: “Certainly normal replication—adherence to convention—is an intentional mechanism that nonintentional mechanisms cannot do without” (2000: 78). Yes, if by intentional mechanism Croft means intentional actions (1). No, if it means that in conventional, normal/everyday language use we as speakers help ourselves with having intentions (2). Having intentions (2) do not have a place in the explanation of language conventions. At least, I want to argue for this view in the next section.

7. *A proposal*

Intentions used in the explanation of language and language change seem to have a number of problems: 1. Unanswered questions (what is

¹⁷ Looking at the indexes of many books on language change we find very few entries, if at all, on speakers' intentions.

unconscious intention?), 2. Confusions (intentional actions vs. having intentions), 3. Contradictions (free will vs. blind selection).

A good methodological strategy is to seek nonintentional mechanism first, and only turn to intentional mechanism at higher linguistic levels. The reasonable suggestion is that nonintentional mechanisms for innovation are more likely to be found at lower levels of language organization such as sound structure, while intentional mechanisms are more likely to be found at higher linguistic levels (Croft 2002: 76). In this respect Croft's hierarchical structure as presented above is useful as a starting point.

In a possible hierarchical structure, I first follow John Ohala (1989) whose research is mainly in phonology and who also deals with issues of phonological change. Ohala is a firm advocate of the elimination of intentional talk on the phonological level. For him the source of variation is definitely the speaker but the speaker is *unaware* of the variation. He says: "There exists in any speech community at any point in time a great deal of hidden variation in the pronunciation of words.... by hidden I mean rather that speakers exhibit variations in their pronunciation which *they and listeners usually do not recognize as variation*" (1989: 175, italics mine).¹⁸ Speaker is totally unaware of any kind of change so like in biological evolutionary theory "there is no mind directing the change, no choices made to take one path over another" (1989: 33). Ohala justifies the exclusion of speakers' intervention, i.e. speakers' intentions, in language change with a somewhat unusual comparison and he says: "I avoid explanation of the sort '...the speaker chose a different pronunciation in order to optimize (something)'...for the same reason that modern science rejects explanations like '...the earth's climate is getting warmer because the gods are angry with us'.... it is part of the tradition of modern science to seek the less extravagant explanation before embracing the extravagant ones. This is, after all, the nature of explanation: reducing the unknown to the known ...not to further unknown, uncertain, or unprovable entities" (1989: 37). It is obvious that Ohala finds the intentional talk in language change nothing more than an extravagant myth not worthy of being part of a scientific approach to language.

Ohala is concerned only with the initiation (actuation) of sound changes, not their transmission. The way that change gets transmitted is by ordinary means of reproduction (1989: 21). "Spread is mediated primarily by psychological and social factors and lies outside the domain I consider here" (1989:15). In innovation Ohala is looking and supporting mechanistic or nonintentional causes of change. In sum, the claim is that there is no need, and moreover it is implausible and scientifically wrong, to include speakers' intentions in phonological change.

¹⁸ And more strongly: "What I am claiming is that the devoicing of voiced stops and the friction of stop releases can happen inadvertently or unintentionally" (1989: 178). Ohala takes sound change in its initiation (or innovation) to be non-mentalistic.

What I want is to suggest (more radically) that normal language use and with that language change is not intentional at all. In other words, we do not need intentional talk in order to explain ordinary language use or language change on any linguistic level by invoking speakers' intentions. My suggestion is that Ohala-style explanation should be extended to higher linguistic levels such as morphology, syntax and even lexicon. In other words, in everyday language use and with that language change there is no need to invoke speakers' having intentions at all. They do not play any explanatory role in conventional language use. The speaker is not intentionally doing anything (2). He is only intentionally acting (1). But this is as it should be.¹⁹

In order to accept this proposal we have to take for granted some background theoretical assumptions. 1. We have to see linguistic competence not as knowledge-that (even tacit) but as a skill or ability, i.e., knowledge-how. I go along with Devitt here who says: "Why think that linguistic competence is just a skill or ability? Briefly, because it has all the marks of one: it has limited plasticity; it is extraordinarily fast; the process of exercising it is unavailable to consciousness; once established, it is "automatic' with the result that it can be performed whilst attention is elsewhere" (2020: 28).²⁰ 2. Furthermore, one has to accept that conventions play a significant role in language. A convention is the regular use of language forms on all linguistic levels and speakers in a community are participating in the same (or very similar) linguistic conventions. Devitt says: "These shared dispositions amount to a linguistic convention if their sharing is explained by a certain sort of causal relation between the dispositions" (2021b: 83). Regularity is noticed by speakers and hearers but (very importantly) "this noticing and catching on are likely not high-level-cognitive processes; likely, they are 'implicit' and 'procedural' rather than 'explicit' and 'declarative'" (2021b: 86).²¹ If following the conventions in language use is not high-level cognitive process then speakers do not have to use intentions in order to speak or change their language. This is why I think that Croft is not right in putting convention (being understood) as an intentional mechanism.²²

If the above is accepted (and I do not claim that it is not controversial) then were do we find having intentions as playing a role in language change? In the hierarchical structure where can we find place for intentions? If asked what kinds of linguistic changes speakers are most

¹⁹ To be reminded of the comparison: We walk intentionally but we do not form an intention to walk.

²⁰ See also Devitt (2006b: 209–10). I argued for knowledge of language as knowledge-how and not implicit or tacit knowledge-that in Jutronić (1995).

²¹ See also Devitt (2006b: 210–20).

²² Devitt in his article "The irrelevance of intentions to refer" has argued convincingly that reference fixing does not need any use of intentions, either (2021b). He finds the explanation with intentions "implausible, incomplete, redundant once completed and finally misleading." Indeed, intending to refer "should have no place at all in a theory of language" (2021b).

likely to make deliberately, one would think first of lexical innovations. Possible conscious role of individual speakers is especially clear in lexical innovation cases of new words created by high prestige individuals, such as writers and poets. Every generation of teenagers has its own slang vocabulary and every specialized field has its own technical lexicon. There are words that invented either entirely (e.g., names of new products such as Kleenex and Xerox). Or partly to take an obvious example: email, for instance, combines the first letter electronic with the noun mail, etc. Metaphorical use of language is also intentional, not to mention poetic use of language. All the uses of language that pragmatists try to stress, those due to contextual factors and interpretations are likely to be intentional. A very important thing to notice is that in the above stated possibly intentional use of language and the inclusion of pragmatists' claims we are not talking anymore about ordinary language use. The talk has switched to communication, its strategies and its goals.²³

8. *Goals of communication*

What do the authors we discussed say when trying to explain language change? Whichever approach is taken, either autonomous or agent driven or the approach on the model on evolutionary biology, when one looks more carefully one notices that in trying to explain the innovation in language the authors often, one might say, change the subject from individual actions to the goals of communication.

Croft states in the above chart that intentional mechanisms for innovation (his altered replication) are: expressiveness (creativity), not being misunderstood, economy. In Andersen we find the stress on the rationality of the agent, his free will as evident in creation of new words and poetic language. What one notices is that the mentioned mechanisms have little to do with ordinary language use. In the proposed hierarchy of nonintentional and intentional mechanisms their place is to be found in the communicative strategies and not in language as a conventional means of communication. Expressiveness, creativity, not being misunderstood, economy, not to mention free will and rational choices are mechanisms not involved in ordinary, nonintentional language use and language change. I suggest that intentions have an explanatory role in what I labelled as goals of communication. The suggestion itself is actually nascent, although mostly covertly, in the writing of the authors involved in this discussion.

For example, in Milroy with his speaker oriented assumptions, we expect to hear more about speaker's intentions but when Milroy asks who practices bricolage in language he switched from the role of the speaker to the discussion of speaker's *communicative strategies* (2003:

²³ See for example Devitt (2021a) for the critical debate about pragmatists' claims and where to draw the line (distinction) between semantics and pragmatics.

156). He says: "...the change that I am about to discuss here is involved with the *communicative strategies* of speakers" (2006: 257); "no change is ever independent of some form of *speaker-based social motivation*" (2006: 161). Keller argues that the linguistic change is a by-product of the speakers' intentions to *attain socio-communicative goals* with their language use. Croft makes very much about the distinction of speakers' innovation and selection (or propagation) which he says is intentional. "*Language use is intentional behavior. What matters, however, is the goal of the intention*" (2006: 119, italics mine). Lass who emphasizes the implausibility of the view that speakers take action in language change says: "... they [speakers] are preeminently interested in *communication*, and do not deliberately and consciously aim at changing language" (1997: 359). Isa Itkonen who (like Andersen) sees language change as rational action of human free will, reverts to a community of speakers and gives them an important role in the selection of certain innovations. "The real effective reason of a given (phonetic) change is that a *community*, which might have chosen otherwise, *willed it to be thus...*" (2005: 73, italics mine).

What can we reasonably conclude from the above statements or claims? One thing seems to be certain and that is that the discussion of speakers' intentions in language change is switched above linguistic levels, to the level of communicative interaction with the stress on the goals of communication. They all support the sociolinguistic guiding idea that the most significant contribution of sociolinguistics to linguistics in general is the fact that is has been demonstrated time and again that one cannot fully understand the emergence, spread and loss of a linguistic feature without taking into account extralinguistic factors. As Labov, the father of sociolinguistics says: "rarely do we have some sense of what gets the whole thing rolling in the first place in terms of the 'actuation problem'" (1972: 162–63). "Therefore we can say that the language has changed only when a *group* of speakers use a different pattern to communicate with each other... The origin of a change is its 'propagation' or acceptance by others" (Labov 1972: 277). However, there is also a general conviction that processes of linguistic change are "multi-causality" phenomena in the way that *cognition and social structure interact* and shape the path of language change. But maybe one has prevalence over the other in the role they play in the explanation of language change. In a larger perspective set forth by Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968), we can say that the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to. They give prevalence to social factors. All the observations Labov made in Martha's Vineyard gave him the idea that speech is always linked to social attitudes and linguistic change of several groups of society.

If the stress in language change is switched from speakers to their goals in communication, then do we have to switch from the individual

to the collective? Peter Harder (2010), for example argues that the individual is a wrong starting point in approaching language and thus also language change. His contribution is in suggesting how cognitive linguistics is to be expanded to include the social side of language and meaning. In other words, language-and-conceptualization needs to be set in the wider context of “meaning-in-society”. Language and language change are fundamentally social interactional phenomena. “If a word meaning does not exist in a sociocultural niche (however fleeting and emergent), the word does not exist at all” (2010: 171). But “if we see the existence of meaning at collective level..., the fact that meaning cannot exist without individual minds is no argument against collective meaning” (2010: 166).

One of the more important goals in communication that one finds discussed in literature is speakers’ attempts to accommodate to their interlocutors. This is known as language accommodation. Very briefly, research shows that in the process of accommodation speakers tend to adapt/accommodate their language to the interlocutor, which necessarily gives rise to linguistic change.²⁴ Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) shows that interlocutors tend to converge linguistically over the course of interaction (Giles 1980). The goal of accommodation is possibly an intentional mechanism for language change. There is (intentional) convergence in face-to-face interaction. For example, in contexts of dialect contact speakers accommodate their variety to other variety or varieties in order to show solidarity, identity, etc. The variants that emerge are a result of accommodatory behavior which gives rise to linguistic change and which can/may gradually stabilize and become more durable characteristic of that person’s linguistic repertoire.²⁵

In sum, in weighing the role of individual/mental and social we might conclude that cognitive states have to be completed with a reflective social evaluation. There surely are different unreflective, non-intentional cognitive/perceptual factors that contribute to innovation but again if they are not completed with reflective, intentional social evaluations, we would not surface at all, i.e. we would not know about them at all.²⁶

9. *Emergentism*

A possible more theoretically profitable way to look at hierarchical levels of intentional talk is within the emergentism approach. Emergentism in linguistics is becoming more and more popular. The advo-

²⁴ See for example Trudgill (1986).

²⁵ See Kerwill (2002). On the other hand there are opposing views to intentional explanation of accommodation. For example, Trudgill says: “linguistic accommodation is not driven by social factors such as identity at all but is an automatic consequence of interaction” (2008: 252).

²⁶ See Jutronić (1995).

cates of emergentism characterize both the language of the community and that of the individual as being in a state of *constant change* and reorganization. The idea is related to the explanation in usage-based linguistics in emphasizing that language structure emerges from language use. Linguistic emergentism assumes that the properties of language arise from the interaction between the demands of communication and general human capabilities. The issues are numerous as evident from the articles in the recently published volume *The Handbook of Language Emergence* in 2015 that has over 600 pages. The core idea uniting this approach is that levels of linguistic structure emerge from patterns of usage across time. It firmly embraces the idea of inherent variability and uses variationist (sociolinguistic) tools for tackling specific descriptions and problems. There is a lot of stress on an interlocking hierarchical structure that is of interest to us here. Complexity arises from the hierarchical recombination of small parts into larger structures. Given the interactive nature of these interlocking hierarchies, reductionism (Fodor 1983) is clearly impossible. Within the emergentist framework, the principles of competition, hierarchicality, and timeframes are recognized and much discussed.

In their contribution on linguistic change in the emergentist framework, Poplack and Cacoullos (chapter 12), trace changes and continuities in grammar and lexicon over decades and even centuries. They view the individual's linguistic abilities as emerging from interactions with the wider social community. They refer to sociolinguistics as "language emergence on the ground" because of the richness of its observational data relating to language usage and change. They show that by situating newly emerging forms in the social and linguistic structures, we can discover the mechanisms involved in emergence of new forms. A core insight of this approach to language is that form–function mappings are inherently variable and there is mention of Darwinian theory in producing and proliferation of variants.

Is the emergentism approach another possible venue of discussing the role of speakers' intentions in the explanation of linguistic change? I think that the answer has to be: No. One notices that emergentists hardly mention intentions at all. The index of the mentioned volume barely has an entry or two on intentions or intentionality. Thus, even simply looking at the index, one will conclude that authors do not seem to be interested in intentions in language or language change. The whole stress again is that language changes across generations is hierarchical manner and that the changes are determined by communicative function.

Denis Noble in his book *The Music of Life: Biology Beyond Genes* (2006) argues for (if I read him right) a hierarchical multilevel selection view in biological explanation which is not gene-centered. He is proposing an emergentism view of higher-level properties. He says: "This, then, is the great challenge of twenty-first-century biology: how

to account for the phenotype in terms of the systems-level interactions of the proteins“ (2006: 17). Some biologists have called these properties “emergent” properties. Noble prefers to call them “systems-level” properties. The higher-level properties emerge from the lower ones and linking levels is part of what systems biology is about (78). One of the important goals of integrative systems biology is to identify the levels at which the various functions exist and operate (129).

For the purpose of our discussion it is important what Noble says about who is driving or creating the emergent properties. The parallel question for language is of who is driving or creating language change. And Noble’s answer is: Nobody! He says: “I am nowhere to be found. The subject is not usually there.²⁷ It all has to emerge without there being a driver. The grand composer was even more blind than Beethoven was deaf!” (112). In our case, it is not the individual or his/her intentions that changes language. What is also important in the emergentist’s framework is that “explanation is possible only at the appropriate level, in this case the level at which it makes sense to talk about...”(129). In the case of intentions in language, levels are important, too. The proposal was that the level where we can talk about intentions is in communication strategies and not in ordinary language use. Noble also stresses the importance of social context. “Obviously, any explanation of my pointing *as an action* would need to take that social context into account” (127). The same in language case. My suggestion was that the levels where we can talk about intentions is much more on the creative use of language and communicative strategies than in ordinary language use.

Thus, it seems that in our journey about the role of intentions as an explanatory tool in language change we have come back a full circle to Roger Lass who says: “... we don’t gain anything by invoking them [speakers] (whatever their role)” (1980: 377, note 42). “There is of course no doubt that at some point in the procedure humans do have a role to play (individually and collectively), since they are at least end-users. The important thing is not to confuse the end-user with the product” (1980: 385).

10. *Concluding remarks*

We have gone a long way from presenting language as an autonomous system where a linguistic change is discussed as purely a language-internal account and external influences are not taken into account. Speakers’ role in changing the language is minimized. Then subsequently speaker-based account of language change was found more satisfying but also more demanding. Speakers are agents, they bring about the language change. The role of speakers’ intentions becomes

²⁷ “The most natural way of saying the Japanese or Korean equivalent would be ‘thinking, therefore being’” (2006: 140).

rather crucial. But still, the goal of speakers' intentions is not linguistic change. The common agreement among linguistics is as Croft puts it, "[s]peakers have many goals when they use language, but changing the linguistic system is not one of them" (2000: 70). With the evolutionary model of language change the problematic nature of intentions becomes more evident. If linguistic change as evolutionary process is blind and random, then speakers as agents become problematic.

I then looked into the arguments for the crucial role of speakers' intentions (either conscious or unconscious) in understanding language change and found them either incomplete or insufficient. I suggested that ordinary language usage and also language change cannot be explained by intentional language.

So, who or what is changing the language? If the individual is not a good starting point then I suggested (after Harder's ideas and many usage-based approaches to language and language change) looking into the goals of communication. The crucial factors enabling us to explain the phenomenon of "language change" have, accordingly, to be localised to the social nature of human beings. Social and communicative aspects of linguistic structures require a *communication-centred perspective*. One example that I briefly discussed was accommodation theory. The most important suggestion put forward was that of the hierarchical order in the explanation of language change—from nonintentional to intentional actions and finally to speaker's intentions. Speaker's intentions play a role at higher levels related to creative language use and communicative strategies. I (tentatively) introduced the most recent attempt in emergentist linguistics where it is assumed that the changes of language arise from the demands of communication. I tried to draw the parallel to the approach in biological emergentist in the explanation of the evolutionary change as suggested by Denis Noble. Higher-level properties emerge from the lower levels.

Since we are celebrating Kathy Wilkes let me conclude with some of her views. Kathy says: "whether or not goal-representations, or intentions, are essentially cited in the explanation of purposive behaviour. I think it is obvious that they are" (1989b: 205). Kathy Wilkes is here saying that intentions are essentially cited in the explanation of purposive behaviour. In other words intentionally doing A requires an intention to do A. I tried to show that it does not. In the next quote Kathy Wilkes says: "He shot Lincoln, he pulled a trigger, he crooked his index finger. There comes the point, low down in a hierarchy, when we want to reject all talk of 'intentions'; it is to put it mildly, odd to say that the concert pianist 'intended' to hit C-sharp when playing a fast prelude" (1989b: 208). What is suggested in this passage is that intentions are not needed at the lowest point in the hierarchy which is similar to my main proposal that language is simply a skill and there is no room for invoking speaker's intentions at this level. Moreover, Kathy Wilkes mentions implicit and explicit intentions (maybe unconscious and con-

scious?) and she says: “We thus find a sliding scale from the apparently clear cases of explicit (or explicitly stated) intentions to those that seem ‘merely’ implicit...” (1989a: 162). This comes close to the suggestion of hierarchical order of levels of explanation with explicit intentions being introduced at higher levels that have to do with communicative strategies.

Needless to say the devil is in details about which, sorry to say, I have not said much.

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