Usage-based approaches to language contacts

Antje Quick & Anna Verschik

Keywords: Usage-based, Contact Linguistics, bottom-up

The current workshop proposal is aimed at summarizing what has been achieved so far under the heading of a usage-based approach to contact linguistics (Backus 2015). Languages in contact almost always influence each other and the impacts are manifold such as structural and lexical borrowing, or code-switching. Many different disciplines have investigated these issues and each discipline has come up with their own explanations. For example, in structuralist approaches, different metalinguages are used for the description of contact phenomena in lexicon (code-switching, borrowing) and in morphosyntax (structural borrowing, convergence, grammatical interference, morphosyntactic restructuring), resulting in different models and different theoretical accounts all with the aim to find universal validity. However, empirical studies demonstrate that there is no strict separation between morphosyntax and lexicon on the cognitive level (insertion of a foreign lexical item can affect morphosyntax, contrarily to some influential models such as MLF). This suggests that structural accounts only provide useful descriptive generalizations: they might not tell us much concerning the cognitive mechanisms that are involved in contact phenomena. As a result, we get formal descriptions without explanations. Another reason why the structuralist approaches failed to find universal validity is that they do not take diversity of the bi- or multilingual individuals into account. However, variation is important as most of the time speakers in contact situations show little uniformity and this fact is seldom reflected in general descriptions.

On the other extreme, sociolinguistic studies of bilingualism have been focusing on communities, treating individual language users merely as representatives of these communities but not as something worth investigating in itself. It is true that in some instances the identification of the relevant communities themselves is the focus (e.g. Keim 2007) but this is not always a research goal; quite often it is language use, variation and change that a sociolinguist wants to investigate. On the community level one can attest already conventionalized innovations; however, it is instructive to understand how innovations start and spread. Innovations (including contact-induced ones) first appear in an individual’s language use. What kind of innovations will appear, depends on experience and social interaction of a given speaker. An individual would opt for an innovation because it helps to achieve communicative goals in a given situation. Thus, linguistic and communicative competence emerges through the interaction of cognition and use. This is in accordance with the emergentist view on language acquisition and change: grammar is not something “out there” and innate but a process of identification of innovations through individual experience, and accumulation and internalization of these innovations. As everybody has unique linguistic experience, and a language user’s experience with language is represented rather directly in competence, individual differences can be expected.

The role of the individual in contact-induced language change has been acknowledged (Weinreich 1953, Matras 2009, Blommaert and Backus 2011) but needs further elaboration.
An innovation starts in one or many individuals and may spread gradually among a larger set of individuals (or not), until we recognize a change at the community level. Or the innovation does not gain currency and eventually becomes obsolete. Investigating all this requires adding cognitive aspects to sociolinguistic research on contact-induced language change and sociolinguistic aspects to cognitive and linguistic research.

Therefore, in this workshop, we strive towards an elaboration of a holistic metalanguage that would unite the various phenomena at the descriptive level while also doing justice to what we know about cognitive processes. Methodologically, a usage-based approach presupposes bottom-up, data-driven explanations of contact phenomena. Usage-based approaches are thoroughly functionalist which means that human linguistic communication has a symbolic functional dimension. It is a cognitive-functional approach that sees speakers’ grammars as fundamentally grounded in ‘usage events’; emerging from language use and consequently shaped by individual usage, both historically and ontogenetically (Bybee, 2010; Croft, 2001; Langacker, 1987). Speaker’s mental representations therefore, differ in their make-up and their competence is changing all the time: language competence is inherently based on language usage. Consequently, research should focus on language use. Constructions are the units in Usage-based approaches and are moving along a continuum of completely lexically fixed items (chunks), via partially schematic to fully schematic utterances. Exactly this feature blurs the lines of syntax versus lexicon, competence versus performance and functional versus lexical items. Constructions constantly differ in their degrees of entrenchment: the more frequently a construction is used, the higher its level of entrenchment and consequently the easier its activation.

Based on these assumptions, the workshop addresses the following topics:

- The cognitive question: what’s behind the descriptive structural generalizations? What determines chunk status? What psycholinguistic evidence can back it up? What does it mean when speakers establish equivalence? Does that have to do with entrenchment ‘jumping’ to an equivalent structure in the other language?
- Community and individual: What is the granularity of community? Why is insertion common in certain forms in certain sociolinguistic settings? Why is there no clear preference for insertion vs. alternation in some settings? And do these concepts reflect cognitive reality?
- Comparative perspective: attractiveness across language contact situations (for instance, conjunctions, discourse particles etc), universal and common principles behind borrowability, contact between different versus contact between similar languages.
- Emergence, entrenchment and conventionalization (establishment of equivalence, “pivot matching”, variation in adaptation), role of cognitive routinization; spread through a community.
- Methodological issues: what quantitative analyses are possible with relatively small corpora?
To summarize, in the following workshop we want to look at contact phenomena bringing together contact linguistics, cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistic research. We feel that bringing together these disciplines and applying a bottom-up, non-constraint approach would contribute to a better understanding of contact-induced language change mechanisms and outcomes.

References


