Language contact

Language contact is as old as language itself. It refers to a situation in which speakers from two speech communities are in contact with each other. There are different kinds of contact, depending on the manner in which speakers interface with each other. This can range from day to day contact as in the Scandinavian period in English history to a narrow range contact between a small number of prestigious speakers as during the later French period. Indeed in some cases the ‘contact’ does not involve speakers at all: members on one community can acquaint themselves with the language another through different media, the written word or today, the recorded word. This latter type of contact is what present-day languages have with English.

Ever since authors have written on language, contact has been considered as a source of features. In principle this stance is quite respectable but care is required not to attribute unexplained features in language X to contact with some other language Y just because Y also shows the feature. Furthermore, one must bear facts about internal development and historical input in mind. For instance, a striking parallel between English and Irish is that the third person singular personal pronoun in the feminine are homophonous, \textit{she} [ʃi] and \textit{si} [ʃi]. In English the origin of \textit{she} is not entirely clear, it could be a continuation of Old English heo ‘she’, but this is not uncontroversial. The suggestion that the English pronoun is a borrowing from Irish is fatally flawed because the pronunciation of \textit{she} [ʃi], from an earlier [ʃe], is a result of the Great Vowel Shift which cannot have taken place earlier that the fourteenth century when there was no contact between English and Irish (and contact in Ireland would not have affected developments in England).

Although contact cannot never be proved as a source, stringent principles must be applied when considering the question. Any doubts about contact must be foregrounded and only when these and all other sources, above all inherited historical input, can be excluded should contact be considered. To put it in a nutshell, contact explanations are a last resort. If treated as such, the likelihood of making false claims is reduced.

\textit{Direct and indirect contact} Languages can come into contact in a variety of ways. Basically there are two types: the first is direct contact in which speakers of one language turn up in the midst of speakers of another (because of invasion, expulsion, emigration, etc.), the second is where the contact is through the mediation of literature or nowadays television, radio or the internet. This is the case with the contact between English and modern European languages at the moment. The former type can be illustrated clearly with examples from history such as Scandinavian or French contact with English.

In any contact situation there will be different scenarios for change. Lexical borrowing can take place from language into the other. But structural influence from one language can lead to changes the other. The essential difference is that for grammatical interference to take place, there must be a degree of bilingualism in the community, otherwise there are no speakers to transfer structures from a second language into their mother tongue. With an indirect contact situation borrowing can take place without any bilingualism.
## Divisions of language contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct contact</th>
<th>Indirect contact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(speakers intermingle)</td>
<td>(no mixing of speakers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical loans; Structural transfer in closed classes</td>
<td>Only lexical loans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(morphology / syntax)</td>
<td>(‘cultural borrowings’)</td>
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</table>

### Some cases where attested

- Scandinavian and late Old English
- Central French and Middle English
- Old English and Modern English
- Low German and Swedish

Contact situations have a number of further consequences for the languages involved. If contact is accompanied by extensive bilingualism then there is a distinct tendency for both languages to simplify morphologically to a more analytic type. This can be seen in the history of English where the periods of contact appear to have led to an accelerated movement from a synthetic to an analytic type (see remarks on language typology above). The most extreme case in this respect is that of pidgins which, given the type of imperfect bilingualism which is characteristic of them, always result in analytic language types.

Bilingualism usually sorts itself out and one language wins over the other (English over the other languages it has been in direct contact with), unless the languages involved enter some sort of equilibrium for social or political reasons as has happened in Belgium with French and Flemish, for instance. There is in fact an even clearer kind of stable bilingualism, called diglossia where two languages or two distinct varieties of the same language are used side by side in separate spheres of life, typically in the public and private sphere. The functional distinction of the two varieties/language guarantees their continuing existence in a speech community.

## Contact scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Indirect cultural contact, no speaker interface (German-English today). Contact, but little if any bilingualism (French in Middle English)</td>
<td>Only loanwords, ‘cultural borrowings’. No effect on grammar of receiving language</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Contact with approximation of one or both languages (late Old English and Old Norse). Strong speaker interaction</td>
<td>Koinésation or dialect levelling, some structural permeation with typologically similar languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Contact with language shift (Irish → English; Bhojpuri/Tamil → English [South Africa])</td>
<td>‘Speech habits’ of outset transferred to target, grammatical interference found in non-prescriptive environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Contact but restricted input, unguided acquisition (Caribbean, central and south-west Pacific), no continuity of indigenous languages</td>
<td>Pidginisation, grammatical restructuring; creolisation, if the pidgin is continued as the mother tongue of a later generation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Contact and levels of language

Pronunciation

Everyone tends to speak a second language with an accent as any new language is learned on the basis of one first and native language. When whole communities switch to a new language then they can transfer pronunciation features from their first language to the new one. This may lead to an effect on the language they shift to. This has happened historically in a number of situations, e.g. where the Scandinavians switched to English in the Old English period or where Normans shifted to English in the early Middle English period in England and somewhat later in Ireland. This can lead to a permanent change in the language transferred to. New sounds can also be introduced when words are borrowed with these sounds, e.g. the diphthong /ɔi/ or initial voiced fricatives (both from French) in Middle English as seen in words like point or veal, zeal.

Grammar

Syntactic borrowings in the history of English are indeed scarce or at the very least difficult to prove. A case in point is the zero object relative as in The man I met is my cousin which according to some scholars, like Jespersen, himself a Dane, may have arisen due to Scandinavian influence. Influence from the syntax of Celtic languages has been postulated stating that periphrastic do arose from causative do by semantic bleaching and believes that it goes back to the Old English period and to contact in Wessex (south-central England) with Celtic speakers. She postulates a creolisation situation where do was used in affirmative sentences followed by a later linking with be to render the habitual present which was present as a category in Insular Celtic and uses Irish English evidence to support this view.

Vocabulary

The effect of the lexicon of one language on another depends largely on the status of the languages in contact. The influence of French on English has been very considerable due to the higher status of French in the Middle English period. The effect of the Celtic languages on the lexicon of English has been very slight. Old English shows a couple of loans such as bannoc ‘flat loaf of unleavened bread’, brocc ‘badger’, dry ‘magician’ (from Old Irish druí ‘druid’). Modern English has only a couple of undisputed terms like galore (← go leor) exist and some uncertain ones besides, such as dig/twig ‘understand, grasp’ which is taken to derive from Irish tuig ‘understand’.

Language shift

In a language contact situation speakers can retain their inherited language or switch to the language they come in contact with. The linguistic changes which occur differ and the distinctions between them have been captured in the two terms contact-induced change and shift-induced change (a distinction stressed by the American linguist Sarah Thomason). Shift-induced change usually takes place over a few generations at least. This has happened historically in many countries, for instance in Ireland with the shift
from Irish to English, in Scotland with the shift from Scottish Gaelic to English and in South Africa with the shift from Indian languages like Bhojpuri to English among the Indian population in KwaZulu-Natal. Contact with shift leads to new varieties of a language arising and here it is often the closed classes, the sound and grammar systems, which are affected. This is because in language shift (during adulthood, through a process of unguided second language acquisition) speakers search in the second language for equivalents to categories which they know from their first language. Historically, this can be seen clearly in the rise of certain aspectual categories in Irish English. Indeed a case can be made for speakers taking afunctional elements in the second language, such as the unstressed, declarative *do* of early modern English, and employing them for their own purposes, in the case of Irish English, to express the habitual aspect seen, for instance, in *She does be worrying about the children* ‘She is always worrying about the children’.

The relative social status of speakers in a language shift situation is an important consideration. This is usually captured with the terms ‘substrate’ and ‘superstrate’ for the language in the socially inferior and superior position respectively. If the shifting group has high social prestige (not the case with the Irish, Scottish and Indian populations just alluded to) then they may transfer their speech habits to the speakers of the language they are shifting to. This is technically known as *imposition* and it has been proposed that it has happened in many historically attested situations, such as the Scandinavian period in early medieval Scotland, with Vikings who switched to Gaelic, or the late medieval period in Ireland with the Anglo-Normans who later switched completely to Irish. Imposition may account for the appearance of borrowings from core vocabulary in a contact situation. If, for instance, the Normans retained French words in their form of Irish, then the Irish themselves may have picked up these words from the Irish of the Normans who were the military and aristocratic leaders in Ireland for a few centuries after their first arrival in the late twelfth century. This would help to account for why the words for ‘child’ (*páiste* < *page*) and ‘boy’ (*garsún* < *garçon*), for instance, are from Norman French in Irish.

The transfer of features from lower groups to the language of those above them on a social scale may take a long time. Imposition from below can, however, lead to considerable change, above all in the structure of a language. For instance, English is the only Germanic language to use possessive pronouns when referring to parts of the body, e.g. *I brush my teeth twice daily*. Other Germanic languages, including Old English, would have something which in translation would be like ‘I brush me the teeth twice daily’. The Celtic languages of Britain have been posited as a source for the use of possessive pronouns with parts of the body, what is called *inalienable possession*, and Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh still show this. There are other features which are candidates for transfer from Celtic to early English, e.g. the progressive tense as in *You are reading this book now*, which again is not typical of other Germanic languages.

**Dialects in contact**

Within Britain there has been considerable contact between the different dialects throughout history. In England there are three main dialect areas, the north, the Midlands (east and west) and the south (south west and south east) which are already recognisable in the Old English period. The subdivisions have shifted somewhat but the tripartite division of England has remained. In the following a selection of features from the different dialect areas are discussed in the light of dialect contact and adoption into the modern standard.
Northern forms In the Old English period the dialect of the mid south (West Saxon) was the dominant one and that used for writing English. But as later stages show it is often the case that northern forms survive rather than their southern equivalents. For instance, *are* is a continuation of the northern verb forms (themselves borrowed from Scandinavian) rather than of the southern *syndon/sindon*. Other Scandinavian forms of the north, like *they, them, their* also spread to the south.

A particular feature of northern English is that it did not undergo the Great Vowel Shift in its entirety. Specifically, ME /u/ did not diphthongise as is seen in local northern pronunciations like *town* /tu:n/. The form *uncouth* /ʌnkauθ/ is a northern borrowing in the southern standard. It can be recognised as such because the southern form would be /ʌŋkauθ/.

Western forms The number of western forms in the later standard is quite limited and is best seen in the spelling of words with a short high vowel, e.g. *busy*. In Middle English the high front rounded vowel /y/ was longest preserved in the west midlands and in accordance with Anglo-Norman scribal practice it was written with a single *u* (the Anglo-Norman spelling *ou* as in *house* was used for /u/). The sound which corresponded to the western /y/ was /i/ in the east midlands and /e/ in Kent. Hence one has the pronunciation /bisi/ for *busy* and /beri/ for *bury* which again shows a western spelling but a Kentish pronunciation (see below).

Midlands and North In present-day dialectology one does not treat these two large areas as a single unit, but in Old English studies this expanse is labelled Anglian. The reflexes of Anglian forms can still be seen today, for instance, words like *cold* and *old* derive from the Anglian forms *cald* and *ald*. The West Saxon equivalents would have led to different pronunciations in Modern English.

South-East The south-east contains the county of Kent which already in the Old English period was linguistically distinct from other areas in England, having been settled by Jutes. One of the main features of this region is the presence of a mid front vowel where other areas have a high vowel. The case of *bury* has just been mentioned. The word *evil* shows the same phenomenon, this time with a long vowel. The West Saxon form of this word was *eyfel* which would have developed regularly as follows: *eyfel* /eɪfəl/ → /i:vəl/ (unrounding) → /ai:vəl/ (Great Vowel Shift). However, the present-day form /i:vəl/ suggests (as does the orthography) that the input form was Kentish /e:vəl/.

Southern A feature which is found in the south in general (including Kent) is the voicing of fricatives in initial position, i.e. /f, s,ʃ, θ/ appear here as /v, z, ʒ, ɹ/. This is a phenomenon which the south shares to some extent with the varieties of Germanic in the Low Countries, i.e. Flemish and Dutch, which suggests that it could be an areal feature of considerable age. Initial voicing, or softening, can be seen in a few words in standard English whose pronunciation was taken from southern varieties, e.g. *vat, vixen* (cf. *fox* with /f-/), *vane*. 
Historical contact in England

1) Early contact between English and Celtic
2) English and Latin (Old English period)
3) English and Scandinavian
4) English and French (Anglo-Norman and Central French)
5) English and Latin (early modern period)
6) English and other languages

Language contact regions in the anglophone world

The Celtic regions of Britain

1) English and Welsh in Wales
2) English and Scottish Gaelic (Gallick) in Scotland
3) English and Irish in Ireland

Dialect regions of Britain

1) Contact across dialect borders, e.g. in the Fens of East Anglia
2) Contact between traditional dialects and more standard varieties

Canada

1) Varieties of English in Newfoundland
2) English and French in Quebec

The USA

1) English and German in various states (chiefly Pennsylvania)
2) English and Spanish, mainly in the south-west
3) English and African languages in the Caribbean

West Africa

1) English and various indigenous languages in countries such as
   Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon

South Africa

1) English and Afrikaans
2) English and Indian languages (historically in KwaZulu-Natal)

Australia and New Zealand

1) English and aboriginal languages (Australia)
2) English and Maori (New Zealand)
South Asia and South-East Asia

1) Contact with various indigenous languages with ‘New Englishes’, second language varieties and emerging first language varieties

Note. Language contact in the development of pidgins and creoles, many of which are to be found in the anglophone world in both the Atlantic and the Pacific regions. These varieties of English are not listed here as they constitute a special class and require separate treatment.

General references for language contact


