

How language changes despite our best efforts: The emergence of function and the fallacy of intelligent design

Piotr Gąsiorowski (School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

Many (probably most) theories of language change emphasise the instrumental role of language as a human-made tool of communication. Linguistic structures are supposed to be orderly and rational, as if designed for particular communicative applications, and language change, when it happens, is on the whole expected to be explicable in terms of functional motivation. Language users are believed to be the intelligent agents of language change, capable of modifying selected elements of linguistic systems in order to improve their usefulness and efficiency, as when users are said to repair dysfunctional structures or reduce useless variation.

Such an approach fails to explain why most of linguistic variation and change cannot be shown to be functional except by circular reasoning, or why natural languages are riddled with messy irregularities and contain thick layers of historically accumulated junk (“detritus of old systems”, as Lass 1997: 309 calls it). Such junk, deprived of its former functions, manages to survive primarily because human speakers tend to be conservative and conformist in matters of language use; occasionally, however, it may be utilised for some new applications. At the same time, deliberate attempts to optimise linguistic structures through explicit language engineering are typically ineffective and seem unlikely to attract widespread support, contrary to the claim that functional optimisation is what language users are interested in achieving.

It will be argued that in order to make sense of both the seemingly rational and the messy aspects of natural languages we should view them not as products of “intelligent design” but as evolving historical systems – patterns of cultural replicators that survive by causing the production of more-or-less faithful copies of themselves in the context of our communicative behaviour and social interactions. Like other types of replicators in Darwinian models of evolution, they generally go about their own business and are anything but pre-designed for a particular purpose. They have no *inherent* function but, in a historical perspective, may acquire any number of temporary functions as a result of their “cooperation” with other replicators.