

## 15. Language contact across the lifespan

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### 1. Introduction

The outcome of a multilingual encounter depends on a number of factors. Contact may be of various kinds and may differ in duration, and speakers may belong to different sociocultural groups depending on such variables as socioeconomic status, gender, and, crucially, *age*. Furthermore, the outcomes may consequently differ in nature – from lexical loan words, to prosodic transfer and morphosyntactic simplification, to the formation of new contact varieties. This chapter provides a state of the art overview of the ways in which age affects the outcome of a linguistic contact situation, and the way in which age is relevant to the formation of that outcome.

Chronological age in industrialized society serves as the indication of a person's place in society and in the life cycle, measured in years passed since birth. Such a biological or chronological approach is not, however, typical of all societies. The literature on the topic of age has acknowledged this by shifting from viewing age as solely chronological and biological to viewing it as a social construct, situated within frameworks that view language as critical to shaping and creating our social worlds (Andrew 2012). Framing age as social renders it compatible with recent dynamic approaches to identity: age, as an act of identity, is performed, rather than a static state. Age, then, can be approached from different perspectives, including four possible vantage points: biological age, psychological age, functional age, and ultimately, social age. It can also be viewed as all of the above (Cameron 2011: 208).

Approaching language contact studies from the perspective of the individual's age is challenging because most approaches differ as to whether they focus on the process, or practice, of multilingual encounters, or on the outcome, or product, of such encounters. It is rare to find studies that explicitly consider both – and even rarer to find such studies that consider age as a variable. As we return to below, notable exceptions include Kerswill and Williams (2000), Trudgill (2011), and Matras (2009). Auer (2014: 295) also points to the necessity of shifting focus from outcome (e.g. a mixed language) to process (e.g. the practice of extensive borrowing).

Defining contact-induced change as “any linguistic change that would have been less likely to occur outside a particular contact situation”, Thomason (2001: 61–63) illustrates this focus on the diachronic and structural dimensions of language contact, and less on the individuals involved in multilingual practices that actually enable these changes. A case in point is Heine and Kuteva's (2005: 116) discussion of contact-induced grammaticalization, in which they state that they will have “little to say about the process leading to the product since it is still in the main poorly understood”. As linguistic change is often observed post hoc (Wagner 2012: 371–372), it is particularly difficult to assume anything about the nature of the interaction of the speakers that created this change.

Many historical linguists avoid it altogether, creating a lack of records of historical change that take context and/or speaker type into consideration. A different approach involves a focus on the study of linguistic interactions that may create contact-induced change (e.g. code-switching), and hence a focus on the process of multilingual practices (Treffers-Daller and Mougeon 2005).

Despite generating a “mild interest”, as noted by Eckert (1996: 167), and not having been explicitly studied as a sociolinguistic variable, age as a sociolinguistic dimension is routinely included in, for example, variationist studies, alongside variables such as gender and ethnicity (Andrew 2012: 39). The inclusion of age in such studies is typically to uncover or illustrate linguistic change, with age serving as a reflection of historical change. Age can reflect a shift in language across a speech community (reflecting historical change), or a shift in language in the individual (*age grading*). From the former perspective, older speakers provide a mirror into the language of older times, through a methodology referred to as the *apparent time construct*, i.e. using the present to explain the past (Labov 2006; see also Bailey 2008). Despite being widely applied, this approach is also recognized for having shortcomings, and it has been noted that this approach actually underestimates change (Sankoff and Blondeau 2007).

With an increased focus on the multilingual individual, there is a growing awareness that contact is indeed a metaphor. What is in contact are people speaking different languages. Although this awareness began with Weinreich’s (1953) iconic study, the actor – or speaker – is in fact absent from a majority of studies on the outcomes of language change, and language contact in general. Various waves of linguistic research have contributed to an increased focus on the individual in contact linguistics, but this increased awareness is probably symptomatic of a general epistemological change that involves an increased interest in the multilingual individual. This is a change that involves a shift from more structure-based to more agency-based theories of language, or from macro-oriented to micro-oriented approaches, as well as an alignment between sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (Kramsch 2009). The growing understanding of multilingual practice has also enabled the view that the languages – or repertoires – of multilingual speakers interact in harmony (Busch 2012). In other words, in sociolinguistics there is currently a move away from considering ‘named languages’ being in contact, toward a view that takes as the point of departure the multilingual individual’s linguistic repertoire, which may be composed of elements from various ‘named languages’ (Canagarajah 2013; Makoni and Pennycook 2007).

In this chapter, we focus on types of interactions between speakers that belong to different age groups – interactions that may (or may not) in turn lead to the above-mentioned structural changes. We focus on how multilingual speakers dynamically switch between the languages in which they are competent (code-switching, language mixing), or utilize various elements in their linguistic repertoires (translanguaging). In the following sections, we address four different age groups (children, adolescents, adults, and older speakers) in light of language contact, with each section presenting the perspective of psycholinguistic versus sociolinguistic approaches.

## 2. Children

The role of children in studies of language contact has typically been examined from the perspective of acquisition when considering preschool children – whether the case

is one of bilingual first language acquisition or second language acquisition. Age has been a critical variable in studies of bilingual first language acquisition, with exposure to both languages already from birth being a stringent criterion for evaluating linguistic output from children, discussed in depth in Chapter 16 (De Houwer 2009). In more recent studies of young bilingual children, language contact per se has received less attention, while issues concerning input and exposure are highlighted (Carroll 2017; Grüter and Paradis 2014). Language contact in bilingual and multilingual children who have their first exposure to another language after their first chronological language(s) has been studied from both an acquisition point of view, and from a language use perspective, i.e. both psycholinguistically and sociolinguistically. How long childhood lasts is indeed to a large extent culturally determined. However, as noted above, in the extant studies of language contact and children, the age variable is critical for demarcating multiple first language acquisition from early second language acquisition. Furthermore, the language of preschool children, usually pre-literate, is distinguished from that of school-age children before puberty.

## 2.1. Psycholinguistic aspects

Earlier studies of bilingual first language acquisition promoted a one-system hypothesis, and posited that language contact was a sign of a lack of language differentiation by the young child acquiring more than one language simultaneously (Vihman 1985; Volterra and Taeschner 1978; see Lanza [2004] for a review). However, newer research offers robust evidence of the child's capacity to separate her/his languages, indeed from a very early age. In fact, infant perception studies indicate early perception of language-specific features (Fennell, Tsui, and Hudon 2016). Nonetheless, issues of language dominance are also relevant to assessing language contact in the speech of young language acquirers (Yip and Matthews 2007). Interactional analyses, furthermore, illustrate how the young bilingual child differentiates between her/his languages and shows sensitivity towards social parameters of language use, and hence that s/he can indeed code-switch and use basic structural language contact patterns attested in the speech of older speakers in the code-switching literature (Lanza 1997, 2004; Lanza and Li Wei forthcoming; Cantone 2007).

In studies of second language acquisition, age has been an important construct, particularly due to the critical period hypothesis, which states that we are biologically predestined to learn language with ease only before a certain age (around puberty), rendering age a determining factor in second language learning (Long 1990). Descriptions of multilingual practices are abundant, and de Bot and Makoni (2005: 10) note that studies of multilingual practices within the field of applied linguistics have given extensive attention to the age factor, mainly from the perspective of early L1/L2 acquisition and whether native-like proficiency is possible to achieve after puberty.

The degree of language *attrition*, or individual-level language loss in healthy speakers, varies dramatically, depending on the age at which the speakers became exposed to their new linguistic environments. The key moment here is puberty. If exposure to the new linguistic environment takes place before the onset of puberty, attrition is more severe. Schmitt (2006, 2010), for example, finds that Russian emigrants to the US were unable to accurately produce oblique cases (although their proficiency in the nominative

persisted). Furthermore, Schmitt (2006, 2010) found that in children, there is more evidence for both retention and substitution of L1 case assignments than in adults – more evidence for retention and substitution than for loss. Note that child speakers who have attained school age, but not puberty, will generally be able to use most grammatical features of their L1 in a target-like way. Nonetheless their language remains vulnerable to attrition. This is the reason why age of migration is crucial to the extent to which they experience language attrition.

## 2.2. Sociolinguistic aspects

More recent attention to the young schoolchild's use of more than one language has focused on what is referred to as *translanguaging* (García and Li Wei 2014), a term first used in the context of the classroom (see also Chapters 14 and 34). Teachers allowing their students to use the full range of their linguistic repertoires, or translanguaging, contribute to the multilingual child's learning.

Traditionally understood as being a phenomenon only of young adults, *multiethnolects* (see Section 3.2), or non-standard 'mixed' varieties used by speakers with different linguistic backgrounds, are also used by children. In a study on language contact in London, Cheshire et al. (2011) find pronunciation patterns in children as young as five that are compatible with patterns found in surrounding multiethnolects. Interestingly, these patterns are not compatible with the parent's English pronunciation, and the authors conclude that this is likely so because the children do not speak English with their parents, and therefore are exposed to English primarily through interaction with other multilingual children in 'shift-induced interference' (Thomason and Kaufman 1988). The same was found for 8-year-olds in London, who mainly made use of the multicultural London vowel system. Together, these findings indicate that features from multiethnolects associated with youth language are not only used by young adults, but also other age groups.

Kerswill et al. (2013) provide a detailed account of the role of age groups in contact situations, and in the development of the English language specifically. The authors suggest a tripartite division to assess the speech of children and adolescents. Infants and children (0–6), they argue, are special, in the sense that they inherit a substantial sociolinguistic competence from their parents or caregivers. Preadolescents (6–12) find themselves in the specific situation in which other peers gradually become the primary influence on their dialect and contact feature acquisition, while adolescents (12–17), on the other hand, demonstrate a growing peer-group involvement, as we shall see in the next section.

## 3. Adolescents

Adolescents have received substantial attention in the literature on language contact, linguistic innovation, and change (Cutler and Røyneland 2018). They are seen as prime innovators and users of non-standard speech forms (Eckert 1988, 2003; Nortier and Svendsen 2015), until this period ends in the late teens. Adolescents incrementally in-

crease their use of new norms, but this increase levels off at about the age of 16/17, a point which is referred to as the *adolescent peak* (Kirkham and Moore 2013). Adolescence differs from the other age groups discussed here, in that as an age group, it is relatively new in the research literature. Adolescence being seen as a separate age group is largely a product of industrialized society, more specifically of its institutionalized secondary education, which has resulted in segregated, age-homogeneous groups involving adolescents only. In these networks, besides the construction of identities, linguistic innovation and creativity thrives (Eckert 2003), due to the flexibility of language norms and the high tolerance for linguistic variation, and the socio-cognitive period of identity searching that forms linguistic development (more than the stabilization of a grammar, as in children). Different approaches to age thus have sociolinguistic consequences. In societies in which adolescents are expected to work, for example, they do not form age-homogeneous groups similar to those found in current Western societies' systems of secondary education, where linguistic innovation flourishes.

### 3.1. Psycholinguistic aspects

Adolescence is crucial for understanding attrition (see also Chapter 17). Here, age of emigration is critical (Schmid 2011): if you emigrate after puberty, you are less likely to experience language attrition. In attrition, many elements come into play, such as age of emigration, age since emigration, and age at the time of the investigation. Studies of attrition occur most effectively with individuals after the onset of puberty, because attrition can be confused with incomplete acquisition in the case of individuals who emigrated during childhood. Once a speaker has acquired knowledge of a second language, there will necessarily be some interaction not only from the first to the second language, but also from the second language to the first (in cases involving two languages). This view presupposes the hypothesis of a critical period (which has been heavily criticized, see Birdsong [1999] for a much-cited overview; see also Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, and Pinker [2018] for a discussion on its age of offset), with some studies finding that the first language can deteriorate, and sometimes even completely disappear, if emigration takes place before the age of 12. It appears that even though second language learning is easier when engaged in before the critical period is over, it is also more likely that the first language will be subject to more radical attrition at this very same age.

Adolescent multilingual competence also plays a key role in studies of simplification due to post-threshold second language learning (McWhorther 2004; Trudgill 2011). This view entails that adolescents have passed the critical period of language learning, and therefore will fail to learn structures that are 'L2-difficult'. This inability might lead to simplification of a morphological, syntactic, and phonological nature (for a discussion of a possible contact-induced simplification in Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires, Argentina, see Fløgstad [2016: 179–185]). This assumption is far-reaching. Pavlenko (2014: 38–39), for example, argues that the assertion that languages are by definition equally complex is meaningless, because languages spoken in industrialized, contemporary societies necessarily undergo simplification because they are learned by a number of speakers who have acquired them as a second language. Since this is not the case for languages spoken in small, economically self-sufficient groups, the latter languages tend to display greater morphosyntactic complexity.

### 3.2. Sociolinguistic aspects

As we observed in 2.2, multiethnolects, or urban youth speech styles, are typically associated with youth and young adults. A multiethnolect is used to refer to different linguistic varieties: mixed speech of speakers with different heritage languages, with the major dominant language, or with an ethnically neutral variety, which nevertheless includes non-standard and innovative phonetic, grammatical, and discourse-pragmatic features (see Nortier and Svendsen [2015] on urban youth styles in Scandinavia and Rampton's [1995] classical work on crossing). Both urban youth styles and crossing are typically associated with adolescent speakers, and are often assumed not to continue beyond adolescence (see, however, Section 4). Cheshire et al. (2011), in a study of multiethnolects in London, treat the formation of multicultural urban vernaculars in detail. They argue that for the London case, the nature of the multiethnolect may have depended on its formation. In certain areas, due to the lack of native speaker models, large groups acquire the majority language from other second language speakers, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as 'group second language acquisition' and shift-induced interference. Given the lack of native input, the version of the majority language acquired by these speakers may show signs of, for example, simplification. If the minority group is well-integrated, these simplifications may spread to the speakers of the majority language. Note, however, that Cheshire et al. (2011) find no evidence of imperfect learning in their study.

## 4. Adults

If adolescents are the innovators, then adults are seen as conservative, possibly to comply with the pressure to use standard forms of language at the workplace that begins to occur after their late teens. Compared to children and adolescents, adults have relatively stabilized grammars, and bring these with them into new interactions, but see Grosjean and Py (1991), which shows that even adults' first language can change in a contact situation. Only adults are usually portrayed in the literature as the 'default', 'unmarked' age group in language use. Historically, adults have been the main subject of research for methodological reasons: age as a variable is readily applied to contemporary sources, but less so to historical sources, as studies that are based on written language necessarily reflect the language of those who knew how to write – often adults.

### 4.1. Psycholinguistic aspects

Adults are often thought of as having grammars that represent an 'endpoint', and their linguistic competence is treated without a developmental perspective (a perspective that involves children as acquirers, adolescents as innovators, and older speakers as experiencing loss in linguistic and cognitive abilities). As such, studies involving adults rarely involve fine-grained distinctions, and typically treat adults as a homogeneous group (de Bot and Makoni 2005). Adults are rarely distinguished in terms of being split into subgroups, and are rarely viewed as interesting per se, although age of second language acquisition can be an important variable in psycholinguistic testing of the effects of

bilingualism, that is, whether the adult learned the second language as a child or later in life (Ortega 2013). Typically, no distinctions are made between, for example, 30-, 40-, or 50-year old speakers in the second language acquisition literature (see Andrew [2012: 15–19] for an overview), but such nuances are included in studies of errors in elderly monolingual speakers; Burke and Shafto (2004), for example, find that old adults make more production errors than young adults.

#### 4.2. Sociolinguistic aspects

When adults do contribute to the formation of a new dialect or variety, it is often assumed that their contribution will create simplifications. This is because their acquisition will involve problems with learning the difficult, or marked, structures of the new variety, as adults have passed the critical threshold for language acquisition. Still, this does not mean that adults do not change their languages at all – indeed, their ability to do so is emphasized within cognitive and usage-based approaches to language (Bybee 2010), as well as Dynamic Systems Theory (de Bot et al. 2013). Labov (2007) notes that adults participate in ongoing changes, albeit more sporadically, and at a slower rate, than children. He also finds that adult acquisition leads to the loss of the “fine structure of the linguistic system being transmitted” (Labov 2007: 380), compatible with findings emphasizing that post-threshold second language learning leads to simplification (Trudgill 2011). Note that this assertion has been challenged: Kerswill and Williams (2000) argue that by viewing scenarios that involve post-threshold second language learners as creators of simplification, we are ignoring important distinctions. For example, few migrations or settlements involve only adults; children from these groups will rapidly form a new speech community, and their exposure to their native languages will depend on a variety of linguistic and demographic factors.

Traditionally, multiethnolects were considered to be used by young adults only. However, we now know that such hybrid styles may persist. Sheng, for example, began as a typical urban youth variety in Nairobi, Kenya, but is now acquired as a first language (Dorleijn, Mous, and Nortier 2015). There is increasing evidence that multiethnolects may survive beyond adulthood. Rampton (2015) discusses the case of a British-born executive of Pakistani descent, with long-lasting relationships with speakers of many other languages, and finds a hybrid speech style that appears to be stable in his repertoire. He also proposes the term ‘contemporary urban vernacular’ to account for the fact that these varieties – sometimes referred to as ‘urban youth speech styles’ – are not restricted to young speakers only. Although there is evidence for the use of multiethnolects in adults, it continues to be a phenomenon primarily associated with young adulthood. It is also notably persistent: young people would use such styles 20 years ago, and similar structures are found in young adults today.

#### 5. Older speakers

After decades of neglect (cf. the so-called ‘gerontological lament’ [Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991: 9]), there is growing research on multilingualism in the older population,

mainly as examples of an individual whose linguistic competence is in decline (Plejert, Lindholm, and Schrauf 2017). The mere definition of ‘old’ is not fixed to one chronological age, but is typically associated with loss of societal roles as well as cognitive decline. However, studies on the older generation’s linguistic behavior have yet to be conducted within the field of ‘language contact and its consequences’. Older speakers are typically included not due to an interest in their language per se, but either as representatives of older times (in apparent time studies), or as examples of post-threshold migrants (in attrition studies). The former appeals to historical causes to explain elders’ speech, as opposed to alluding to inherent or environmental causes (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991: 5–7). This group has traditionally had the position of being the stable, static representation of older times, and is rarely distinguished in terms of being split into subgroups. Exceptions include a division into young/old (64–76) and old/old (77 and up) (see Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991: 9; Gitterman, Goral, and Obler 2012; de Bot and Makoni 2005).

### 5.1. Psycholinguistic aspects

As for the psycholinguistic aspects concerning older speakers, it is true that most participants in studies of language attrition, for example, are relatively old – usually in their sixties or older. This, however, is usually not because the speaker’s age is seen as interesting in itself. Investigators usually prefer participants that emigrated after puberty, but who have stayed in the country for a substantial amount of time. In addition, older speakers are often recruited for practical reasons: many older speakers are able to dedicate time to time-consuming projects, and also find themselves at a period in their lives in which they feel nostalgic about their country of origin (Schmid 2011). Older speakers are often also thought to experience language reversal, or decay in proficiency, in the second language. However, as Schmid (2011) notes, such claims are typically unsupported myths, and the few large scale studies that actually do address the issue find no evidence for such second language decay. There is also some evidence that older speakers become less conservative in their speech style with age. As Eckert (1996) notes, this is perhaps associated with the reduced burden associated with childcare and pressure to comply with workplace norms. With certain exceptions, it is a fact that studies of older speakers that do not have the perspective of decline are rare, but there is a growing literature in the study of multilingual dementia (e.g. Knoph, Simonsen, and Lind 2017).

### 5.2. Sociolinguistic aspects

As mentioned initially, older speakers are typically included in studies of language change not because of an interest in their talk per se, but as representative of older times in apparent time studies. Similarly, older speakers may represent a window into otherwise dying languages, and proficiency in a language by older members of a community is a sign that the language is threatened.

The concept of L1-regression – reverting to a first language in a second language setting – has been explained by environmental causes. A growing population of multi-



lingual older speakers entails a whole range of new challenges. Nursing homes, for example, provide an illustration of this, where older speakers with migrant backgrounds may have problems communicating with staff because they have reverted to their first language, and speakers of the majority language may have trouble communicating with staff who do not speak the local language (de Bot and Makoni 2005: 23–24). Both scenarios illustrate less-than-optimal types of interaction. There is less code-switching in older speakers, because they participate in less differentiated social networks that would require language mixing, and studies have shown that older speakers code-switch less than adolescents (David Maya et al. 2009).

## 6. Future directions

Although the actor-centered approach to language change and contact has allowed for substantial advances within the field of language contact, there is an obvious need for further implementation of the individual within this field, especially regarding the combination of process-centered approaches (such as code-switching) with product-centered approaches (those investigating the structural outcomes of the multilingual encounters) – studying contact-induced change *in medias res*. Sankoff (2006) notes that the greatest potential for developing this field is through the reintegration of the individual into the overall matrix of the speech community, and that this approach represents the greatest challenge to, and the greatest scope in, contact linguistics research. This assertion is still relevant, and only when such an integration takes place, and when focus is on the individual as the real locus of language change will age as a variable find its suitable place in studies of language contact. Large-scale studies that trace the individual's social networks (Petré 2017) are a step in that direction, and including the same methodology in multilingual settings would likely yield interesting results.

Furthermore, two age groups stand out as groups in particular need of more research. First, we see the language of adults as deserving to be studied in its own right, beyond being viewed as a static entity. How much innovation is possible in the adult linguistic system? Are monolingual adults capable of making substantial changes to their grammars and sound systems (as is argued by proponents of cognitive linguistics [Bybee 2010], but typically dismissed by proponents of generative approaches [Kroch 2008])? All in all, more fine-grained analyses of adults, possibly dividing adults into smaller age cohorts or by life event, not chronology, would be welcome. Second, an increased focus on the elderly is necessary in order to understand more about language contact, learning, and attrition in this group (Schmid 2011). Together, the need for more research on adults and the elderly confirms the need for an increased focus on the lifespan perspective.

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