SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND PHONEMIC MODIFICATION

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When I made my first efforts to apply principles of Prague phonology in an analysis of the French and Italian vocalic systems (Acta Linguistica II, 1940-41, 232-246; III, 1942-43, 34-56), I soon arrived at the conclusion that this was not possible if I assumed that two units of expression (in my case two "vowels"), in a given position, and throughout the vocabulary, were either variants (allophones) or invariants (phonemes). It turned out that certain units were definitely phonological in some words, mere variants (free allophones) in others. The fact that /e/ - /ε/ in final position is definitely distinctive in pairs like dé-dais, fée-fait does not exclude their use as free variants in e.g. quai, gai, (je) sais. As far as the two a:s (/a/ and /ɑ/) are concerned, they have their full phonological value only in relatively few words (là-las). Even Parisians (only the language of the capital is referred to here) who agree on the existence of the opposition often do not agree on the distribution of the units in the vocabulary. I had also mentioned in my early study the critical oppositions /ø/ - /œ/ and, though better maintained,. /o/ - /ɔ/ (both in closed syllable). I also mentioned the quantitative opposition, still retained by a few speakers, between /ε/ (mettre) and /ε:/ (maître). The cases of merger were far too frequent to be dismissed as mere phonemic word variants (Jones). I had drawn from these findings the conclusion that it was reasonable to look upon the French vocalism as containing two phonological systems, one richer and another poorer, or in my terms, a maximum system and a minimum system, one of them applied by certain speakers and in certain types of words, the other applied by others and in other words. I never concluded that some speakers used just one, others the other of those two systems in their entirety. I still do not know if there are native Parisians who make full use of the maximum system in any possible position and other native speakers who content themselves with the minimum one throughout the vocabulary. What is certain is, however, that the latter case seems to be normal in the pronunciation of numerous immigrants from the provinces and particularly in southerners and French immigrants from North Africa.

There seems to be no doubt that the choice between a more complex and a more reduced system is determined by non-linguistic (social, cultural, and in the case of immigrants from other French-speaking areas, regional) factors. The maximum system represents the complete set of oppositions permissible according to the paradigm and all the syntagmatic distinctions admitted by the distributional laws - the minimum system the smallest number of distinctive units without which the message does not function and the identification of the meaningful units ceases. (When putting it that way I do not take into consideration factors such as redundancy and context.) In other words, the difference between the two is one between what a speaker can and what he must do. The same interpretation seemed to me to be useful in the analysis of other complicated systems, i.e. the word accent problem in Scandinavia and (as demonstrated in the article quoted in Acta Linguistica III), the oppositions /e/ - /ε/ and /o/ - /ɔ/ in Italian, where in both cases it is a question of interference between dialects (or regional variants of the standard), whereas in French the situation can at least partly be interpreted as one between diachronically different systems (though both present at the same time and transformed into social or individual phenomena). Consequently, a state of language (introduced here as a translation of état de langue used in my French text,[1] a concept which goes back at least as far as Saussure's "Cours") may contain different strata, the most simplified of them pointing in the direction the evolution will take if no intervening factors prevent it. It is from this point of view that such an idea may be useful for a correct interpretation of diachronic, or evolutionary phonology. A language thus becomes a harmonious a-chronic system, or rather complex of systems, whereas a state of language is a linguistic situation described as valid for a chosen period of time or/and for a chosen spatial region or social stratum (all arbitrarily chosen).

The minimal system of French vowels represents a reduction in relation to the fuller one; in purely synchronic terms a system of inferior complexity. Diachronically it represents a loss of certain oppositions retained in the richer one. In all the cases under

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(1) See my article in Mélanges Straka I, 1970, reprinted in Malmberg, "Linguistique générale et romane", Mouton, Paris 1973, 155-159.

discussion, the distinctions are phonetically subtle. This means that the oppositions based on the slightest differences of articulation and perception have been eliminated or, in most of our examples, reduced in their usage to a small number of words, forms, and contexts. This is typical of what happens in languages in reduction or destruction (in evolutionary phonology, in aphasia, etc.), and in reversed order in languages in construction (in the child, in the language learner, etc.). This is a consequence of Jakobson's law, implying that the complex system supposes the less complex ones, the subtle differences the rougher ones. We know that this law is valid in language learning and in language loss. It must necessarily be taken into consideration also in a study of linguistic change (phonological or other). We also know that the complete elimination of a language - under the pressure of another or owing to lack of motivation for its conservation - takes place according to the same hierarchic order. A situation such as the one reflected in the actual French vocalism is typical of a stage which precedes a generalized simplification. This does not mean that the simplification will necessarily take place. The choice of the speakers may be directed towards a retention of status quo, or even lead to a reestablishment of the more complex system (an example seems to be the opposition /e:/ - /ɛ:/ in the Swedish pronunciation of Stockholm).

My thesis is consequently that any state of language contains levels of different complexity from the maximum system maintained by strong linguistic norms, through degress of increasing simplification down to the minimum system, and even beyond these to defect forms of language in the child, in aphasia, or in other disorders such as deafness, and in such foreigners and bilinguals as belong only partly to the socio-linguistic group in question. Any language system and, more generally, any semiotic system, is maintained thanks to a tradition respected by the members of society. Its basis is the prestige of norms regulating people's behaviour. The structural reduction of a system and its final elimination is the inverted function of the strength of the norms which guarantee its validity. Consequently, the existence of levels of varying structural complexity is due to the incapacity of the norm to maintain the complete system down to the lowest strata of society, in the more distant parts of the linguistic community, and under un-

favourable external conditions. Those are only aspects of the same phenomenon. In earlier studies and particularly with reference to Romance and Hispanic phonological evolution,[2] I have proposed to talk about simplification in the periphery. It follows from what has been said so far here that the concept of periphery is used with reference to two dimensions: spatial and social. The simplified or defect linguistic usage in the lowest social and cultural strata is peripheral in the same sense as the form of language in distant regions, far from normative centres. The concept of distance is consequently taken as meaning horizontal as well as vertical remoteness. With a slightly deviating use of the term it may even be extended to cover a weak (individual) mastery of the functional system.

If we look upon a state of language as a unity of systems of varying complexity, it will be necessary to introduce as a further variable the concept of choice. A Frenchman of today may choose one type of structure or another. His choice will be determined by his preference for one or another of existing norms (any linguistic usage being, of course, governed by some norm). He may make his choice unconsciously and in accordance with his social (cultural) background, or in a conscious intention to manifest his position as belonging to the upper ten, or as loyal to the social group where he comes from or to which - for personal or ideological reasons - he wants to belong. In such cases, his choice of pronunciation may function in exactly the same way as his choice of clothes or his social behaviour in general.

When, in my plenary report to the International Congress of Linguists in Bucharest (in 1967), I formulated the consciously and intentionally provocative thesis that language does not change and that what we call linguistic change is the speaker's choice of another language (taken here as a stable system of functions, and independent of any time factor), I thereby wanted to stress the importance of the choice factor in the evolution. I found it fruitful to see language as consisting of strata or levels, the choice between which is determined by social evaluations, even by changing

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(2) Summarized in Orbis XI, 1, 1962, 131-178 (reprinted in "Phonétique générale et romane", Mouton, Paris 1971, 301-342), and, as far as Spanish is concerned, in "La América hispano-hablante", Istmo, Madrid 1970.

modes. We have seen that modifications by choice may in principle take place in two directions: downwards, towards a simpler structure, and upwards, i.e. replacing a simpler structure by a more complex one. The danger of homonyms, often quoted as an important positive factor, and the absence of them as a negative one, has probably been exaggerated.

Interference (substratum, superstratum, adstratum) has often been quoted as an underlying factor in sound change. It supposes bilingualism. Bilingual areas and societies are given as examples of conditions under which the linguistic norm may be weakened and where system reductions a priori seem probable (well-known examples are the loss of voiced stops in the French spoken in Alsace and the loss of the phonemic word accent in the Swedish of Finland). Now an important question arises: are such peripheral simplifications to be explained through direct influence from the language which ignores the distinction, or are they simply due to a general weakening of the norms in a peripheral area? We know that voiced stops are relatively rare and that they come late in the child's linguistic development. We also know that phonological word tones belong to the subtle phonological distinctions, late in Swedish children and absent in cases of individual linguistic weakness. This question can hardly be answered. The effects are the same. When the change is just a phonological reduction, the interference theory is superfluous. Only when the new system contains new structural features and/or structural relations do we have any real reason to consider an interference theory. The introduction into Northern Gallo-romance of the phoneme /h/ as a consequence of the Frank colonisation (retained till today in some dialects, Normandy) is inexplicable without the foreign influence (and understandable in consideration of the socio-linguistic situation in the bilingual Frank kingdom).

It seems, on the other hand, quite normal if in a language in close contact with a quite different neighbouring one whose influence on the former is understandable (socially, culturally, politically, or simply through a quantitative dominance), we meet phenomena of phonetic realization of the phonological system which have to be explained through interference between different speaking habits. The examples are numerous (the lack of aspiration of Swedish-Finnish /p, t, k/; the pronunciation of the Spanish /j/-

phoneme as /d͡ʒ/ in Paraguay; intonation and stress phenomena). These features do not belong to the phonological system strictly speaking (though they may play a part in communication on other levels than the strictly cognitive one). And they may come to play a role at later stages in the phonological evolution (an example later).

In my critical studies on Romance diachronic phonology, I have been very restrictive as far as interference theories are concerned. I have tried to prefer internal evolution and peripheral simplification as explanations, the latter socially determined.

The expansion of Castilian in medieval Spain which became a consequence of the reconquest ("reconquista") from the Arabs, as well as its continuation (from 1492) in America, implied numerous instances of structural simplification of the phonological system (loss of the medieval opposition between voiceless and voiced fricatives, voiced and fricative stops). This evolution was parallel with the social changes brought about by the political events. The medieval /t͡s/ was replaced by the interdental /θ/ in the centre but confused with /s/ in the South and in America ("seseo"). A widespread dialectal confusion of liquids is found in (regionally and/or socially) peripheral strata all over the Spanish speaking world. It results in a substitution of one for the other (mostly a generalization of l), or in a phonetically intermediate type. A map published by Alonso-Lida (Rev. Fil. Hisp. VII, 1945, 320) of the extension of the merger in Spain shows its marginal character. Other phenomena of simplification show a corresponding spatial and social extension on both continents. The Spanish of America reflects the differences of political, social, and spiritual structure in the colonial period. The replacement of implosive -s in Spanish through an undifferentiated h-like fricative has the same extension as other "vulgarisms", in Spain and in America. Though it is a mere manifestation of the s-phoneme, it may have secondary phonemic consequences (lengthening of vowels, change of vowel quality) and ought to be mentioned for this reason. A parallel evolution took place in medieval French and is still reflected in oppositions like Fr. patte - pâte.

Linguistic evolution would not be conceivable without the hierarchic differentiation of a state of language, without vari-

ability in the strength of norms, and without a choice (free within
limits) made by the members of the different social strata.   These
are the essential factors in the socio-linguistic evolution.
In conclusion: diachrony interpreted as a substitution of one
system for another (in any of the dimensions of language) through
a socially determined choice between possibilities of varying com-
plexity was the principle I wanted to submit for consideration to
the Bucharest Congress of 1967.   I did it by saying: language does
not change; man changes languages.