How New Languages Emerge

New languages are constantly emerging, as existing languages diverge into different forms. To explain this fascinating process, we need to understand how languages change and how they emerge in children. In this pioneering study, David Lightfoot explains how languages come into being. He explores how new systems arise, how they are acquired by children, and how adults and children play different, complementary roles in language change.

Lightfoot distinguishes between "external language" (language as it exists in the world) and "internal language" (language as represented in an individual's brain). By examining the interplay between the two, he shows how children are "cue-based" learners, who scan their external linguistic environment for specified structures, making sense of the world outside in order to build their internal language. The internal properties of human brains provide the means to interpret speech.

Engaging and original, this book offers a pathbreaking new account of language acquisition, variation, and change.

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Contents

Preface

Newspapers tell us that languages are dying out at an alarming rate but they do not tell us that new languages are always emerging. To explain the emergence of new languages with new structures, one needs to understand how languages change and how they emerge in children, like new plants growing and spreading. In fact, we need some new understanding, because the most usual models of change and of the acquisition of language by children make it hard to think of how new languages can emerge; we need new models.

This book aims to investigate not new meanings or new pronunciations but how new systems might arise and be acquired by children, who are the vehicles for structural shifts, I argue. Languages undergo big changes from time to time and adults and children play different, complementary roles.

Linguists have always been interested in language change. Linguistics first became an independent discipline in the nineteenth century and at that time it was concerned exclusively with the history of languages, trying to understand how languages became the way they are. The nineteenth century can be seen as the century of history. Linguists wanted to know how languages changed, biologists wanted to know how species changed, and political thinkers wanted to know how societies and political systems changed; they read each other and gave similar kinds of answers.

That nineteenth-century work has profoundly influenced linguists of subsequent eras as the field has expanded to encompass many branches: phonetics, language acquisition, syntax, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, semantics, neurolinguistics, and much more. However, the early, influential work on language change had little understanding of how languages emerged in children, and very little interest in the topic. As a result, it never achieved the levels of explanation that it sought, ambitiously. I shall argue that a significant part of change needs to be understood through the mechanisms of children's language acquisition.

In the second half of the twentieth century, language came to be studied alongside other aspects of human mental life and some linguists saw themselves as cognitive scientists. This brought remarkable developments in syntactic theory and in our understanding of how children acquire language, involving quite new

concepts. Language came to be seen as emerging in children rather as a plant develops, unfolding according to an inner program. This book will examine those concepts and show how some of them help us to understand better how new languages emerge.

The book addresses people who have thought a little about language but who do not necessarily work on syntactic theory, who have no concern whether syntax is minimalist or cognitive or unificationalist or systemic, but who might be interested in the implications of that work for understanding how new systems can develop. I aim to describe the key concepts of the new work, particularly the distinction between internal and external languages, in a way that avoids unnecessary technicality and enables us to see how new languages emerge. I want to be comprehensible for colleagues, both faculty and graduate students, in areas like anthropology, sociology, psychology, and neuroscience, colleagues who view language with the special lenses of those disciplines. Such readers may not be interested in the nineteenth-century antecedents of the new work and may skip chapters 2 and 8.

Within linguistics, syntacticians need to understand work in discourse analysis and the USE of grammars, if they are to achieve their goals. To explain language change, one needs to understand grammatical theory, language acquisition, discourse analysis, and social variation in grammars. The book will draw on all of these different areas, making connections through language change, and, in some cases, I shall be introducing practitioners to each other.

I address old themes of language change but from a new angle, asking how new systems emerge, where there are different syntactic structures. That question is most often asked within an independent branch of linguistics dealing with creoles, sometimes called "creolistics," but I aim for a broader understanding of new languages that integrates the study of language change, acquisition, and creoles and shows how new languages of many sorts emerge naturally. This yields a new, broad-based kind of historical linguistics, embracing internal and external languages, language change, acquisition, use, grammatical theory, and creoles.

I believe that linguists have developed a more sophisticated analysis of history and change than evolutionary and developmental biologists and political historians, and I hope to demonstrate that. I shall draw on earlier work, particularly my *Development of Language*, but here I will undertake a more comprehensive treatment of change than in my earlier work, which focused on change in internal languages. In this book I shall explore the interaction between change in external and internal languages, showing how they feed each other, thereby addressing critics of the earlier work.

I am indebted to people at many different levels. We stand on other people's shoulders and readers will see whose. I build on and reconstrue the work of many people, and sometimes my thinking has been clarified and sharpened by

rejecting certain work. Historical linguists as a group have always had a great interest in explanations, perhaps greater than other linguists, and have been willing to think broadly in order to find them; I like to think that I am following in that tradition. Noam Chomsky's work has been a major influence on almost everything I have written and here I make crucial use of his distinction between internal and external languages. I have also benefited a great deal from the work of the Diachronic Generative Syntax (DIGS) community and the discussion at those lively and productive biennial meetings.

One is also influenced by one's immediate environment. For many years I was at the University of Maryland in a highly focused department that I helped to set up. However, a few years ago I moved to Georgetown University as Dean of the Graduate School, working with colleagues from a more diffuse department and, indeed, with colleagues from the full range of graduate programs. This drew me into a different kind of discourse that has helped to shape this book.

More immediately, thanks to the generosity of Curt Rice and Jürgen Meisel, I digested the book into a series of lectures at the University of Tromsø and for the multilingualism research group at the University of Hamburg. The Hamburg group has a broad vision of linguistics, studying acquisition and change in the context of grammatical theory, discourse analysis, multilingualism, and translation. It is just such a broad range of people that this book addresses and the book emerges from the notion that in order to understand how languages change and how new languages may emerge, one needs to understand many different branches of the field.

As with almost everything else I have written over the last thirty years, Norbert Hornstein has read the whole manuscript wisely and forced me to think through various points from different angles. Over the same period, Noam Chomsky has read most of my book manuscripts, usually being the first to reply and with the richest commentary. I thank these two old friends now for reading a draft of this book, offering helpful advice, and raising important questions.

I thank Christina Villafana and Kay McKechnie, CUP's copy editor, for their fast, graceful efficiency in the preparation of references and the final shape of the book.

New languages emerge through an interplay of internal and external language. This needs to be understood through a non-standard approach to language change, where there are no principles of history. That approach, in turn, requires a non-standard, cue-based analysis of language acquisition by children. We need models that differ from those generally used by linguists, including by modern generativists.

Now to the rich substance of the matter.