

Economy and Prescriptivism: Internal and External Causes for Linguistic Change

Language change is inevitable. In this paper, I show how Principles of Universal Grammar (UG), in particular Economy Principles, condition linguistic, i.e. internal, change. I then show how external factors such as prescriptive rules hinder internal developments. I will first provide some background to Chomskian Linguistics.

Universal Grammar

Chomsky examines two main problems in, for instance, his 1986 *Knowledge of Language*: (a) how do we know so much on the basis of so little evidence, and (b) how do we know so little given that we have so much evidence? These are referred to as Plato's Problem and Orwell's Problem respectively. The first problem

concerns what we know about language and how we acquire this knowledge. It will be dealt with in some detail. The second problem concerns the use of language and the mechanism of indoctrination. I cannot go into that here due to limitations of space.

Plato's problem is that of the 'poverty of the stimulus'. As speakers of a language we know so many rules without ever having been explicitly taught them. We can produce sentences that we have never heard before. The reason we know this much is because we have acquired a Grammar not on the basis of imitation but by using an innate Universal Grammar to acquire a grammar. This Universal Grammar (hereinafter UG) helps to interpret the language we hear around us and to build up our unique grammar. This process is schematized somewhat simplistically in (1):

$$1. \text{UG} + \text{L1} = \text{G1} \rightarrow \text{L2}$$

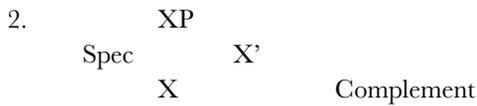
A child hears a language (L1 in (1)), and principles and rules of UG enable him or her to build up a grammar (G1 in (1)). The output of this grammar is a language (L2) not necessarily the same as L1. In principle, each speaker can have a slightly different grammar from other people speaking the 'same' language. Such 'imperfect' transmission is how language changes.

I'll now briefly give an example of a UG Principle. It is assumed that all languages use a form of (2) to represent their structure. Building the derivation, there are three positions, a specifier, a head, and a complement:

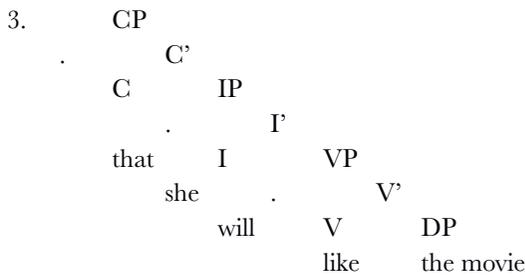
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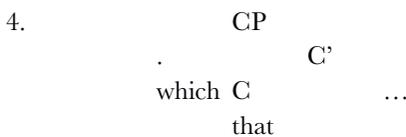
The specifier and the complement are positions that accommodate full phrases. All languages have structures such as (2) but the headedness varies. Thus, in English and Norwegian, verbs precede their objects (complement in (2)), but in Farsi, Urdu, and Japanese, the verb follows. Heads such as verbs (V), inflection markers (I), and complementizers (C) use (2) to derive (3), representing the three layers of an English subordinate sentence:



Economy Principles and Internal Language Change

Looking at linguistic change, I will argue that there is an Economy Principle that states that it is more economical in (2) to use the head position than the specifier position (see also van Gelderen 2004). Intuitively, this can be formulated as ‘be a head, rather than a full phrase’, or the Head Preference Principle. The only case I can discuss here is that involving English relative pronoun preferences.

The structural representation for English relative pronouns is one where pronouns such as *who*, *which*, and *from which* occupy the specifier position but where *that* occupies the head position, as in (4). In standard modern English, the two kinds do not occur together but in earlier English and in modern non-standard varieties they do, as in (5):



5. I wonder which dish that they picked (Henry 1995: 107).

The Head Preference Principle predicts either that *that* will be favored or that the *wh*-pronoun will shift from the specifier to the head position. Both can be argued to occur in sentences (6) to (8), quoted from Miller (1993: 111–2):

- 6. I haven't been to a party yet that I haven't got home the same night.
- 7. a cake where you don't gain weight.
- 8. The girl that her eighteenth birthday was on that day.

In (6), *that* is used over *from which* which would be the prescriptively correct form; in (7), *where* is most likely in the head position; and in (8), *that* is used over a more complex form. In informal language, examples such as these abound.

Table 1: *That* versus *who* in the CSE

	the N	a(n) N
<i>that</i>	5637 (=82%)	1758 (=81%)
<i>wh</i> -form	1199 (=18%)	414 (=19%)
total	6836 (=100%)	2172 (=100%)

In a (2 million word) corpus of modern spoken formal English (www.athel.com), the preference is very clear. Table 1 shows that *that* is much more frequent after *the man...*, *the book* etc than *who* or *for*.

Montgomery & Bailey (1991: 155) analyze relative clauses in academic writing as well as speech. Out of 200 relative clauses in speech, 138 use *that*, 36 have no pronoun, and the remaining 26 (or 13%) use a *wh*-form. The writing sample is very different. There are 22 clauses with *that*, 6 with no pronoun, and the remaining 172 (or 86%) are *wh*-forms. This difference between spoken and written data shows that there is a prescriptive rule at work, typical for written language. I turn to that next.

External Prescriptivism stopping Internal Change

Many prescriptive rules concern relatives and these favor *wh*-relatives over *that*, going against the internal change. Prescriptive rules are external in that they make very little linguistic sense. For instance, there is a rule that *who* is to be used referring to humans. A recent usage guide says: “*who* refers to people or to animals that have names... [*w*]hich and *that* usually refer to objects, events, or animals and sometimes to groups of people” (Kirsznner & Mandell 1992: 381). Anecdotal reports from English composition teachers say they often correct sentences such as (9):

9. The people that you should contact are ...

If the *wh*-preference is indeed a prescriptive rule, the difference between written and spoken, mentioned before, is completely expected.

There is a second prescriptive rule that favors *wh*-relatives, i.e. specifiers, namely, the rule against preposition stranding. Sentences that end with prepositions, such as (10), are judged to be incorrect, and (11) is preferred:

10. I met the woman who I had seen a picture of.

11. I met the woman of whom I had seen a picture.

The figures given in Montgomery & Bailey (1991: 156) for the spoken and written samples mentioned above are again interesting in showing that the written sample more closely mirrors the prescriptive norm. In speech, 86% of prepositions are stranded, whereas in writing, 7% are. Since (11) is only possible with *wh*-relatives, this second prescriptive rule (indirectly) also favors *wh*-relatives.

Conclusion

After giving some background on UG, I argue that an Economy Principle is responsible for certain kinds of language change. The example I discuss involves the English relative clause. I then show that there are various external factors hindering this development. This becomes especially obvious when one compares written and spoken data.

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