

Evolution and revolution in language and linguistics

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The first issue of *Nota BeNe* explores the phenomena of evolution and revolution in language science and in language use. Linguistics has evolved over time, making it the versatile discipline it is today, and the field should continue to remain open to new perspectives and critically consider old habits and new approaches. Revolution, peaceful or violent, may emerge when it comes to questions of language, power and identity. The four thematic contributions in this volume discuss questions of evolution and revolution from different angles: by investigating attitudes on language change expressed in Austrian newspapers, by considering Francophone Belgian pupils' performances in a popular national dictation contest, by unravelling the various denominations used in different domains to refer collectively to Canada's First Nations, and by discussing to what extent a Dynamic Approach to language could be a more beneficial approach than the commonly adopted static perspective.

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1. Reflections of evolution and revolution

For those interested in questions related to evolution and revolution, the domain of language is a captivating area. Both as far as language use and language science are concerned, numerous developments, changes, innovations, quarrels and struggles can be identified. Let us explore some of them, to set the scene for this thematic issue.

1.1 Evolution

Evolutions in the field of language and language studies are multiple and varied in nature. A first obvious, yet crucial, evolution related to language is of course

the development of the human language faculty. At what point in time did human beings start to speak, which were the exact reasons behind it, and how does our language capacity relate to the sounds animals make and the way they communicate? Even though the development of speaking in humans has been a traditional research topic in biological, anthropological and evolutionary studies, in the field of linguistics, “[a]s a research topic, language evolution is only now beginning to regain respectability, after more than a century of neglect” (Carstairs-McCarthy 2003:1). Research concerned with the evolution of the human language faculty has explored different angles and has expressed various hypotheses (e.g. on the lowering of the larynx because of our bipedalism, hence creating a vocal tract enabling speaking, and on the moment when this development took place). However, as biological traces that could lead to decisive evidence on the development of the human vocal tract have obviously been lost through time, the question still continues to puzzle and intrigue us (cf. e.g. Carstairs-McCarthy 2003; Levinson, 2014).

Linguistics as a scientific discipline has traditionally been more concerned with describing and trying to understand language as a phenomenon, rather than with the purely evolutionary questions. Even far before linguistics was established as an academic field in its own right, scientists and philosophers have been thinking about human language and the system underlying it. Illustrative is for instance Plato’s *Cratylus*, a philosophical dialogue between Socrates, Hermogenes, and Cratylus, in which they are trying to establish an answer to the question what would be natural, or instead conventional, about the names of people, things and activities (1a). The excerpts below illustrate that they were not just discussing the origin of denominations, but that they were also already aware of the variation between different areas and tribes (1b), and that they also noticed the changes occurring in language use among young people (1c).

- (1) a. **HERMOGENES:** “I should explain to you, Socrates, that our friend Cratylus has been arguing about names; he says that they are natural and not conventional; not a portion of the human voice which men agree to use; but that there is a truth or correctness in them [...]”
- b. **SOCRATES:** “And the name of anything is that which any one affirms to be the name?”
- HERMOGENES:** Yes.
- SOCRATES:** And will there be so many names of each thing as everybody says that there are? And will they be true names at the time of uttering them?
- HERMOGENES:** Yes, Socrates, I can conceive no correctness of names other than this; you give one name, and I another; and in different cities

and countries there are different names for the same things; Hellenes differ from barbarians in their use of names, and the several Hellenic tribes from one another”.

- c. **SOCRATES:** “And therefore the Goddess may be truly called *Pherepaphē* (*Pherepapha*), or some name like it, because she touches that which is in motion (*tou pheromenon ephaptomene*), herein showing her wisdom. And Hades, who is wise, consorts with her, because she is wise. They alter her name into *Pherephatta* now-a-days, because the present generation care for euphony more than truth”.

Plato, *Cratylus* (translated by Benjamin Jowett)

The *Cratylus* dialogue on the origin of names may remind of the linguistic thinking of one of the founding fathers of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), discussing to what extent the linguistic sign is arbitrary. And when we think of linguistic theory, the concept of evolution certainly applies there too. In its endeavour to describe and conceptualize human language, the field has seen approaches and theories that succeeded, contradicted or instead complemented each other. For instance from the Port Royal Grammarians of the 17th century, to the dialectologists of the 19th century, to the structuralists of the early 20th century, and to the various flavours of generativism and construction-based approaches in recent times (cf. for instance Campbell 2003 and Dryer 2006 for accessible yet comprehensive overviews on the history of linguistics). Like linguistic theorizing, also the methods and tools applied in the different subfields of language sciences have evolved. Linguistics has become so diversified that linguists can, among others, “be found working in the *library*, the *bush*, the *closet*, the *laboratory*, and the *street*”, working with “*texts*, *elicitations*, *intuitions*, *experiments*, and *observations*” (Labov 1972a: 99). The different branches of linguistics that emerged over time, and the variety of language phenomena they cover, also explain why “[...] linguistics as a heterogeneous field has been in a continuous process of reformulation and bridge-building, both across its subfields and in collaboration with other related fields” (Litosseliti 2018: 1). This is a development that is not a threat to the unity of linguistics, but that rather helps to strengthen the field, as Labov (1972a), with foresight, noted and applauded:

Despite the fact that we have a variety of methodological approaches, the unity of linguistics is not hard to conceive. It is not necessary for everyone to use the same methods – indeed, it is far better if we do not. Otherwise we would not benefit from the complementary principle. The unification of linguistics must necessarily proceed from the understanding of linguists that the field need not be defined to fit their personal style, but can expand to a broad attack on the complexity of

the problem. Data from a variety of distinct sources and methods, properly interpreted, can be used to converge on right answers to hard questions.

(Labov 1972a: 119)

Evolution, both in the sense of change and development, is also clearly manifest in the object of linguistic research as such: patterns of language and of language use. A wide range of developments that deserve to be explored in detail can of course be found in the linguistic behaviour of children acquiring their mother tongue (L1). They evolve from one stage to the next, from a mute stage to babbling, from a one-word phase to a two-word and multiword phase, and from thereon to increasingly complex messages with inflection and agreement (e.g. Clark 2003; MacWhinney 2017; Kidd & Donnelly 2020 for concise overviews on L1 acquisition). Before going to primary school, children master the essentials of the grammar of their mother tongue and in school their linguistic toolkit continues to evolve, by developing sensitivity to registers, by expanding their vocabulary and by learning how to write. And this process in some sense continues throughout our lifespan, as we always adopt new words and may lose or obtain specific linguistic habits.

Those who want to, or have to, learn a new language at some point later in their lives also develop by transgressing several phases in which the learner's competence becomes gradually more target-like. This idea of consecutive intermediate target language systems is famously captured by Selinker's (1972) image of the "interlanguage" (IL): "[a]s part of a definition of 'learning a second language,' 'successful learning' of a second language for most learners, involves, to a large extent, the *reorganization of linguistic material* from an IL to identity with a particular [target language]" (Selinker 1972, p.224). If at some point it turns out that learners do not evolve any further (because of factors such as motivation, age, quantity of exposure, quality of feedback), the interlanguage is said to have become "fossilized" (cf. Han & Selinker 2005, Selinker 1972, Selinker & Lamendella 1978).

With language use comes language variation, and potentially also change in the longer run. Variation can be related to social factors such as the group(s) a speaker belongs to, to language contact and also to linguistic factors like coarticulation between sounds. Such "changes from below" usually originate among the speakers in ordinary language use and they typically go unnoticed by the members of the language community (Labov 1972b; 2001), as tellingly illustrated in the following description where a teacher returns to his speech community after a long period of absence:

A French teacher returning to Paris from Prague or Kyoto, after an absence of twenty years, would probably be baffled by certain phonetic neologisms. [...] After two or three days, he would be convinced that the French language of today,

the French of young people, differs significantly from the French of yesterday, as he himself was taught. Curious or worried, he would ask his French colleagues and friends about these new developments, who would assure him that nothing had changed, and that he had probably misheard things, or that he had heard foreigners. It is possible, however, that this teacher was right, and that, on the contrary, the fact of continually living in the same linguistic environment prevents us from noticing the gradual changes in which we ourselves participate. We also have to take into account the conservative tendency of members of a linguistic community when faced with changes that could alter their verbal universe.

(Fónagy 2006. pp.15–16, our translation)¹

Changes from the opposite category, i.e. the top-down changes, are conscious changes, trying to repair the language in some respect. They are instigated and implemented by authoritative language institutions or governmental bodies. Such imposed changes often provoke firm reactions within the speech community, and they may constitute, among many others, one of the sources of revolution in the field of language.

1.2 Revolution

Language users hardly realise how much we actually engage with language in our daily lives and how omnipresent language is in its various forms, be it spoken, written, signed, or non-verbal. This lack of awareness applies not only to the amount of language around us, but also to the structures we use. If you ask an ordinary (i.e. non-linguistically trained) language user about what they do, it will be generally difficult for them to explain why they exactly use their language in a particular way and an answer along the lines of “just because”, or “otherwise it doesn’t sound right”, is likely to follow. In yet other respects, language users may be very aware of the language they speak or the speech community they belong to. This is for instance the case in situations where languages are not properly recog-

1. “Un professeur de français revenant à Paris de Prague ou de Kyoto, après une absence de vingt ans, serait probablement déconcerté devant certains néologismes phonétiques. [...] Au bout de deux-trois jours, il aurait la conviction intime que le français d’aujourd’hui, le français des jeunes, diffère sensiblement du français d’hier, tel qu’on le lui avait enseigné dans le cadre d’un stage. Curieux ou inquiet, il irait poser des questions sur ces nouveautés à ses collègues et amis français qui l’assureraient que rien n’a changé, et qu’il a probablement mal entendu, ou entendu des étrangers. Il serait pourtant possible que ce professeur ait entendu juste, et, qu’au contraire, le fait de vivre continuellement dans le même milieu verbal, empêche de s’apercevoir des changements graduels auxquels on participe soi-même. Il faut compter également avec un penchant conservateur propre aux membres d’une communauté linguistique en face des changements qui risquent d’altérer leur univers verbal”. (Fónagy 2006. pp.15–16)

nized, if they are not allowed or discouraged to be used, or if changes are involved of which language users feel these badly impact their language. Fierce reactions, and even calls for revolution may be the result.

In communities with standardized languages, the standard is commonly seen as the most prestigious, pure form of the language, enabling communication across varieties (cf. Milroy 2001). As language users learn to follow the rules of the standard in school and are exposed to this variety in the media (e.g. broadcast news, cf. Bell 1983) and formal contexts, they are highly aware of the existence of the standard, i.e. “the correct form”. Variations and changes emerging within the speech community that deviate too much from the standard (and that are, for one reason or another, brought to language users’ awareness, e.g. the abundant use of anglicisms), may come to be seen by specific groups within the speech community as entailing a loss of prestige and even as signs of decay (e.g. Milroy 2001: 535–539). The specific uses may get stigmatized, by extension also negatively affecting the speakers who assimilated the new form or habit.

Also “Changes from above” may be ill-received by the speech community, especially when these are felt to have a substantial impact on the standard language people learnt and rely on. Reyes (2013) for instance examined the reactions shared online by language users after Spain’s official language institution, the *Real Academia Española*, proposed several language reforms in 2010. People overall reacted clearly negatively. In 27.7% of the cases, the members of the Spanish Royal Academy were accused of not taking their task of “protecting the language or maintaining its status, purity, elegance, complexity” seriously. With 23.2% and 23%, respectively, the second and third most frequent criticisms were that the changes were completely illogical and that they made the language deteriorate. The fourth most frequently expressed argument against the reform questioned the authority of the Academy to impose such a change on the speech community (Reyes 2013: 342). Reyes (2013: 354) concludes that “Language users’ reactions to reforms not only show their discontent because they believe those changes are shaking the pillars of a language but also, and more importantly, the pillars of their own education, and therefore who they are [...]”. The reader interested in the dynamics behind spelling reforms may also want to consult e.g. Humphries (2019) on the 2016 uproar on the French spelling reforms of 1990, Ball (1999) for a contrastive study on attitudes towards spelling reforms in France and Germany, Karunyk (2017) for a discussion on Ukrainian spelling reforms against the backdrop of the Soviet era, and Hjelde & Jansson (2016) for a depiction of the issues related to reforms in writing standards in the Norwegian linguistic landscape.

Language and identity are undoubtedly closely linked: we identify ourselves as speakers of a certain language and/or language variety, and it is on the basis of our language that we can distinguish ourselves from other groups. However, the

right to use the language of the language community with which we identify is not always self-evident. Many minority language communities feel that their identity (and therefore their language, and vice versa) is to some extent insufficiently recognised or even threatened or suppressed. This can lead to social tensions and to peaceful or violent struggles for language recognition at the regional or national level. The reasons why a language is (or has become) a minority language (e.g. is it a second, smaller, official language, a local dialect, an immigrant language, a former colonial language or an indigenous language?) determine which socio-political debates are likely to emerge, with which kind of arguments and with which tenacity and urgency (cf. Fishman 2001, Jaffe 2007, Aalberse, Backus & Muysken 2019, Hogan-Brun & O'Rourke 2019). Situations where minority language groups fight for linguistic recognition can be found in history, in our contemporary society, and all over the world. Because of the inherent link between language and power, and between language and identity, such fights, and more or less violent revolutions, are not likely to fully disappear any time soon.

The preceding pages aimed to illustrate how intrinsically intertwined evolution and revolution are with language and linguistics. This first issue of *Nota BeNe* will further explore a number of these struggles, delving into situations of (r)evolution in linguistics and among language users in a variety of contexts across the world.

2. Overview of the contributions

Steven Schoonjans looks at language users' attitudes towards spontaneous and imposed language change. He analyses letters to the editor in which concerns about language developments are expressed, and which have been published by three different Austrian newspapers (with different reader profiles) between 2020 and 2023. The negative reactions to two natural changes (the use of anglicisms and of teutonisms) and to two imposed changes (gender-inclusivity and political correctness in language use) are examined in detail and contrasted. Gender-fair language turns out to be by far the most frequently discussed topic in these letters and he furthermore discovered that several topoi are used to criticize both imposed change as well as natural change. These shared arguments essentially relate to common beliefs on the negative sides of language change, such as signs of decay of the national language, grammatical incorrectness and fears for intelligibility. For the cases of imposed language change in his corpus, Schoonjans finds the exclusive use of arguments questioning the relevance of and support for the proposed solutions by language institutions.

Numerous people nowadays worry about the spelling skills of children and adolescents, i.e. teachers and the parents of these pupils, but such worries are also expressed online and in the media, reflecting a broader concern of public opinion. **Anne Dister** and **Marie-Louise Moreau** analyse outcomes of *La dictée du Balfroid*, a dictation contest which is organised every year in the French-speaking part of Belgium for pupils in the 6th year of primary school. Despite its popularity, very little is known about the nature of the errors committed by the contestants. Dister and Moreau analyse dictations between 2012 and 2016, yielding a corpus of about 11,000 answer sheets. Even though the pupils who are better at spelling are most likely to participate, the overall results turn out to be far from error-free. Pupils clearly appear to master the general link between sounds and orthography (and the corresponding opacity between them in the case of French). When looking in more detail at the letters and letter groups *c, ç, cu* and *g, ge* and *gu*, whose phonetic realisation depends on the alphabetical context, Dister & Moreau reveal among others that sound-grapheme mappings involving multiple letters (*gu, ge*) are less well mastered than mappings with simple graphemes (*g*). They end their contribution by raising the question to what extent the educational field and society in general should find the outcomes alarming.

Mireille Elchacar examines the evolution of the denominations used to refer to Canadian indigenous people as a whole. In the past, clearly pejorative terms such as *sauvages* ('savages') were used, and since the turn of the century, we have seen that designations such as *Indians* and *Amerindians* got increasingly questioned and rejected by indigenous peoples. Over the past 10 years, the discussion has been put more and more openly on the forefront, partly because of several political-social events, such as the abuses in Residential Schools that have come to public light and the discussions surrounding the construction of oil pipelines under Indigenous peoples' territories. The original inhabitants of Canada do not consist of one people, but they are different tribes, each with their own language, traditions and way of life. This partially explains why they themselves prefer to be called (*Membre des*) *Premières Nations* ('Member of the First Nations') when outsiders feel the need to refer to the original inhabitants of Canada collectively. By examining legal texts, textbooks and dictionaries over time, Elchacar explores what changes occurred when and by which circumstances these shifts in denominations were possibly induced.

In the final contribution of this volume, **Luis Miguel Rojas-Berscia** invites the reader to reflect on our traditional approaches to conceptualising and analysing languages. Essentially based on our idea of standardised languages and linguistic nationalism with "one nation, one language", we look at languages, language varieties and language use in a rather static way. Rojas-Berscia outlines the key ingredients of a dynamic approach to language. Several scholars have been pointing

out the need for such an approach for some 200 years, but it has never become a dominant perspective so far. In a dynamic approach, *lect* and *languoid* are seen as more suitable concepts when studying language, as they leave room for including characteristics of form or use that cannot be captured by the traditional, rigid, construct of “language”. The functioning of a dynamic approach to language and linguistics is illustrated by means of three case studies, zooming in on languoids from Northwestern Amazonia, Western Australia and West Africa.

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