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ABSTRACT

The Pacific area is generally acknowledged to manifest great linguistic diversity. Such diversity is generally assumed to be dysfunctional, an obstacle to efficient functioning of society. Such diversity must, however, have its functions at least in the circumstances in which it arose. It is also generally assumed that such diversity is the result of a communication density too slight to permit uniformity to be maintained. However, in numerous actual cases, feeble communication density seemingly cannot be the explanation for persistent diversity. Therefore two assumptions can be made: (1) an ongoing process of diversification led gradually to the present level of diversity, and (2) this diversification cannot reasonably be attributed to isolation. It can therefore be assumed that diversity itself may in some circumstances offer selective advantages. Only some very inconclusive suggestions concerning such advantages can be made at present. However, it also seems that different kinds of diversity should be distinguished, and that some may not be as onerous as has been assumed. (Author/AM)

Linguistic Diversity in the Pacific: on the Sources of Diversity*

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The expression 'linguistic diversity' evokes most naturally a picture of numerous discrete 'ethnic' groups, each with its own language and its own territory. Although other kinds of diversity also exist--especially in association with the development of specialized functions within societies--it is diversity of the first kind which concerns me here. There can be no question that the Pacific area exhibits such diversity; there are over 7,000 entries in a recent checklist of Oceanic language and dialect names (O'Grady and Zisa 1971). Even with generous allowance for duplication in the list, it is apparent that the number of languages is great.

Such diversity is most often seen as something dysfunctional, as an obstacle to the efficient functioning of the society. It is my purpose here to argue, however, that such diversity must have its functions, at least in the circumstances in which it arose, and that it is important to seek an understanding of those functions. In brief, I contend that the diversity must have had a function on the grounds that (1) we must posit an ongoing process of diversification which led gradually to the present level of diversity, and (2) this diversification cannot reasonably be attributed to isolation.

That the present diversity is the result of a process of diversification is a necessary assumption if we are not to suppose that every language migrated independently to its present location. This diversification cannot be attributed to isolation unless we are prepared, in one region after another, to assume that conditions at some time in the past were radically different from any that have been reported by actual observers.

The only conventional explanation for linguistic diversification--a kind of linguistic entropy hypothesis--requires a degree of isolation. This hypothesis may be stated roughly as follows: any two idiolects, to the extent that there is not communication between them will change in such a way that the characteristics of one will tend to become random with respect to those of the other. This tendency to mutual randomization is seen as restrained only by mutual communication, and the effectiveness of the restraint as dependent largely on the density of communication.

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Such a model represents the availability of other idiolects to a particular speaker; it presumably provides an accurate measure of the opportunity presented one speaker to approximate his idiolect to that of other speakers. However, linguists have been aware that these opportunities are exercised selectively. It has become more or less traditional to call the selective factor (or factors) "prestige". However, it does not seem that prestige in the usual meaning of the term is adequate to explain the degree to which opportunities for linguistic influence are actually exercised.

This model of diversification sees it as deterioration--as an aimless drift the only consistent consequence of which is a steady reduction in the communicative reach of the particular speaker.

The negative view of this sort of diversity as associated with disorder stands in sharp contrast to our general acceptance of diversity within the speech community as a proper adjunct to the order obtaining in the community. For example, few would question the need for specialized technical vocabularies, and the relation of elaborate linguistic etiquette to the social structure of the community seems apparent. In fact, Gumperz has provided (1962) a general discussion of the functional associations between types of community and types of linguistic diversity.

This picture of orderly diversity within the community contrasts sharply with the picture which I presented at the beginning of the kind of diversity which concerns us here. I spoke of numerous discrete 'ethnic' groups each with its own language and its own territory. This suggests a sharp cleavage between intra-community diversity (which is supportive of order) and inter-community diversity (which is antagonistic to order). The difficulty that arises is that the picture I presented of communities of the latter sort seems to be distorted.

Roger C. Owen (1965) points out that patrilocal bands in different parts of the world generally are obliged to bring in wives who speak a different language or dialect. Thus a band ordinarily includes native speakers of more than one language or dialect. Although Owen limits his attention to societies on the band level of organization, it is apparent that multilingualism is widespread in other types of societies as well (cf. e.g., Hardy 1967: 6, 196, 203; Leenhardt 1930: 263; 1946: xvii; Sorensen 1967; Salisbury 1962).

Although in such cases groups seem generally to have a particular language attributed to them as their own proper language, their members often interact on a very regular basis with people to whom a different language is attributed. In fact, abrupt switches in the linguistic affiliation of villages or groups have been reported (Salisbury 1962: 10, Sharp 1958: 3, Leenhardt 1946: xvi).

It is obvious that in such situations we must conclude either that we cannot draw language boundaries at all, or if we do draw them according to the official attributions, that they do not correspond to lines of weakness in the net of communication as the density of communication model would suggest. In fact, it is not clear what the boundaries of the linguistic community are, and whether the diversity we are considering deserves to be called inter-community diversity at all. Since the members of the local unit associated with a language typically possess a repertoire of several languages, and since they communicate regularly with members of other units having more or less similar repertoires, it seems possible that in some cases at least the most significant clustering of norms will be found to extend over a multi-language area. (cf. Jackson 1974:55).

Let us consider again the contention that this type of linguistic diversity is dysfunctional. Leenhardt argues for New Caledonia that the concepts were so like from language to language that New Caledonians could learn additional New Caledonia languages with "astonishing ease" (1930:263). It would seem that where everyone was "at least bilingual" (Leenhardt 1946: xvii) and could easily learn additional languages, that if the multiplicity of languages was at all disadvantageous, it would be easily and promptly reduced. In fact, in the Vaupés River system of Brazil and Colombia diversity persists even though the resolution is already at hand since a lingua franca is established in the area (Sorensen 1967, Jackson 1974).

Since it must require more effort to learn several languages than to learn a single one, we must conclude that multilingualism exacts a certain cost. When the means for reducing it are obvious and it still persists, we must conclude that it offers offsetting advantages, that it has some function, at least in those societies. So far I have seen very few discussions of what those functions might be. I will briefly review some of the points that have been raised.

Fernando Nottebohm has suggested (1970) that some kinds of linguistic diversity may have a biological basis and a biological function. He reports that birds of certain species acquire their songs in part by learning from other birds of the species. They are capable of learning only during one stage of their development; afterwards the song is fixed. The consequence is that song dialects exist. Nottebohm suggests that the dialects play a role in an assortative mating system and may tend partially to isolate small breeding populations, thereby permitting a more rapid adaptation to local environmental conditions. He notes that there are language learning blocks at certain stages of human development, and suggests that they may have arisen in response to the same functions.

In the first instance, of course, the dialect differences serve to identify members of the population. Human dialects still serve in this way although the biological function which Nottebohm proposes has

presumably not been significant in more recent human history. In fact, it is interesting to note that Nottebohm's evolutionary function calls for endogamous populations, whereas in the cases we have considered marriage at least tends to be (is required to be in the Vaupés case) outside the group identified with a particular language.

William Labov, in the light of Nottebohm's remarks, suggests that the evolutionary function for human beings may be that of "providing relative cultural isolation and maintaining cultural pluralism (1972:325)" rather than physiological adaptations. It is, of course, impossible to evaluate that possibility at present. However, we should note another point made by Labov, namely, that his studies indicate that "dialect diversification is continuing in the face of saturation by the mass media, and in spite of close contact among the social groups involved (1972:324.)"

I think, however, that we must conclude that the suggestions of Nottebohm and Labov are not immediately relevant to the kind of diversification which concerns us here. They are concerned with what we might dub the "branding on the tongue" kind of diversification, which is (entirely?) a matter of pronunciation and which fixes the individual inescapably into a particular social identity at a certain stage in his development.

In the multilingual situations that have been mentioned here particular languages are usually associated with particular groups and often serve as an emblem of the group (Jackson 1974). Group members may employ their language affiliation as a kind of badge of their membership. However, an individual often has had the opportunity to acquire native-like ability in more than one language. Hence many people in these places presumably have the necessary linguistic skills to misrepresent their affiliations if they so chose. In fact, in some multilingual situations phonologies have apparently converged to the point that early learning of a particular language might not even be necessary in order to speak it without an accent (this seems to be the case in Kupwar village, Gumperz 1967).

There can be no doubt that one function served by diversity is that of providing distinctive emblems for social groups. However, the thought immediately arises that if that is the sole function of such diversity, the means employed are disproportionate to the ends. It would seem that differences in some feature of pronunciation or in a few high frequency vocabulary items would prove sufficient for that purpose.

There is perhaps another clue in a comment of Leenhardt's. I have already mentioned his remarks concerning the ease of translation from one New Caledonian language to another. He adds that equivalent words in different languages were so identical in meaning that they appeared to the speakers simultaneously as translations and as synonyms (1946:xvii). The situation was exploited in oratory where a standard device involved the repetition of a word several times, but each time in a different language.

He goes on to indicate that this practice represented an important enrichment of the expressive means of the language, although he does not give further details.

I do not know how to evaluate Leenhardt's remarks. However, I am impressed with the enormous complexity of linguistic styles that human beings tend to envelope themselves in. Perhaps in relatively homogeneous cultural settings there is some kind of pressure to expand the linguistic resources. Again it would appear that extensive multilingualism is a costly and inefficient means to this end. At least it appears to be so unless it is true that additional languages can in these cases be learned, as Leenhardt asserted for New Caledonia, with "astonishing ease".

Kupwar village is a particularly instructive case both because of the phenomena which occur there and because they have been effectively reported. We are told that there is an extraordinary degree of translatability among the local varieties of Kannada, Marathi, and Urdu. Morpheme-by-morpheme translation is possible throughout extensive texts. The reports give particular emphasis to the grammatical convergence which makes this possible. It is interesting to compare this with Leenhardt's statement (1930:263) about the degree of translatability among New Caledonian languages, and his emphasis upon the identity of meanings of vocabulary items in the different languages. In fact, although Gumperz appears to emphasize grammatical similarities and Leenhardt vocabulary similarities, I suspect that the two cases are very parallel. Certainly the New Caledonian languages are very similar in grammatical structure, and Gumperz and Wilson seem to be saying that vocabulary meanings have converged when they say (1971:155) that only differences of lexical shape remain in Kupwar. Easy translatability obviously depends on compatibility of both grammar and lexicon.

It has sometimes been said of Melanesian Pidgin English that it has Melanesian grammar and English vocabulary. What I believe was meant is that certain features of grammar found in Melanesian languages occur, but <u>mainly</u> that the vocabulary is made up in large part of Melanesian concepts with English labels, i.e., that the form of the words comes from English but their meaning is Melanesian (on this matter see now Camden 1975).

I would propose that the same two components separate out in all of these cases; that the local Kupwar varieties approximate one another in the same ways as the New Caledonian languages and in the same ways that Melanesian Pidgin English approximates Melanesian languages, and that the component that differs in Kupwar and in New Caledonia is the same component that Melanesian Pidgin shares with English. The latter component consists simply of labels; the first consists of everything concerned in the conceptualization of the message.

I do not intend to claim, of course, that the two "components" as I am calling them have separated out completely in these cases. What I do want to claim is that the two sets of phenomena that I have identified are two differentially adaptive components. The first component consists of those aspects (in addition to phonetics) which tend to converge in the typical bilingual situation. The second, I believe, is that which is involved in processes of diversification of the kind that are the concern of this paper.

Labels themselves are empty. They may arbitrarily be associated with any meanings, and therefore the association between label and meaning is essentially non-adaptive. Moreover, the number of label-meaning associations in a language is very large. For these reasons, label-meaning associations are very good historical markers. For the same reasons they are very apt for emblematic use.

The first component is that of content. It has a complex structure and a complex relation to reality. It is a very difficult problem to determine how arbitrary or how adaptive it is in relation to the actual things that can be talked about. However, in its relation to the content component of other languages it is subject to adaptive pressure as we have seen.

Finally, I want to propose that, to the extent that the first component--the content form--is held constant, learning a new set of labels is not a very onerous task. If this is correct, the suggested conclusion is that diversity arises because it is functional--that selective processes seize upon differences and preserve them--but that these differences tend to be such that the resulting diversity imposes only a limited burden on the language users.

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