

Comment on Esme Winter-Froemel's paper

The first part of my paper will contain some idiosyncratic ideas about the history of linguistics which I got when reading Winter-Froemel's paper. I will divide linguistics into three eras:

(1) *Unclear thinking era*. The historical linguistics beginning in the eighteenth century and lasting in some European language departments into the 1970s made great and admirable discoveries although the basic linguistic theory showed weaknesses. The difference between spoken and written language was often not clearly seen and it was not recognised that diachronic research should be based on systematically described synchronic descriptions. The notions of vowel and consonant were not sufficiently well defined. (For details see my books *Memories of a linguist 1940–2010* (p. 21 and 58–59) and *Fundamentals of Diachronic Linguistics* (p. 5–11t). Both books München: Lincom Europa 2012.) Ideas of this era are still with us but usually in improved form.

(2) *Clear thinking era*. Some basic problems are cleared up and the value of synchronic description is understood. Saussure (1916), the Prague School from the 1920s and European and American structuralists are important when the new ideas are introduced. In the first era linguistic publications could on the whole be read and understood by anybody having learnt some grammar at school. In this second era linguistics becomes more technical and is more difficult to be understood by a lay person. Most of the ideas of this era are still with us.

(3) *Complex thinking era*. In the third era, perhaps starting in the 1940s, many publications of different orientations demonstrate complex thinking. Linguists of one orientation may have difficulty understanding publications of other orientations. One example is Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena to a theory of language* (in Danish 1943 and in English 1953). Some complexities entail real progress and others are more or less meaningless. Chomsky's early ideas, 1957–1968, were complex but more or less meaningless. (I have not bothered about reading anything written by Chomsky after 1968.) Together with Halle he wrote *The sound pattern of English* (1968), which is nonsensical. I have written about this book in *The problem of nonsense linguistics* (*Acta universitatis upsaliensis. Nova series* 2:4. Uppsala 1971) and in the paper *Generative phonology. A critical appraisal*. *Phonetica* 27, 1973, p. 157–184.

As can be seen the three eras overlap greatly in time.

And now to Winter-Froemel's paper. It is written in a complex manner and discusses complex ideas. I will only comment on one of the points she discusses, the work of an invisible hand (p. 8–10). (I use here the indefinite article before the term as Adam Smith himself did.) According to a simplified form of this idea, one thing is brought about intentionally and results in an unintended thing of another order. In a detailed and partly critical manner

Winter-Froemel discusses this idea and its implications. I think that this problem and other problems she discusses can be dealt with in a simpler manner. When a language or a fact of language spreads, it has not another thing as a result. The characteristics of language are there at an early period. They change, are added to or are reduced during the time the language is used. One may think that functions such as the sociolectal and dialectal ones are later additions but in a weak form the “me or we against the others” function exists from the beginning. Facts of language or whole languages may also become less common and even disappear without it being reasonable to say that one thing has caused another. If I try to show what is essential in my own ideas about language change as explained in *Fundamentals of Diachronic Linguistics* and in earlier publications, the reader may agree that my ideas are not complex. I believe that there is nothing more profound to say about the innovator's choice and about those who accepted the innovation than that they liked it, found it attractive, interesting or even funny. The new expression is the possession of the innovator's own group and not of other groups, which is also pleasing. The change itself may be attractive, *variatio delectat*. Most changes are from a well functioning expression to another well functioning expression. If so, they have no purpose from a functional viewpoint. Less often the new expression functions better than the old one. Gilliéron showed convincingly that a new word could be needed to avoid a *homonymie dangereuse*. When in Gascogne the development of the Latin words for the cat and the cock had resulted in the same word and the word was sometimes used in the same context, it is understandable that one of the words had to be changed, in this case the word for the cock. By a strange coincidence the English word for the animal called *cock* is also often avoided in favour of another word, *rooster*. The aim of the change is, however, not to disambiguate two homonyms because this is done by the context. It is to avoid the word *cock* which also means penis. One may think that such changes are caused. I would, however, emphasise that one does not know why the change was carried out in one way and not in another. If so, the change is not caused but the best solution seems to be to say, in a more adequate way, that there are causal elements or prompts in changes despite them being basically intentional. Less often the new expression seems to be less well functioning than the old expression. This is the case of the new meaning of English *you*, which is being generally used when addressing both one and several persons since *thou* was made to disappear. Sometimes one uses *you all*, which seems to be a clumsy way to show that more than one person is addressed. Another example is that one may regret that *gay* with the old meaning can no longer be used after it has taken the present meaning of “homosexual”. I cannot see that there is a complete cause at work anywhere in language change. An important argument for this view would be that there is always more than one possible change or there may be no change at all. This discussion is and has generally been about what I have called major changes. Minor changes, the *pizza* case where the Italian word is introduced together with the thing, and the case where an authority imposes a change, are less problematic. Here one can usually find a strong causal element. However, such changes are also basically intentional. The fact that there is more than one solution to the problem shows that the chosen solution is not caused. Some of the ideas which I believe are particularly important are the following. In the common definition of cause there is a law saying that a certain cause has a certain effect and the effect must follow when the cause is at work. Thus one can predict the effect if one knows the cause. Only one thing can happen, which, as far as I can see, is not the case in language change. Also, what one may try to see as a cause is either probably wrong or it is

something that I think one should see as a causal element but not as a cause. I believe that attractiveness or something like it is important for a change. The speakers have a choice between several possible expressions but, as mentioned, a cause of a law can only have one effect. Another point to consider is that one does not know what moved the innovator to find a new expression, nor why it happened when it happened. My ideas about language change are fairly simple and Winter-Froemel's ideas as evidenced in her paper are fairly complex. Am I right in thinking that in many cases simpler ideas are preferable?