

Intentions and their role in (the explanation of) language change

Short Summary

The primary aim of this presentation is to find out what some (different) linguists say about the role of intentions in the study and explanations of language change. I try to investigate if in the explanation of language change, “having an intention” does any explanatory work. What I want to find out is if intentions play a role, how do they do it, at which point it is salutary to invoke them, and what do they contribute to the explanation of language change.

What is very crucial in this discussion is to distinguish intentionality as intending to do things (no. 1) and not to confuse it with having an intention to act (no. 2). Namely, intentions (no.2) in the sense of having a thought to act, or to have a thought about language, to have a thought about reference, etc. are propositional attitudes. In Michael Devitt's statement: “Intentions, like beliefs and desires are thoughts, propositional attitudes” (2021 on the web).

I proceed as follows: In section II. under the subtitle *Causes of language change* I present some old and some more recent opinions on the causes of language change. In section III. *What kind of beast language is?* I set the scene and restrict myself to the discussion of two models of language: language as autonomous system versus language as the 'rational agent' system. The question is: Does language change

happen internally by itself or do speakers have an important role in language change? In section IV. under the subtitle *Transferring the evolutionary metaphor to the case of language change*, I discuss the adoption and adaptations of the theory of biological evolution as applied to an evolutionary theory of language change and mostly present William Croft evolutionary theory of language change which is then followed by Henning Andersen's criticisms. *The role of intentions is the central issue.* In section V. under the title *On speakers' intentions* I review what has been said about intentions and find the arguments unsatisfactory, insufficient, and even contradictory. In Section VI. *Problems with explaining change with speakers' intentions* I try to argue that it is implausible that in using language (that is speaking) and consequently also in language change, we need to help ourselves with intentions. The claim that in speaking we do not have to form a thought about it, i. e., we do not form an intention to speak and that is also true for language change. There is no need to posit intentions in language change. Speakers' intentions do not have an explanatory role in language speaking or language change.

If the locus of change is not the individual mind (individual intentions), then the driving forces behind language change might be social. The intentions might have a role to play on higher levels that is in speakers' communicative events. This possibility is explored In section VII. under the subtitle *Goals of communication*. In the same section there is a short presentation of emergentism in linguistics which I try to relate to the role of emergentisms in the explanation of biological evolution as suggested by Denis Noble.

Since this is a celebration for Kathy Wilkes and her contribution to goal-directed behaviour, in Section VIII. (*Concluding remarks*) I go back

to her remarks on language and intentions and see how they fit my discussion in this paper.