Latin grammar could have 'complexified' during its 'prehistory'

Sociolinguistic Typology: Social Determinants of Linguistic Complexity

Peter Trudgill

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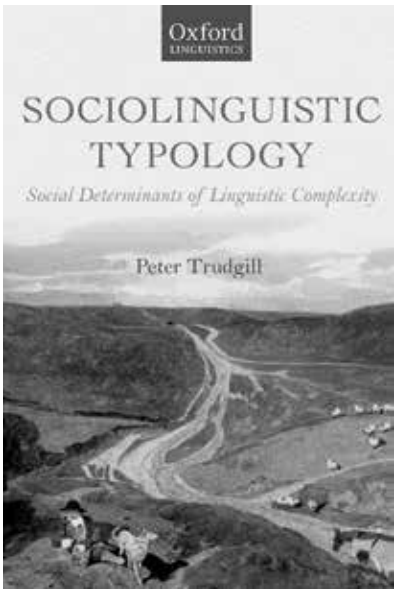

Ian Crookston

Young-earth creationists have sometimes been inclined to believe that language change is in some way unidirectional. It is an attractive thought. Suppose, for example, that the complex tense and agreement morphology of verbs in such languages as Latin may disappear or remain unchanged, but may never arise anew. This would be a non-trivial argument against the uniformitarian timescale for human 'prehistory'; after so many tens of thousands of years of simplifying verb forms, why are not all languages like Chinese, with no verb inflections as such? Within academic linguistics, such lines of argument might be seen as contrary to this or that accepted idea, or undermined by this or that debate in progress. Within creationism, they have been advanced with few if any.[1,2]

This book closes that door. Or if this seems overdramatic, let us just say that as far as can be seen and foreseen, it is now established that the grammatical change which has sometimes interested creationists is not unidirectional. It is difficult now to envisage any possibility that young-earth creationism and uniformitarianism might make different predictions about historical linguistics.

The core of the book is chapters 2–4, and within this, chapter 3 stands out. Here Trudgill simply lists some known grammatical changes in languages which have made some area of the language concerned more complex. If I may put it like this, the relevant 'page' of the language's 'grammar book' becomes more detailed and opaque. Readers will be diverted by the irregular past tenses which have arisen *de novo* in Norfolk English (Trudgill's native variety) (p. 87); ten of the examples are indisputable innovations, including *save-seft, shriek-shruck,* and *wrap-wrop.* There are a number of other examples of so-called 'complexification' drawn from other traditional dialects of England. But perhaps Trudgill's star example of adding complexity is Faroese.

Faroese—more complex than Old Norse?

A creationist who knew something of Old Norse, modern Danish, and Icelandic might be tempted to argue that grammars can only stand still

or simplify. Old Norse had rich verb and noun morphology, similar to that of Latin; Icelandic, to a great extent, still has it; while Danish has lost much of it. Faroese, on the other hand, has added to it. Faroese has been a written language for centuries, and it is clear that the Faroese of the later twentieth century had complexities which were absent in earlier times. For example, over roughly the same period in which English was replacing *cow-kine* with *cow-cows*, Faroese was carrying out exactly this type of grammatical change *in reverse* to a number of nouns. Three of the forms of the word for 'day', for instance, changed from *dagur-dag-dagas* to *deavur-dea-dags*. Faroese has also invented plural imperative endings for verbs, which are otherwise unknown in Scandinavian languages; and plural indefinite articles, which are a rare linguistic feature by world standards.

This brings us to the 'sociolinguistic typology' of the title. Faroese is an example of a certain sociolinguistic type: a language spoken by a 'small, tight-knit, low-contact' speech community. 'Low in language contact' specifically means that such languages as Faroese have never been learnt as a second language by adults in any numbers. The theory is that it is these three factors which permit a language to add complexities. Trudgill adduces much indirect evidence for this idea, in the form of unlikely grammatical complexities occurring in just this type of speech community. The number of small, remote languages discussed in this book is huge. Some of these complexities can be argued to be innovations (rather than survivals) by standard comparative-linguistic techniques. Few parallels for these complexities are to be found in the languages of larger, looser-knit nations which have experienced large-scale immigration.

Trudgill's explanation of the Faroese evidence, and his theory in the round, have been debated and challenged. But almost regardless of any debate as to explanations and theories, academic linguistics has established that, for whatever reason, morphological complexities can accumulate in a language.

(Trudgill also discusses other sociolinguistic situations in which grammatical complexities can be added. These are situations where many children are bilingual, for example when there are taboos against marrying within one's own small people-group. Space prevents a proper discussion here, but it reinforces the point that complexities can indeed be added.)

Danish, by contrast with Faroese, has been a largish language covering a looser-knit society, and was learnt by many adult speakers of Low German in medieval times. In this theory, these three factors are the explanation for its loss of noun and verb morphology. Standard English and many of the other well-known standard languages of Europe are examples of a different sociolinguistic type, the koiné. They arose when speakers of many different rural dialects came together in leading cities such as London, and some of the complexities of those dialects were lost in the melting-pot. Those of us whose view of language has been dominated by European standard and classical languages are naturally tempted to think that complexity can only be lost.

Sociolinguistic typology and creationism?

The point is not that Trudgill's analysis is uncontroversial, still less that it is incontrovertible. The point is that bald assertions by creationists such as "the evidence shows language evolution as mostly a process of decay"[3] are problematic with regard to evidence; and that there are alternative avenues of explanation for the evidence that languages are young.

The implication is that even less can be said about the 'prehistory' of language than may have been thought. The languages created by a Babel miracle could have been like modern Chinese, with very few inflections; or like modern Turkish, where words are very simply segmentable; or like Latin/ Old Norse/ modern Icelandic, with many dense 'pages' of inflectional morphology in the 'grammar book'. Any of these starting points could have led to the known ancient languages.

Trudgill of course believes that what led to the known ancient languages was a hundred millennia of tribal 'prehistory' (p. 168). It is interesting that he makes no argument that such a timescale is necessary for the historical-linguistic processes involved. Historical-linguistic timescales (for periods before historical records) are decided by faith in other things rather than by evidence from historical linguistics—*pace* some creationists.

Trudgill is unusually readable for an internationally pre-eminent academic. Any reader of this review should be able to read the book, with some help from a good glossary of linguistic terminology. He or she would see a great scholar marking what is likely to be a landmark in his discipline, and would see something of the wide world of linguistics.

References

1. French, M., The origins of language: an investigation of various theories, *J. Creation* (formerly *TJ*) **18**(3):24–27, 2004.
2. Duursma, K., The Tower of Babel account affirmed by linguistics, *J. Creation* (formerly *TJ*) **16**(3):27–31, 2002.
3. Field, F., The language faculty: following the evidence, *J. Creation* **22**(1):73–80, 2008; p. 73.