

From language mixing to fused lects: The process and its outcomes

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Abstract

Objectives: In this introductory article, we advance a unified framework for analysis and interpretation of transfer of overt linguistic structure in language contact situations. Our goal is to demonstrate that fusion, a process whereby results of bilingual practices become grammaticized and conventionalized (see Auer 1999, 2014), is a gradient phenomenon, which applies to a large spectrum of language contact phenomena. Our additional objective is to situate the contributions to this special issue in the context of this approach.

Design: The article defines fusion as a central concept underlying the proposed framework, identifies the basic dimensions of fusion and showcases its various outcomes by reviewing extensive contact linguistics literature and the contributions to this special issue.

Data and Analysis: In our analysis of contact linguistic phenomena, we draw on available linguistic descriptions of pertinent contact varieties and bilingual practices. We examine these phenomena in terms of fusion and in relation to its three basic dimensions.

Findings: This article shows that fusion, being a gradient multifaceted phenomenon, should be analyzed along the following dimensions: (a) the amount of structure affecting the receiving language, (b) the degree of sedimentation of bilingual patterns, (c) the degree of fusional compartmentalization.

Significance: The present article identifies and describes manifold outcomes of fusion in terms of three basic dimensions. These dimensions enable one to distinguish fused lects from language mixing and other bilingual phenomena and need therefore be incorporated in future linguistic descriptions and analyses of fused lects.

Keywords

Language mixing, language fusion, borrowing, mixed languages

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Previous studies of direct language contact in bilingual or multilingual communities provide empirical evidence that patterns of language mixing (intrasentential codeswitching) in specific communities may undergo grammaticization and become conventionalized (McConvell & Meakins, 2005; O’Shannessy, 2012; Schaengold, 2004). Adamou and Shen (2019) have recently shown that this process also reduces the processing costs of an utterance when compared to less predictable, non-sedimented mixing. The process whereby mixing patterns become grammaticized and conventionalized has been labelled by Auer (1999) as *language fusion* and the community’s inherited variety which has adopted elements from another language as a *fused lect*.

The term “fusion”¹ goes back to Max Weinreich (1956, p. 403), who posited a continuum of languages types, with “lineal languages” and “fusion languages” (such as, in his case, Yiddish) as the extremes. The starting point of any fusion is, according to Weinreich, the contact between various “stock languages”. Fusion occurs when “under peculiar circumstances, certain portions of these stock languages reach the melting point. Then, fusion takes place. The affected ‘certain portions’ of the stock languages now emerge as the components of the new fusion language. It is a unique linguistic structure apart from the stock languages and is governed by rules of its own. Fusion thus can be defined as a continuous and cumulative process of systematization” (Weinreich, 1959, p. 563).

Important features of fusion already described by Weinreich are its gradual character – fusion may affect only few or many parts of the language – and its “systematization”. The latter means that the end product of fusion is a new language which functions just as any “lineal” language, that is, as one system.

The outcomes of fusion, as Auer (2014) shows, are manifold. In an extreme case, fusion brings about what is often called a “mixed language”, with a split between grammar (from one source language) and lexicon (from another source language), or a split between the verbal and the nominal morphology. However, cases of such a clear-cut split are notoriously rare (cf. Thomason, 2003).

It is mistaken in our view to equate fusion with dual ancestry or hybridity in the strict sense of the word. Rather, even in radically fused languages, a structurally dominant (historical) source language can be identified which provides the basic grammatical patterns into which those of another (historical) source language were borrowed and integrated. As recently shown by Gillon and Rosen (2018), even a supposedly hybrid language such as Michif, which has been considered a prototypical “mixed language” ever since Bakker’s (1997) groundbreaking work, clearly is a variant of Cree on synchronic structural grounds. This is compatible with Auer’s (2014) claim that the starting point of fusion is always insertional (and never alternational) mixing. Insertional mixing by definition requires a matrix, or frame, language into which elements and materials from another language are inserted. Insertional mixing often consists in the copying of lexical material from the other language (“nonce borrowing”, cf. Poplack, 2018). It can follow a maximizing strategy (in which the grammar of the phrase is copied together with its lexical head) or a minimizing strategy (in which the lexical item is made to fit the phrasal grammar of the receiving language), resulting in different types of fusion.

The processes that lead from insertional mixing to “mixed languages” are of course not restricted to such extreme cases, but are observed in language contact all over the globe. Hence, instead of singling out a separate type of “mixed languages”, it appears more adequate to think (in Max Weinreich’s (1956) sense) of a continuum/degrees of fusion, starting from simple cases such as the copying of Old French vocabulary *cum* derivational morphology into German or English and ending with very complex cases in which identifying the dominant language is a non-trivial issue (such as in the case of Light Warlpiri, see O’Shannessy, in this volume). There is no clear borderline from which a specific language type can be identified, from a historical linguistic perspective. (Synchronically, of course, any sedimented form of fusion is part of an ‘ordinary’ language system.) Needless to say, that the sociolinguistic conditions – and the social identity work done

by them – may vary, and tends to be more specific and also sometimes more unusual in the case of radical fusion.

Speaking of fusion as a gradual process is a first step, but it becomes immediately obvious that it is more than one continuum which is involved. Three different dimensions can be distinguished and all are relevant here: (a) there is a continuum defined by the amount of structure of the receiving language that is affected. This ranges from single elements of a functional class to whole subsystems of the grammar; (b) the degree of sedimentation of the fusional processes may vary on a continuum. Some copied elements may still alternate to some degree with those of the receiving language (hence there is still alternation instead of fusion), others may have established themselves without an alternative, that is, some may be obligatory, while others may still occur variably within or across speakers; and (c) the degree of fusional compartmentalization is a third gradient involved. Here, one extreme is represented by completely compartmentalized fusion, in which case only borrowed lexical material can appear with borrowed grammar. On the other extreme, borrowed grammar can combine with lexical items of either provenience. These three dimensions of gradience in fusion interact in various ways.

Studies that investigate fusion as a gradient phenomenon are still rare (but see Adamou, 2010). Therefore, the present special issue of the *International Journal of Bilingualism* aims to describe fusion of varying degrees and to illuminate paths of their emergence. We contend that it is relevant to investigate the whole continuum of fusion, including its early stages, with due consideration of structural, social and cognitive factors, in order to come to a full understanding of this process.

The stages of fusion reported in this special issue therefore range from complete fusion, which presupposes a complete regularization and conventionalization of mixing patterns and a huge number of grammatical categories involved (O’Shannessy, this issue) to incipient fusion found when conventionalization of mixing formats occurs only to some degree and only in a few elements of the language (Goria, this issue). In other cases, a portion of the other-language grammatical elements has undergone conventionalization and their use has become obligatory, though the rest of the other-language grammatical words alternate with their recipient language equivalents and are thus variable (Hakimov & Rießler, this issue). The special issue also includes two special cases; one is an artificially fused set of varieties, that is, Macaronic Latin (see Demo, in this issue), the other is a case of radical lexical convergence (between Jingulu and Mudburra, cf. Meakins & Pensalfini, this issue).

Looking at the domains of linguistic structure affected by fusion (i.e. the first of the three continua mentioned above), various borrowability scales (see the discussion in Matras, 2009, pp. 153–165; also Auer, 2014) suggest that fusion in the system of discourse markers and/or modal particles already occurs in very early stages, while fusion by copying of grammatical words, of derivational morphology and inflectional morphology follow later (in this order). Note that fusion as a result of mixing is restricted to “matter replication” (Matras, 2009, p. 234), while “pattern replication” is not covered, as it does not involve a surface alternation of structures from the two source languages.

Large-scale borrowing of discourse markers and/or modal particles from another language and the integration of this system in the borrowing language (adding to it a system of discourse markers/modal particles or replacing the existing one, cf. Hakimov & Rießler, this issue) has, of course, been widely reported (see also Goria, this issue). For Matras, this type of fusion also subsumes the borrowing of adverbials and conjunctions (cf. Matras, 1998, 2000, 2007) since they may also fulfill discourse functions (in which case they can in fact be regarded as discourse markers, cf. Auer & Günthner, 2005). Together they are sometimes referred to as “utterance modifiers” (Matras, 2000). Utterance modifiers and coordinating conjunctions are borrowed even when the community’s bilingualism level is low (Matras, 2009; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988, p. 80). Once fused with the system of the receiving variety, utterance modifiers may even spread to

neighboring, genetically related, or unrelated varieties, which have not been in direct contact with the donor language. Auer and Maschler (2016) discuss the case of the discourse marker *nu*, borrowed from Slavic languages into Yiddish and from there into modern Hebrew.

The borrowing of grammatical words may lead to the addition (or replacement) of an entire grammatical sub-system (such as that of the determiners or subordinate conjunctions), but not always with the whole functional range served in the source language. An example is the borrowing of irrelevance pronouns by the varieties of Canadian French in contact with English, including the varieties of Prince Edward Island Acadian French spoken in Abram-Village and Saint-Louis (King, 2000, pp. 151–166) and the Chiac of Moncton (Perrot, 2003). These varieties have additionally incorporated a number of prepositions, but not in all of their functions. For instance, the preposition *about* was copied as a marker of prepositional objects, substituting the French forms *de* and *à* in this function. However, the marking of partitive and comitative relations remains the domain of French-origin prepositions (Perrot, 2003).

Fusion of systems of derivation morphology starts with derivational affixes being borrowed together with the stems they attach to, that is, lexical borrowing. The compartmentalized stage of fusion is reached when new derivations can be produced from borrowed stems by means of these affixes within the receiving language. In a subsequent stage of fusion, they may be used with stems (or roots) of the recipient language as well, that is, they become fully productive and compartmentalization is lost. Standard examples of languages with fused derivational systems are English and German, which have rebuilt their derivational systems under French influence, (continental) north Germanic languages, which have done so using (Low-)German affixes, as well as South Slavic languages, where a number of (neo-)Latin- and Turkish-origin derivational affixes developed into productive word-formation means. In all these cases, we are dealing with *Sprachausbau*, that is, the development of registers of the language suited to deal with the demands of (mainly written) communication.

Fusion in the domain of inflectional morphology can also be compartmentalized. As an example, consider Adamou's (2010) description of Komotini Romani, spoken in Greek Thrace today. This language borrowed verbal finite morphology from Turkish, but restricted its use to the numerous Turkish-origin verbs. Romani verbs inflect in the Romani way, and Turkish-origin nouns are, as a rule, integrated into Romani morphology as well. That is, while Turkish verbal inflectional suffixes co-occur with Turkish lexical stems in Komotini Romani, the Romani inflectional system is confined to Romani verbs. A non-compartmentalized system arises when a language borrows an inventory of formatives marking a specific grammatical category without such restrictions (see Seifart, 2015 for further discussion).

Examples of partial compartmentalization may be observed in the domain of plural marking in languages such as Yiddish and Maltese. In Yiddish, for example, the Hebrew-origin plural suffix *-im* occurs almost exclusively with Hebrew-origin, or *Loshn Koydesh*, nouns, whereas the suffix *-(e)s*, which is also of Hebrew origin, may attach to noun stems of Hebrew, German or Slavic origin (cf. Abugov & Ravid, 2014, pp. 14, 16). In other words, while the use of the plural suffix *-im* represents a vestige compartmentalization, which is similar to the one found in Komotini Romani, the use of the suffix *-(e)s* is an example of a non-compartmentalized fusion.

Fusion in the domain of inflection is far less frequent than in the domain of derivational morphology. This can be explained by the degree of the bilingual ability required for affix separation. Language users need to maintain a high level of bilingualism to be able to match the form of the other-language grammatical affix to its function and to eventually separate it from the inserted word form, whereas a high degree of bilingualism seems not to be a prerequisite for the identification and separation of derivational affixes. Once the borrowed elements are fully fused into the system, there is of course no variation any longer and hence there are no cognitive extra

costs. The imbalance between derivational and inflectional morphology is therefore due to the bilingual (mixing) phase preceding fusion.

While previous studies have largely focused on the structural makeup of fused lects, the contributions to this special issue put the process of their emergence center stage. Here, the social conditions of language use and their identity-related functions occupy a crucial role. Equally important, but so far hardly existent are studies on first language acquisition and its role in the emergence of fused languages. Arguably, children who are exposed to language mixing play a central role in the process of fusion (cf. O’Shannessy, 2021). By using empirical data covering diverse sociolinguistic settings and various language constellations, the papers of the special issue describe differing phases of fusion, identify the factors facilitating the emergence of fused lects and the paths that fusion might take in situations of community-wide bi- and multi-lingualism.

We conclude this brief introduction by summarizing the individual contributions to this special issue, situating them within the context of the overarching topic of fusion as outlined above.

Demo examines Macaronic Latin, which is the language of a particular genre of Renaissance and Baroque poetry, characterized by a mixture of Latin and the respective European vernacular language. Demo shows that the structure of Macaronic Latin is akin to the structure of “mixed languages” with a grammar-lexicon split, as a large part of the lexical items come from the vernacular language and are inserted into (pseudo-)Latin syntactic and morphological patterns. The persistence of this style in the European literary culture throughout several centuries makes it a possible candidate for fusion. In his analysis, Demo compares Macaronic Latin with naturally emerging “mixed languages” as well as (other) artificial languages and he reports a number of crucial differences. One of them is the low degree of regularization of the mixing patterns and thus of fusion, due to the highly variable choice of the lexical items, which makes the fusion incomplete. In part, this low degree of regularization is also due to the socio-cultural functions of Macaronic Latin in the context of highly artful literary genres, often with the intention of ironizing “bad Latin”. These texts were composed in order to distinguish the writer from others – which precludes full sedimentation of patterns – and hence under social conditions which differ considerably from those reported in most other studies examining fusion.

Goria zooms in on the very early stages of fusion, focusing on changing patterns of bilingual speech in Gibraltar in an apparent-time study. He argues that on the basis of frequent mixing, a process of sedimentation has set in which affects discourse markers, left dislocations, coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions (subsumed under the heading of “extra-clausal constituents” by him). Although these elements are considered to be instances of alternational mixing according to Muysken’s (2000) framework, note that they are insertional from the perspective of discourse grammar (i.e. in the speaker’s turn) – they do not affect the language of the clauses themselves to which they are preposed but only affect the framing elements of each clause. By looking at three generations of speakers, Goria manages to reconstruct the very beginnings of fusion. While in the oldest speakers, the direction of mixing is not fixed (the extra-clausal materials can be in Spanish or English), and the transition still carries discourse meaning, the youngest, English-dominant generation has established a much more fixed pattern – the extra-clausal elements are mostly in Spanish, and they frame English clauses. The pattern has no longer any discourse meaning. This emerging pattern lays the foundations of a fused system in which “utterance modifiers” (in the sense of Matras), but also left dislocated elements are produced in one language and the clause itself in English.

Hakimov and Rießler investigate the vernacular variety of Kildin Sámi spoken on the Kola peninsula in the Russian Federation. Kildin Sámi is a severely endangered Uralic language whose grammar and lexicon have undergone intensive contact influence from Russian. The conversational data that they analyze contain large amounts of Russian(-origin) unbound forms such as utterance modifiers and grammatical words. The authors identify the Russian-origin elements that

have fused with Kildin Sámi grammar by proposing and testing three diagnostic criteria of fusion. The results indicate that vernacular Kildin Sámi is a fused lect that has adopted a number of Russian grammatical words pertaining to different functional sets without a total borrowing of their individual functional profiles. They identify numerous parallels between the distribution of Russian(-origin) items in vernacular Kildin Sámi and a specific pattern of “alternational mixing” (*sensu* Muysken, 2000) and claim that the persisting practice of mixing, which is also attested in early recordings of vernacular Kildin Sámi speech, is the locus of incipient language change (fusion).

Meakins and Pensalfini report on a previously unattested case of massive bidirectional lexical borrowing between the two genetically unrelated languages Jingulu and Mudburra, which are spoken in North-Central Australia. By using the lexical comparative method, the authors show that the two languages have each borrowed large amounts of lexical items from each other. However, the grammatical systems of the examined languages appear to bear no traces of this intensive language contact. The authors label this unusual case of massive contact “lexical convergence” – the two languages share “a large single lexicon” but are separated by their grammars – and attribute it to long-term peaceful cohabitation of Jingulu and Mudburra speakers, similarities in sociocultural and socioeconomic conditions and socio-political equality between the two groups, who lived in a “single set of speech communities”. Although lexical borrowing is massive, no relexification set in. The two authors argue that massive lexical convergence has led to a particular type of “mixed languages”. Despite this large-scale lexical convergence, the speakers of each of the languages feel that they are speaking either Jingulu or Mudburra, based on the grammar of their speech.

O’Shannessy’s article in this special issue adds an important aspect – the role of first language acquisition in the emergence of fused lects. Her focus is on the transformation (reanalysis) of the parents’ language mixing style when talking to their children into a new, “mixed language”, that is, Light Warlpiri (Australia). Light Warlpiri fused Warlpiri nominal case grammar with verbal grammar from English and Australian Kriol and underwent further innovations. O’Shannessy argues that this fusion and particularly the innovations are the result of the children’s acquisition of what their parents used as a variable code-mixing pattern. However, the children analyzed that variable input as a regular system, a new fused language. The crucial question here, of course, is why the children would not separate the two languages (Warlpiri and Australian Kriol/English) in their caregivers’ input, although numerous studies show that even very young children are able to do so in multilingual communities. O’Shannessy argues that they did indeed separate Warlpiri and the mixed (Warlpiri/Australian Kriol) input, but reanalyzed the latter as one system. This she attributes to the interactional embedding of child care in Warlpiri society. In contrast to Western societies (from which most studies of bilingual first language acquisition come) children in Warlpiri society spend much more time among themselves and less with their parents. Their reanalysis of the caregivers’ input is therefore much less controlled by the adults, and innovations can easily spread and conventionalize among the children, resulting in new (fused) structures.

Note

1. We thank Anna Verschik for drawing our attention to Weinreich’s (1956) use of the first paper on the topic of “fusion” which is very close to ours, although Peter Auer was not aware of this when he wrote his paper (Auer, 1999). At that time, the term was inspired by Yaron Matras’ (1998) use of the term, which, however, is considerably narrower than Weinreich’s. Note, however, that Weinreich does not link fusion to prior mixing or switching.

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