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From 'marked' to 'unmarked':
temporal change of language meaning

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Abstract

Language changes through time, space and technological development. The direction of change is from specific, i.e., *marked* toward general, i.e., *unmarked*. Change is driven by forces for regularization and forces for generalization.

Keywords

marked, unmarked, regularization, generalization, socialization

1. Language changes through time, space, and technological development

Language change reflects the socio-cultural change through time. The word *sophisticated* came from old Greek *sophist* and meant being clever but dishonest. In America of the mid-20th century when urbanization is regarded as improvement, the word came to mean being urbanized, that is, refined, civilized and elegant. Language changes in space. *Lift* in British English became *Elevator* in north American English. Language changes by scientific and technological innovations. *A blue rose* is a symbol of impossibility because no one was able to produce roses of that color, but Japanese firm, Suntory, genetically created a blue rose this year by using pansy's blue pigment after 14 years of research. When blue roses become common, they no longer will symbolize impossibility. When space travel becomes common and people watch the earth from up there, the word, *earthrise* might join *sunrise* and *moonrise*.

2. Changes are from marked to unmarked

When a word is used for long, the specificity and intensity or edges gradually wear down. Such words as *terrific* and *terrible* originally meant causing terror or dread, but today they turned into just an intensifier. "She's doing a terrific job" does not mean "She is doing a horrible job" and "I'm terribly happy to see you" does not imply "I am terrified to see you."

These changes tend to be from *specific* to *general* and *irregular* to *regular* in language forms, semantic meanings, and pragmatic functions. To borrow the terms of the Prague School and later Universal Grammar, these changes are from *marked* toward *unmarked*. In English, *Band-Aid* and *Kleenex* started as the particular trademarks of products but now they are common nouns for bandage and tissue paper in general. In Japanese, the plural suffix, *-tachi* was exclusively applied to entities to be deferential to as *kami-tachi* 'gods' in *Manyoshu*, Japanese poem anthology compiled in the middle of the 8th century. It began to suffix human beings, but only to superiors among aristocrats as *oya-tachi* 'respectable parents' in *the Tale of Genji* at the beginning of the 11th century. In modern

Japanese *-tachi* lost its deferential implications and also used to minors as *kodomo-tachi* ‘children’ and *kisama-tachi* ‘(derogative) you guys.’ It began to suffix non-humans as *sakana-tachi* ‘fishes’ and *kotori-tachi* ‘birds.’ In the past decade or two, it began to suffix inanimate objects as *koishi-tachi* ‘pebbles’ and *supuun-tachi* ‘spoons’ and even such abstract concepts as *jikan-tachi* ‘hours’ and *eigo-tachi* ‘Englishes.’ The *-tachi* suffix has been changed from *marked* to *unmarked*.

Euro-English (Yano 2001), namely, lingua franca English among nonnative speakers in Europe, has been widening co-occurrence rules. Seidlhofer and Widdowson (2009) report from the data of VOICE (the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English) that European speakers of English collaboratively broaden the collocational range of *endangered* to include such nouns as activities, areas, disciplines, fields, program and study while the data in the BNC (the British National Corpus) show that 47% of the word is directly followed by *species* and otherwise followed mostly by nouns denoting animals and other natural phenomena. Euro-English has also begun to use *head* and *mind* interchangeably. Collocational and semantic rules are moving from *marked* toward *unmarked*.

As a way of striving for sexual equality in society, we have changed gender-specific expressions such as *actor/actress* to *actor*, *businessman/business woman* to *businessperson*, *chairman/chairwoman* to *chairperson*, *Miss/Mrs.* to *Ms.*, *policeman/police woman* to *police officer*, *steward/stewardess* to *flight attendant* or *cabin crew*. The Japanese counterparts of *businessperson*, *chairperson*, *Ms.*, *police officer*, *flight attendant* are *kaishain*, *gichoo*, *-san*, *keisatsukan*, *kyakushitsu-joomuin*, which are gender-neutral. *Joyuu*, ‘actress’ are slowly replaced by *haiyuu* ‘actor in general.’ PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) used to be *fukeikai* (Father-Brother Association), changed to *fubokai* (Father-Mother Association) to include mothers, and now *hogoshakai* (Curator Association) to include those bring up the children who are not parents. The word *kyodai* means ‘brothers’ as against *simai* ‘sisters.’ But the word is also used for gender-neutrally as in “Go-kyoudai wa nannin desu ka?” (How many brothers and sisters do you have?). This move toward gender-neutral expressions can be interpreted as part of generalization, namely, unmarking gender specificity. The word ‘guys’ has semantic features [+male][+plural] but *you guys* in such an utterance as “Come on, you guys, let’s get going!” has been used to refer to either of the male group, female group, or mixed group (Figure 1 below).

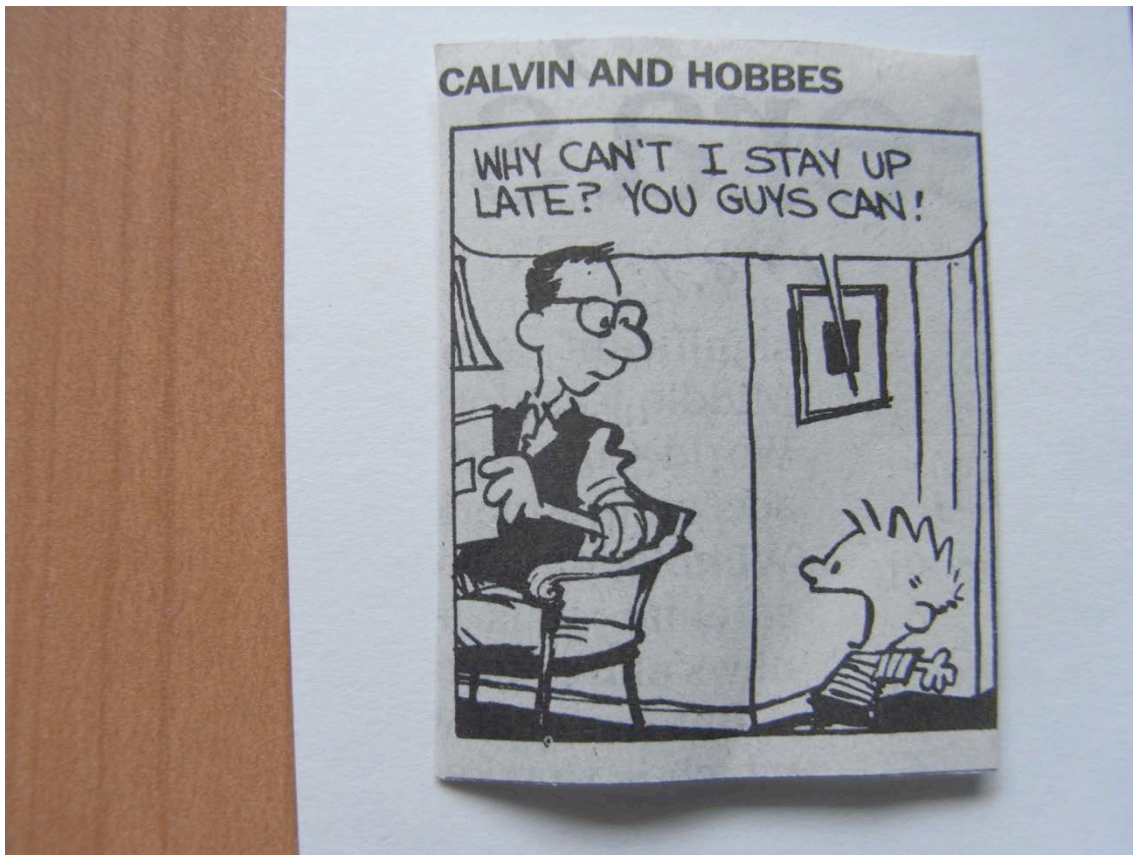


Figure 1 “You guys” to father and mother
(International Herald Tribune, 2011.8.1)

3. Forces for Regularization

One feature of being unmarked is regularization. In the 17th century, the final *-se* of *pease* was dropped by mistaking the final sound [z] as the plural suffix and the word became *pea*. The same mistake changed *biceps* to *bicep*. These examples indicate that the forces for regularization override grammatical correctness. In the future, therefore, it is very likely that *men* will be *mans*, *oxen* will be *oxes*, and *sheep* (plural) will be *sheeps*. In this respect, Japanese manufacturer, SONY contributed for regularization by insisting the plural form of *Walkman* is *Walkmans*, not *Walkmen* since it is a proper name.

In order to regularize the pronunciation-spelling agreement, British English spelling such as *centre*, *programme*, and *realise* has been changed to *center*, *program*, and *realize* in north American English, which is closer to the pronunciation. Similar move can be observed in informal writings such as *nite* for *night* as in *Nite Club* (Figure 2 below), *hi* for *high* as in *HI-FI stereo set* and *hijack*, *tho* for *though* as in “*tho it may be*” (Figure 3 below), and *thru* for *through* as in the highway sign *THRU TRAFFIC* and the term of credit card validity as in *GOOD THRU*.



Figure 2 Nite Club sign (Vancouver 2010.7.27)



Figure 3 'tho' for 'though'
(International Herald Tribune, 2011.8.4)

Greek/Latin-originated plural forms such as *corpora*, *syllabi*, and *symposia* are gradually being replaced by regular ones as *corpuses*, *syllabuses*, and *symposiums*. Regular forms are easier to learn and use and new expressions are daily created according to the word-formation rule. When Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was ousted from his office in 2011, the verb *demubaraking* appeared in newspapers.

4. Forces for countability

Another feature of unmarking is to change abstract concept which is expressed by uncountable noun to concrete object which is expressed by countable noun. Counters are deleted from *a cup of coffee*, *two glasses of beer*, *three pieces of advice* and uncountable nouns assume the role of counter by becoming countable as *a coffee*, *two beers*, and *three advices*. The afore-mentioned Japanese *jikan-tachi* ‘hours’ and *eigo-tachi* ‘Englishes’ also illustrate this phenomenon because *-tachi* is suffixed only to countable nouns. Strictly speaking generic terms such as breakfast are not concrete edible entities. Therefore we used to say ‘have breakfast’ but these days people change abstract entity to concrete one and say ‘eat breakfast’ These phenomena can be explained if we can assume that *concrete* is more general than *abstract*. Pluralizing uncountable nouns such as *advice*, *information*, and *baggage/luggage* has been referred to as a common feature of sub-Saharan African Englishes by Kachru and Nelson (2006). However, VOICE (the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) indicates that the same phenomenon happens in Euro-English and Kirkpatrick (2010) also observes this phenomenon in ASEAN Englishes. Further, this pluralizing of uncountables is being observed in English of young native speakers. *The New York Times* (September 21, 2002) reports that 60% of online population under the age of 17 in America uses pluralized form such as *advices*, *baggaages*, *furnitures*, *informations* in cell phones, web logs, and e-mails. It may be premature to argue that conceptualization is changing from abstract to concrete, which results in changing uncountable nouns to countable, but it seems that things are moving toward that direction.

5. Conclusion

We learn how to think, behave, and communicate by socialization. In this sense, we are the product of society in that we are carriers of socio-cultural tradition of our society. But at the same time we also do modify, change, and create the socio-cultural norms and new expressions along with them. Therefore, it is fascinating to study how we learn and use language and how language influences our thought and behavior.

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