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# Dynamic Simulation of Historical Change in Language Using Monte Carlo Techniques

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and
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## ABSTRACT

A system designed to serve as a vehicle for testing hypotheses about language change through time is being programmed in JOVIAL. A basic requirement of the system is that models must be formulated within the framework of Sapir's concept of drift and Bloomfield's definition of a speech community. Outside this restriction, an experimenter's selection of hypotheses is unrestricted.

It is anticipated that the simulation system will provide a formal mechanism for checking the adequacy and internal consistency of various explanations about the causes of language change.

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# Dynamic Simulation of Historical Change in Language Using Monte Carlo Techniques [1]

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## 1.0 Introduction

Computer simulation of real-world events for the purpose of prediction or of testing the validity of models has numerous precedents in the behavioral sciences.[2] The first step in such a simulation is the formulation of a model in terms that can be implemented in a computer program. A strong check on the

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[1] This research is supported in part by Grant MH-07722, National Institutes of Health, United States Public Health Services (to the Carnegie Institute of Technology).

[2] For example: B. Orcutt, M. Greenberger, J. Korbel, and A. Rivlin, Microanalysis of socioeconomic systems: A simulation study (New York: Harper, 1961); R. Bush and F. Mosteller, Stochastic models of learning (New York: Wiley, 1955), H. Guetzkow, (Ed.), Simulation in social science: Readings (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962); A. C. Hoggat and F. E. Balderston (Eds.), Symposium on simulation models: Methodology and applications in the behavioral sciences (Cincinnati, Ohio: Southwestern Publishing Co., 1963); E. A. Feigenbaum and J. Feldman, (Eds.), Computers and thought (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963); Dell Hymes, (Ed.), Uses of computers in anthropology (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton and Co., in press); W. N. McPhee, Formal theories of mass communication (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

validity of the assumptions in the model is successful prediction of pertinent events. For some types of simulation, such as the behavior of laboratory animals in a hypothetical experiment, a model can be considered adequate if the simulated behavior falls only within the range of behavior of real animals in a live experiment. In general, a model can be considered valid even if its predictions are only statistically significant approximations of real-world behavior.

Simulation experiments may model the behavior of a single entity or that of a large population. The number of entities used in a simulation may be equal to a total population, or may be viewed as representing a small sample of a very large population.

The term 'Monte Carlo', adopted because of its gambling connotations, refers to the use of random numbers as determiners of events in a simulation. The events that take place may be random only within the constraints of posited stochastic relationships that govern probabilities of transition from one state of events to another. The transition probabilities may either be constant or altered during the course of a simulation. Assume, for example, that under certain conditions a given event has a .2 chance of occurring. Further assume that the pertinent conditions exist. The simulation system would refer to a source of random or pseudorandom numbers for a fraction in the range 0 to 1, implementing the event only if that number were in the range 0 to .2.

In evaluating the predictions of a system incorporating such decision-making devices, it is essential to determine the effects of different choices of random numbers. This is normally accomplished by repetition of the same simulation with different random numbers. The pertinent data may then appear in the form of a statistical analysis of the behavior in the repeated trials.

A simulation may yield several kinds of information of interest to a researcher. For example, it might be of interest to know that a model predicted a state C from a state A, and also to know that in the course of prediction it simulated an intermediate state B.

The program described in this paper is a vehicle for the the testing of diverse models of language change. While the author, in the course of his work, may test the implications of some particular models, the program itself will serve, hopefully, as a general tool for conducting a variety of simulation studies.

## 2.0 The basic design of the simulation system

The program, which is being written in JOVIAL, an ALGOL compiler language, is designed to simulate the interaction of members of a speech community among themselves and with members of other communities. It is flexible enough to model special relations among particular members, e.g., family groups and social classes; to simulate the transmission of language from one generation to the next; and to handle the phenomena of multilanguage acquisition.

While the experimenter has a large range of choice in designing models for simulation, certain basic assumptions about group language phenomena are inherent in the design of the program, and more or less unalterable. Such assumptions are analogous to definitions and metatheorems in a system of formal logic. Except for the concept of 'generation grammar' none of these primitive assumptions is alien to readers of Sapir and Bloomfield. The assumptions are consistent with Sapir's concept of 'drift'.[3]

> 'Language exists only in so far as it is actually used--spoken and heard, written and read. What significant changes take place in it must exist, to begin with, as individual variations. This is

[3] E. Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921), pp. 165-166.

perfectly true, and yet it by no means follows that the general drift of language can be understood[8] from an exhaustive descriptive study of these variations alone. They themselves are random phenomena,[9] like the waves of the sea, moving backward and forward in purposeless flux. The linguistic drift has direction. In other words, only those individual variations embody it or carry it which move in a certain direction, just as only certain wave movements in the bay outline the tide. The drift of a language is constituted by the unconscious selection on the part of its speakers of those individual variations that are cumulative in some special direction. This direction may be inferred, in the main, from the past history of the language. In the long run any new feature of the drift becomes part and parcel of the common, accepted speech, but for a long time it may exist as a mere tendency in the speech of a few, perhaps of a despised few. As we look about us and observe current usage, it is not likely to occur to us that our language has a "slope," that the changes of the next few centuries are in a sense prefigured in certain obscure tendencies of the present and that these changes, when consummated, will be seen to be but continuations of changes that have already been effected.

[8]Or rather apprehended, for we do not, in sober fact, entirely understand it as yet.

[9]Not ultimately random, of course, only relatively so.'

The basic assumptions of the simulation system are also consistent with Bloomfield's thoughts about the nature and formal representation of the concept of 'speech-community'.[4]

'The most important differences of speech within a community are due to differences in density of communication. The infant learns to speak like the people round him, but we must not picture this learning as coming to any particular end: there is no hour or day when we can say that person has finished learning to speak, but, rather, to the end of his life, the speaker keeps on doing the very things which make up infantile language-learning ... Every speaker's language, except for personal factors which we must here ignore, is a composite result of what he has heard other people say.

'Imagine a huge chart with a dot for every speaker in the community, and imagine that every time any speaker uttered a sentence, an arrow

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[4]L. Bloomfield, Language (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1933), pp. 46-47.

were drawn into the chart pointing from his dot to the dot representing each one of his hearers. At the end of a given period of time, say seventy years, this chart would show us the density of communication within the community. Some speakers would turn out to have been in close communication: there would be many arrows from one to the other, and there would be many series of arrows connecting them by way of one, two, or three intermediate speakers. At the other extreme there would be widely separated speakers who had never heard each other speak and were connected only by long chains of arrows through many intermediate speakers. If we wanted to explain the likeness and unlikeness between various speakers in the community, or, what comes to the same thing, to predict the degree of likeness for any two given speakers, our first step would be to count and evaluate the arrows and series of arrows connecting their dots. We shall see in a moment that this would be only the first step; the reader of this book, for instance, is more likely to repeat a speech-form which he has heard, say, from a lecturer of great fame, than one which he has heard from a street-sweeper.

'The chart we have imagined is impossible of construction. An insurmountable difficulty, and the most important one, would be the factor of time: starting with persons now alive, we should be compelled to put in a dot for every speaker whose voice had ever reached anyone now living, and then a dot for every speaker whom these speakers had ever heard, and so on, back beyond the days of King Alfred the Great, and beyond earliest history, back indefinitely into the primeval dawn of mankind: our speech depends entirely upon the speech of the past.

'Since we cannot construct our chart, we depend instead upon the study of indirect results and are forced to resort to hypotheses. We believe that the differences in density of communication within a speech-community are not only personal and individual, but that the community is divided into various systems of sub-groups such that the persons within a sub-group speak much more to each other than to persons outside their sub-group. Viewing the system of arrows as a network, we may say that these sub-groups are separated by lines of weakness in this net of oral communication. The lines of weakness and, accordingly, the differences of speech within a speech community are local--due to mere geographic separation--and non-local, or as we usually say, social.'

Simulation of drift through a dynamic implementation of Bloomfield's concept of speech community, in which the density of communication is determined by probability values rather than statically mapped by lines of interaction, is a goal implicit in the design of the simulation system. Any programming of models or testing of hypotheses with this program must take place within this basic framework.

2.1 Population

Each member of a speech community is represented in the program by a generation grammar and a recognition grammar. Individuals with command of more than one language may be associated with additional grammars. A grammar consists of a set of rules for either parsing or generating forms in a particular language.

The grammars of individuals are not necessarily identical. During the course of a simulation, various individuals will die, and new ones will be born. A death requires the deletion of the grammars associated with the deceased; a birth, the addition of new grammars. The grammars representing newborn children are empty. An adult just entering an alien speech community may acquire empty recognition and generation grammars in addition to the nonempty ones he may possess as a member of another speech community.

The program is flexible with respect to the kinds of recognition and generation grammar rules it may use. These rules may be limited just to syntax; just to phonology; to syntax and semantics; or they may pertain to any range of linguistic phenomena that some theory might designate as significant. Accordingly, the program can use either stratificational or transformational grammar models, and might manipulate rules pertaining to phonemes or distinctive features, semolexemic rules or transformations.

This flexibility is possible because the program is designed to treat grammar rules as data in tables. While program modifications might be necessary for certain types of rule systems, these changes would be required only in the generation-parsing component of the system. The system's basic structure would remain constant.

The first testing of the simulation program will use, as a matter of convenience, an approximation to a stratificational model that contains dependency and phrase-structure rules and manipulates dependency networks and rules of cooccurrence to approximate relations between sememic and lexemic entities. The particular model has been described by the author[5] and is convenient because it is associated with an operational generation-parsing system that is ready to serve as a basic component in the simulation system.

2.2 Units of interaction

The basic units of interaction are speech forms produced in response to other speech forms. A good portion of the simulation will consist of small conversations among members of the population. A monitoring system controls the choice of interacting members.

A fundamental assumption of the simulation is that a major cause of change is the differences in the grammars of various members of a community. These differences are manifested in the varying speech forms produced during interactions. Assume that individual A has directed an utterance to individual B. B will attempt to parse the utterance with the rules available in his own

[5] S. Klein, Automatic paraphrasing in essay format, Mechanical Translation, in press; S. Klein, Control of style with a generative grammar, Language, in press.

recognition grammar. Each time B applies a particular rule in recognition, there might be an increase in a parameter value controlling the frequency of its usage in his generation grammar. If B's rules are not adequate for any step of the parsing, he may temporarily modify some of his own rules, or temporarily borrow a rule from A in order to complete the parsing. Whether or not the temporary changes or borrowings are made permanent would be governed by other probability parameters. Changes might first be limited to the recognition grammar, and permitted to enter the generation grammar only when the value of parameters sensitive to usage-frequency passed a threshold. (Rules about vocabulary as well as the phonemic interpretation of phones are treated as part of the recognition and generation grammar systems.)

If rules pertaining to meaning are included, the conversations may be required to be coherent and to adhere to particular content areas.

2.3 Structure of the program

The components in the system are data tables and dynamic programs. One of the major data tables contains the sets of recognition and generation grammars representing the members of speech communities. Associated with each set of grammars are parameter values pertinent to the contents of the other major data table, a list of stochastic relationships applicable to a simulation.

The major dynamic components are a program for parsing and generating speech forms, and a monitoring system that controls the flow of the simulation. The recognition-generation component also has the task of modifying the grammars of individuals in the system. The design of this component may require alteration for simulations incorporating different theories of grammar, or different notation for grammar rules belonging to the same conceptual genre. The tasks of the monitoring system include determining the passage of time and taking a periodic census to inform the experimenter of the changes that have taken place at various stages of the simulation.

3.0 The modeling process

Section 2 provided a description of the basic model. The term 'basic' is used because the description refers to the program implementation of unalterable, primitive assumptions about the representation of members of a speech community and their mode of interaction. As indicated above, these assumptions are roughly analogous to definitions in an axiomatic system.

The analogue of axioms consists of posited stochastic relationships pertinent to the interactions among members of a community. The choice of such relationships is at the option of the researcher, and he may select them to represent a particular theory about the nature of language change and also to represent particular facts or hypotheses about historical events and social relations pertinent to a given simulation. Some typical assumptions likely to be common to many models might include:

1. A parent is more likely to speak to his child than to a member of the community selected at random.

2. A child is more likely to speak to his parent than to a member of the community selected at random.

3. A husband is more likely to speak to his wife than to a member of the community selected at random.

4. A wife is more likely to speak to her husband than to a member of the community selected at random.

5. Each time an individual interacts with a particular member of the community the probability of future interactions with that member increases.

6. A child is more likely to adopt a grammar rule from a parent than from another member of the community selected at random.

7. An adult is less likely to adopt a grammar rule from a child than from another adult.

To incorporate the preceding assumptions in the program, the phrases 'more likely' and 'less likely' are redefined in terms of specific probability values, and a statement such as 'the probability ... increases' is redefined in terms of a mathematical function. Probability values are placed in the parameter lists associated with each grammar system in the community; mathematical functions that refer to the parameters are placed in the table of stochastic relationships. The number and kind of assumptions that can be incorporated in a simulation are limited only by the amount of available computer storage space, and indirectly by the availability of sufficient computer time to meet the requirements of increasingly complex simulations. For example, it is possible to model the effects of the existence of a prestige group within a community by the addition of such rules as:

8. A member of the prestige group is more likely to adopt a grammar rule from another member than from a nonmember.

9. A nonmember of the prestige group is more likely to adopt a grammar rule from a member than from a nonmember.

10. Members of the same groups (prestige and nonprestige) are more likely to speak to each other than to members of other groups.

The experimenter may define a community subgroup by presetting pertinent parameters of the subgroup members to the same values. The treatment of multilingual contact is merely an extension of the same devices. A multilingual speaker is associated with grammars for each of his languages, and each grammar system may be associated with different parameter values. Also, special stochastic relationships may be posited for rule borrowing between individuals speaking different languages, or even for the transfer of rules between different grammar systems associated with a single individual. In general, the selection of proper parameter values and stochastic relationships should permit an experiment to model a variety of social conditions pertinent to speech interaction; marriage between speakers of different languages, sporadic interaction between members of different speech communities--even the appearance of foreign peddlers selling popular trade goods. (In this last example, the popularity of trade goods might be represented by associating a high probability of being borrowed with the names of the trade items listed in the vocabulary portion of a peddler's grammar.)

It is even possible to model the interaction of several speech communities in a particular geographical relationship. For example, consider a situation in which four speech communities, A, B, C, and D, are located so as to form the corners of a square surrounding a central community, E. This geographical distribution could be modeled by rules stating that interactions between members of communities A and C or B and D are less likely to occur than between members of other groups. The effects of physical barriers to communication, such as intervening rivers or mountains, could be similarly approximated.

The sudden splitting of a single speech community into two groups can be modeled by assigning zero probabilities of interaction to members of diverging groups at a specified point in time. A gradual split taking place over a lengthy period of time can be modeled by a stochastic relationship that decreases the probability of interaction as a function of elapsed time. The complementary situation in which one speech community gradually migrates into the territory of another can be modeled by the use of a function that increases the probability of interaction as a function of elapsed time.

The experimenter is also free to implement various models of individual grammar change, e.g., special hypotheses about language acquisition by children, the effects of functional load or symmetry on individual grammar modification, etc.

## 4.0 Simulation experiments

One of the major goals of this research is to perform simulations that will model language changes corresponding to events in the real world, i.e., to predict a later stage of a language from a description of an earlier stage. But there are less ambitious experiments, which must be performed first, that may be of interest in themselves. For example, one must determine if the general design of the simulation system is capable of maintaining reasonable properties of language through time, both on an individual and group basis. Conceivably, logical inconsistencies in a theoretical model, in the choice of stochastic rules, or in parameter values might cause the grammars representing the population to lose most of their rules after a few generations of interaction; or perhaps all members of the population might quickly acquire exactly the same grammars; or worse, grammars might diverge to such an extent that within a generation or two each member of the population would speak a different language.

It is also essential to determine if the simulation model can actually reflect language changes in the range of observed phenomena. For example, independent of prediction, one must determine if a model has the capability of simulating a sound shift--any sound shift, real or hypothetical.

While, for a given model, there may exist combinations of parameters and rules capable of simulating acceptable real-world language change, they may be rare enough to hinder experimentation. Hopefully, this pessimistic result will not occur. The author expects that preliminary experimentation with a model will yield insights about combinations of parameter values that should be avoided, and about combinations that are likely to yield system behavior conforming to real-world language phenomena.

This kind of testing is much like tuning an automobile engine. The system may be extremely sensitive to particular combinations of parameter values, e.g., a .5 probability of a parent interacting with his child, in combination with a .3 value of interacting with a stranger, might produce unacceptable system behavior, while any choice greater than .6 for the former and less than .2 for the latter might yield satisfactory results. In such an instance the mathematical functions pertinent to this area of interaction should be ones that do not permit the parameters to attain values outside those limits. It is likely that such a tuning will be necessary for every new modeling experiment involving different languages and/or different stochastic relationships.[6]

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[6] As part of the methodology of 'tuning', one should first test the effects of only a part of the assumptions of a model, gradually adding the remainder as the more simple models are made to function satisfactorily.

Also, as indicated in section 1, it is essential to determine the effects on a simulation of different choices of random numbers. If a model is inadequate, runs differing only in the selection of random numbers may yield widely divergent behavior. The anticipated results with an adequate model would be divergent behavior--but with the divergence falling within a range too small to invalidate the model. For example, a model might be considered adequate if it predicted only hypothetical dialect variants of an attested stage of a language.

4.1 Prediction of historical events

One might attempt to use the simulation system to predict the future of a contemporary linguistic situation. The accuracy of the predictions would, of course, not be verifiable in the experimenter's lifetime. More fruitful experiments might involve predicting successive stages in the development of a language or language family in cases where the results could be checked against written records. Such records must be adequate for the construction of recognition and generation grammars. One would also wish to incorporate information pertaining to social structure, material culture, geography, and if possible, detailed information about trade routes, migrations, and dated changes in social structure. If, for example, records indicate that barriers between certain social classes disappeared after a certain date, one might arrange for the program to alter the pertinent interaction parameters at the appropriate time during the course of the simulation.

In the absence of exact historical detail, one may run a simulation that posits the missing information and perhaps tests for its adequacy in accounting for future changes in a language. E.g., can the simulation predict adequately if it assumes the unattested existence of trade contacts between two widely separated communities; or the unattested introduction at a particular time of foreign terms for popular items of material culture; or the unattested existence of an indigenous community speaking an alien language having specific, hypothetical, but unattested grammatical features.

Ideally, results of historical simulation studies would be adequate predictions that used only documented facts. If one is forced to incorporate speculations about history, successful prediction is not as impressive. In such cases there is justification for claiming only that the model is but one consistent, plausible theory about the factors pertinent to the language change.[7] If possible, one should try to predict the same results with various combinations of speculations. Each model that accurately predicts the same results is (within the limits of the simulation system) a theory about the causes of change in the test case. Analysis of runs with different models might yield information about hypotheses common to successful simulations, or about the mutual incompatability of certain combinations of hypotheses.

Another use of the program would be to test the relative validity of two hypotheses about factors of change. At best, one hypothesis would yield a valid prediction, the other fail. At worst, both would fail. More frequently, neither might yield wholly satisfactory predictions, but one prediction might be a little more accurate than the other. Note that the determination of

[7]It must be conceded that, at some level, a model always contains unverified speculations and that one is never justified in making a claim broader than the preceding.

relative accuracy might rest on many factors; for example, the only significant difference between two models might be that one predicts a verifiably false date for a minor innovation.

4.2 Analytic simulations

Given success in simulating historical events, one might wish to test the relative significance of various parameters in the system. Such testing, although similar to the 'tuning' described in section 4 is to be performed only after a successful predictive simulation. In essence, it would determine the range of values for a particular parameter within which the results were not significantly altered, e.g., mean age at death, mean age difference between marriage partners, etc.

Another type of simulation that must be considered analytic is the use of grammars of reconstructed languages for predicting the languages upon which the reconstructions were based. Certainly the pitfalls of circular reasoning are present for almost any conclusion to be drawn from a successful prediction. On the other hand, it is not clear to the author what the significance of a failure would be. Nevertheless, assuming successful predictions have been made with real documented data, the temptation to perform such analytic experiments might be very great. Perhaps the only significance of such testing might be to determine whether the type of model necessary for successful simulation with reconstructed data were any different from that required for simulations based on attested grammars.

5.0 Discussion

This paper describes a system for simulating language change within the framework of models selected at the discretion of an experimenter. Without external verification, the validity of any conclusions drawn from a simulation can be no greater than the validity of the individual assumptions incorporated in the associated model. While accurate prediction may be a criterion of success, it does not guarantee that a model accurately represents real-world events. There might exist any number of models, some mutually incompatible in their assumptions, that could yield equally accurate predictions.

Failure to predict accurately does not necessarily imply that some assumptions in a model are invalid. The model itself may have been particularly sensitive to a parameter that was not sufficiently varied in the simulations, or perhaps some highly improbable but significant event occurred in the real history of a language, and was not incorporated in the set of otherwise valid assumptions of a particular model.

The ultimate function of simulation is to provide a researcher with a formal mechanism of inquiry in situations where static deductive testing of the implications of a model is not feasible because of the complexity of the phenomena involved. Explanations about historical change dependent upon unverifiable hypotheses can be tested for adequacy and internal consistency, not validity. However, if the predictions of a simulation have been accurate, one may presume that the validity of any underlying unverifiable premises is at least as great as similar assumptions in untested models, formal or otherwise.

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13. ABSTRACT

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It is anticipated that the simulation system will provide a formal mechanism for checking the adequacy and internal consistency of various explanations about the causes of language change.

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