

Chapter 10

Can language evolution lead to change for the worse?

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Can languages change for the worse? What does it actually mean for a language to be worse than another one? This chapter approaches this question from the point of view of evolutionary theory. It is argued that evolving systems can be compared with regard to their *fitness*, and “better” can be translated as “more fit”. Seen this way, the initial question is an instance of the overarching problem *Can evolution reduce fitness?* While the general answer to this question is yes, it is argued that this is of little interest with regard to languages as a whole, since their fitness is mostly determined by extra-linguistic factors. However, it is shown that there are at least three scenarios where individual linguistic items can be replaced by less fit competitors during language change: (1) Inflationary use of extravagant expressions, (2) systematic directed replication errors, and (3) evolutionary drift in small populations.

1 Introduction

Before I can address the questions whether languages ever do change to the worse and if so, how this can be modeled, some clarification is needed in what sense a language A can be “worse” than another language B. Some ideas that spring to mind immediately are:

- *A is less regular than B*, e.g., has many declension classes where B has just one, or A has many suppletive forms in its paradigms.
- *A is more complex than B*, e.g., A allows a variety of syllable structures while B only uses CV-structure.

- *A is harder to acquire than B*, e.g., because A's lexicon contains many synonyms and B's lexicon does not.
- *A is harder to use than B*. This may apply to the speaker – perhaps because the words in A are generally longer than those in B – or to the hearer, e.g., if A's syntactic structures lead to many local ambiguities.
- *Certain concepts or distinctions can easily be expressed in A but not in B*, e.g., aspectual distinctions or evidentiality.

These informal notions of *worse* are not necessarily mutually distinct, and the list is far from complete. To tackle the overarching question, a more precise notion of what it means for a language to be worse than another is needed.

An analogy from evolutionary biology might be helpful here. According to an often-quoted phrase due to Herbert Spencer (1875: 453), Darwinian evolution is based on the “survival of the fittest”. In Spencer's original formulation, *fittest* is used in an informal sense. A few lines later, Spencer writes: “While one saves its life by higher speed, another does the like by clearer vision, another by keener scent, another by quicker hearing, another by greater strength, another by unusual power of enduring cold or hunger, another by special sagacity, another by special timidity, another by special courage; and others by other bodily and mental attributes” (Spencer 1875: 454). So the comparison that organism A is less fit than organism B appears to be as vague and multi-faceted as the notion that language A is worse than language B. However, in modern evolutionary theory the term *fitness* has a precise quantitative meaning as the *expected number of offspring*. It does not apply to individual organisms but to populations thereof, which may be defined by heritable genotypic or phenotypic traits. *Evolution by natural selection* essentially means that the average fitness of a population of organisms increases over time.

Conceived in this way, the question *Is there evolutionary change that decreases fitness?* has a precise meaning, and the answer is not obvious.

Extrapolating these considerations to linguistics, one might tentatively say that language A is worse than language B if B is fitter than A. This only makes sense, though, if the biological notion of *expected number of offspring* is applicable to languages, or, in any event, to linguistic entities. Darwin certainly held the opinion that this is the case. In *The Descent of Man*, he notes:

The formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously parallel. [...] Max Müller has well remarked: “A struggle for life is constantly

going on amongst the words and grammatical forms in each language. The better, the shorter, the easier forms are constantly gaining the upper hand, and they owe their success to their inherent virtue.” To these important causes of the survival of certain words, mere novelty and fashion may be added; for there is in the mind of man a strong love for slight changes in all things. The survival or preservation of certain favored words in the struggle for existence is natural selection. (Darwin 1871: 465–466)

The idea that language change shares certain characteristics with biological evolution has regained popularity in the past two decades (see for instance Croft 2000 and much subsequent work) and will be taken for granted in this article. To apply the notion of fitness to language change, however, it needs to be clarified what linguistic *offspring*, or, more generally, linguistic *replication*, amounts to.

Many researchers in the field of language evolution (Croft being a prominent example) draw inspiration from Richard Dawkins’s work (e.g., Dawkins 1976). According to Dawkins, the notion of a *replicator* is central for evolution, biological or otherwise. They are “[t]he fundamental units of natural selection, the basic things that survive or fail to survive, that form lineages of identical copies with occasional random mutations” (Dawkins 1976: 253). This suggests that replicators are discrete entities replicating (almost) faithfully. There is a multitude of *prima facie* candidates for the status of “linguistic replicator”, such as I-languages (or I-grammars) in the Chomskyan sense, E-languages, grammatical rules, constructions, words, morphemes, phonemes, etc. For all these linguistic units, it can be argued that they are culturally replicated in some sense, be it via language acquisition or via imitation in language use. However, unlike the prototypical Dawkinian replicators – genes – neither of them is a discrete physical entity directly endowed with a replication mechanism.

However, the logic of Darwinian evolution via natural selection does not require the existence of discrete replicators and (almost-)faithful replication. This is made clear quite lucidly in the article *The nature of selection* (Price 1995) by the (among many other things) biomathematician George Price. This little-known article, written around 1971 but only published post-humously in 1995, spells out the conceptual underpinning of the *Price equation* (Price 1970), a mathematical model of Darwinian evolution.

2 The Price equation

Price sees selection as a very general mechanism that has been studied intensely in biology but is also at work in other domains. He writes programmatically:

Selection has been studied mainly in genetics, but of course there is much more to selection than just genetical selection. In psychology, for example, trial-and-error learning is simply learning by selection. In chemistry, selection operates in a recrystallisation under equilibrium conditions, with impure and irregular crystals dissolving and pure, well-formed crystals growing. In palaeontology and archaeology, selection especially favours stones, pottery, and teeth, and greatly increases the frequency of mandibles among the bones of the hominid skeleton. *In linguistics, selection unceasingly shapes and reshapes phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary.* In history we see political selection in the rise of Macedonia, Rome, and Muscovy. Similarly, economic selection in private enterprise systems causes the rise and fall of firms and products. And science itself is shaped in part by selection, with experimental tests and other criteria selecting among rival hypotheses. (Price 1995: 389; emphasis mine)

In this section I will briefly recapitulate the fundamental ideas of this article and spell out why Price's approach is useful for the study of language change. For a fuller account, the interested reader is referred to Jäger (2008).¹

Price distinguishes two concepts of selection: *subset selection* and *Darwinian selection*. For instance, if ten out of one hundred applicants are admitted to college, the selected students form a subset of the total pool of applicants. Darwinian selection, in contradistinction, is about parents and offspring, which are disjoint sets. Both notions of *selection*, however, involve two sets which are ordered in time. Furthermore, there is a function (in the mathematical sense) mapping the later to the former population. For subset selection, this is just the identity function. For biological selection, this is the *parent-of* function if reproduction is asexual. For sexual selection, one has to resort to the level of genes, and the relevant function is *is a copy of*. Price's mathematical model of selection is applicable to any scenario of this sort, i.e., two sets where one is considered to be later in time than the former, and a function from the later into the former set. For ease of reference, I will call the "earlier" set *parents* and the "later" set *offspring*.

Selection can be iterated, i.e., the offspring can become parents of another round of selection, etc.

For the mathematical study of selection, (at least) two functions are required: w measures the amount of entities of the two sets. Formally, it maps subsets of the parent and offspring sets to non-negative real numbers. The simplest example w would be counting, mapping each finite set to its cardinality. However, w can

¹See also Frank (1995) for a very good overview of Price's work in evolutionary theory.

also be a more complex measure function such as social influence, economical value etc.

The function x measures some quantitative character whose evolution is being studied. It could be the body size of organisms, the consonant-vowel ratio of a text or what have you. Formally, x maps subsets of the parent and offspring sets to real numbers.

A schematic example of such a scenario is shown in the left panel of Figure 1.

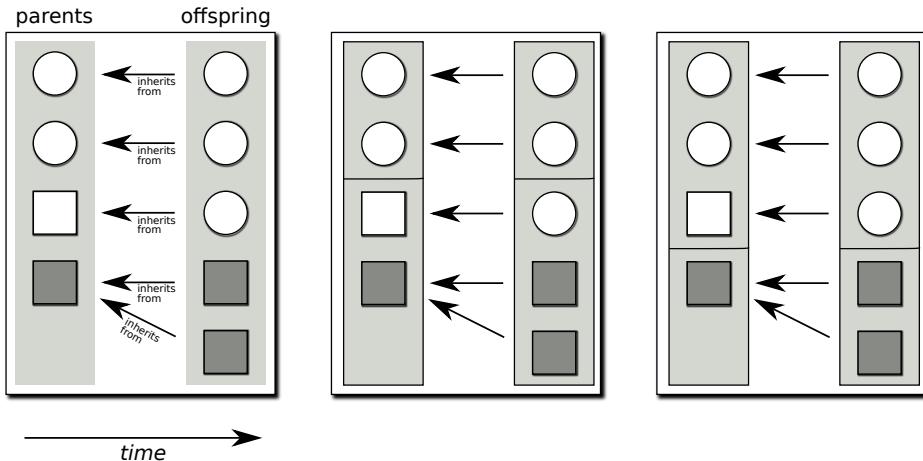


Figure 1: Schematic example of selection

We have two populations of objects of different color and shape. The left population are the parents and the right one the offspring. The arrows map each offspring to its parent.

In the next step, the parent population is partitioned according to some criterion. The middle panel of Figure 1 partitions it according to shape and the right panel according to color. The parent-of function induces a corresponding partition in the offspring population. Note that the third offspring in the middle panel is placed in the group corresponding to square-shaped parents, even though it is round rather than square-shaped, because its parent is square-shaped.

The *fitness* of a group, in the technical sense, is the amount of offspring in that group as measured by w , divided by the amount of parents in the corresponding group. Formally, if w_i denotes the amount of group i among the parents and w'_i the amount of the corresponding group among the offspring, the fitness f_i of group i is defined as $f_i = w'_i / w_i$.

If we assume that w simply counts the objects in our example, the fitness of the round parent objects and their offspring is $2/2 = 1.0$, and $3/2 = 1.5$ for the square-

shaped parents plus offspring. So the square-shaped parent objects have a higher fitness than the round ones, because they have, on average, more offspring.

For the grouping according to color, as shown in the right panel, we have a fitness of $3/3 = 1.0$ for the white and $2/1 = 2.0$ for the gray objects.

The total fitness of the population, f , is defined as the amount of offspring divided by the amount of parents. In our example this is $5/4 = 1.25$, regardless of the grouping structure.

Regarding the function x , for a group i , x_i is defined as the value of the parent group i under x , divided by w_i . In other words, x_i is the density of x in group i . Analogously, x'_i is the density of x in the corresponding offspring group i . For the whole population, x and x' represent the average density of x among parents and offspring respectively. The notions $\Delta x_i = x'_i - x_i$ and $\Delta x = x' - x$ refer to the groupwise and global difference in the density of x between offspring and parents.

In our example, let us suppose that the function x counts the number of gray objects in a set. Then we have $x = 1/4 = 0.25$ and $x' = 2/5 = 0.4$, so $\Delta x = 0.15$.

Under the groupings both in the middle and the left panel, $x_1 = x'_1 = \Delta x_1 = 0$, since there are no gray objects on either of the upper groups. For the lower groups, we have $x_2 = 1/2 = 0.5$, $x'_2 = 2/3 = 0.6$ and $\Delta x_2 = 0.16$ in the middle panel, and $x_2 = x'_2 = 1$, $\Delta x_1 = 0$ in the right panel.

The quantity w_i/w can be interpreted as the *probability* of group i . With this move, it follows from the definitions that²

$$f\Delta E(x) = \text{Cov}(f, x) + E(f\Delta x). \quad (10.1)$$

This is the celebrated *Price equation* (first published in Price 1970). Here, Cov and E denote the *covariance* and the *expected value* in the sense of probability theory.

The equation is a tautology; it results directly from some algebraic manipulation of the assumptions. Its importance lies in the conceptual clarity it provides. The left-hand side holds the total change in the average value of x between parent and offspring generation, multiplied by overall fitness. This overall change is split into two components on the right-hand side. The first term, Cov(f, x), covers the contribution of between-group *selection* to the change in x . If x strongly

²Here is the derivation: By definition, $\Delta x = x' - x$, and $x' = \sum_i w'_i x'_i / \sum_i w'_i$. As $w'_i = f_i w_i$, $x' = \sum_i w_i f_i x'_i / fw = E(fx')/f$. Hence $f\Delta x = E(fx') - fx$. This is the left-hand side of the equation.

By definition and elementary equivalences, $\text{Cov}(f, x) = E(fx) - E(f)E(x) = E(fx) - fx$, and $E(f\Delta x) = E(fx' - fx) = E(fx') - E(fx)$. So the right-hand side of the equation sums up to $E(fx') - fx$ as well.

covaries with fitness f , selection will favor an increase of x over time. Conversely, if high values of x are associated with low fitness and vice versa, selection leads the average value of x to shrink.

This is not the full story though. The second term, $E(f\Delta x)$, captures the change of x between parents and offspring *within groups*. If the average value of x within a group i is unchanged between parents and offspring, $\Delta x_i = 0$. If this holds for all groups, x is replicated faithfully. Provided that the external circumstances do not change, the second term becomes 0. However, if replication is not fully faithful or the environment changes, the term may be non-negligible. So one way to interpret the Price equation is to say that it separates evolutionary change into the effect of natural selection and the effect of unfaithful replication and a changing environment.

It is important to point out though that this distinction between selection and within-group change depends on the assumed grouping of the parent population. Since this is imposed by the modeler rather than being empirically determined, this distinction is an analytical tool, not something which is objectively given.

To bring this point home, consider again the example in Figure 1. Average fitness f is 1.25 and the change in the average proportion of gray objects is $\Delta x = 0.15$. So regardless of the grouping, the left-hand side of the Price equation is:

$$f\Delta x = 1.25 \cdot 0.15 = 0.1875$$

For the right-hand side of the equation, the grouping structure makes a difference. In the middle panel, the populations are grouped according to the parents' shape. The character of interest x , changes from 0.5 to 0.6 between parents and offspring for the square-shaped group, so it is not faithfully replicated. Therefore the second term is non-negligible. Numerically, we have

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Cov}(f, x) &= 0.0625 \\ E(fx) &= 0.125 \end{aligned}$$

In the left panel, objects are grouped according to parents' color. Here the proportion of gray objects remains constant between parents and offspring for both groups, so the second term becomes 0. Carrying out the calculation gives

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Cov}(f, x) &= 0.1875 \\ E(fx) &= 0 \end{aligned}$$

So according to the first grouping, we find moderate between-group selection for grayness (of magnitude 0.0625) and unfaithful within-group replication favoring grayness. According to the second grouping, there is faithful replication and stronger between-group selection for grayness (of magnitude 0.1875). Both conceptualizations describe the same dynamics, though. In both cases, the sum of the two terms equals the left-hand side of the equation.

The explicit focus of the Price equation on the grouping structure makes it well-suited to study hierarchical selection, e.g., the relative strength of between-individual and between-groups selection. Also, it can be used to capture the effects of directed mutations via the second term.

A major advantage of Price's approach is its generality. It leaves the modeler complete freedom to decide what kind of dependency between stages of a system is considered as parent-of relation, and how populations are structured into groups. The question what *is* a replicator in linguistics is meaningless in this context. It is up to the modeler to decide what is *considered as* unit of selection.

To return to the mathematical detail, in the limiting case where selection is iterated many times and the time interval between successive generations is so short that time can be approximated as continuous, the Price equation becomes the differential equation (see Price 1972a for the derivation)

$$\frac{dE(x)}{dt} = \text{Cov}(f, x) + E\left(\frac{dx}{dt}\right). \quad (10.2)$$

3 Fisher's fundamental theorem and evolutionary change to the worse

In his landmark book *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* (originally published in 1930), Ronald Aylmer Fisher – one of the founders both of population genetics and of statistics – postulated what he called the *fundamental theorem of natural selection*:

The rate of increase in fitness of any organism at any time is equal to its genetic variance in fitness at that time. (Fisher 1999: 35)

If higher fitness is read as “better” and vice versa, this seems to suggest that there cannot be biological evolution to the worse. A moment's thought reveals, however, that this “theorem” cannot be quite right in its literal interpretation. If *variance in fitness* is taken in its obvious mathematical interpretation, this quantity cannot be negative. In fact, it has to be positive in any population that is not

fully homogeneous with respect to fitness.³ So according to the theorem, the *rate of increase in fitness* must be non-negative, and in fact positive in almost all cases. Once a population has a fitness > 1 , fitness must remain > 1 , and this entails that such a population will keep growing indefinitely. This is of course inconsistent with the observation that populations never grow forever.

In Price (1972b) it is spelled out how Fisher's theorem is to be understood, and a simple proof is given. It can easily be shown to be corollary of the Price equation.

Consider the continuous-time version of the Price equation given in Equation (10.2). The quantity x can be any quantitative character, including fitness. If one replaces x with f , one gets

$$\frac{dE(f)}{dt} = \text{Cov}(f, f) + E\left(\frac{df}{dt}\right) = \text{Var}(f) + E\left(\frac{df}{dt}\right)$$

Recall that the first term on the right-hand side captures the change due to selection. So what this formulation says is that the part of change in fitness *that is due to selection* equals the variance in fitness. This variance is virtually always positive, but this may be offset by the second term, which tracks the within-group change in fitness from parents to offspring. This term may be negative for two reasons. First, replication may be unfaithful, and this change – perhaps due to a deleterious mutation – decreases fitness. Still, even if replication is fully faithful, the term may be negative. To see why, recall that the change in fitness is the difference in fitness between offspring and parents, and fitness is the expected number of offspring. Even if the offspring is an exact copy of its parent, its fitness may be lower because *the environment may have changed*. Similar to generals that proverbially always fight the last war, evolution favors change from parents to offspring generation that would benefit the offspring if they were to live in the parents' environment, but it may or may not benefit them in their actual environment. Fisher (1999: 41) called this effect the “deterioration of the environment”.

To return to the issue whether there may be evolutionary change to the worse, the answer is: Yes, populations may change to the worse in evolution if the deleterious effects of unfaithful replication and of the deterioration of the environment are stronger than the effect of natural selection.

A well-known example of deterioration of the environment is the prisoner's

³By the term *organism*, Fisher must refer to populations of organisms, since an individual organism cannot have variance in fitness.

dilemma. Recall that in this kind of game, there are two types of players, *cooperators C* and *defectors D*. The utility matrix for the game is

	C	D
C	2,2	0,3
D	3,0	1,1

where the first number in each cell is the utility of the row player and the second one of the column player. The maximal overall utility that can be achieved is 4 if both players are *C*, and it is lowest with 2 if both play *D*. Still, it is rational to play *D* because *D* always incurs a higher utility than *C*, no matter which strategy the opponent plays.

This pessimistic prediction carries over under an evolutionary interpretation of the game where utility is interpreted as fitness. Suppose we have a large population consisting entirely of *C* players. Then there is a mutation, leading to a single *D*-player. This mutant will have a fitness of 3 while the rest of the population has fitness of ≤ 2 . Therefore *D* will spread over the generations, and the overall population will approach a pure *D* state. So the average fitness of the population starts at 2 and converges to 1. Still, if one of the *D*-players were placed in the original environment of a pure *C*-population, its fitness would be 3. The decrease in average fitness is a result of the changing population composition.

4 Deterioration of the linguistic environment

The various notions of linguistic replication mentioned above – replication of I-languages, E-languages, grammatical rules, constructions, words, morphemes etc. – can all be accommodated within the Pricean framework. Consider the generative notion according to which linguistic replication primarily proceeds via first language acquisition of syntactic parameters (cf., e.g., Lightfoot 1999). In the simplified case where each infant acquires language from exactly one teacher, each acquired parameter value can be considered the offspring of the teacher's corresponding value. In a more realistic scenario, a learner has more than one teacher though, and there is a probabilistic relation from teacher's to learner's parameter values. This can be fitted into Price's framework if we replace x , f , and w by their expected values.

Similar considerations apply to usage-oriented notions of linguistic replication. Following Bybee (2006), exemplars, i.e., memory traces, of linguistic experiences can be seen as forming the populations selection operates on. As with syntactic

parameters, there is no unique map from offspring to parent, so formally, the underlying probability space over exemplars would be the populations in the formal sense.

Taking the latter perspective, the fitness of an exemplar would then amount to the expected number of later exemplars that it spawns. In other words, an exemplar is accessed in the production of an utterance by the speaker, and this utterance is stored as a new exemplar by the listener(s) and perhaps by the speaker herself. While the number of listeners is a non-linguistic random variable that can be averaged out when considering the expected fitness of an exemplar *type*, the crucial fitness-inducing features are (a) the frequency of situations where the speaker wants to make an utterance where the exemplar provides a suitable precedence, (b) the ease of access from memory (as compared to other suitable exemplars), and (c) the likelihood that the resulting utterance is stored as an exemplar in the listener's memory. It is easy to recognize the well-known notions of speaker economy in (b) and hearer economy in (c).

The overall fitness of a population of exemplars within a speech community, however, is no linguistically meaningful quantity, as it depends on the number of community members and their verbosity, not on language internal features. In this sense, a language – conceived as the totality of linguistic exemplars stored in the minds of the language users – becomes fitter if the total amount of usage of the language increases (and vice versa). This can happen because the language community expands or because people increase their linguistic activity. In this sense, language change to the worse, i.e., decrease in linguistic fitness, occurs if and only if the usage of a language shrinks, for whatever reason. This, however, has arguably little to do with the language's properties as such, and is therefore not a helpful answer to the overarching question of this volume.⁴

To formulate it in another way, if extralinguistic and sociolinguistic factors are averaged over, languages do not change to the better or to the worse as long as they serve the language users' communicative needs. However, we may ask whether certain slots within the language system can change to the worse, in the sense of losing fitness.

This is exactly what is happening in the initial stages of grammaticalization, as conceived by Haspelmath (1999). He assumes (1999: 1055) the following schematic structure of this process:

⁴One reviewer remarked that in situations of direct language competition in multilingual contexts, selection between languages takes place, and factors like learnability or expressivity might have an impact on the strength of selection between languages. This is a relevant aspect that will not be pursued further here.

- a. A speaker says $YB_L Z$ where s/he could have said $YA_F Z$ [...]. (X_L = lexical element; X_F =functional element).
- b. Other speakers follow him/her and say $YB_L Z$, too [...].
- c. B_L increases in frequency in the community's speech, because B 's new meaning is more basic to discourse [...].
- d. Because of its high frequency, B becomes more predictable.
- e. Because of its predictability, B is pronounced in a reduced manner by many speakers [...].
- f. Because of its high frequency, B (which is now B_F) is increasingly automated/routinized in the speaker's mind [...]; automated processing entails features such as merger with adjacent elements; obligatory use in certain contexts; fixed position; etc.; [...].
- g. Through habituation, the meaning contribution of B is no longer perceived as pragmatically salient.

This process is set in motion due to a conversational maxim stated in Keller (1994), which Haspelmath (1999) dubs the maxim of "extravagance": "Talk in such a way that you are noticed." (Keller 1994: 101)

During stage b., the innovative item B achieves a high fitness because few existing exemplars give rise to many copies thereof. However, during stages c. and d., B 's fitness decreases because a speaker choosing B has more exemplars to draw from, and B is not very extravagant anymore. During this phase, B is *getting worse*. Haspelmath aptly compares this process with economic inflation, where an oversupply of money leads to its devaluation.

Note that this effect applies whether or not B is phonetically reduced and/or semantically bleached during this process. What has changed from phase a. to phase c. is the surrounding population of linguistic exemplars, not the linguistic type. B 's reduction in fitness is an instance of deterioration of the environment in the sense described in the previous section.

5 Directed mutations

Price's framework does not require replication to be faithful. (Recall, e.g., that in the example in Figure 1, the third row changes its shape from square to round.) Changes due to unfaithful replication are also covered by the second term of the right-hand side of the equation, just like deterioration of the environment. If copying errors reduce fitness, this may also lead to a decrease in fitness.

Let me illustrate this point with a schematic example⁵, which is illustrated in Figure 2. Suppose we have two types of individuals, *A* and *B*, in a population.

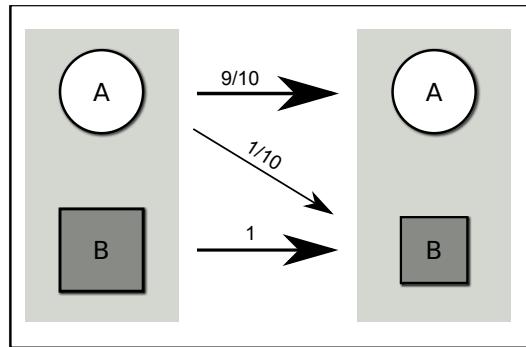


Figure 2: Schematic example of fitness loss due to directed mutations

A has fitness 1 and *B* has fitness $4/5$. *B* always reproduces faithfully, but there is a $1/10$ chance that the offspring of an *A*-individual is a mutant and has type *B*. Suppose the population consists of $2/3$ type *A* and $1/3$ type *B*. Then the variance in fitness is $2/225$. The expected change in fitness for type *A* is $-1/50$ (since there is a 1 in 10 chance that the offspring has type *B* and therefore fitness $4/5$ rather than 1), while the expected change in fitness for type *B* is 0. So the expected change in fitness due to unfaithful mutation is $-1/75$. This amounts to a net change in population fitness of $-1/225$. (This system will eventually settle in an equilibrium where both types are equally abundant.)

A linguistic instance of this effect is phonetic reduction. Consider, e.g., the English word *fifteen*, pronounced /fif.ti:n/. Analogously to *fourteen*, *sixteen*, *seventeen* etc., the regular word for $10 + 5$ should be *fiveteen* (/farv.ti:n/). Arguably, the monophthongization of the vowel and subsequent consonant devoicing in /fif.ti:n/, as compared to the regular formation /farv.ti:n/, are the result of phonetic reduction. It is well-known that phonetic reduction is the more likely the more frequent a word is (see, e.g., Ernestus 2000). Krifka (2007) observes that round number words are ambiguous between a precise and a vague interpretation, while non-round numerals only have the precise interpretation.⁶ Therefore it stands to reason that round number words such as *fifteen* words are more frequent in conversation than comparable non-round words like *fourteen* or *sixteen*.

⁵This is an instance of the *quasispecies* model from biomathematics; cf. (Eigen & Schuster 1979).

⁶I owe the example regarding *fifteen* to Manfred Krifka, p.c.

In fact, according to the Google Ngram Viewer⁷, *fifteen* was consistently more frequent than either *fourteen* or *sixteen* in English language books between 1800 and 2000. The plot is given in Figure 3.

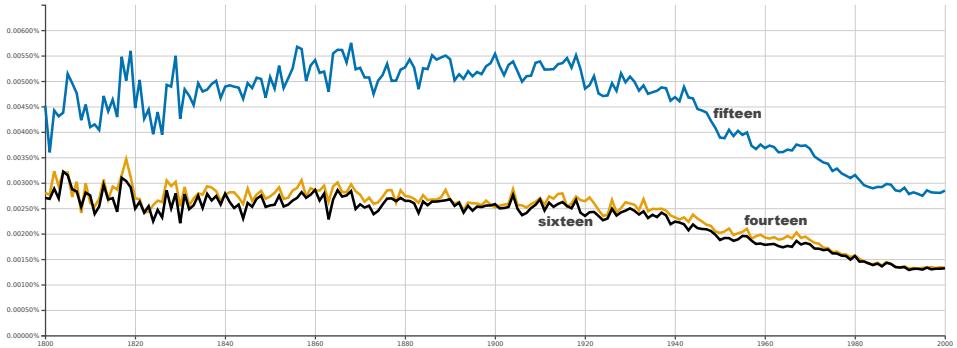


Figure 3: Google Ngram search for *fourteen* (orange), *fifteen* (blue) and *sixteen* (black).

The regular formation *fifeteen* is easier to acquire for language learners than the irregular *fifteen*, so it arguably has a higher fitness. However, hypoarticulation of *fifeteen* is apt to lead to altered replication; many exemplars of *fifteen* spawn *fifteen*-offspring. This eventually led to the entrenchment of the phonetically reduced form *fifteen*. So here we have a case where in a competition between a fitter and a less fit item, the latter wins out because there is systematic altered replication to its favor.

6 Random drift

A third scenario where the fitness of a population can decrease despite the force of selection is *random drift*. This effect becomes negligible as population size increases but can be substantial in small populations.

Again I will give a simple example for illustration. Suppose a population consists of two types of individuals, types *A* and *B*, with fitness f_A and f_B respectively such that $f_A < f_B$. In this scenario, both sub-populations will grow indefinitely, even though the relative size of the *A*-subpopulation will shrink in comparison to the *B*-subpopulation. But now suppose f_A and f_B are random variables rather than being fixed. The exact number of offspring of an *A*-individual may depend on all sorts of random circumstances, and it is only known that its *expected value*

⁷<http://books.google.com/ngrams>, accessed on September 10, 2019.

is f_A (and likewise for B -individuals). If the total population size is finite and limited, there is a positive probability that a mixed population will evolve towards a pure B -population, even though A has a higher expected fitness.

A simple model of this principle is the *Moran process* (Moran 1958). It assumes a finite population of fixed size N . At each time step, one individual is picked at random from the population, and a copy of it is made. Then a random individual is picked (which could be the same as the first) and eliminated, and the copy of the first individual assumes its place. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

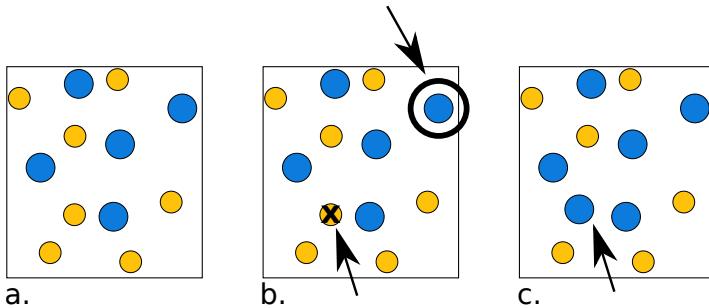


Figure 4: Moran process. In a finite population (a.), an individual is chosen randomly for replication and one for elimination (b.). The eliminated individual is replaced by a copy of the replicated one (c.).

The probability that a given individual of type A is picked for replication is $p(A)$, and likewise for $p(B)$. Each individual is equally likely to be picked for elimination.

Now suppose a population of size N consists entirely of B -individuals, but one replication event introduces a mutation. This results in one B -individual being replaced by an A -individual. No further copying errors occur. According to Nowak (2006: 101), the probability that the entire population is eventually replaced by A -individuals is given by the formula

$$P(B \rightarrow A) = \frac{r^{-1} - 1}{r^{-N} - 1}, \text{ where } r = \frac{p(A)}{p(B)}.$$

If $p(A) < p(B)$, this is the probability that the “better” type B is replaced by the “worse” type A . As shown in Figure 5, this probability can be non-negligible if both the population and the discrepancy between $p(A)$ and $p(B)$ is small.

The figure also shows that even if $p(A) > p(B)$, i.e., if A is better than B , it is by no means certain that A will replace the worse type B .

Instances of language change where among two competing forms, the less natural/more marked variant occasionally wins out are not hard to come by.

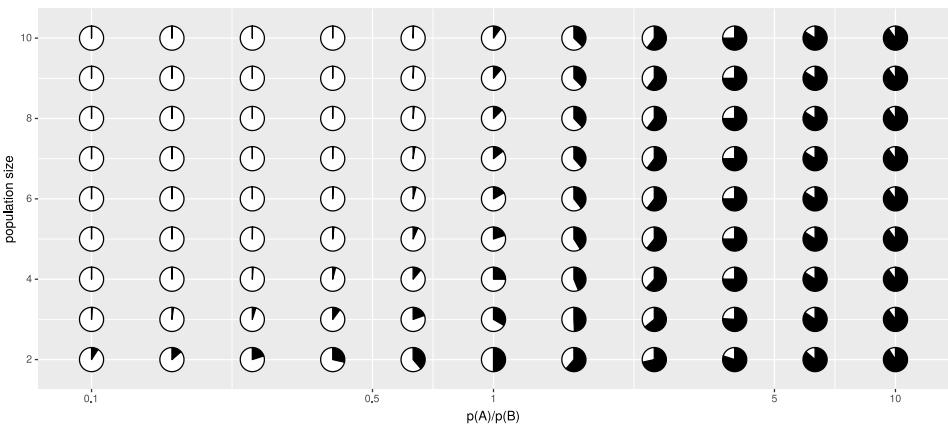


Figure 5: Probability of a finite population of incumbents B being successfully invaded and replaced by a mutant A

An example would be the general trend in Germanic languages to replace the strong (vowel alternation) by the weak (dental suffix) verbal inflection. Verbs that changed from strong to weak abound, e.g. English *shove* which derived from the the strong Old English *scufan*⁸ or the German *kauen*, derived from the strong Old High German *kiuwan*.⁹ However, there are a handful of examples of the opposite trend, verbs that were originally weak but switched to strong inflection, such as English *dive*¹⁰ or German *schrecken*.¹¹ It seems plausible that the synchronously regular weak inflection is easier to acquire by children and second language learners and therefore has a higher fitness than the competing strong inflection (if both exist or can be morphologically constructed). Since the population of exemplars of a verb is finite, we expect switches from one inflectional

⁸www.etymonline.com, accessed on April 23, 2019.

⁹www.dwds.de, accessed on April 23, 2019.

¹⁰According to www.etymonline.com, accessed on April 23, 2019:

dive (v.)

c. 1200, *diven*, “descend or plunge headfirst into water,” from a merger of Old English *dufan* “to dive, duck, sink” (intransitive, class II strong verb; past tense *deaf*, past participle *dofen*) and *dyfan* “to dip, submerge” (weak, transitive), from Proto-Germanic verb **dubijan*, from PIE **dheub-* “deep, hollow” (see deep (adj.)).

In the merger of verbs the weak forms predominated and the strong inflections were obsolete by 1300. The past tense remained *dived* into 19c., but in that century dove emerged, perhaps on analogy of *drive/drove*. [...]

¹¹www.dwds.de, accessed on April 23, 2019: “Das ursprünglich schwach flektierende, mit j-Suffix gebildete, intransitiv gebrauchte Verb ahd. *scricken* ‘empor-, aufspringen, erschrecken’ (um 800) [...] entwickelt die Bedeutung ‘in Schrecken geraten, erschrecken’ aus [...].”

paradigm to the other to be possible, and the switch from strong to weak inflection to be more probable. However, the switch from weak to strong inflection has a probability > 0 , so it is to be expected to occur occasionally.

7 Conclusion

This article probed the question whether languages can change to the worse from a conceptual, modeling point of view. I argued that this question has an illuminating analogy to the issue whether Darwinian evolution in biology can lead to the reduction of fitness. Following much recent work in historical and evolutionary linguistics, I assume that biological evolution and language change are two instances of an overarching principle of evolution via replication and selection. I furthermore argued that George Price's mathematical framework is well-suited to tackle conceptual questions like the one discussed here. My main conclusions are:

- A language as a whole cannot become better or worse, in the sense of increasing or decreasing in fitness, as long as it is fully functional as a vehicle for communication in its speech community.
- Parts of the language system can become worse in the sense that they are changed towards or replaced by alternatives that would be less fit than the original version under similar circumstances.
- There are at least three general scenarios for how this can happen:
 1. *Deterioration of the environment*, e.g. inflationary use of originally extravagant forms,
 2. *directed mutations*, e.g. in phonetic reduction, and
 3. *random drift*, e.g. switch from weak to strong verbal inflection in Germanic languages.

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