

LANGUAGE LIVES!

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will deal with language change and will mainly focus on the 1994 work of Rudi Keller, 'ON LANGUAGE CHANGE' which discusses, in detail, the concept of '*The invisible hand in language*'. This idea, while not originally his, neatly and succinctly, offers a plausible explanation for language change. Keller's interpretation of ideas and theories concerning the invisible hand in language are thought provoking and on the mark. Commencing with classical possible reasons for *why* this occurs, it leads the reader to the idea that language belongs to the group of *so-called* 'invisible hand'. Briefly stated, this entails the reality that language '*is indeed change* due to peoples' **unintentional** acts: that society (people) do influence changes in language. Its many forms of **use** and other factors are influenced by the billions of people that utilize language on a day to day basis. To the present writer, this appears to be the most logical explanation to date for this phenomena and offers a plausible alternative idea in an effort of explain language change. Certainly, this book is a 'must read' for all teachers of language and linguists alike.

I

Ask just about anyone-linguist, language teacher, auto mechanic, etc., and they will tell you that language changes (always). While this is undoubtedly true -the literature bears witness to the fact that languages *do* alter over time-the reason(s) *why* remain unclear. It can be readily seen from a glance at newspaper headlines from half a century ago that certain ways of expression, commonly used at that time, would strike today's reader as strange. Certainly, the message conveyed would be understandable, but the words utilized would sound strange.

Fleischer (1971:9) writes in German that *each* language MUST reflect its culture. Therefore, a consequence of this is that, in order to cope with the ever changing world in which people live, vocabulary is required to constantly expand and change. But, still, even though we accept this as truth, (indeed, it is an essential component of languages) the basic question remains: WHY? Not only words but also the grammar itself also undergoes various alterations.

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Numerous attempts at explanation have been proposed but all have been found to be lacking explanatory power. There are arguments that attempt to relate language in biological terms. *Ontogenesis* in living matter is true, however attempts to apply it to language are rife with problems. Language is *NOT* the same as living organisms. They do not lend themselves readily to linguistic explanation.

In the early centuries it was proposed that language came from *GOD*. That it was *given* to humans by a divine power. However, as agnosticism and other non-religious ideas gained strength, the idea of *divine intervention* lost credence. Attempts were also made then, to account for language as something that was due to *nature*. Since the existence of God could not be confirmed for sure, then with God issues notwithstanding, it was proposed that language changes were due to something different, but still some form of *nature*.

If this was true—that language was due to nature, it still left the inquiry unanswered. Then what gave language its special quality? It had to be governed by something, didn't it? As noted above, various attempts at explanation have been attempted. The philosophy of language offers a plethora of possibilities. Problems with them, however, still remain. Among them was the simple, and yet, far reaching question of how then do we account for permanent language change?

It has been held that the process of permanence in language change occurs too slowly for observation: namely, in that it would have to happen over too long a period of time, for someone to see. However, as Keller and many others have noted, this is simply *not true*. Within language, very quick, dramatic and most importantly, '*OBSERVERABLE*' changes *do take place*. Persons *do* (!) notice linguistic changes, but, in the majority of cases, do *not* consider them to be of a permanent nature. The decay of language is the most common way of bearing witness to language change. People often simply notice that '*something*' is lost. They often fail to consider in what ways changes have occurred. That is, alterations that *still* maintain the basic meaning but, nevertheless represent change. Language change *is* undeniable. The obvious question remains: WHY?

Is language a living thing? *Yes*, this paper professes. However, it differs from living matter. It is *not* (!) a living organism. Simply stated, the processes that are in play for biological life *do not* apply to language. Rudi Keller (1994:9) writes that ontogenesis is goal oriented *but* language is *NOT!* 'While both have an aim 'both language change and biological evolution are collective phenomena. They are characterized by the fact that populations are involved in the process'.

II

It has been proposed by many, that speakers change their language, *not with conscious thought, but unconsciously*. These changes are the result of *societal changes* that occur as man evolves. It is NOT **intentional, systematic or conscious** in the strictest sense. Keller rejects the idea that language change is implemented on a *conscious* level. Basically, he states that language change is implemented on an unconscious one. He then pointedly asks, ‘if the world’s population is involved in language change (as he/others and the present author maintain) how can billions of people do something unconsciously? Many believe (the author of this paper also) that, while, what Keller advocates is undoubtedly true, it is an ‘over-kill’ of sorts. Surely, there is an unconscious element involved in group dynamics. It does not necessarily require voicing. While humans are ‘NOT’ consciously changing ways of language expression, the fact remain that language **does** change. Keller rightly states that collective statements (as implied above) such that language changes because of the unconscious actions of persons, *explains NOTHING*. Further, he takes issue with the ‘lumping together’ of terms such as ‘**intentional, planned & conscious**’. He points out differences in meaning between these expressions through various examples. (Space considerations do not allow for discussion on this point, but the reader is encouraged to read the 1994 book ‘**ON LANGUAGE CHANGE**’ pgs. 9-13 for clarification on these differences). The fact remains, however, that these words are used as synonyms. On page 13 of the above mentioned treatise he writes that “The speakers change their language neither intentionally, nor to plan, nor consciously. This is generally true and there is **nothing else to it**’. (emphasis mine).

III

Language can be discussed from the point of view that it evolves independently of human will: that it belongs to the arts and humanities, and therefore, it is solely human beings that could possibly bring about any evolutionary changes. Such approaches, i.e. that it is either from God or from human beings in the form of being a man-made artifact, represent ‘*all or nothing approaches*’. Each is full of existing problems, or potential ones. Therefore, Keller is adamant in maintaining that there exists another so-called theory of a ‘*third kind*’: that of the ‘*invisible hand in language*’.

Haakonssen (1981:172) writes that “The things in this category resemble artificial phenomena in that they are the result of human action”. However, as Keller and others before him (ex. Muller/Whitney/Merger et.al.) claim, although the term ‘*the third kind*’ is not used by all (always or even at all), it can be gleaned. The term itself (The Third Kind) apparently comes from Robert Nozick (see R. Nozick, 1974, ‘Anarchy, State and Utopia, New York).

Generally speaking, actions of this sort are collective-*not* individual. Language is a collective phenomena: it results from many actions of a huge number of persons. The results can be of great consequence. Often the results of an '*an invisible hand*' action are **NOT intended**. That is to say, people did not perform a change of vocabulary usage with the intention of '*changing*' ways of expression. For example, as noted by Keller, the change of the expression '*auto* accident, to '*car* accident' was **NOT** a conscious attempt to change 'auto' to 'car'. While they are synonyms to be sure, however that is where any similarity ends.

It has been proposed by many that a great number of vocabulary terms, such as money, market, law, the state and such-like concepts/words/thoughts and etc. are always changing and that this constant alteration is the '**unintended**' result of social developments-i.e. '**invisible hand**'.

The theory behind these 'invisible hand' actions is, simply stated, that human beings have *absolutely no conscious intention* of having something result from a certain action. That something '*does*' happen is where things are 'led by an invisible hand' [See Adam Smith (1776/1970), **THE WEALTH OF NATIONS**, vol. 1, reprint, London & New York)].

Many things appear to be the product of someone's intention, but really, *are not*. Language is one such thing (Keller et.al) 'An invisible hand explanation explains what looks to be the product of someone's intentional design, as not being brought about by anyone's intentions.' (Nozick, 1974:447). Such 'invisible hand' explanations are very good at explaining such things as taste, language and many other social institutions. That is, various socio-cultural structures that might easily lead one to believe that they were '**intentionally**' created by some sort of central authority (God) or some central committee, but **they are 'NOT'**.

People often (usually) see changes in language as forms of decay and often (usually) fail to perceive peoples' own speech conventions. That is, the reality that language used (spoken, written, and/or heard) is a **true reflection of culture-it is NOT necessarily man-made**. "An invisible-hand explanation explains a well-structured social pattern or institution...through a process involving the separate actions of many individuals who are supposed to be minding their own business unaware of an '*afotori*' not intending to produce the ultimate overall outcome." (Keller, 1994:69).

In order to really understand a 'third-kind' phenomenon it is imperative that one know the formation process as well as the result culminating from said information process.

The validity of an invisible-hand theory cannot be readily or easily established. In the vast majority of cases: the motives for why such & such occurred cannot be accurately ascertained. They deny placement under the guises of verification and/or falsification for a wide variety

of technological and psychological reasons. Many problems are subsumed under the rubric of observation when it comes to invisible-hand matters.

Even given this reality, however, it must be noted that this does not take away anything from the explanatory power inherent in invisible-hand theory explanations. They can be ‘good’ if the premises are plausible and if the ‘invisible hand process’ is cogent. (See Keller, 1994:67-77).

The only real problem inherent in ‘invisible-hand’ explanations, lies in its weakness for prognostic value. All invisible-hand theories contain valid diagnostic value, but are lacking in terms of predicting ‘*HOW*’ things will turn out in the future. They are good and accurate in explaining ‘*WHY*’ something developed as it did; but not for predictions about what will happen in the future. Too many variables exist for accuracy in the prediction department.

IV

A question that begs to be asked at this juncture is, ‘does language change represent a case of socio-cultural evolution?’ “In this context, language evolution does not mean the development of human language or language from animal proto-forms, but the historical evolution of language.” (Keller, 1994:141)

He states that the word ‘evolution’ is not liked by many when discussing or writing about language. This is largely due to the common assumption that ‘evolution’ is used in discussions about biological life: things alive in the same manner that living organisms are. **IT IS NOT**. There is a real difference between living, biological organisms and language. The latter is something made by man.

Also, it is thought that some would equate it with ‘*SOCIAL DARWINISM*’. This concept was one used in the past as an attempt to give justification for racial prejudice and imperialism. (Very rampant things in the past). Even today, in some parts of the world its ideas may still be used.

However, both fears are not relevant (for reasons expounded upon by Keller, 1994:141-145). The reader is cordially invited to read what Keller has to say about this.

Social Darwinism was not really prevalent in the field of linguistics although Max Muller said in *NATURE* (1870:25) *Lectures on the Science of Language* 4th ed. London, that, “A struggle for life is constantly going on amongst 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 own inherent virtue.” Keller sums up his thoughts about the evolutionary process as **NOT** belonging to the natural sciences but as belonging to the cultural sciences. He states, (1994:144) “...I wish to apply a genuinely cultural model, that of ‘*the invisible*

hand', to the study of language".

CONCLUSION

This paper made an attempt to offer a possible explanation for why change occurs in language by attempting to utilize 'invisible-hand theory'. It is undeniable that language **DOES CHANGE**. However, attempts at explanation as to 'why' this occurs have been shown to be filled with unanswerable questions. The history of the philosophy of language contains many attempts to answer the inquiry as to '**WHY**'. Regretfully, no final answer has yet to be found. The question remains.

Given the many questions (some without *any* clear answer) linguists have been 'stumped' when confronted with queries.

Honestly speaking, this writer previously '**KNEW**' that language changes. Never really giving any real thought as to '**WHY**', he was content to 'let it go' given that it was undeniable that language change did occur. In the course of reading about the philosophy of language, however, things changed. He began to wonder **WHY** languages do change. This socio-linguistic reading pointed to the reality of societies being marked with all-encompassing influence and that they **MUST** have influenced language development. While this did offer a glimmer of hope towards an answer, there were still many questions that remained.

Then, Rudi Keller's book, '**ON LANGUAGE CHANGE-the invisible hand in language**' caught his attention. While old (it is now 2010 and the book was written in 1994) the title spurred interest. Regretfully, this book lay on his book shelf for more than a decade. Finally, after moving offices, the writer of this paper began reading it. It contained a very interesting possibility towards explaining the conundrum of why language changes. It makes sense to this writer as it offers an explanation that differs from the classical ones previously encountered.

It is this writer's contention that 'invisible-hand' theory offers the most plausible explanation for language change. As Keller (et.al) surmises, language change occurs unconsciously. There is/are **NO REAL REASON(S)** that are conscious. Language does not change according to some plan with a desired result in mind. It simply (not really 'simply') changes according to societal fluctuations.

It is this writer's hope that this article will spur enough interest into the inquiry as to *why languages alter* to inspire teachers/linguist to seriously look into the validity of invisible hand theory explanations. After all, it is up to the teacher and linguist to be in a position to offer some sort of explanation should this inquiry arise.

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