

THEORIES OF

Language Change

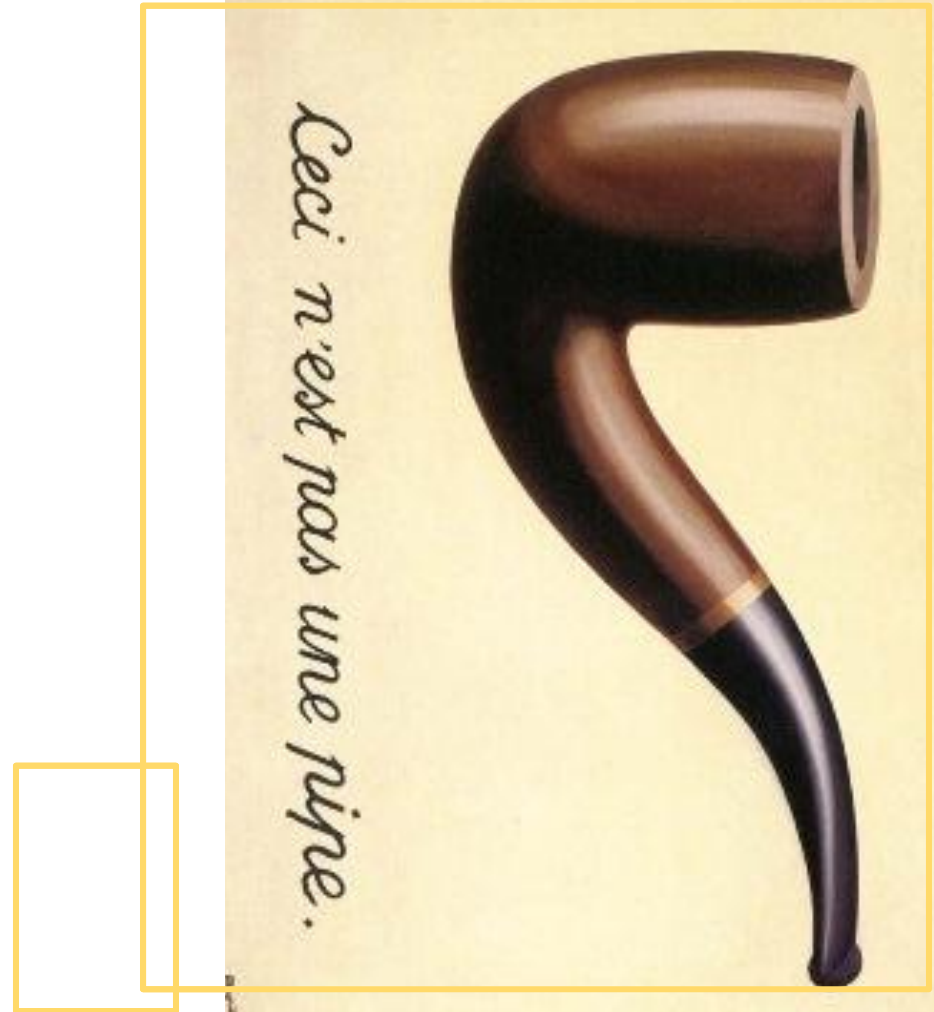
Semiotics Theory

Ferdinand de Saussure

Saussure posits that all communication is done through the medium of signs (sounds, markings on a page, hand gestures, etc.).

Signs are made of the the **signifier** (writing, sounds, etc.) and the **signified** (the idea that the writing/sound/etc. is meant to express).

As language changes, the relationship between the signifier and the signified often changes. For example, new meanings can be attached to existing words (same signifier but new signified) or the spelling of a word may change (new signifier but same signified).



Functional theory



Michael Halliday

The broad form of this theory relates well to language change, while Halliday's more specific "seven functions of language" relates well to childhood language acquisition.

In its broadest sense, Halliday's theory of language states that because the purpose of language is to be functional (that is, accomplish some purpose or goal whether that be sharing information or reinforcing social bonds), then language change will occur to meet the needs of the people who speak it.

Social, economic, and technological changes ultimately bring about language change as speakers adapt their language to reflect these changes, especially in the formation and use of new words (lexis).

Substratum theory

There is no one theorist to credit for this theory. However, the concept grew out of William Labov's study of Jewish communities in New York.

This theory posits that language change often originates from substrate (lower power/prestige) varieties of English, such as the varieties spoken by second language/outer circle communities or the varieties used in non-standard dialects (for example, African-American Vernacular English).

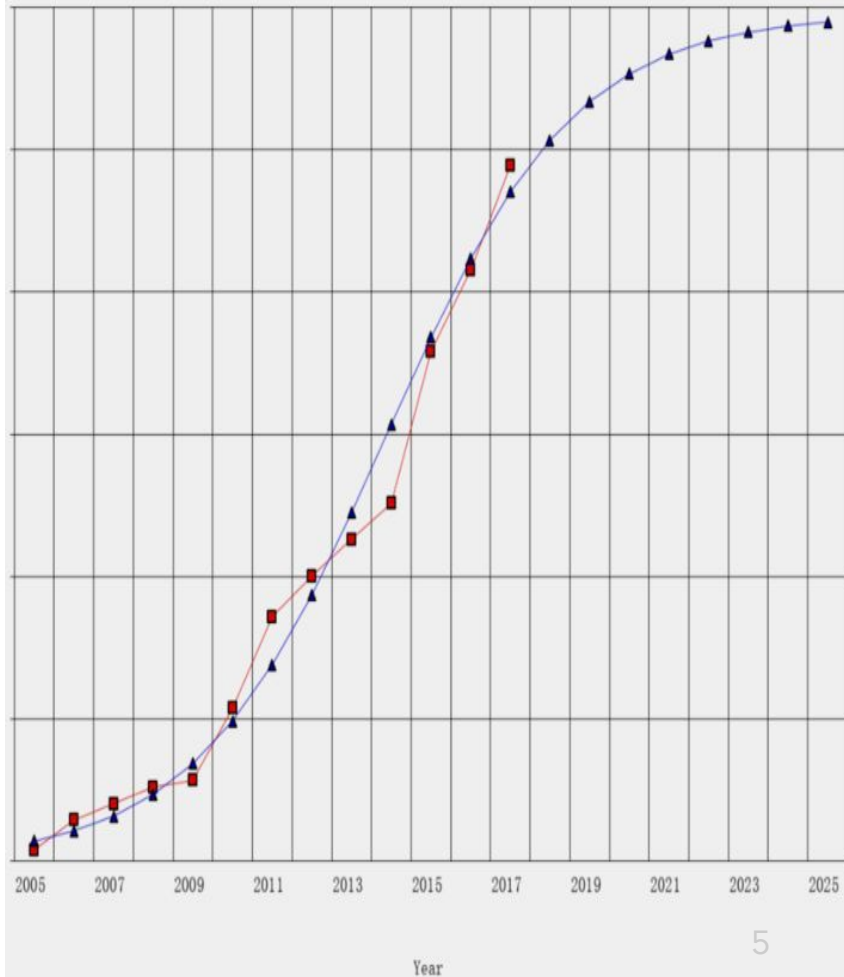


S-curve model

Wei-Heng Chen

The S-curve model posits that language change tends to follow a certain pattern. Changes start off slowly but then achieve exponential growth (or decline) before just as suddenly levelling out again.

If plotted on a graph, this pattern of adoption or abandonment of a language feature creates an s-shaped curve.



Prescriptivism and descriptivism

These are not theories about how or why language changes so much as they are attitudes about and perspectives on language change and variation.

PRESCRIPTIVISM



Prescriptivism is the belief that there is a standard and correct form of language, and that changes to and variations from that standard are to be considered incorrect usage. Prescriptivists focus on the “rules” of language.

DESCRIPTIVISM



Descriptivism doesn't seek to differentiate correct or incorrect language usage but to simply describe how language is used by individuals and populations. Descriptivist study the many varieties of a language used by different groups as well as how language changes over time.



Theory of lexical gaps

There is no one theorist to credit for this theory. However, the concept grew out of Michael Halliday's functional theory.

This theory seeks to explain one way by which new words are added to a language. It states that people use existing linguistic patterns to coin new words in order to fill a “gap” in the language where there is no word for an idea/object.

A lexical gap, the space where there could be a grammatical word, but there is not, is also called a **lacuna**.

Example: The word “mansplain” is a grammatically acceptable construction that was coined to fill the lexical gap for men’s unsolicited and patronizing habit of explaining things to women based on the assumption that men know better or that women are less informed/knowledgeable.

Random fluctuation theory

Charles Hockett

Random fluctuation theory posits that many changes in language are random, occurring from random “errors” in pronunciation, spelling, or usage that are then spread across language groups.



END