Language in use II: language change, and acquisition

1 Investigating language change

During the first few years of the twenty-first century, the following expressions appeared in the British tabloid press, describing economic migrants coming to the United Kingdom from relatively poorer parts of Europe:

(1) welfare shopping
(2) benefit tourists

a. Conduct on-line research to discover what each of these expressions mean, and the context that prompted their use.
b. Explain how you might go about investigating whether, and to what extent, these terms have become conventionalised and/or propagated in your English-speaking community.
c. Now make a list of expressions that you think have entered your speech community recently. Investigate when, where and why they first began to appear, and hypothesise how each expression might have begun to propagate. For each expression, make a prediction as to how conventionalised you think it will become. What is the basis of your prediction?

2 The role of new media in language change

In 2015, the British tabloid newspaper Metro produced a listing of what it dubbed that year’s ‘most annoying’ English words and expressions, as voted for by its readers. The list included the following:

(1) hot mess
(2) on fleek
(3) FOMO
(4) awesomesauce
(5) bae
(6) twerking

a. First of all, provide your own definition of each of these expressions that you know. How many don’t you know?
b. Now look up and provide definitions for those that you don’t know.

Each of these words and expressions has been coined and propagated in the context of social media and other aspects of popular culture, including television.

c. Conduct on-line research to establish how and when each of these expressions was coined, and how it was propagated. Consider in particular the main media channels that served to propagate the words/expressions.
d. Which demographic (and other) factors might influence how well established the terms are in a given community of English speakers?
e. How might you investigate how entrenched each expression is in a particular linguistic community?
f. Now conduct your investigation for one of these words/expressions.
g. How does the account of usage-based language change in Chapter 6 help to account for your findings?

3 Language acquisition and holophrases

In light of Tomasello’s account of language acquisition, presented in Chapter 6, consider the early uses of the following holophrases reported by Tomasello (1992, 2003):

(1) *Play-play*: first use, when ‘playing’ the piano; second use, to name the piano
(2) *Steps*: first use, when climbing or descending stairs (never to name them)
(3) *Bath*: first use, when preparing for a bath; second use, when bathing a baby doll (never to name it)
(4) *Game*: first use, to describe the activity when she plays with a baseball and baseball glove; second use, to describe the activity when others play with a baseball and baseball glove (never to name objects)

a. Now, provide a definition, in your own words, of ‘holophrase’.
b. Based on these examples and others described in Chapter 6, what different functions can you discern in the use of holophrases? Is there a pattern that emerges in terms of the order of acquisition in holophrase function?
c. Given that some holophrases come to be used to name an object and others do not, what might this indicate about how a particular holophrase is being analysed by the infant?