This book, compact and accessibly written, will serve as a useful precis of a now-established school of work which, over the past ten years, has made a case that extensive acquisition by adults radically decreases grammatical complexity in a language. This paradigm, which has included monographs by Kusters (2003), Dahl (2004), and McWhorter (2007) and anthologies such as Miestamo, Sinnemaki & Karlsson (2008) and Sampson, Gil & Trudgill (2009), specifies that language’s normal state is the massive complexity European linguists typically associate with “exotic” languages, while the moderate complexity of languages like English and French – and certainly creoles – is a sociohistorical anomaly.

Trudgill acknowledges at the outset that culture, rather than acquisitional factors, can influence linguistic structure, as in the fact that the Tibeto-Burman language Qiang has prefixes indicating “up the mountain” and down the mountain” and is spoken in a mountainous region. However, this kind of explanation goes much less further in explaining the differences between grammars than fashionably supposed. “Why does the Amazonian language Jarawara have three past tenses while Russian has only one?” Trudgill asks, among other questions. His book argues that the answer has to do with an interaction between acquisition and social history.

Trudgill’s first chapter, “Sociolinguistic typology and the speed of change,” introduces the subject matter in a perhaps roundabout way given the ultimate topic of the book, asking simply why some languages change faster than others. Armenian’s erku and erekh are cognate to English’s two and three – the language is markedly less phonetically conservative than most Indo-European languages, for reasons unknown and possibly uninteresting. Trudgill proposes that often what makes differences like these is contact.

The second chapter, “Complexification, simplification, and two types of contact,” settles into the main meal: all languages undergo contact of some kind, but something unusual happens under a particular kind of contact – rapid acquisition by a decisive number of adults. Namely, grammars become less complex because of the atrophied language-learning abilities of humans after the critical age for acquisition. The more usual kind of contact, termed “linguistic equilibrium” by Dixon (1997), entails long-term stable bilingualism, amidst which languages bleed into one another but stay normally complex. Trudgill specifies that “Simplification will occur in sociolinguistic contact situations only to the extent that untutored, especially short-term, adult second language learning occurs, and not only occurs but dominates.”
Thus Trudgill answers a common objection to the new school of thought, such as Campbell & Poser’s (2008) objection that German has undergone “contact” just as English has, and thus “contact” cannot explain English’s less elaborate morphosyntax. German has existed in a state of linguistic equilibrium with other languages, while English was transferred to Britain and acquired rapidly by adults (most would consider the agents to have been Vikings; Trudgill supposes otherwise, as I will return to below). Hence German has three genders and V2, while English, alone among Germanic languages, has no gender and no V2. Especially valuable is the close study of population demographics in Scandinavia amidst contact with Low German speakers. It is often noted by scholars in the complexity school that Mainland Scandinavian was decomplexified by Low German contact, but Trudgill gives actual town headcounts of the period, demonstrating exactly how widespread non-native Norse would have been.

The chapter “Isolation and complexification” specifies types of complexification that are normal in languages not often acquired non-natively: increase in morphological categories, syntagmatic redundancy (such as a Flemish dialect in which the word for yes is marked for person [!]), allomorphy (one dialect of Frisian has three infinitive markers), and irregularity. Here and elsewhere Trudgill’s examples of obscure Germanic dialects are especially interesting, such as that in Southwestern English, inanimate count nouns were pronominalized with he while mass nouns were with it (Pass the loaf, he’s over there).

“Mechanisms of complexification” fills us in on how the complexifications listed in the previous chapter come about. The chapter is useful against another common misunderstanding of complexity theories in linguistics. Many linguists object to the idea that inflectional morphology is a form of complexity, supposing that what one language marks with an affix will be marked by the next one with a free morpheme, with neither strategy being identifiably more “complex” than the other. However, as often as not, what one language marks with an affix is not marked in another language at all, and many of Trudgill’s examples demonstrate this neatly. In Icelandic, for example, the adjective rikur “rich” occurs in 14 forms according to number, gender, and case: rikur, rika, rikan, rikar, rikri, riki, rikir, rik, riku, rikum, riks, rikrar, rikra. In Norwegian, there are only three, rik, rike and rikt, and the language does not “compensate” for the inflectional loss with free morphemes marking the lost distinctions.

The final two chapters are, in their way, case studies. “Contact and isolation in phonology” outlines a point Trudgill has usefully made in the past, that cross-linguistically marked phonological developments happen more in isolated varieties than widespread ones, such as parasitic velars in small dialects of assorted Western European languages, e.g. extreme Western Danish [bik] for bi “bee” and [hekl] for hel “whole.” “Mature phenomena and societies of intimates” links Trudgill’s observations with Dahl’s (2004) conception of “mature” features, those that form as the result of uninterrupted
long-term evolutionary development and are thus signs of isolation. Examples include grammatical gender – Trudgill deftly deconstructs claims that it is a “cultural” feature rather than a mere sign of millennia of stepwise reinterpretation of materials. It is not accidental, then, that isolated Icelandic is richer in gender and its attendant allomorphies and irregularities than Norwegian or English.

Trudgill notes that for most of human history, languages were spoken by “societies of intimates,” in which such “mature” and/or complex features were free to thrive endlessly. Hence the fearsome degree of complexity in languages like Navajo (with no regular verbs) or the Khoi-San languages with their proliferation of click sounds. Trudgill notes that it is “probable that widespread adult-only language acquisition is mainly a post-neolithic and indeed a mainly modern phenomenon, associated with the last 2000 years.”

It is here that this school of thought should be interesting to creolists. The technology that brought slaves from multiple locations across oceans, or Europeans to locales vastly distant from their homelands where they gathered indigines into work arrangements, only became possible within the past 600 years or so. The result was unusually widespread adult acquisition, and hence languages unusually low on the kinds of phenomena that distinguish Navajo and Icelandic. One might argue that situating creoles into this framework is more scientific – and more interesting – than the countervailing idea in creole studies that creoles are simply a matter of mixing “features” from different languages amidst an “ecology.”

Trudgill, for my taste, puts his hypothesis forward too timidly given his evidence and that in similar sources. In maintaining that he is describing a tendency rather than a theory, he implies that there are languages in the world that have undergone heavy adult acquisition and yet are as impressingly allomorphic and irregular as Estonian. However, no one has presented such a language. Nor has there appeared a language markedly low on the kinds of phenomena that distinguish Navajo and Icelandic. One might argue that situating creoles into this framework is more scientific – and more interesting – than the countervailing idea in creole studies that creoles are simply a matter of mixing “features” from different languages amidst an “ecology.”

Otherwise, Trudgill’s idea that the simplifiers of English were the indigenous Celts rather than the Viking invaders entails admirable acknowledgment of the undervalued work of those showing that Celtic languages had a profound impact on English structure. While I count myself among the latter, I find the case for the Celts decomplexifying the grammar – as opposed to transferring features such as periphrastic do – unconvincing. It is the Celts who existed among Old English speakers in linguistic equilibrium, maintaining their languages while acquiring English gradually over centuries and infusing it with Celtic features from all modules of grammar (according to the increasingly convincing findings of the Celticult school of English language origins). This is typical of well-studied linguistic equilibrium zones like the Amazon and Australia.
The Vikings, on the other hand, were faced with functioning in Old English as soon as they invaded. More to the point, the massive Scandinavian lexicon in Modern English is a testament to a people acquiring it partially, and English’s grammatical streamlining begins demonstrably in the northeast, where Vikings settled.

Finally, in warding off common objections, Trudgill might also have specified that the streamlining process in question has usually occurred before print, and is impeded by widespread literacy and education. Some might ask, for example, why Russian, used as a second language by so many, isn’t the “simpler” Slavic language – I have encountered this question after a talk as well as in an exchange in a journal. The answer is that Russian has largely been imposed via formal education and widespread media: the standard forms persist – at least on paper, despite passing developments on the unrecorded oral level.

However, these are small objections. This book is the one I will now refer people to for a brisk and informative introduction to a way of thinking about language that has profound implications for analysis of language diachrony, acquisition, contact, and spread – and of course, given those areas, creolization.

References


