

“Linguistic Change”

By Dr. Nikethan

What is Linguistic Change?

Language is constantly evolving—over time, between speakers, and across regions. This continual transformation is a hallmark of any living language. Indeed, no language changes in just one way for just one reason; instead, it experiences **linguistic change** (also known as **language evolution**), emerging in multiple forms and from various causes.

How We Observe Language Change

By comparing two or more historical stages of a language, we uncover its evolution over time. It's rare for a language in active use to remain static—growth demands change across eras, individuals, and geographies. Otherwise, languages can't thrive. For example, Sanskrit—once a rich, living language—declined when it was no longer used for everyday communication. Today, it survives only in religious or scholarly contexts.

Languages naturally borrow vocabulary from neighbors and evolve through both external influence and internal creativity. Over time, this leads to significant changes in **sound, grammar, structure, vocabulary, syntax, and meaning**. These different layers of change are known as:

- **Phonetic change** (changes in individual speech sounds)
- **Phonemic change** (changes in the sound system)
- **Morphological change** (how words form)
- **Structural change** (grammar and sentence patterns)
- **Syntactic change** (sentence order and relations)
- **Semantic change** (word meanings)

Causes and Mechanisms of Linguistic Change

The reasons behind language change are complex. Scholars identify multiple influencing factors—these can be grouped into internal versus external causes.

Internal factors include:

- Pronunciation habits and tendencies
- Mental patterns and cognitive habits of speakers
- Speaker attitude and mindset
- Education, tradition, and superstition

External factors include:

- Mass media: newspapers, radio, and television
- Geography and environment
- Cultural and religious influences
- Social structures
- Contact with other languages
- Desire for innovation
- Convenience and practical needs

Notably, **external influence and borrowing**—words, sounds, expressions—are natural and powerful drivers of transformation. For example, contact with Muslim communities brought many Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani words into Kannada; interaction with Europeans brought English terms. Thus, **loanwords**, alongside **internally created words**, fuel lexical change.

Core vs. Peripheral Mechanisms of Change

Another way to understand change is by its mechanism, sometimes called “**processes**” or “**change strategies**.” These fall into two types:

1. **Major processes:** These drive fundamental, widespread changes within the language.
2. **Minor processes:** These cause occasional or marginal changes—less widespread, more localized.

Major changes—like sound shifts or persistent borrowing—alter the very foundations of a language, while minor changes tweak details. Therefore, phonetic shifts and borrowed vocabulary are considered **principal mechanisms** of linguistic change.

Sound Change in Action

Phonetic change often shapes entire languages. For instance, in old Kannada, the initial "p" sound changed to "h" in modern Kannada. This shift led to words like "halli" (village), "hallina" (of the village), "hallu" (tooth), "haadu" (song), and "hakki" (bird). Similarly, old "v" became modern "b," giving rise to word pairs like "valu → balu," "valli → balli," and "vaa → baa." These sound changes result in new forms replacing old ones, significantly altering pronunciation patterns and contributing to broader phonemic restructuring.

Borrowing and Its Effects

Borrowing is a key mechanism in linguistic change. When languages come into contact, they exchange vocabulary—something deeply tied to both tangible and cultural exchanges. Sanskrit gave Kannada words like "swarga" (heaven), "naraka" (hell), "atma" (soul), and so on. English brought in "bank," "cycle," "bus," "radio," and "school." Every borrowed word brings shifts in sound, form, and meaning, influencing the linguistic system as a whole.