



The Reflexivity of Change: The Case of Language Norms

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Second Thoughts on The Reflexivity of Change

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Here are some thoughts I've had since I published this essay in 1989.

- (September 1997.) One of the essential features of a natural language is that it is not entirely regular and not entirely irregular. I believe this balance of order and disorder is well-explained by my theory. Language is regular because regularity is required for mutual understanding, and lapses from mutual understanding are corrected or punished by the process of self-stabilization. Language is irregular because it changes and the changes are not coordinated by a standards-setting body. Language change is distributed. Every speaker is an agent of change and an agent of stability. If irregularity becomes excessive, mutual understanding is threatened and is brought back into line by self-stabilization. If regularity becomes excessive, change is slowed. The current state of a natural language is something like the angle of repose in a pile of sand. A greater angle would produce avalanches; a lesser angle would show unripeness and insufficient development. Mature natural languages, then, exist —stably— on the edge of chaos.

Go to [the essay](#) itself.

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