

## **Language complexity in historical perspective: The enduring tropes of natural growth and abnormal contact**

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Focusing on the work of John McWhorter and, to a lesser extent, Peter Trudgill, this paper critically examines some common themes in language complexity research from the perspective of intellectual history. The present-day conception that increase in language complexity is somehow a “natural” process which is disturbed under the “abnormal” circumstances of language contact is shown to be a recapitulation of essentially Romantic ideas that go back to the beginnings of disciplinary linguistics. A similar genealogy is demonstrated for the related notion that grammatical complexity is a kind of “ornament” on language, surplus to the needs of “basic communication”. The paper closes by examining the implications of these ideas for linguistic scholarship.