On the sorts of changes that linguists can(not) predict

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Linguistic particularities – variant A replacing variant B, construction X developing into a marker of Y, discourse marker Z falling out of favor, and so on – are awfully hard to predict, for reasons that are well-known (see, e.g., Croft 2000, chapter 1). I will specifically emphasize that cultural changes often interfere and interact with linguistic changes, which additionally complicates matters. To illustrate this point, I will draw as a case study on the genitive alternation (*the president's speech* versus *the speech of the president*; Rosenbach 2002, Wolk et al. 2013) in English, which turns out to be particularly erratic in a historical perspective. By way of a conclusion, I will claim that less particular (i.e. less feature-centered), more general linguistic changes – for example, "drifty" (Sapir 1921) changes, or contact-induced simplification changes along the lines of Trudgill (2011) – are easier to predict, because here linguists can more easily extrapolate from the past into the future, and/or exploit the knowledge we have about crosslinguistic regularities and generalizations.

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