This thesis investigates the influence of language external factors on language internal structure. It is argued that the number of non-native speakers of a language, the social cohesion within a speech community, and the value attached to a language can lead to changes in the complexity of verbal inflection.

In the first three chapters the concept of ‘complexity’ is given historical context and empirical justification with the help of data from language acquisition and language processing research. The number, the order, and the transparency of inflectional categories are all dimensions of complexity.

Next, the behaviour of complex verbal inflections is followed under various sociolinguistic circumstances in four language groups, i.e. Arabic, Scandinavian, Quechua, and Swahili. It was found that languages that are used as languages franca tend more to simplification than languages that are spoken in closed speech communities. However, language contact is shown to be neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for morphological simplification. The less tangible symbolic value of a language co-determines the tendency towards simplification as well. In addition, typological aspects of the original structure of the mother language must be taken into account when explaining simplification patterns.

Throughout this work the framework of Optimality Theory is used in order to present the patterns of simplification in a coherent and explicit fashion. Crucial to an OT account of morphological change is the concept of Lexicon Optimisation interpreted in a historical mode.

This book is of interest to linguists studying language change, language contact, morphology, typology and Optimality Theory, and to researchers interested in the language-society interface and in questions concerning language complexity and language simplification.