

Where is historical syntax going?

A review of Galves, Charlotte; Cyrino, Sonia; Lopes, Ruth; Sandalo, Filomena & Avelar, Juanito, eds. 2012. *Parameter Theory and Linguistic Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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1. Introduction

The volume under review addresses most of the relevant current issues in the field of historical linguistics, specifically the theory of parameters and the dynamics of language change.

The interest in language change, and especially in syntactic change, has significantly grown in the past few two decades in the generative framework to the extent that historical linguistics has obtained a place of its own in many curricula, journals and conferences. Central to the generative view of language change is the claim that linguistic change – hence, also syntactic change – takes place during the language acquisition process and in the transition of grammar from one generation to the next. The enquiries of how and why such a change occurs are the key issues addressed by historical linguistics.

In the generative literature, there is consensus that languages do not change randomly, but that this change can be narrowly constrained by the requirement that all languages conform and adapt to the specifications of the human language faculty. However, the fact of language change, as well as the structural diversity of the world's languages, signals a limit to the biological specification of language. Hence, how broad a range of variation biology allows and what phenomena fall within this range are perhaps the major open questions of both historical and theoretical linguistics. Since the '80s the most powerful tool to address these questions has been the notion of parameter: parameters appear to be “the principal explanatory mechanism in diachronic syntax” (Roberts 2007: 121). Language change indeed can be reframed in terms of parameter-resetting operations, an acquisition-driven phenomenon. Therefore, having a precise understanding of what parameters are and how they are reset in language

change is fundamental in order to reach an explanatory adequacy in the field of historical linguistics and, moreover, in order to answer questions also at the synchronic level of explanation, such as, among others, the internal mechanisms of first-language acquisition and the degree of grammatical variability in linguistic communities. These are precisely the aspects under scrutiny in the book under review, which has its origins in the Eleventh Diachronic Generative Syntax (DiGS) conference, at Campinas in 2009.

In this review I attempt to highlight the progress reached thus far as it is represented in this volume and the implications it may have for future works on diachronic syntax. The exposition will proceed as follows: first, I will give a short overview of the volume (section 2) and then I will concentrate on some issues of special relevance for evaluating the future role of historical studies of syntax (section 3).

2. Overview of the volume

The volume is organized as follows: a presentation by the editors that provides a unified introduction to the whole volume and a general overview of the open questions in the field of historical linguistics (pp. 1-20). Following are sixteen chapters, which can be arranged in two parts as proposed by the editors in the introductory chapter. This classification relies on the main issue addressed by each single paper, i.e. whether the contribution has a greater impact on (i) the formalization of language change – eleven papers – or (ii) the theory of parameters and the dynamics of change – five papers. To this division I would like to add another layer, grouping together papers that deal with similar topics. In so doing, I will thus not follow the order in which the chapters are arranged in the volume.

The first division consists of eleven papers, which all deal with parametric changes in the clausal domain and show how parametric analysis of syntax can capture the connection between different co-occurring surface changes. The first subgroup presents contributions that focus on the VP/IP domain, whereas the second one consists of chapters that investigate phenomena related to the CP domain.

Five papers concentrate on the syntactic change occurring in the VP and IP domain. Guido Mensching discusses parameters related to word order, focusing on the shift from Old Romance to Modern Romance. While both stages allow for the XP-V-Subject structure, only Old Romance also shows the AUX-XP-Participle structure. He

derives this word order by XP-movement to the specifier of v^0 . The author claims that the EPP feature in v^0 that triggered this movement in Old Romance is no longer available in Modern Romance. Adriana Cardoso investigates the extraposition of restrictive relative clauses in the history of Portuguese, arguing that this phenomenon is derived through coordination and ellipsis in the earlier stages of Portuguese, whereas it is derived from VP-internal stranding in Contemporary European Portuguese, in which IP-scrambling was lost. Chris Sapp adopts the notion of peripheral parametric change as proposed by Uriagereka (2007). He investigates the verbal complexes in subordinate clauses in Middle High German and some modern varieties of German. In earlier stages of German, the order of the verb inside a cluster of two verbs in subordinate clauses was either the non-finite verb preceding the finite one, as in Modern Standard German, or the inverse order, which is still grammatical in some modern dialects, but ungrammatical in Modern Standard German. The author proves that the inverse order declined between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, demonstrating that this decline was prescriptively driven since the most formal genres show the lowest rates of the inverse order. Therefore, this change is accounted in terms of change in the periphery of the grammatical system. The paper by Joel Wallenberg emphasizes the importance of the interaction between acquisition studies and quantitative historical work, investigating the change from a German-like tense-final grammar to a tense-medial grammar in the history of Yiddish. Adopting Yang's (2000) model of acquisition, in which the most successful grammar in a situation of grammar competition is the one that produces the highest frequency of unambiguous outputs, the author proposes that the tense-medial grammar is correctly predicted to win over the tense-final one. The paper by Judy Bernstein and Raffaella Zanuttini investigates the encoding of phi-features in three grammatical systems, Standard English and two of its varieties, Older Scots and Appalachian English. While Older Scots encodes person in its inflectional system, thus representing the positive setting of the parameter, in Standard English there is no independent functional head hosting the person feature. Between these two poles with respect to the setting of the person-parameter, Appalachian English represents an instance of intermediate situation: (a) person is encoded in an independent functional head in the presence of a finite auxiliary or a modal; (b) person is not encoded in an independent head in the presence of both auxiliaries and modals as well as finite lexical verbs.

The following six papers deal with phenomena related to the

CP domain. Ribeiro and Torres Morais discuss doubling-*que* embedded constructions through the history of Portuguese, including data from both European and Brazilian Portuguese. The authors show that these constructions have always been present in the Portuguese grammar but they underwent diachronic changes, with V-to-Fin in earlier stages, and with zero morphology in the modern languages. Mary Kato compares two independent changes occurred in Brazilian Portuguese and Caribbean Spanish, namely the loss of referential null subjects and the loss of VSX order in *wh*-interrogative clauses, with the aim of identifying the minimal units of syntactic variation. Both changes were triggered by a single change: an affixal type pronominal agreement, which turned into a free weak pronoun paradigm in both languages. Ana Maria Martins discusses the diachronic emergence of a type of sentence-internal unambiguous metalinguistic negation markers from the deictic locatives *lá* 'there'/'*cá* 'here' in the history of Portuguese. The deictic locatives entered the functional system as T-related emphatic markers, which later developed into C-related elements. In the transition from ordinary deictic locatives to metalinguistic negation markers the former grammatical properties were not lost, whereby the diachronic change affecting *lá/cá* is interpreted as a case of pragmaticization. Elliott Lash studies the history of the Irish comparative particle *ná* 'than'. He proposes that this particle underwent two shifts: (a) the first, accounted in terms of shift in the parameter setting of C, results in a V to C category change; (b) the second, which is accounted in terms of grammaticalization as discussed in the functionalist literature, led to the change from C to P. The last two papers address more general issues regarding the clausal domain. Chris Reintges presents a case study in which the macro-parameter agglutinativity /syntheticity can have its setting changed to analyticity, investigating the loss of verb movement from Ancient Egyptian to Coptic Egyptian. John Whitman and Yuko Yanagida investigate the change in the syntactic alignment in Old Japanese and Iranian, supporting the claim that non-accusative alignment is fixed by a small number of specific parameter settings and that changes to or from non-accusative alignment result from changes in these settings.

The second group consists of five chapters, which deal with the dynamics of change and parameter theory. The contribution by Theresa Biberauer and Hedde Zeijlstra investigates variation in the negation system of two modern varieties of Afrikaans, Afrikaans A and Afrikaans B, specifically addressing learnability issues as well as third-factor considerations. Virginia Hill studies

the grammaticalization of the Romanian verb *putea* ‘can’ from a full-fledged verb to a pragmatic marker. The author indicates that the changes in the syntax and the interpretation of this verb arise from its reanalysis, by merging it higher in the structural hierarchy. She thus supports the view that setting and re-setting of parameter values are only driven by syntactic terms. Chiara Gianollo focuses on the sequence of morpho-syntactic changes, which affect the realization of adnominal arguments from Latin to Modern Romance. The author challenges the common account according to which the change from inflectional to prepositional realizations of the arguments of nominal heads has to be attributed to morphological impoverishment. Instead, she proposes a syntactic analysis of Old French inflectional genitives, which is able to capture the diachronic link to the Latin genitives and to elucidate the following steps leading to the generalization of the prepositional realization in modern Romance languages. The paper by Giuseppe Longobardi addresses another interesting challenge, namely whether historical relatedness between languages can be measured based on syntactic information. Focusing on the DP internal structure, the author shows that a quantitative parametric phylogeny is possible and thus language distance can be measured in principle through a parametric comparison method as proposed in Longobardi and Guardiano (2009). The paper stresses that parameters tend to disclose an intricate implicational structure so that for each given language positive or negative values of some parameters have a deep effect on the relevance or irrelevance of other parameters.

The last chapter by Ian Roberts proposes a formal account for the nature of parameters. He advances the idea that macro-parameters correspond to clusters of micro-parameters, hierarchically organized: true macro-parameters sit at the top of the network and as we successively move down, systems become more marked, parameters become more specific, more “micro”. Hence, apparent macro-parametric variation appears when a group of functional heads is specified for the same property. This aggregate behavior is not due to some UG properties but to a conservative learning strategy: the more specific choices, which imply a longer walk down the parametric network, are disfavored by a general principle of economy, part of the “third factor”. Thus, the choices among options in the parameter schemata arise from a general human ability to compute relations among sets.

3. *Where is historical syntax going?*

The volume represents an extremely valuable resource for linguists involved in historical syntax research from both an empirical as well as a theoretical point of view. The sixteen papers included showcase a wide range of (un)related languages, such as Latin, Irish, Coptic, and Japanese, a variety of historical periods and some take a fresh methodological grasp by looking into geographical micro-variation. Despite the diversity of topics and languages, the volume turns out to be a cohesive and coherent representation of current research in the field. All the chapters aim to propose new approaches to both parameter theory and language change, offering the reader pertinent advances in the understanding of what can vary among languages and how and why languages change.

Furthermore, the volume offers the reader a better understanding of long-noticed syntactic phenomena, such as the rise of prepositional genitives discussed by Gianollo or the grammaticalization of the Romanian verb *putea* investigated by Hill.

Moreover, this volume shows that a parametric analysis of syntax properly captures the connection between different co-occurring surface changes. It is both descriptively and explanatorily adequate in deriving various apparently unrelated grammatical changes from one abstract point of variation, as it is evident from the analyses by Cardoso and Martins. It proposes a way to handle clusters of distinct parametric changes by proposing a theory of complex interdependencies among parametric values, as clearly shown in the papers by Roberts and Longobardi.

The introduction lays out three principles that are fundamental to this field: (i) the nature of parameters; (ii) the dynamics of change; (iii) the methodological issue of quantitative analysis of the linguistic data.

As for (i) and (ii), the editors offer a detailed overview of the state of the art. They start summarizing the debate around the distinction between micro- and macro-parameters. Since Baker (1996), it has been claimed that parameters come in two fashions: macro-parameters, which are the parametrization of the way Universal Grammar (UG) principles are satisfied across languages; and micro-parameters, which concern the features of functional categories. Differently, Kayne (2005) emphasizes that every parameter is a micro-parameter and that differences in macro-parameters are due to differences in arrays of micro-parameters. This last proposal has been challenged by Baker (2008), who concludes that at least three macro-parameters (the head directionality, the agreement and the polysynthesis parameters) are

not instances of clusters of micro-parameters and are not associated with properties of functional categories, but with general principles of grammar. On this issue, the volume under review proposes two main novelties, which may profoundly change the field: (i) one approach follows and implements the proposal advanced by Roberts & Holmberg (2010); (ii) the other one aligns with Uriagereka (2007)'s claim.

The paper by Roberts proposes a formal way of reconciling Baker's and Kayne's positions: macro-parameters are clusters of micro-parameters, hierarchically organized. True macro-parameters – such as the ones identified by Baker – sit on the top of the network; moving down the network, more marked, specific, micro-parameters are found. The more specific choices imply a longer walk in the parametric space and this is disfavored by a general principle of economy, which is not a property of UG but part of what Chomsky (2008) labels as “third factor”. Thus, it follows that UG only contributes to the definition of parameters with the inventory of formal features, functional categories and the basic processes of computation. The parameters themselves are only partially determined by UG and the choices among options in the parameter schemata depend on a general human “ability to compute relations among sets” (Roberts & Holmberg 2010: 51).

A slightly different approach is proposed by Uriagereka (2007). Three are the sources of variation in languages: (i) core parameters, which set structures through elementary information; (ii) sub-case parameters, which involve the customary learning, via unconscious analytical processes; (iii) peripheral parameters, which involve things as peer or adult pressure. The last source of variation is governed by analogy and is subject to conscious manipulation of the speaker. Bringing into consideration phenomena that are not produced by a single core grammar, this approach recalls the idea of grammars in competition first proposed by Kroch (1994, 2001). In absence of external causes, syntactic change begins in the periphery, when adults come to use new syntactic patterns which were not in the input of their own acquisition, as the paper by Sapp in this volume supports.

Both approaches introduce in the system something crucially original, which restates the ontological status of parameters and their hierarchies that was proposed in the Principle & Parameters framework. This novelty is the proposal that parametric variation is only partially specified by UG. The leading idea of these new trends is indeed that the source of change is not UG itself, but other components of the mind. Variation is then attributed to three factors: UG,

primary linguistic data, and language-independent principles of data processing and computational efficiency. This change provides a fully workable research program for the formal study of linguistic variation. Nevertheless, at the same time it raises new questions, such as the identification of which parameters are specified in the UG and which are not, the role of the periphery in changes, and the nature of the “third factor”. Hence, it requires more empirical and theoretical work in the field of historical syntax.

Another consequence of this new approach and of the volume itself is the need of closer collaboration with functional approaches. The primary difference between generative and functional linguistics with respect to the issue of explaining universals was that generative approaches in the ‘80s-‘90s assumed that syntactic universals should all be derived from UG, whereas functionalists consider the possibility that syntactic universals could also be due to general ease of processing factors (Haspelmath 2008). Given the introduction of the third factor by generativists, the crucial difference is somewhat reduced and, hence, deeper collaboration between the two frameworks could be fruitful and desirable.

The final central aspect in the field of historical linguistics is the gathering and treatment of data. In the introduction it is accurately stressed that historical syntax makes use of quantitative approaches in order to circumvent the lack of access to speaker judgments. Since the ‘90s the field borrowed methods from other approaches, such as statistics and corpus linguistics, which “are now a current practice in generative historical syntax” (p. 11). Some papers are indeed representative of these recent developments in the treatment and use of data. However, few papers in this volume present quantitative information and some others, when they do so, present such information in a fast and loose manner. Mensching and Hill, for instance, do not make any reference to the texts or corpora used. Ribeiro and Torres Morais present information on the gathered data in a brief footnote. Lash, while presenting more substantial data, gives neither percentages nor raw numbers of the occurrences of the Irish forms. Quantitative information, like formalization, is of course only a means to an end and does not provide explanations *per se*. Nevertheless, given that one of the linchpins of diachronic syntax is the collection and treatment of reliable data, I hope that future works in this field will also contain a higher level of quantitative sophistication, which will enable the reader to have greater confidence in the claims being made.

In sum, this volume is the witness that historical syntax has

achieved impressive results, which not only introduce advances in the field itself and crucially in the understanding of language variation, but also shed light onto linguistic theory proper. This volume proves that approaching language change and historical syntax from a generative perspective is fruitful in order to question old orthodoxies and test out the implications of new theories. Finally, it shows that historical syntacticians are generally committed to a rigorous methodology for description.

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