# Diachronic Construction Grammar

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## Volume 18

Diachronic Construction Grammar
Edited by Jóhanna Barðdal, Elena Smirnova, Lotte Sommerer and Spike Gildea

*To the memory of our friend*

*Anna Siewierska*

*Who understood both Diachrony and Construction Grammar
and whose ideas continue to live among us*

# In memory of Anna Siewierska

Willem B. Hollmann
Lancaster University

On 6 August 2011 the world of linguistics lost one of its most productive, influential, kind and generous members. Being only 55 years old and publishing widely on topics ranging from linguistic typology to grammatical theory as well as, more recently, dialect grammar, there was still so much that Anna Siewierska had to offer to the rest of us. She was as inspiring then as she had always been, engaging with linguists from all over Europe and the rest of the world, stimulating us to join forces and work together in our journeys of linguistic discovery. Anna greatly admired and followed the work of other well-known, pioneering linguists, some of whom have contributed to the present volume. At the same time, she was also extremely pleased to see new linguists entering the field, and several slightly less established contributors to this volume have benefitted greatly from her encouragement.

A substantial amount of Anna's work had a diachronic dimension (e.g. Siewierska 2010), so it is certainly fitting that this volume be dedicated to her memory. Fewer colleagues, perhaps, would associate her with construction grammar. I will, in the following, attempt to provide some background to explain why in this respect, too, the dedication is apt.

Anna was best known for her work in and on language typology. The starting point here were her (1983, 1984) publications on the passive, continuing through her work on word order, much of it carried out in the context of the EUROTYP project (see especially Siewierska 1998). Her research branched out into a range of other topics, such as grammatical relations and person, some of which she wrote together with her husband, Dik Bakker (e.g. Bakker & Siewierska 2007; Siewierska & Bakker 2007). Anna's (1991) book on Simon Dik's Functional Grammar illustrates one prominent formative influence on her thinking, yet in most of her work her theoretical perspective is more broadly functional-typological. Nonetheless, Anna was always open to new ideas, especially new ideas that held a promise of shedding light on linguistic phenomena that had previously remained more obscure.

This willingness to keep a theoretically open mind underlined Anna's status as a true scientist. Sometimes the ideas came from the more formalist end of the

spectrum, although as a typologist, Anna generally felt more affinity with functional and also cognitive linguistic work.

One or two years after I had joined the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University, where she had held a chair since 1994, Anna drew my attention to the interface, back then largely unexplored, between linguistic typology and dialect grammar. At the time, research on this interface was driven mainly by Bernd Kortmann and his colleagues (see e.g. Kortmann 2003; Kortmann et al. 2005), whose work Anna had come across at a conference. Being surrounded by a variety of British English whose speakers have a relatively strong sense of local identity, we felt inspired to start investigating the grammar of Lancashire dialect in this novel manner. In our joint research Anna mainly contributed the typological angle. Having just completed a thesis under the co-supervision of Bill Croft in Manchester, my background in cognitive linguistics and construction grammar brought a few additional ideas to the table. Anna had always been an avid reader and admirer of Croft's work (as well as being a close friend of his), and our frequent discussions about the explanatory potential of notions such as schemas and frequency effects led to a prominent constructionist angle in our publications on variation and change in Lancashire dialect (e.g. Hollmann & Siewierska 2007, 2011).

Ever interested in the interplay between data and theory, Anna became increasingly drawn to the tools offered by the construction-based perspective in relation to linguistic variation and change. She took them on board in her own thinking with characteristic ease and speed, and displayed great enthusiasm about the related 'constructionist turn' in grammaticalisation studies (e.g. Himmelmann 2004; Traugott 2003, 2010). In her perpetual curiosity, she would undoubtedly have devoured the present volume, and so it not easy to think of a more appropriate way for us to honour her memory than to do the very same.

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# Diachronic Construction Grammar

## Epistemological context, basic assumptions and historical implications

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The main goal of this chapter is to discuss the value of the Construction Grammar framework to solving perceived problems with diachronic syntax. As such, one part of this chapter provides a condensed review of previous research in diachronic syntax, including a brief discussion of why many linguists have doubted the value of such work. While most of this early work did not emphasize the importance of constructions to our understanding of either synchronic or diachronic syntax, we do identify earlier examples of work for which the notion of construction was crucial, although not richly developed. The bulk of the chapter then proposes ways in which a constructional perspective/theory allows us to address some of these perceived problems with the study of diachronic syntax, hence providing a research context for the individual studies published in this volume.

## 1. Introduction

Multiple influential scholars in linguistics have argued that diachronic syntax is a vexed enterprise, one in which even attested syntactic changes cannot be well understood and, consequently, in which unattested syntactic changes cannot be reconstructed using the Comparative Method.[1] In most theoretical conceptions

of syntax, there is no arbitrary form–meaning correspondence that can provide cognates with internal correspondences, and in addition the claim has often been repeated that consistent directionality cannot be determined for syntactic change (§2.1). The latter claim has been addressed somewhat within the evolving Grammaticalization literature, with multiple case-studies of attested change, strong statements about directionality of change, and some theory-building efforts. However, from our perspective too often this body of literature has relied on less than rigorous reconstructions, more or less confined to only internal reconstruction, has focused too narrowly on the change from lexis > grammatical morphology, and has spent excessive energy on the question of unidirectionality. Outside of the grammaticalization framework, a few scholars have broadened the scope of diachronic syntax to larger units like clause types, in which entire constructions are reanalyzed, sometimes with component pieces extending by analogy to other constructions. Studies of the latter type demonstrated the viability of reconstructing syntax within the context of the construction, but they lacked an elaborated notion of CONSTRUCTION.

Independently, the framework of CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR (CxG) was developed to deal with cases that generative grammar did not deal particularly well with: idioms, set phrases and fixed expressions. Within CxG, the construction is a symbolically linked form–meaning pairing, which can model not only idioms, but also regular expressions like argument structures. Most versions of CxG are usage-based, and so take frequency to be an important ingredient in the system. The inventory of constructions is conceived of as a CONSTRUCTICON, which changes over time as new constructions come into being and old constructions fall out of use. Within CxG, an independent strand of work began on historical syntax, originally based on historically attested change and focused on questions about how constructions change over time, especially in their form–meaning overlap and the ways they get extended both semantically and pragmatically. Historical change in constructions has cast interesting light on the interaction of frequency and CONSTRUCTIONALIZATION, as well as how constructions may become more lexicalized, more schematic, or both. More recently, this strand of research has arrived independently at the value of the construction in reconstructing morphosyntax.

This remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: §2 gives a limited history of some pre-CxG approaches to historical syntax, §3 introduces the main theoretical postulates of CxG, as well as some of the findings that follow from these postulates, and §4 offers some concluding remarks. The bulk of the chapter is contained in §3, in which each subsection first exposits specific principles of CxG, then discusses and illustrates some of the diachronic implications of these principles. Each of the individual papers in this volume is introduced in the relevant section.

## 2.   Pre-constructional approaches to historical linguistics

The starting point for discussions of historical syntax must be the same as the starting point for discussions of historical linguistics in general: the work of the Neogrammarians. As discussed in some detail in Harris & Campbell (1995: 16–35), multiple neogrammarians were doing historical syntax alongside their historical phonology and lexicology. However, there was a major difference in the results of their work, in that for phonology they proceeded to develop and rigorously test a methodology for reconstruction that has remained largely unchanged as the modern Comparative Method. In contrast, for morphosyntax, they did not consolidate their individual works into a coherent, consistent methodology, and so they did not produce similarly large-scale reconstructions of PIE syntax.

Since then, over a century has passed, and while various individual scholars have engaged at one time or another in the pleasures of historical syntax, is it nonetheless the case that most historical linguists have expressed doubts about the feasibility of actually reconstructing syntactic patterns. The doubts coalesce around certain themes, all drawing a clear contrast between the (plausible) reconstruction of historical phonology and the (implausible) reconstruction of historical morphosyntax. The first distinction that many point to is the crucial role of cognates: words too similar in both form and meaning for the similarity to have arisen by chance. In the systematic methodology of the Comparative Method, we can confirm a body of cognates via their consistent phonological correspondences, which we then take to be modern reflexes of phonological correspondences in the source word that gave rise to each set of modern cognates.

In contrast, syntax was held to consist of productive rules rather than stored sequences (cf. Watkins 1964; Jeffers 1976; Lightfoot 1979, 2006; Harrison 2003). As abstract entities that are autonomous from meaning, syntactic rules cannot meet more than the formal half of the operational definition of a cognate, and even this formal half cannot be confirmed via multiple correspondences, as each modern syntactic utterance is merely another (identical) application of the same productive rule.

Further, the identification of lexical cognates is considered valid because the connection between form (sound sequences) and meaning is essentially arbitrary, and therefore similarity in both domains is unlikely to be due to chance. Given a theory of syntax that is predicated on either a Universal Grammar of abstract principles or even merely on rules from which we generate surface syntactic form, the notion of a truly arbitrary syntactic cognate is seriously compromised. If syntax is held to be regular and productive, it lacks the essential arbitrariness of the lexicon, and so finding similarity between rules in related languages does not automatically suggest a common origin.

However, despite the general pessimism, a growing body of historical linguists agrees that these arguments are not conclusive. The relatively recent surge of studies in the area of grammaticalization has been key to rehabilitating the idea of reconstructing syntax. The notion of grammaticalization is not recent at all, with multiple examples from 19th century work by neogrammarians like Bopp (1816); Humboldt (1825); Whitney (1875); Paul (1880); and von der Gabelentz (1891). The term GRAMMATICALIZATION itself was first introduced last century by Meillet (1912: 133):

> While analogy can renew the details of forms, but it usually leaves intact the structure of the existing system, the "grammaticalization" of certain words creates new forms, introduces new categories that once had no linguistic expression, transforms the entirety of the system.                [Translation JB & SG][2]

Although Meillet does mention concomitant changes to the syntactic system, e.g. in his discussion of the kinds of change he wants to categorize as grammaticalization, he mentions "the progressive attribution of a grammatical role to autonomous words *or that of the manners of grouping the words* [translation and emphasis JB & SG]" (p. 132).[3] He also makes clear multiple times that the fundamental point of interest is "the passage of an autonomous word to the role of a grammatical element [Translation JB & SG]" (p. 131).[4] In subsequent studies, the focus has remained on the movement from lexical item to grammatical morpheme, as famously formulated by Kuryłowicz (1965: 69): "Grammaticalization consists in the increase of the range of a morpheme advancing from a lexical to a grammatical or from a less grammatical to a more grammatical status, e.g. from a derivative formant to an inflectional one." This definition does not give us historical syntax *per se*, but it certainly shows that one possible outcome of syntactic change is the conversion of a lexical item to a grammatical operator, which, as noted by Meillet, has great implications for the syntactic system in which such a change takes place.

The explosion of Grammaticalization Studies within functionalist approaches to linguistics gave us overviews of different facets of the phenomenon, as well as many case-studies, e.g. Givón (1971, 1976, 1979); Heine (1993) Heine & Reh (1984); Traugott & Heine (eds, 1991) *inter-alia*, Bybee, Perkins

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2.   "Tandis que l'analogie peut renouveler le détail des formes, mais laisse le plus souvent intact le plan d'ensemble du système existant, la « grammaticalisation » de certains mots crée des formes neuves, introduit des catégories qui n'avaient pas d'expression linguistique, transforme l'ensemble du système."

3.   "l'attribution progressive d'un rôle grammatical à des mots autonomes *ou à des manières de grouper les mots*".

4.   "le passage d'un mot autonome au rôle d'élément grammatical."

& Pagliuca (1994); and Heine & Kuteva (2005, 2006, 2007). In the 1990s came volumes that systematized approaches to grammaticalization, such as Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer (1991) and Hopper & Traugott (1993/2003). Volumes on grammaticalization continue to appear, both problematizing and refining grammaticalization as a theoretical notion (many collections, published in *Typological Studies in Language* and other venues). This body of work has become sufficiently rich to justify published catalogs of attested grammaticalization changes, such as Heine & Kuteva (2002), as well as a recent treatment in one of the ubiquitous topical Handbooks (Narrog & Heine 2011).

From the perspective of historical syntax, the grammaticalization studies constituted a huge step forward, both in terms of what we understood about the nature of at least this aspect of syntactic change and in terms of creating a community of researchers who came to the discussion of historical change in grammar without the pre-emptive negativism of those trained in the traditional comparativist and structural paradigms. Among the strengths of grammaticalization research has been a wealth of empirical results: the exposition of a number of detailed case-studies of attested historical change in morphosyntax, as well as strong claims about empirical issues like directionality. In addition, some have invoked the idea of "grammaticalization theory", in which the general mechanisms of grammatical change help to explain both why specific grammar in specific languages takes the form it does, and why, in general, the same sorts of source lexical domains keep evolving into the same sorts of resultant morphological categories, creating widespread, or even universal, "grammaticalization pathways" (cf. Heine 1994; Bybee et al. 1994; Givón 2008).

However, maintaining the perspective of historical syntax, there have also been problems with the grammaticalization enterprise. First, of course, is the narrowness of the focus: in zooming in on identifying which source lexemes become which resultant grammatical morphemes, the importance of the constructional context is frequently lost. Although Givón (1979:208) defined "syntacticization" as the condensation of discourse structure into syntactic structure (i.e. the creation of constructions), to be followed in turn by "morphologization" (i.e. grammaticalization), and he went on (p. 220) to argue that both were "two mutually dependent parts of the same process," the term "grammaticalization" was rarely used in this broader sense. Others who used the term in this broader sense include Heine et al. (1991:13), who include the "fossilization" of discourse into syntax, and Hopper's (1987, 1991) "emergent grammar". More recently, grammaticalization researchers (e.g. Traugott 2003; Heine 2003; Bybee 2003; Givón 2008) clearly acknowledge the importance of the entire construction in individual cases of grammaticalization, but even so, the paradigm focuses attention on the emergent morpheme rather than seeking to make generalizations based on the details of the

larger construction (cf. also Noël 2007). This has the unfortunate effect of leaving much of historical syntax out of the picture (e.g. the evolution of new alignment patterns in Kartvelian, as described in Harris 1985, or the creation of entirely new clause types in Cariban, as described in Gildea 1998).

Additionally, a sometimes acrimonious debate has ensued over the distinction between grammaticalization as a label for an observable outcome of language change versus grammaticalization as an independent phenomenon that cannot be derived from more general principles of syntactic change. To the extent that grammaticalization is an independent process of language change, it motivates an independent grammaticalization theory to "make sense of" synchronic patterns in grammar and guide reconstructions. Campbell & Janda (2001) cite many such claims, then introduce an entire issue of *Language Sciences* (Campbell ed. 2001) dedicated to expositing the problems with such a theory. One crucial question is whether one can identify anything unique to grammaticalization as a process, or whether one could simply describe it as an outcome of otherwise well-understood principles of historical change. Another is whether grammaticalization is, in fact, unidirectional. Multiple publications have listed apparent counter-examples (see Janda 2001 and Norde 2001 for several), but defenders of unidirectionality (e.g. Haspelmath 1999; Heine 2003) have countered that most putative counter-examples are actually not the "reversal" of grammaticalization, but rather independent processes operating to create examples that give the appearance of reversing grammaticalization. The preoccupation with these debates about grammaticalization *per se* had the effect of drawing attention away from larger questions of historical syntax, such as the evolution of new constructions in the absence of a lexical word becoming a grammatical morpheme. At its most extreme, this debate has led some to equate the term GRAMMATICALIZATION with 'language change' (Joseph 2011).

While grammaticalization studies got most of the attention in the 1980s and 1990s, there were also examples of studies that went beyond the questions of grammaticalization, widening the focus to larger units like clauses. The body of work by Alice Harris stands out as an early example, in which she reconstructed historical change in entire clause types – including especially their alignment patterns – in the Kartvelian family (Harris 1985, 1990, 2008). While not invoking the label "construction", Harris (1985: 13–4) argues that "we can trace the evolution of a clause type within a given language and compare types across languages. The structure of a clause may be reflected directly in case-marking, agreement, word order, and, less overtly, in other phenomena amenable to study." The parallel to construction grammar is strengthened by an additional claim: "A further consequence of the lexicalization of syntax around a governing verb is that we can establish clausal equations as a basis of comparison, within a single language and

among sister languages." In other words, independently of phenomena that might be considered cases of grammaticalization, constructions themselves can be seen as cognate.

This strand of work was further systematized in Harris & Campbell (1995), which offers a framework with only three mechanisms of syntactic change, none of which depend on or follow directly from the grammaticalization paradigm: Reanalysis, Extension, and Contact. We focus here only on the first two of their mechanisms. The definition of reanalysis (originally formulated by Langacker 1977) is a hidden change in grammatical form, such that the surface form does not change, but the speaker's analysis of that form does change. This change is always motivated: in a functionalist interpretation by the change in function (meaning, information structure), in the generativist interpretation (cf. Lightfoot 1979, 1991) by the accretion of small formal changes.[5] While reanalysis can certainly take place at lower levels as well (cf. Langacker's 1977 seminal coverage of both phonological and morphological reanalysis), it is clear that Harris & Campbell's treatment of reanalysis is generally at the level of entire constructions (evidenced by the fact that the materials from Harris' 1991 Linguistic Institute course on Diachronic Syntax use the term "Construction Reanalysis") and the phenomena that Harris & Campbell analyze are thus of exactly the type found in papers in this volume that address Constructionalization (we return to this discussion in §4 below).

In contrast, extensions change surface form without changing analysis, for example spreading rules and/or forms to new environments (constructions) without changing the invisible component of analysis. These two mechanisms are complementary not only in that one is characterized as invisible change and the other as visible change, but also in that the visible changes of extension are often motivated by the invisible changes of reanalysis, and as such they constitute the evidence that reanalysis has taken place (i.e. the "actualization" of a reanalysis, cf. Timberlake 1977; Harris & Campbell 1995:77). Although these terms are not common currency in constructional accounts of change, these concepts are central to the notions of constructionalization (either reanalysis alone or reanalysis plus actualization, depending on one's definition) and on changes within an existing construction (generally extension alone).

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5.  Note that de Smet (2009) argues that reanalysis is itself epiphenomenal, perhaps only an artifact of an analytical tradition that puts a high value on syntactic representation. We agree that there must be a careful reconsideration (and perhaps redefinition) of the theoretical notion of reanalysis within usage-based approaches. Individual authors in this volume do address this question to some extent, but this is not a focus of our work here.

In this same vein, Gildea's (1992, 1997, 1998, 2000) reconstructions of alignment and constituency patterns in the Cariban family followed from the same principles: identify cognate clause types, within these cognates seek patterns of evidence characteristic of the different mechanisms of change, and then argue for reconstruction based on principles of directionality that can be derived from these specific mechanisms of change. Although inspired by work in grammaticalization, Gildea was unable to fit his Cariban data into that box: of the six innovative modern clause types whose origins he was able to reconstruct, none resulted from grammaticalization as traditionally defined, because the new tenses and aspects came not from lexical sources, but rather from reanalysis of nominalizations and participial forms in predicate nominal and predicate adverb clauses. Some of these source constructions contained a matrix clause copula, but just as many had no finite verb form in the clause to participate in the expected pathway of verb > auxiliary > inflection. As such, Gildea was forced to think at the level of the entire clause, which he analyzed as distinct "verbal systems", a label that translates felicitously to "main clause constructions." Harris & Campbell's mechanisms of syntactic change provided exactly the tools he needed to understand the comparative Cariban picture.

What these studies from the 1990s shared was an understanding that syntactic changes, even those that were well-studied in the grammaticalization literature, were taking place in a larger context. In order to fully appreciate these changes, it was necessary to keep track not just of the lexical item on its way to grammatical morpheme, but also of the other grammatical elements and schematic slots in the clause where this evolution took place. Because these studies were focused on the tools necessary to reconstruct variation in main clause grammar amongst related languages, they identified the cognate status of units larger than the morpheme or even the fully inflected word – they worked with constructions. These constructions contained both form and meaning, which were transparently inherited (even though usually in somewhat altered form) from a common source; they showed internal complexity that allowed an analogical appeal to the notion of correspondence; and the primary mechanism of change that allowed reconstruction was construction reanalysis (the primary mechanism of change in most of Harris' and nearly all of Gildea's examples).

In this body of work, the broad strokes of diachronic construction grammar are already visible. However, while the mechanisms of the diachronic changes in syntax were well-elaborated, the notion of construction was almost entirely intuitive, which led to a lack of focus on the interactions between these mechanisms and the various kinds of units that combine to make up constructions.

At roughly the same time, Israel (1996) applied the developing principles of Construction Grammar to the attested history by which the modern English