Perspectives on Historical Syntax

Edited by
Carlotta Viti

Perspectives on Historical Syntax

Edited by

Carlotta Viti

University of Zurich

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI z39.48-1984.

Perspectives on Historical Syntax

Studies in Language Companion Series (SLCS)

ISSN 0165-7763

This series has been established as a companion series to the periodical *Studies in Language*.

For an overview of all books published in this series, please see
http://benjamins.com/catalog/slcs

Volume 169

Perspectives on Historical Syntax
Edited by Carlotta Viti

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com

Table of contents

Introduction

Historical syntax

Problems, materials, methods, hypotheses

Carlotta Viti
(University of Zurich)

1. Historical syntax as an emerging field

The present volume is a collection of articles resulting from the international work-shop "Syntactic change and syntactic reconstruction: new perspectives" held at the University of Zurich in September 2012 and is devoted to various topics of historical syntax.

As is well known, syntax has been less investigated than phonology or morphology in Indo-European studies, and as a consequence thereof, in historical linguistics, which to a large extent has been conducted on Indo-European languages. Although excellent syntactic studies were produced in the research traditions of Neogrammarians and of Structuralists in the XIX century and in the first half of the XX century (cf. Delbrück 1878, 1879, 1888, 1893–1900; Grimm 1870–1898; Miklosich 1874; Speyer 1886, 1896; Brugmann 1925; Wackernagel 1926–1928; Schwyzer 1950; Hofmann & Szantyr 1965), they do not usually aim to reconstruct unattested syntactic structures, but rather rep-resent a synchronic analysis of the syntax of the ancient IE languages and are more descriptive than explanatory discussions of syntactic change. Even the upsurge of syn-tactic theory that may be observed in the generative framework in the second half of the XX century has privileged synchronic over diachronic matters.

Only in recent times has diachronic syntax been established as an autonomous discipline, in Indo-European studies (Lehmann 1974, 1976, 2000; Faarlund 1990; Bauer 1995, 2000; Crespo & García Ramón 1997; Devine & Stephens 1999; Barðdal 2001; Hewson & Bubenik 2006; Luraghi 2010; Barðdal & Eythórsson 2012) and in historical linguistics in general (Ferraresi & Goldbach 2008; Ferraresi & Lühr 2010), in the functional-typological research tradition (Harris & Campbell 1995), as well as in generativist studies (Lightfoot 1979, 1991, 1999, 2002a, 2006; Longobardi 2003; Batllori et al. 2005; Roberts 2007; Crisma & Longobardi 2009; Jonas et al. 2012). How-ever, much of the recent literature on historical syntax tends to be divided along what might be called "party lines" with separate conferences and separate volumes for mini-malists, functionalists, variationists, etc. As a result, there is often no consensus on

many empirical and theoretical issues of historical syntax. This especially holds for syntactic reconstruction, which in recent years has received even less attention than syntactic change.

The main reason for this relative disregard for a diachronic study of syntax, at least compared to other disciplines of historical linguistics, is that basic syntactic units, that is, phrases and especially clauses, are diachronically transmitted in ways other than the lexicon: they are freely generated, not memorized, and they present much more heterogeneousness than phonemes, morphemes, and lexemes, whose forms may be contained in closed inventories, albeit of different size. Syntactic units are therefore much more difficult to compare in different languages and to reconstruct for past stages of a language according to the practice of the Comparative Method, which implies regular correspondence among the phonological substance of the compared morphemes or lexemes (cf. Meillet 1925; Hymes 1974; Baldi 1990; Polomé & Winter 1992; Fox 1995; Durie & Ross 1996; Watkins 2001; Harrison 2003; Rankin 2003). Accordingly, many scholars of historical linguistics have been, or still are, sceptical on the feasibility of a theory of syntactic change and syntactic reconstruction.

The present volume is a contribution to discussing the topics of the emerging field of historical syntax. On the one hand, it seeks to bring together between the same covers issues of both change and reconstruction in the domain of syntax. On the other, it aims at bridging some theoretical divides, while at the same time increasing the number and range of detailed case studies.

2.   Controversial problems of syntactic change and of syntactic reconstruction

2.1   Mechanisms of syntactic change

The problem of identifying the mechanisms that underlie syntactic change was already posited at the end of the seventies, from different theoretical perspectives, by Li (1977) and by Lightfoot (1979). Several papers in Li's collective volume identify reanalysis as a cause of syntactic change, that is, the process whereby a surface structure receives its interpretation on the basis of different composition (cf. Anderson 1977; Chafe 1977; Langacker 1977; Timberlake 1977). In general, however, Li considers it premature to postulate a theory of syntactic change, in the conviction that diachronic syntax was "still very much in its embryonic stage" at that time, and that "it is only through the unbiased analysis of data collected from either historical documents or comparative studies that mechanisms of syntactic change may be discovered" (1977:XIX; cf. also Fisiak 1984). Lightfoot's (1979) monograph, by contrast, presents a stronger (and bolder, cf. Romaine 1981) proposal of the mechanisms underlying syntactic change,

which in his view are borrowing, expressivity, and after-thought. While expressivity is often responsible for the reinforcement of a certain structure, after-thought may account for many instances of word order change, in particular for the drift from SOV to SVO; in Lightfoot (1991), after-thought is presented as the trigger of a parameter resetting. Three basic mechanisms of change, such as borrowing, reanalysis, and extension, are also hypothesized by Harris & Campbell (1995), according to whom analogy is just a type of extension, while grammaticalization is subsumed under reanalysis ("alteration of syntactic patterns takes place by means of specific mechanisms of change. We hypothesize that there are only three basic mechanisms: reanalysis, extension, and borrowing. All three have been much discussed in the literature on diachronic syntax [...] Our proposal differs in that we claim that no other mechanisms exist, and that others that have been suggested, such as rule addition and loss, lexical diffusion, changes in phrase structure rules, grammaticalization, contamination, etc., are really just specific instances or consequences of one or a combination of these mechanisms", p. 50). König discusses case studies of syntactic reanalysis, in particular of the reanalysis of verbs as prepositions (cf. König & Kortmann 1991, 1992), as well as of grammaticalization (König & Traugott 1991; König & Vezzosi 2004). A combination of different mechanisms such as reanalysis, analogy, grammaticalization, and exaptation are propounded in Vincent (1997: 166–67) and in Batllori et al. (2005). The importance of analogy as a principle of syntactic change has been more recently revaluated by Garret (2012) and by Kiparsky (2012), albeit from different points of view. Garret considers analogy, as well as grammaticalization, to be a more reliable interpretation for syntactic changes traditionally interpreted as instances of reanalysis ("reanalysis plays a less interesting role in syntactic change than many of our handbooks and leading theorists have argued", p. 71). Kiparsky ascribes to analogy traditional case studies of grammaticalization, as well as of degrammaticalization; in both cases, we would have a "non-exemplar based analogy" tending to "grammar optimization", since synchronically anomalous or opaque constructions are modified in line with other majority patterns of the language.

We can observe that these mechanisms are not exclusively limited to the syntactic domain, but rather have been variously posited also for other components of grammar. This does not hold true only for borrowing, which is the only mechanism where the generativist study of Lightfoot (1979, 1991) and the functional-typological study of Harris and Campbell (1995) agree, and which clearly is more evident in the lexicon than in the grammar. It also holds for analogy and for grammaticalization. Analogy was considered by the Neogrammarians – together with sound change – to be at the basis of language change: analogy was the principle capable of accounting for those morphological and lexical changes to which the regularity of sound change did not apply (cf. Paul 1920: 106ff). Grammaticalization was considered by Meillet (1921) – together with analogy – to be the main principle of word formation. Reanalysis seems

to be the principle that is more characteristic of syntax, or of morpho-syntax, with respect to phonology and morpho-phonology, since the new interpretation of a structure requires the presence of a meaning-bearing unit. In general, however, the postulation of different mechanisms of syntactic change carries with it the question of whether a certain mechanism may be considered as having an autonomous status, or whether it should be regarded as being a specific manifestation of another mechanism of larger applicability. This especially concerns grammaticalization, which despite its increasing acceptance in historical linguistics (cf. Lehmann 1982, 2002; Heine et al. 1991; Traugott & Heine 1991; Hopper & Traugott 1993; Giacalone Ramat & Hopper 1998; Fischer et al. 2004; López-Couso & E. Seoane 2008; Stathi et al. 2010), over the last years has been accused of being only a by-product of other better-understood principles of language change. Campbell (2001:113), for example, claims that grammaticalization is derivative in nature, and that "perfect" examples of it, such as the emergence of the English future marker *will* from a verb meaning "want", may be easily explained by sound change, analogy and reanalysis without additionally invoking the notion of grammaticalization (cf. also Harris & Campbell 1995; Lass 2000; Newmeyer 2001; Joseph 2001, 2004; Fortson 2003).

I think that the difficulty of ascribing an autonomous status to grammaticalization or to any other mechanism of syntactic change is not a problem, but rather an advantage for understanding syntactic change, for two main reasons. First, mechanisms of syntactic change often overlap and are difficult to tease apart. For example, the Latin *consecutio temporum vel modorum* represents an instance of extension of the use of the subjunctive from the original domain of irrealis, expressing an act of volition or wish, to a grammatical marker of subordination. This is, however, also an example of grammaticalization, since it entails the semantic bleaching of the primary modal function of the subjunctive, as well as the development of structural constraints according to the verb of the main clause. It may be difficult to determine which is the primary factor underlying the establishment of the Latin *consecutio*, since they are intermingled, and one reinforces or prepares the terrain for the other. Second, both the description and the explanation of a certain phenomenon are more accurate if more than one factor is taken into consideration. The attempt to account for linguistic facts in terms of Ockham's razor is, in my opinion, damaging for a reliable linguistic analysis, and motivated by the assumption that language should follow the principles of logic and of natural science. Language, however, is a historical and cultural fact, which can be explained in the same way as the objects of historical and cultural research: when reporting a historical fact, we do not want to offer the simplest explanation, but rather the most accurate and most reliable one. This perspective has been recently elaborated by Heine & Kuteva (2003, 2005), according to whom internal language change and external language change, traditionally considered to be in opposition (cf. Lass 1997:209), often co-occur and strengthen each other, so that we have a "contact

induced grammaticalization" (cf. also Bisang 2008). In the same vein, Joseph (2013) identifies a possible conciliation between inheritance and independent drift, which are also seen as mutually exclusive in the traditional practice of the Comparative Method. According to Joseph, the existence of a structural variation in the proto-language may account for a parallel change in different related languages, so that a linguistic feature is at the same time inherited and independently developed. The interaction of different principles of change may be valid for all domains of grammar, but it especially concerns syntax: syntactic units are inherently more complex than morphological and phonological units, since the former consist of the latter, and it is therefore natural that more factors are taken into account in syntactic change.

The fact that syntactic change may be often due to the same principles underlying sound change and morphological change hints at the possibility of identifying a certain naturalness and directionality in syntactic change, as has been determined for other types of linguistic developments. This possibility is, however, not accepted by all historical linguists. On the contrary, the different transmission of clauses with respect to phonemes and to morphemes has been seen as evidence for the lack of a natural directionality in syntactic change. Rankin (2003), for example, writes: "One of the factors that makes phonological reconstruction possible is our fairly thorough understanding of the directionality of sound change in particular environments. We expect sound change to be phonetically natural, at least at the outset, and we expect it often to affect entire natural classes. This frequently makes reconstruction a matter of working backwards along well-established trajectories. Our understanding of naturalness in syntactic change is far less well developed" (p. 206; cf. also Winter 1984). Other scholars, instead, consider syntactic structures to follow paths of change as precise as those of phonetic and morphological forms. Dunn et al. (2008) argue that, as in sound change a plosive becomes a fricative more often than the other way round, similarly in syntax postpositions become case markers more frequently than case markers become postpositions. This unidirectionality is also assumed by grammaticalization theory.[1] I find the latter assumption to be more persuasive, as can be seen in the similar target features of different types of language change. In sound change, lenition and assimilation are more frequent than fortition and dissimilation (cf. Blevins 2004). In the same vein in morphology, short or frequent forms usually replace long forms or rare forms, so that the latter are often restructured by analogy to the former (Kuryłowicz 1945;

---

1.   The possibility of a unidirectional syntactic change is compatible with the idea of a cyclic development, as described in van Gelderen (2011) for articles, agreement, tense, mood, aspect, negation, etc., since also in this case a lexical element first becomes functional and then is reinforced by a different lexical strategy. Accordingly, a grammaticalization path is followed by a formal renewal. For argumentation and case studies against unidirectionality in syntactic change, instead, see Janda (2001) and Norde (2009).

Mańczak 1958, 1980; Bybee 1985: 50–52). A similar situation may be identified in syntactic change, which also tends to replace long, heterogeneous or rare forms by means of shorter, more homogeneous or more frequent correspondents. An example of this is the diachronic decay of the correlative diptych, which implies a sort of appositive linkage between subordinate clause and main clause, in favour of embedded subordination in many Indo-European languages.

One may argue that mechanisms of change pertain to the description, rather than to the explanation, of a syntactic development, as well as of language change in general. Anttila (1977) observed that analogy is not an explanation, but rather something to be explained. The same may be said of reanalysis and of grammaticalization, as well as of borrowing, which clearly requires extra-linguistic information; as Thomason and Kaufmann (1988) argued, extra-linguistic factors of social and cultural nature are even more important than purely linguistic, system-internal factors in situations of contact (cf. also Thomason 2001; Trudgill 2011; *contra* Heine & Kuteva 2005). What may thus count as a genuine explanation for a syntactic change? At present, there is no agreement on this, since explanations are even more controversial than descriptions, but in general diachrony and universals have been suggested as the most probable candidates for explanation (cf. Good 2008). Universals are commonly appealed in the generative research tradition, according to which syntactic change is determined by the synchronic properties of the language system, and these properties ultimately trace back to the inbuilt capacities of the human mind; from this point of view, "synchronic assumptions have diachronic consequences" (Kiparsky 2008: 23). This is related to the generativist claim that syntactic change occurs in first language acquisition, since child language is minimally influenced by language specific usages (cf. Zipser 2012). A possible drawback to positing universals as ultimate explanation may be the fact that the assumption of innateness is not falsifiable and therefore also not demonstrable; in fact, innateness has been accused of being an empty explanation in certain functional-oriented literature (cf. Tomasello 2004). Diachrony, instead, is a more popular explanation in the functional-typological approach, whereby a given construction is the historical product of a syntactic change, even though speakers are usually not conscious of it; in this sense, diachronic assumptions are the ones that have synchronic consequences (cf. Lass 1997: 9ff; Bybee 2008: 108). Diachronic and universal explanations are not necessarily incompatible. In Viti (2015: §6.4) we have observed that synchronic explanations of systemic nature may especially apply to structural inventories consisting of least numerous, least complex, least meaning-bearing units and to those that are least prone to contact (for discussion on complexity see Hawkins 2004; Dahl 2004; Miestamo et al. 2008; Sinnemäki 2011). This applies to the domain of phonology, and actually even supporters of grammaticalization theory concede that this mechanism of change usually exerts a scarce influence on phonological forms (cf. Heine 2003: 597; Heine & Kuteva 2007: 55). In this, a system is by no means to be intended as

ordered or consequent, as in Bybee et al. (1994: 1) – on the contrary, language systems usually present gaps and redundancies; I mean rather a systemic property whereby a change in one domain may affect also other domains of the system. Instead, inventories consisting of more numerous, more complex and more meaning-bearing units such as lexemes and especially syntactic structures are also less explicable through language internal systemic considerations; diachrony has a greater explanatory value in this case. Universals and diachrony are not the only possible explanations for language change; other potential explanations may be seen, synchronically, in pragmatic functions, whereby different types of information in terms of topicality, accessibility, focusability, novelty or contrast may be identified behind the use of different competing constructions (cf. Matić et al. 2014). Pragmatic explanations, however, are often difficult to measure objectively, especially in cross-linguistic comparison, and some scholars impute a certain vagueness to them.

In general, it is also by no means ascertained that finding an ultimate explanation is necessary; Kurylowicz (1945), for example, claimed that we can describe *how* languages change, but we cannot predict *if* they change or explain *why* they change. However, the validity of an explanation for syntactic change may be better assessed if compared with explanations suggested in other domains, such as the philosophy of language and the philosophy of science (cf. Okasha 2002: 40ff; Leiss 2009; Newen & Schrenk 2008; Bertram 2011; Curd et al. 2013: 647ff). I see three basic types of possible explanations, which bring about strikingly different theoretical assumptions and which may also affect data interpretation. First, a certain phenomenon X may be explained by another temporally preceding phenomenon Y (*explanatio ut prior eventus sive causa*), as we have seen for the assumption of diachrony claimed in the functionalist-typological approach, as well as already in diachronic etymology as practiced by Neogrammarians. Even though a previous event could be the explanation of a subsequent event only if it is the cause of it, in language this principle is relaxed, owing to the logical fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Second, a phenomenon Y is the explanation of a phenomenon X if the former may be seen as more basic or simpler than the latter, and X can be led back to Y through a process of reduction (*explanatio ut reductio*). This way of reasoning is common in the natural sciences, where elementary units are identified from which other substances derive. In linguistics, this type of explanation is usually pursued in the generativist framework, which despite the various modifications of its tenets has always been consistent to this search for economy. Third, one may explain a phenomenon X by relating it to another phenomenon Y that is somehow similar or better known (*explanatio ut translatio*). This third type of explanation is the least investigated and may also be regarded as the least scientific, since there is often no objective basis to assess similarity. Similarity was searched, for example, by ancient etymologies as those suggested in Yāska's *Nirukta*, in Plato's *Kratylos*, and in Varro's first section of *De Lingua Latina*, which in fact are considered false: etymology

as a scientific discipline only begins with the Neogrammarians (cf. Belardi 2002). Still, the search for similarity, as well as the development of an abductive type of inference in Pierce's sense (cf. Hartshorne & Weiss 1931–1958) have been shown to reflect common reasoning with linguistic effects. This may therefore be also relevant for syntactic investigation, to the extent that syntactic change may reflect the speaker's subjective perspectives, and even false assumptions. As folk etymology may leave traces on the structure of a word,[2] syntactic constructions may also change owing to an incorrect interpretation of a linear or hierarchical sequence; this is actually reanalysis, which we have seen as being more typical of syntax than of other grammar components.

2.2   Feasibility of syntactic reconstruction

The essential problem of historical syntax is, as anticipated above, the comparability of syntactic units such as phrases, clauses and sentences. Scholars who strictly follow the Comparative Method do not admit this possibility (cf. Jeffers 1976; Watkins 1976; Lightfoot 1979: 155ff, 2002a, 2002b; Winter 1984; Rankin 2003; Pires & Thomason 2008: 50ff; von Mengden 2008). Others scholars are more open to the possibility of a syntactic comparison, which, however, has mainly been limited to two basic situations, that is, to clusters of syntactic features, rather than single features, and to syntactic idioms. Watkins (1964) argues that the agreement of different Indo-European languages in their linear sequence of verb, preverb and enclitic particle with respect to each other may be considered to be inherited and therefore reconstructable also for Proto-Indo-European, while the word order of a simple constituent, such as the verb at the end of the clause, is not characteristic enough of Indo-European with respect to other genetically unrelated languages such as, say, Burushaski. The same assumption of inheritance may be made if we compare idioms: idioms represent a fixed syntactic unit, which usually does not admit much room for lexical substitution and which has an idiosyncratic, rather than compositional, meaning; as such, it is stored in the lexicon similarly to simple lexemes. Watkins (1995), who so much contributed to the reconstruction of Indo-European poetics, identifies a number of idioms in proverbs and in formulaic structures of inherently conservative religious, juridical and poetic texts.

---

2.   The effect of a folk etymology on a form can be seen in the case of the so-called *étymologie croisée* studied by Vendryes (1955), whereby a word X with a certain etymology is connected by the speaker to a non-cognate word Y having another etymology on the basis of their surface similarity, and Y influences the structure of X, as in the well-known case of English *sparrow-grass*. Actually, some points of ancient etymology have been recently revaluated in historical linguistics, as Katz (2010) observes: "folk etymology, often derided by those 'in the know', remains an important linguistic force and must be taken seriously – for one reason, because the popular form often wins out" (p. 345).