



# The Diachrony of Grammar

VOLUME 1

T. Givón



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T. Givón

University of Oregon

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VOLUME 1

*IN MEMORIAM*

*John Verhaar, S.J.*

*"The past is never dead. It's not even past".*

*William Faulkner*

## Preface

In the summer of 1976 I spent six weeks at the LSA summer institute at SUNY, Oswego, teaching a class on diachronic syntax. It was a heady time. Carol Justus hosted the Institute, doing the legwork for the official director, her mentor Win Lehmann. Charles Li came up, having just put on the third and, as it turned out, last of his Santa Barbara symposia, where we all got together for three years running, striving to integrate functionalism, typology and diachrony. Tim Shopen brought in his just-funded NSF project, Language Typology and Linguistic Field Work, with a conference celebrating Joe Greenberg. Marianne Mithun ran a summer-long workshop for her Mohawk speakers. For a lighter touch, Lisa Menn and I organized a two-day conference on Middle Earth Linguistics, with the opening remarks delivered by Win Lehmann wearing his inimitable formal deadpan, and Woopsy Wolfram wowing the gallery with Middle Earth dialectology. My own paper dealt with diachronic change in Entish phonology and the puzzling consequences of hyper-slow delivery speed.

Also teaching at the Oswego institute were fellow travellers Paul Hopper, Bernard Comrie, Wally Chafe, Joan Bybee and many others, some of whom sat in on my class and enriched the rather skeletal offering. My plan was to rework the materials into a textbook. Fortunately, I didn't. All I had to offer at the time were disparate case studies and a rather wobbly theoretical perspective. Those case studies, with the data still shining bright, did find their way into a book though, as the first 10 chapters of this work.

Fifteen years later, my friend and editor John Verhaar, S.J., suggested that I gather all my work on diachronic syntax and grammaticalization into a single venue. I told him I would think about it. In the intervening years, Paul Hopper and Elizabeth Traugott had published their textbook, as had Bernd Heine and his associates in Koeln. The very same year, the two volume of our 1988 Oregon symposium on grammaticalization came out, edited by Elizabeth Traugott and Bernd Heine, and a few years later the book by Joan Bybee and her colleagues. I told John I wasn't sure I could add much to what my colleagues had already done. When I saw him for the last time, in Nijmegen in the late 1990s, he was blind and failing. Are you still thinking? he asked me. I told him yes, but that I was still learning more about the subject, working primarily with two North American languages, Ute and Tolowa-Athabaskan.

Fifteen years later, it has finally dawned on me that the kind of book that should be ideally written could not in fact be written, leastwise not by me. Sure, I have learned some more, who wouldn't? More data, an expanded theoretical perspective. But this is precisely why, as much as I admire what my colleagues have done, I am still reluctant to produce a definitive didactic tome. In the interim, *en attendant Godot*, I have chosen to bring together all the case-studies that ought to lead someone smarter, or bolder, than myself to nail down the grand design. The data in these two volumes – much revised, corrected and expanded – are still the gist of what stands firm and shines bright as theories rise and fall.

I have attempted, first, to recast these case studies in as coherent a theoretical perspective as I could muster after 45 years of trying to make sense of the diachrony of grammar. If this work is about anything, it is about how theory emerges out of the data, and how tentative the theory remains in spite of the solidity of the data that prompted it. By the same token, the work is also about how the data, solid as it may seem, is not independent of the theory within which it is embedded. Its meaning, its very significance, changes as it is recast in a new or expanded framework. In the philosophy of science, we owe this dynamic perspective to Russell Norwood Hanson, and ultimately to Charles Sanders Peirce.

While the data remains the backbone of these two volumes, the theoretical perspective is not exactly absent. If one had to boil it down to one sentence, it would run as follows: This work constitutes a frontal assault on F. de Saussure's corrosive legacy in linguistics, beginning with his cutting off of linguistics' cross-disciplinary lifelines, urging us to lower our sights to "internal linguistics" (latter days' "pure linguistics"). Then onward to his three core dogmas of Structuralism: The arbitrariness of language structure, the idealization of the data – enshrining *langue* and disdaining *parole*, and last but not least, the arbitrary firewall between synchrony and diachrony.

One of the things I hope to show here is that the clustering of Saussure's four dogmas is far from arbitrary. Rather, the four sit well together, organically, inevitably, being a strange amalgam of the two worst features of reductionist epistemology – the theory-shyness of extreme Empiricism, and the data-aversion of Platonic Rationalism.

Over the years, reviewers have slapped my wrist periodically for daring to commit, brazenly, that most heinous of offenses against Saussure's revered legacy – panchronic grammar. The truth is, I stand guilty. *Mea maxima culpa*. After which a confession is perhaps in order, one that will animate this work: I have never seen a piece of synchronic data that didn't reek – instantly, to high heaven – of the

diachrony that gave it rise. Reek in two distinct ways: First, with the frozen relics of diachrony that prompt us to reconstruct prior states. And second, with synchronic variation that hints at the early stirrings of ongoing change and intimations of things to come.

Conversely, I have never seen a piece of diachronic data that didn't demand, indeed insist on, an understanding of the non-arbitrary, adaptive general principles – Carnap's general propositions – that govern synchronic language behavior. The synchrony and diachrony of grammar are but twin faces of the same coin. To study the one in artificial isolation from the other is to gut both. If we let de Saussure's seductive siren song continue to bewitch us, we will never understand how synchronic grammars came to be the way they are. Nor would we unearth the cognitive, communicative, neurological and developmental universals that guide diachronic change.

White Cloud Ranch  
Ignacio, Colorado  
March 2014



# Table of contents

## VOLUME I

Preface	IX
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## PART I: Perspective

Chapter 1. Historical syntax and synchronic morphology: An archaeologist's field trip	3
Chapter 2. From discourse to syntax: Grammar as a processing strategy	27
Chapter 3. Where does crazy syntax come from?	49
Chapter 4. The SOV mystery and language evolution	75

## PART II: Out of Africa

Chapter 5. On the diachrony of the Bantu copula <i>ni</i>	101
Chapter 6. On the verbal origin of the Bantu verb suffixes	117
Chapter 7. Serial verbs and syntactic change: Niger-Congo	131
Chapter 8. Topic, pronoun and grammatical agreement	163
Chapter 9. The drift from VSO to SVO in Biblical Hebrew: The pragmatics of tense-aspect	197
Chapter 10. The evolution of subordinate clauses in Biblical Hebrew	245
Chapter 11. The diachrony of the so-called 'ethical dative'	281
Chapter 12. The evolution of indefinite markers	307

## PART III: Voices

Chapter 13. The rise of the English GET-passive	329
Chapter 14. Diachronic hybrids: The Lunda Passive	355
Chapter 15. The evolution of de-transitive voice in Tolowa Athabaskan	375
Chapter 16. Tale of two passives: Internal reconstruction in Ute	409
Chapter 17. Toward a diachronic typology of passive voice	427

**VOLUME II****PART IV: High up the mountain**

Chapter 18. The evolution of Ute case-marking	443
Chapter 19. The evolution of Ute post-positions	465
Chapter 20. The diachrony of pronominal agreement in Ute	477
Chapter 21. The diachrony of complex verbs in Ute	507
Chapter 22. The usual suspects: The grammaticalization of 'do', 'be', 'have' and 'go' in Ute	525

**PART V: Complexity**

Chapter 23. Serial verbs and the mental reality of 'event'	553
Chapter 24. The puzzle of Ngabere auxiliaries: Comparative cum internal reconstruction in Chibchan and Misumalpan	577
Chapter 25. The genesis of complex verb phrases: Multiple routes to clause-union	599
Chapter 26. The genesis of complex noun phrases	637
Chapter 27. Nominalization, de-subordination and re-finitization	661

**PART VI: Prospective**

Chapter 28. Diachrony, ontogeny, and evolution	693
Chapter 29. Internal reconstruction: As method, as theory	731
Chapter 30. The intellectual roots of functionalism in linguistics	771
Chapter 31. Beyond Structuralism: Exorcising Saussure's ghost	787
Chapter 32. <i>Mi vida loca en la lingüística</i> : A conversation with Zarina Estrada	801
Bibliography	B1
Language Index	I1
Topic Index	I3

## PART I

# Perspective



## Historical syntax and synchronic morphology: An archaeologist's field trip\*

### 1. Introduction<sup>1,2</sup>

This chapter constitutes an attempt to explain the genesis of bound – affixal – morphology, both derivational and inflectional. I propose that in order to understand why the synchronic morphology of a language is the way it is, one must consider the syntactic order and clausal structure that prevailed at the time when that morphology arose. I will further attempt to show how the synchronic syntax of

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\* This chapter was originally published in the proceedings of the CLS #7 meeting (Givón 1971a). My aim at the time was rather modest – explaining Greenberg's (1966b) typological correlations between clausal word-order (VO vs. OV) and bound morphology (prefixal vs. suffixal, respectively). At the time, I had read neither F. Bopp (1833) nor H. Paul (1880) nor A. Meillet (1921) nor Jespersen (1917), and thus set out rather innocently to re-invented grammaticalization from scratch. The paper argued the grand theme that synchrony is largely explained by diachrony. The other major explanatory parameters of grammar – communicative function, the neuro-cognitive processor and language evolution – were grafted onto my evolving perspective a few years later (Givón 1979; see Chapters 2,3,4, below). While the main thrust of the original paper seems sound, I have removed several examples that seem, in retrospect, either dead wrong or irrelevant. I also dispensed with some of the more embarrassing formal discussion of ordered transformational rules and overly abstract syntactic structures.

1. The original footnote, perhaps forgiven in view of the *Zeitgeist*, went as follows: This trip was inspired in part by an *Analect* variously ascribed to Confucius but most likely emanating from that greatest of all time-trippers, Lao Tse; who is reported to have remarked, on the occasion of being informed that Chinese was an isolating language: "Weep not, my children, for today's syntax is tomorrow's morphology".

2. I remain indebted to Theo Vennemann, W.P. Lehmann, Robert Hertzron, A.E. Meeussen, Benji Wald and Larry Hyman for many comments, suggestions and criticisms of an earlier draft of the original paper.

a language constrains the possible pathways through which its morphology may arise. And, throughout, I will also illustrate the converse – how one can use the synchronic morphology of a language to reconstruct earlier diachronic stages of its syntax.<sup>3</sup>

In approaching this topic, one must first re-consider Saussure's dogma of segregation between synchrony and diachrony as it applies to grammar.<sup>4</sup> In this, one of the less-surprising observations coming out of this chapter is that diachronic change in syntax quite often resembles Chomsky's (1965, Chapter 3) synchronic syntactic transformations.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Syntactic change in the verb phrase

### 2.1 Bantu verb affixes

In conformance with their current VO word-order, core-Bantu languages, exhibit the order V-COMP in their verb phrase. Further, the most common Bantu verb morphology consists of the following sequence:

#### (1) SP-TAM-OP-**verb**-VS

whereby SP is the obligatory subject pronominal agreement prefix, TAM one or more tense-aspect-modal prefixes, OP an optional object pronoun, and VS the various verbal suffixes.<sup>6</sup>

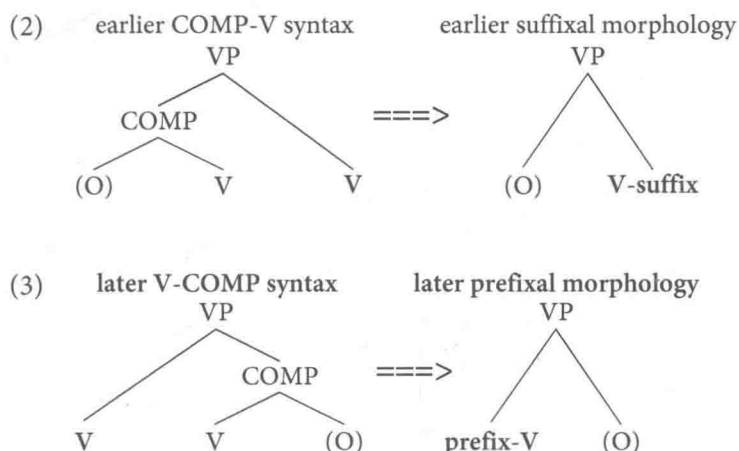
3. Primarily by the oft-maligned method of Internal Reconstruction (see vol. II, Chapter 29).

4. See discussion in vol. II, Chapter 31. At the time the original paper was written (1971), I didn't fully appreciate how my thesis constituted a flat-out rejection of Saussure's (1915) second idealization dogma. Nor did I realize how muddled and self-contradictory his arguments were for a strict segregation between synchrony and diachrony. Given the posthumous provenance of the *Course*, it is not entirely clear how much of the muddle was due to Saussure himself.

5. The reigning syntactic formalism of the era, ordered syntactic transformations (Chomsky 1965, Chapter 3), struck me at the time as isomorphic to some of the diachronic morpho-syntactic changes I was investigating (Givón 1967). Around the same time, Wally Chafe (1968) noted that Chomsky and Halle's (1968) proposed ordered rules of 'synchronic' English phonology largely recapitulated the diachrony of English sound change.

6. The larger Bantu verb suffixes mark either de-transitive voice (passive, middle-voice, reciprocal), transitivity changes (causative, applicative) and the 'reversive', a species of

In an earlier paper (Givón 1971c; see Chapter 5, below), I surveyed evidence suggesting that both the T-A-M prefixes and verbal suffixes of core-Bantu arose historically from main verbs governing clausal complements. I further suggested that while the grammaticalization of modal-aspectual verbs into T-A-M *prefixes* in Bantu is relatively recent and indeed still ongoing, the grammaticalization of semantically-similar main verbs into verb suffixes must have occurred much earlier, at some pre-Core-Bantu stage. Lastly, I suggested that the best explanation for the post-verbal position of the core-Bantu verb suffixes, given the current VO, V-COMP order of Bantu languages, lies in the hypothesis that at the time those suffixes arose from main modal-aspectual verbs, the syntactic order of Bantu languages was OV, COMP-V. The differential position of the T-A-M prefixes and verb suffixes in Bantu may thus be ascribed to a historical change in word-order – OV to VO, thus COMP-V to V-COMP. That is:



Another fact that seemed at the time to support this hypothesis was the current position of anaphoric object pronouns as *prefixes* in the core-Bantu verb (1), contrasting with the post-verbal (VO) position of object nouns. A purely synchronic account would posit a syntactic transformation, as in e.g. Swahili:

- (4) **synchronic nominal order (VO)**                      **synchronic pronominal order (OV):**
- |                         |     |              |
|-------------------------|-----|--------------|
| ni-li-ona <b>kitabu</b> | ==> | ni-li-ki-ona |
| 1s-PA-see <b>book</b>   |     | 1s-PA-it-see |
| 'I saw a book'          |     | 'I saw it'   |

lexicalized negation. But smaller – thus presumably older – suffixes, primarily vowels or morpho-phonemic changes with the i/e, u/o vowel harmony, mark an old perfective, a subjunctive and a negative. For details see Chapter 5, below.

A similar suggestion may be made about Romance languages, e.g. Spanish:<sup>7</sup>

- |     |                |                 |            |              |
|-----|----------------|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| (5) | <i>ví</i>      | <i>un libro</i> | $\implies$ | <i>lo-ví</i> |
|     | see/PA/1s      | a book          |            | it-see/PA/1s |
|     | 'I saw a book' |                 |            | 'I saw it'   |

## 2.2 Amharic object pronouns

The current clausal word-order in Amharic is a rather rigid OV, COMP-V. Evidence from Geez and other Semitic languages, however, makes it clear that the older syntactic order of pre-Amharic, indeed of all the Ethiopian Semitic languages prior to contact with the Cushitic SOV substratum, was VO, V-COMP. Object pronouns in Amharic, like those of Geez and other Semitic languages, are suffixal, conforming to the old pattern of Geez, Hebrew, and Arabic. The situation is thus the exact converse of Bantu and Romance:

- |     |                                      |   |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---|
| (6) | <b>synchronic nominal order (OV)</b> | <b>synchronic pronominal order (VO)</b> |
|     | <i>issu bā-mākina mätta</i>          | $\implies$ <i>issu mätta-bbā-(a)t</i>   |
|     | he in-car came                       | he came-in-it                           |
|     | 'he came in a car'                   | 'he came in it'                         |

Bach (1968) used this inverse position of pronominal (VO) vs. nominal (OV) objects in Amharic to argue that Amharic still has an 'underlying', 'deep' synchronic word-order VO, a proposal that required a 'synchronic' re-ordering transformation in order to obtain the surface OV order. Rather than treat the discrepancy as a synchronic distortion, the frozen VO order of pronominal suffixes in Amharic merely harkens back to the older VO word-order of Geez and Semitic.

The rest of Bach's arguments reflect the ordered-rules *Zeitgeist* in both phonology and syntax. Within that formal approach, one endeavored to show that synchronic syntactic rules, such as gapping, extraposition, topicalization and focusing, 'worked better' if they were ordered *before* the historically-attested word-order change – now re-christened as a synchronic transformation. The well-documented

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7. The whole argument has turned out to be either fallacious or highly controversial, requiring a later recantation (Givón 1977a).



diachronic VO-to-OV change in Amharic was thus considered as part of its synchronic syntax.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.3 Romance tense-aspect affixes

A close parallel to the Bantu verb affixes, above, may be seen in Romance languages, where the older tense-aspect conjugation is suffixal, suggesting a COMP-V, OV word-order at the time of cliticization. Thus in Spanish, both the imperfective-past and the old future suffixal conjugations can still be traced back to older main verbs, most likely *ir* 'go' and *haber* 'have', respectively; as in:

(7)	person	imperfect-past		future	
	1s:	compra-ba	'I used to buy'	comprar-é	'I will buy'
	2s:	compra-bas	'you used to buy'	comprar-hás	'you will buy'
	3s:	compra-ba	's/he used to buy'	comprar-á	's/he will buy'
	1p:	compá-bamos	'we used to buy'	comprar-émos	'we will buy'
	3p:	compra-ban	'they used to buy'	comprar-án	'they will buy'

In contrast, the more-recently evolving tense-aspect markers in Spanish are pre-verbal, conforming to the current VO, V-COMP word-order. In this way, the new perfect (from *haber* 'have') and future (from *ir* 'go') are on their way to creating a new complex prefixal conjugation, as in:

(8)	person	perfect		future		
	1s	hé	comprado	voy	a	comprar
	2s	hás	"	vás	"	"
	3s	há	"	vá	"	"
	1p	hemos	"	vamos	"	"
	3p	hán	"	ván	"	"

8. A similar approach was suggested by McCawley (1968), arguing that the 'deep', 'underlying' word-order of English was SOV rather than the attested 'surface' SVO. At the time of the original paper, Robert Hetzron (i.p.c.) suggested to me that Semitic languages presented a similar case, whereby the clausal word-order of both Biblical Hebrew and Koranic Arabic was VSO but the pronominal order in at least one conjugation was SVO, perhaps harkening to an older SVO syntactic order. However attractive the argument seemed at the time, I was soon impelled to reject it on both empirical and theoretical grounds (see Footnote 7).