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Grammatical Relations in Change

Edited by
Jan Terje Faarlund

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Change

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Volume 56

Grammatical Relations in Change

Edited by Jan Terje Faarlund

Preface

At the XIV. International Conference of Historical Linguistics in Vancouver 1999 I organized a workshop called *Grammatical Relations and Grammatical Change*. This workshop was the beginning of the collective work resulting in this book. Of the eleven contributions in the book, six were presented at the workshop, namely those by Werner Abraham, John Ole Askedal, Jan Terje Faarlund, Lars Heltoft, Lene Schøsler, and Anette Veerman-Leichsenring. Muriel Norde submitted her paper for the workshop, but could not attend.

The workshop must be rated as a very successful one, not only in terms of the quality of the contributions, but first of all because we all felt that we did not get time to finish our discussions. We therefore agreed to meet once more, in Amsterdam in January 2000, where we would give ourselves two full days for discussion. We also agreed to try to publish the papers collectively. In order to extend the scope and the volume of the book, we decided to invite additional contributions. There were of course papers in the different sections at the Vancouver conference that also fit the topic of our workshop, and four of those were invited to join us. They were Elly van Gelderen, Alice Harris, Alana Johns, and Gary Miller. Fortunately they all agreed to participate. They joined us in Amsterdam, and contributed greatly, academically and socially. Before the Amsterdam meeting, everybody circulated revised versions of their papers among the group, so that the two days in Amsterdam could be spent efficiently discussing work that we already knew well. This book is therefore, to a larger extent than many volumes of this type, a collective work. Everybody has had an important impact on everybody else's chapter.

Amsterdam was chosen as a venue because of its pivotal location in Europe and because it is a city that nobody will want to pass up a chance to visit. We had no funding for the meeting; everybody covered it out of their own institutional (or even private) funds.

Even a small, informal meeting like ours depends on various practical and technical preparations. We are all grateful to Muriel, the local resident, for her help with these details.

The final preparation of the volume was done at the University of Oslo, with the good help of my assistants Anette Lundebø and Gro Vittersø.

Oslo, July 2000,

JTF

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Introduction

Jan Terje Faarlund

Any treatment of syntactic or morphosyntactic change raises a number of methodological and metatheoretical questions related to the phenomenon of language change and to the theory of grammar. In this book, such topics are approached from different theoretical perspectives, generative grammar, valency grammar, functionalism, etc. The contributions also cover a wide range of data from many languages. What the contributions have in common, and what therefore justifies putting them together in one volume, is the topic of grammatical relations, and their role and involvement in linguistic change.

1. Grammatical relations

Grammatical relations is a rather vague or wide term. In principle it can be used about any grammatical dependency relation, in generative grammar defined as head-complement relation or specifier-head relation. In most contexts it is used about such relations within the VP, in other words about the relations between the verb and its argument phrases. This is also the meaning of the notion of grammatical relation adopted in most of the chapters in this book. In Werner Abraham's contribution, however, the term is used in a somewhat wider sense to cover also the relationship between non-lexical heads and their complements, such as modal particles, modal verbs, and the infinitival preposition.

The core relational categories, *subject* and (direct and indirect) *object*, are among the fundamental concepts of just about every grammatical theory or model. They are indispensable in descriptions of most languages. If the author of a linguistic description finds that the categories of subject and object are not useful or usable in the description of the language in question, that usually calls for special motivation and argumentation.

Grammatical relations involve various levels of linguistic description, including lexical (valency), semantic (theta-roles), morphological (case marking, verb agreement, cross-referencing), and even prosodic. But above all, grammatical relation is a syntactic notion. The syntactic description of grammatical relations involves various levels and sub-systems, such as linear precedence, configurational level, and dominance relationship, which again define the various syntactic properties of argument phrases which can be identified in a given language. There is a long tradition in the grammatical literature of describing morphological, semantic and syntactic properties of subjects and objects in various languages. There have been efforts to synthesize such descriptions into universal characterizations, the best known being Keenan (1976). It is an important subdiscipline of linguistic typology to study the distribution and correlation of different subject and object properties across languages. Some of Greenberg's (1963) universals are early examples of such correlations, e.g. Universal 41: "If in a language the verb follows both the nominal subject and the nominal object as the dominant order, the language almost always has a case system". This is but one kind of correlation. The typological distribution of the properties of subjects and objects in a wide range of languages was the topic of one of the groups working within the project *Typology of European Languages* in the 1990's. The results from this group are published in Feuillet 1998.

Generally, the notion of grammatical relations enters into grammatical descriptions and linguistic argumentation from two different perspectives. Adopting a metaphor where the abstract representation of a linguistic unit is "at the bottom", and where the overt phonological representation is "at the top", grammatical relations are *identified* in a "top-down" perspective and *defined* in a "bottom-up" perspective. In the top-down perspective, argument NPs that instantiate grammatical relations are identified in terms of their overt properties. These are either coding properties, such as position in the sentence, case marking, verb agreement, verbal valency; or behavioral properties, such as binding properties, omissibility, island properties, behavior in connection with raising, passivization, equi-deletion, etc. (Keenan 1976). In her chapter, Lene Schøsler demonstrates how especially verbal valency is an important factor in the identification of grammatical relations in a language with few coding properties.

In the bottom-up perspective, grammatical relations are defined in different ways. In the Government and Binding theory of generative grammar they are defined by their structural position, and in the minimalist program (Chomsky 1995) rather by grammatical features associated with structural positions. In Lexical Functional Grammar the relations are defined in terms of

basic grammatical features, while in Relational Grammar they are considered theoretical primitives.

2. Diachronic syntax

In much recent work on syntactic change, *reanalysis* is a central concept. Harris & Campbell (1995) consider it one of three basic mechanisms of syntactic change, and define it as “a mechanism which changes the underlying structure of a syntactic pattern and which does not involve any modification of its surface manifestation” (p. 50). It should follow from this that the locus of syntactic change is the point where reanalysis takes place. According to generative grammarians, this is primarily first language acquisition. On the basis of linguistic utterances in the environment, the learner infers a grammar which is different from the grammar of the adult speakers that produced the utterances. In the context of generative grammar, reanalysis takes the form of setting parameters differently from those that underlay the input from the previous generation (Lightfoot 1991, 1999). According to Lightfoot, explaining language change requires only “(a) an account of how trigger experiences have shifted and (b) a theory of language acquisition that matches PLD [primary linguistic data] with grammars in a deterministic way” (1999:225).

In the present volume, reanalysis is evoked as a factor in syntactic change, by authors writing within a generative framework as well as by others. Alice Harris in her contribution extends the data base of their book by examining a case of reanalysis of cleft sentences leading to monoclausal focus constructions in North East Caucasian. Anette Veerman-Leichsenring shows how NPs that are fronted because of their discourse function have been reanalyzed as subjects in the Popolocan languages of Mexico, resulting in a change from VSO to SVO as a basic order in some of these languages. Gary Miller compares the reanalysis of subjects as objects in gerundive constructions in Old English and Latin, thereby demonstrating how the same mechanism operates independently on similar constructions with similar results in different languages at different times. Elly van Gelderen examines the change from oblique to nominative in Old and Middle English, which results from a reanalysis of those NPs as subjects. In my own chapter I show how an oblique NP could be reanalyzed as a subject without changing its case in Icelandic, leading to ‘oblique subjects’ in that language.

It is debatable whether reanalysis can take place at any point in the life history of the speaker, or whether it is possible only in connection with first

language acquisition. It is obviously true that contact situations involving adult speakers also lead to linguistic change. The internalized grammar of the adult speaker may change as a result of influence from utterances generated by a different grammar, whether in another language, another dialect, or just a different idiolect. Presumably, such influence is possible only in bilingual situations (in a wide and general sense): by adopting elements from another system (language, dialect, idiolect) grammatical rules generating that other system are mixed with the rules generating the original system. Yet such changes do not constitute a diachronic linguistic change until a future generation of speakers have adopted the mixed system as their own uniform system.

Language contact in itself does not uniquely determine or explain what the actual changes will be. The outcome of a process of change, whether triggered by language contact or not, is determined by general principles of grammar and by the cognitive and communicative properties of language (Faarlund 1990: 44–45). The cognitive aspect of language determines what is learnable, and hence what is a possible language. The possible results of a linguistic change is therefore limited by what is a possible language: a language cannot change into something which is not a possible language. Therefore Universal Grammar can be seen not only as a specification of a possible language, but also of a possible change. Another way of stating the same insight, is Lass's (1997) General Uniformity Principle: "No linguistic state of affairs (structure, inventory, process, etc.) can have been the case only in the past" (p. 28). The communicative aspects of language prevent changes from going beyond intelligibility: a language cannot change to the extent that mutual intelligibility between generations is prevented.

One crucial question in diachronic linguistics is what other constraints there are to linguistic change. The extreme hypothesis is that "anything can happen". This is a common assumption among generative syntacticians. To those scholars, the important point is that grammars are created anew by each generation. In that sense each individual speaker has his or her own grammar. Thus there can be no "rules of change" (Lightfoot 1979). To other scholars, reanalysis and other notions, such as *grammaticalization*, *analogy*, *extension* etc. are principles of change, in the sense that they specify possible linguistic changes, and thus further limit the possibilities of "what may happen" from one generation of speakers to the next (Harris & Campbell 1995).

The encoding and identification of grammatical relations may lend themselves to various possibilities of reanalysis. Certain positions in the sentence determined by pragmatic factors may be reanalyzed as the fixed position of a

certain relational category, e.g. left periphery from topic to subject, or right periphery from focus to object. Such a redefinition of a positionally or structurally defined element from a discourse functional to a syntactic category is one kind of grammaticalization, as demonstrated by Lars Heltoft. Morphological marking is of course vulnerable to phonological attrition, another type of grammaticalization. Elly van Gelderen shows us its consequences for the history of subject marking in English, and Werner Abraham describes the semantic side of grammaticalization of lexical words in German, while Muriel Norde demonstrates the interplay of phonological and morphosyntactic factors in the reduction of the case system in Swedish. The move from ergative to accusative syntax in some Inuktitut (Eskimo) languages studied in Alana Johns' paper, can probably be seen as a result of grammaticalization or bleaching of a marked construction, the antipassive.

Of the eleven chapters in this book, eight deal with data from either Latin/Romance or Germanic languages. These languages have a long recorded history. The other three chapters deal with languages without an equally long history of written material. All of these base their analyses on synchronic comparative material, showing that differences between related languages or dialects can be treated as different levels along a historical development. Alice Harris compares different North East Caucasian languages, Alana Johns compares different Inuit dialects from Canada and Greenland, and Anette Veerman-Leichsenring compares different languages and dialects belonging to the Popolocan group of Otomanguean languages in Mexico. The reason why such synchronic comparison is interesting to historical linguistics is that they are based on theories about the mechanisms and principles underlying linguistic change.

3. Typology and diachrony

There is a close and interesting link between typology and diachrony. The most obvious and familiar link is embodied in the notion of "drift", which goes back to the work of Edward Sapir (1921). Drift is understood as a unidirectional series of changes whereby languages go from being more synthetic to more analytic. The changes that constitute this drift include loss of morphological case, its function being taken over by word order, and the increased use of function words. The changes described in the Lene Schøsler's chapter, as well as the contrasts presented by John Ole Askedal, are clear illustrations of the typological drift through history. Many changes involving morphology and function

words cannot, however, be described simply as instances of drift in this sense, as is clearly shown by Muriel Nordes detailed study of the Swedish case system.

Despite all the theoretical and empirical work in this area, certain aspects of the nature of the link between typology and diachrony are, however, not yet completely understood. It has been suggested that word order changes tend to lead languages towards a “harmonic” stage where the order of head and complement is the same for all phrasal categories (cf. Vennemann 1975, Hawkins 1979 and others). There are, however, several serious problems about this notion of a “harmonic” state of a language. If there is such a state, it should have been attained long ago for all languages, and if it were ever disrupted in any language, we would expect it to have been “repaired” immediately. The notion also implies the possibility of a “transitional stage”, which would mean that some of the world’s languages are “imperfect” or “incomplete”, while others have reached a stage of “perfect harmony”. But since languages are learned anew by each generation on the basis of some innate capacity and the input from the environment, a transitional stage as a characterization of a language is logically impossible. In addition, some “transitional” stages seem to be lasting for a very long time. For example, a harmonic language should have the same order of head and complement in verb phrases as in noun phrases. This harmony is found in the Romance languages, which have the object after the verb (VO), and the adjective after the noun (NA) as an unmarked order, and in German and Dutch, which have basic OV and AN. English and Scandinavian, however, have VO and AN, a disharmony that has lasted for more than half a millennium.

What nevertheless seems to be an interesting connection is the historical dimension of linguistic typology. In a typological sample, living as well as dead languages may be included, and a typological class may include different historical stages of different languages, as demonstrated by Gary Miller in his study of gerundives in Latin and Old English.

4. Germanic and Romance: a case study

Since the majority of the chapters in this volume deal with Germanic or Latin/Romance, which have undergone very similar kinds of morphosyntactic changes in the course of their recorded history, I will offer a brief sketch of the changes in those languages that more or less directly concern grammatical relations.

Italic (Latin/Romance) and Germanic have basically three kinds of morphosyntactic means of marking grammatical relations: case marking, verb

agreement, and position. The relative importance of these means reflect the stage on a scale from a synthetic to an analytic linguistic type. At one end of the scale are languages with case marking of all major nominal categories, agreement marking in finite verbs for all person and number categories, and relatively free word order. At the other end are languages without case marking of most nominal categories, with very reduced or no verb agreement, and with a rather fixed word order. The contemporary Romance and Germanic languages are spread out along this scale. There is also a diachronic dimension to this distribution: Latin and all the Medieval stages of Germanic are near the synthetic end, while the modern stages are spread out along the scale, with German and Icelandic still near the synthetic end, and French, English and mainland Scandinavian near the analytic end. There has thus been a typological drift through history, where the individual languages differ in terms of how far they have gone along the various parameters.

4.1 Case marking

All the ancient and Medieval stages have case marking of all major nominal categories. Subjects of finite verbs are in the nominative, and direct objects are mostly in the accusative. This system still exists in Icelandic, Faroese, German and Yiddish.

In all the languages with this type of nominal case marking, certain verbs take their complement in the dative, the genitive or the ablative (Latin only). The origin of this lexical case marking is probably semantically determined. The dative expresses the recipient role, as in double object constructions, but also in single object constructions. Being a syncretism of the Indo-European dative, instrumental, ablative and locative, the Germanic dative may also have these latter semantic functions.

The genitive was probably at one stage the case of a partitive or non-affected object, as in the Old Norse *þeir leituðu hennar* 'they searched her(GEN)'. This use of the genitive still exists in Icelandic, whereas in German there is a general tendency towards replacing the genitive with the accusative in object NPs, and in Faroese the genitive has disappeared altogether in this function.

4.2 Position in the sentence

The Germanic and Romance languages observe certain constituent order constraints, and there is a preferred or stylistically neutral order of argument NPs.

However, the languages with case marking enjoy a certain freedom of word order, depending on context and discourse functions. In addition, certain Romance languages, such as Spanish and Italian, have quite free word order although they have also lost their nominal case marking. Lene Schøsler's work shows how Old and Middle French coped with a similar situation.

In the other languages that do not have a full nominal case system, subjects and objects are tied to specific positions relative to the verb(s), and can thus be identified by their position in the sentence.

4.3 Verb agreement

With the exception of Mainland Scandinavian and Afrikaans, all the Germanic and Romance languages exhibit a certain degree of morphological marking of the verb in agreement with the subject. In languages with case marking, only nominative subjects can trigger verb agreement. If an NP in another case by certain criteria might be defined as the subject ("oblique subject") it can never trigger verb agreement, cf. the data in the chapters by Elly van Gelderen and by myself. It may also happen that a nominative subject fails to trigger agreement if it lacks typical subject properties, for example if it comes at the end of the sentence.

4.4 Subjectless sentences

The Germanic and Romance languages can be divided into two groups depending on whether they have an obligatory subject requirement or not. In Latin, Romance (except French), the Medieval stages of Germanic, and in Modern German, Yiddish, Icelandic, and Faroese, there are various sentence types that do not need an overt grammatical subject. In French and the other modern Germanic languages every finite sentence (except imperative sentences) requires a grammatical subject in its surface manifestation.

The languages that do allow subjectless sentences, however, differ as to the extent and sentence types that allow it. The following is a sketchy survey of the development within Germanic and Romance, leaving details aside, and with the proviso that this part of the grammar is particularly problematic for languages where negative data are not available.

Most Romance languages (except modern French) allow a specific subject referent to be expressed through the verbal morphology only, by a process known as *pro-drop*. With the exception of Old English and possibly Yiddish, the Germanic languages do not seem to have been typical *pro-drop* languages

during any part of their recorded history; compare the Spanish sentence (1a), where the subject is expressed only by the verbal affix, and the Old Norse equivalent (1b), which would be incomplete without the pronoun.

- (1) a. *Encontr-ó al caballo*
 found-PAST.3SG OBJ.DEF horse
 b. *hann fann hest-in-n*
 he.NOM found.PAST.3SG horse-DEF-ACC

The old and middle stages of Germanic, as well as modern Icelandic, do, however, allow subject drop in other cases, such as with weather verbs and other verbs referring to natural processes, Icelandic: *Í gær rigndi* ‘yesterday rained’. Most modern Germanic languages and French now require a grammatical subject in this type of sentences, too, cf. German: *Es regnet* ‘it rains’.

Sentences without a grammatical subject, but with semantic roles assigned to other argument phrases, are somewhat misleadingly referred to as ‘impersonal constructions’. For lack of a better term, we will use it here, too, and include so-called impersonal passives. In the old and middle stages, and in Modern German, cf. Icelandic and Faroese, such sentences may occur without a nominative subject, German: *Gestern wurde getrunken* ‘yesterday was drunk’ (i.e. ‘Yesterday there was drinking going on’).

As the obligatory subject requirement took effect in all the languages except those just mentioned, an oblique argument with experiencer verbs was reanalyzed as a grammatical subject. Thus the Old Norse (2a) was replaced by the modern Norwegian (2b).

- (2) a. *Mun þik kal-a*
 FUT YOU.ACC COOL-INF
 ‘You will be cold’
 b. *Du vil frysa*
 you.NOM will freeze

For ample documentation and discussion of equivalent constructions in Old English, see Elly van Gelderen’s chapter. Impersonal passives either disappeared (French, English, Yiddish), remained subjectless (German, Icelandic, Faroese), or were equipped with an expletive subject (mainland Scandinavian), cf. Norwegian: *Det vart dansa til langt på natt* ‘it was danced till far on night’ (i.e. ‘There was dancing going on far into the night’).