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PRINCIPLES OF DIACHRONIC SYNTAX

DAVID W. LIGHTFOOT

Reader in English Linguistics
Rijksuniversiteit, Utrecht
Contents

Foreword vii

1 PRELIMINARIES
  1.1 Some general observations 1
  1.2 Pre-theoretical reflections 4
  1.3 Early generative approaches to syntactic change 21
  1.4 A theory of grammar 42
  1.5 Grammatical theory within the logic of markedness 71

2 A PARADIGM CASE: THE ENGLISH MODALS
  2.1 Modals in Modern English 81
  2.2 Historical re-analysis 98
  2.3 Appendix: periphrastic do 115

3 A THEORY OF CHANGE
  3.1 The Transparency Principle 121
  3.2 A theory of change 141
  3.3 Syntactic reconstruction 154

4 MORE CATEGORY CHANGES
  4.1 English quantifiers 168
  4.2 The English infinitive 186
  4.3 Redistribution of existing categories 199
  4.4 Serial verbs in Kwa 213

5 CHANGES IN THE LEXICON
  5.1 Impersonal verbs in Middle English 229
  5.2 Passive constructions 239
  5.3 The Greek moods 282
Contents

6 ON CYCLIC TRANSFORMATIONS
   6.1 NP Preposing 295
   6.2 wh Movement 313

7 THE CAUSES OF RE-ANALYSIS
   7.1 Role of surface structure and analogies 343
   7.2 Independent causation 374
   7.3 Conclusion 405

Bibliography (and index of references) 409

Citation index 428
Foreword

The aim of this book is to develop a perspective within which one may profitably study how and why the syntax of a language changes in the course of time. In that sense it concerns the principles of diachronic syntax. Research on syntactic change has always played a minor role in the activities of historical linguists, taking a back seat to phonological, lexical and morphological change. There are good reasons for this. I shall argue that the poverty of the field is a function of inadequate theories of synchronic syntax on the part of neogrammarians, American structuralists and transformational generative grammarians alike. However, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in diachronic syntax, as indicated by the papers from the first and second International Conferences on Historical Linguistics (Anderson & Jones 1974, Christie 1976) and the publication of several books on the subject (Jacobs 1975, Friedrich 1975, Lehmann 1974, and the anthologies edited by Li 1977 and Steever, Walker & Mufwene 1976).

Three developments suggest grounds for some optimism: (a) a renewed interest in surface structure implicational universals, stemming most directly from the work of Greenberg (1966) on word order relationships; such ‘universals’ have formed the basis for claims about how languages change and have led to more extensive catalogues of diachronic changes in various languages; (b) the publication of Visser’s compendious study of the history of many construction-types in English, which makes certain kinds of crucial data far more readily accessible; (c) the recent re-orientation of work in generative grammar, following the results of Peters & Ritchie (1973); work within the so-called Extended Standard Theory of generative grammar tries to provide a definition of what kind of formal object will count as a possible grammar of a particular natural language and seeks a universal template, prescribing explicit constraints on the form of grammatical rules and on the way in which such rules may function.
viii  Foreword

A definition of a possible grammar will provide the upper limits to the way in which a given grammar may change historically, insofar as it cannot change into something which is not a possible grammar. Such a definition, i.e. a restrictive theory of grammar, provides interesting and non-trivial predictions about the way in which grammars change; these predictions are derived via a simple theory of change which states, for example, that grammars are liable to undergo a radical re-analysis as they come close to the limits prescribed by the theory of grammar, and that the outputs of two grammars holding for the language of two ‘adjacent’ generations must be sufficiently similar to permit communication. With a theory of grammar and a theory of change along these general lines, one can view linguistic change progressing as a function of chance and necessity, much as Monod (1970) viewed genetic change. Certain changes may take place in a given grammar, which have the effect of making that grammar more ‘marked’, closer to the limits prescribed by the theory of grammar. As these limits are approached, so a re-analysis becomes necessary. The re-analysis itself must fall within certain bounds, such that the necessary therapy is performed and communication is preserved across generations. Within these limits, imposed by an interaction of the theories of grammar and change, it is a matter of chance which of the possible re-analyses is adopted. Whatever change is adopted in a given dialect may itself contribute to the need for further changes, rendering the grammar more marked in certain areas, despite performing the necessary therapy in other areas. In this way, the restrictions imposed by the theory of grammar play a crucial role in accounting for the causes of change.

Therefore, much of this book will deal with radical re-analyses. As a paradigm case, I take a change whereby the grammar of sixteenth-century English developed a new syntactic category of ‘modal verb’, which manifested itself in a variety of changes in possible utterances. The simultaneity of those overt changes argues for the singularity of the change in the abstract grammar. In the light of such re-analyses we shall gradually develop a Transparency Principle as a statement in the theory of grammar, requiring that derivations be minimally complex and that deep structures be fairly ‘close’ to their corresponding surface structures. I shall treat the English modals and the Transparency Principle like the task of peeling an onion, constantly returning to them from different points of view in the light of an examination of more re-analyses and the development of a rather simple theory of
change. Finally in chapter 7, our perspective on diachronic change will be laid out in full.

The Transparency Principle will constrain possible particular grammars and contribute to the explanation of why such radical re-analyses occur. Conversely, the point at which radical re-analyses occur in history might be expected to tell us about the limits to possible grammars (particularly about the precise form of the Transparency Principle) and thus to inform work on the theory of grammar, conceived as a set of restrictions on possible descriptions. In this way data from diachronic change can be brought to bear on questions arising within the theory of grammar, and the study of diachronic syntax will be fully integrated within the general enterprise of providing restrictions on possible grammars, a central empirical task of linguistics. This will be an innovation for syntax, although data from phonological change often figure crucially in arguments about possible synchronic descriptions.

I see this view of diachronic syntax as having three merits: (a) it relates various simultaneous but superficially unconnected changes by claiming that they are the manifestations of a single change in the abstract grammar. It thereby contributes to our understanding of the internal history of a given language by explaining (and perhaps discovering, as with the English modals) the simultaneity of the changes; (b) it provides a novel approach to questions about the causes of change; (c) it introduces a new style of argumentation for choosing between competing theories and synchronic descriptions, by requiring that the theory of grammar should be responsive to diachronic data insofar as it should interact with a theory of change to account for the point at which grammars undergo re-analyses or ‘catastrophic’ changes in the sense of Thom (1972). This is a matter of some considerable methodological importance at a time when many linguists seem to believe that generative theories of grammar have no empirical consequences for domains of enquiry other than morpheme distribution and the pairing of phonetic and semantic representations. Such criticisms are often based on a failure to distinguish a theory of grammar, a particular grammar and ‘interpretive’ mechanisms deriving predictions about the nature of historical change, language acquisition, pathology, etc. I hope that developing such an interpretive mechanism for diachronic change may be helpful for similar work in the domain of language acquisition, etc., and suggest some caution in dealing with questions of the ‘psychological reality’ of grammatical descriptions – a term which has led to much confusion.
Foreword

This view of diachronic change has provided the basis for my research programme over the last five years. The work has been supported by grants from McGill University and the Canada Council and has been reported in earlier papers by myself and some of my assistants. Several students have collaborated on these research projects, and I am particularly grateful for the work of Michael Canale, Anita Carlson, Elan Drescher, Norbert Hornstein, Monica Koch, Amy Weinberg and Lydia White.

This book has been written in the course of sabbatical leave granted by McGill and funded in part by a Canada Council Leave Fellowship. I am thankful for the gracious hospitality of Clare Hall and the Department of Linguistics at the University of Cambridge. I owe a debt of gratitude to Edward Klima, Elizabeth Traugott and other diachronic syntacticians whose pioneering work has been a necessary prelude to what I have done here, even if I criticize it on some methodological points. I am also grateful to several audiences who have helped me to see defects in some of my earlier conceptions and to many scholars who have discussed various aspects of it: Harry Bracken, Ray Dougherty, Joe Emonds, Henry Hız, Henry Hoenigswald, Jay Keyser, Paul Schachter, Bob Stockwell and John Trim. More immediately, a word of public thanks goes to my wife for her assistance in typing from a semi-legible manuscript; to Sidney Allen, Rudolf Botha, Noam Chomsky, Paul Kiparsky, Roger Lass, and Anthony Warner, each of whom read the whole text and made many useful comments which have made it into a better book; and finally to Sari Hornstein for helping me through the proofs.

Cambridge, July 1977

David Lightfoot