1 Introduction

This book is about historical syntax in general. Although syntactic change was an important part of the comparative linguistic tradition, and while the past fifteen years or so have seen a significant increase in attention to the topic, the study of diachronic syntax is still largely disorganized and unfocused and lacks the sort of consensus enjoyed, for example, by historical phonology. This book is aimed at remedying this situation in so far as this is possible at the present time. It is intended as a basic treatise on diachronic syntax. Some might claim that the present state of the field is too fragmented and overwrought with conflicting claims to offer much optimism for achieving our goal, which is to establish a general framework for syntactic change. This state of affairs, however, does not render the task impossible, just more important, exciting, and more urgent.

1.1 Goals of a theory of diachronic syntax

Recent work in diachronic syntax has been chiefly of three sorts: (1) studies of particular changes in individual languages; (2) research on specific kinds of change (e.g. word order change, grammaticalization); and (3) explorations of the diachronic implications of particular formal approaches to grammar, often given more to championing the particular theory of syntax than to actually accounting for linguistic changes¹ (for details, see chapter 2). The approach followed in this book differs from these. Rather than focusing on particular changes in individual languages, we investigate changes cross-linguistically. Rather than limiting attention to individual kinds of change (or single mechanisms of change), we establish commonalities in changes across languages and determine what mechanisms lie behind them and how they fit into the overall explanation of syntactic changes. While this has not been done heretofore, several have recognized its importance and have called for such research; a sense of how the field is viewed and of the importance of this task is seen in the following statements:
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We should work to enlarge the pool of well-grounded and accessible empirical data available for discussions of syntactic change; to translate informal and intuitive notions of the nature and causes of change into explicit proposals that can be scrutinized for their adequacy. (Langacker 1977: 100)

Zu den Aufgaben der historischen Sprachwissenschaft gehört die Feststellung und Klassifizierung von Typen der Sprachveränderungen . . . Eine umfassende Typologie des Syntaxwandels gibt es nicht. (Ebert 1978:10)

To the tasks of historical linguistics belongs the establishment and classification of types of language changes . . . A comprehensive typology of syntactic change does not exist. [Our translation, ACH/LC]

While in principle the study of syntactic change should both inform and be informed by general linguistic theory, too often rigid devotion to a particular theory of syntax has limited rather than magnified insight into diachronic processes. Our findings clearly have relevance for general theories of syntax; however, we take as our starting point the actual changes themselves, rather than the predictions and constraints of any existing theory of syntax (this procedure is justified in chapter 3). Our interest is primarily in the nature of syntactic change, rather than in the form of the theory of such change (see Moore and Carling 1982; esp. p. 3).

Specifically, in our study we have attempted (1) to investigate syntactic changes in a number of languages and language families, (2) to compare these to determine what are possible syntactic changes and what the commonly recurring types of changes are, and (3) to frame a general approach to syntactic change based on the results. Our goals, then, for this book are: (a) to characterize the class of possible changes in the syntax of natural languages; (b) to determine and state formal constraints on syntactic change; (c) to attempt to explain (at least some aspects of) syntactic change; and (d) to show how an understanding of the nature of syntactic change can form the basis for syntactic reconstruction. Our findings provide the foundation for a theory of syntactic change, which includes (1) mechanisms of change (limited to three: reanalysis, extension, and borrowing), (2) a set of general diachronic operations, and (3) a set of general principles that interact with these operations (see chapter 3).3

1.2 Orientation to the organization and contents of the book

In chapter 2, on the history of diachronic syntactic study, we survey the treatments of syntactic change throughout the history of linguistics. This contributes to our general goal of framing an adequate approach to historical syntax, since whatever proved wrong or impractical in the past must be
1.2 Organization of the book

abandoned, while true achievements and empirical findings must be accommodated and incorporated in any adequate treatment. By including the insights and avoiding the errors of previous work, we make large initial strides towards our ultimate goal of framing an appropriate framework for historical syntax.

In chapters 3–6 we begin to develop a framework for diachronic syntax and closely examine three mechanisms of syntactic change – reanalysis, extension, and borrowing. The basic components and fundamental assumptions of the framework we propose are laid out in chapter 3, and these are presented, exemplified, and defended in detail in chapters 4–6.

Reanalysis (chapter 4) has been the single most important mechanism for most attempts to explain syntactic change throughout the history of linguistics. Reanalysis depends upon surface ambiguity or the possibility of more than one analysis. It changes structure, and we examine examples of change through reanalysis of (i) constituency, (ii) hierarchical structure, (iii) category labels, (iv) grammatical relations, and other aspects of underlying structure.

Extension generalizes a rule. It is a mechanism which results in changes in the surface manifestation of a pattern and which does not involve immediate or intrinsic modification of underlying structure. It is the subject of chapter 5, dealt with together with constraints on its operation.

Syntactic borrowing and the consequences of language contact are treated in chapter 6. This is a neglected and abused area of diachronic syntax. We determine the role of borrowing and language contact in a theory of syntactic change and we evaluate hypothesized universals concerning grammatical borrowing.

In chapters 7–10 we deal with the cross-linguistic (“intersystemic”) comparison of diachronic systems and their contribution to the overall framework we propose. We apply the methods of “Intersystemic Comparison” (described below) to four areas of diachronic syntax. Although some of these areas have been very much discussed in the literature, we believe that we succeed in taking a fresh approach to the problems and in discovering some previously undetected regularities.

Chapter 7 describes processes that simplify biclausal structures and states shared characteristics of these processes. Chapter 8 deals with the role of word order change, both chronicling the failure of certain approaches to word order change and contributing to an understanding of how word order changes and of the effects of other grammatical changes on word order harmonies. Chapter 9 treats changes in alignment, i.e. the distribution of the morphosyntactic markers or characteristics in ergative, accusative, and active typological patterns. Here we discuss the origins of alignment changes, a
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constraint on changes in alignment, and the question of typological consistency in alignment. In chapter 10, we deal with the origins of and changes in complex constructions, and their relevance to the general framework of syntactic change.

On the basis of findings in the earlier chapters, the overall nature of syntactic change is addressed in chapter 11, and in particular disputed aspects of explanation, prediction, and causation are explored. There we discuss some of the persistent problems of diachronic syntax, including regularity and directionality. Our views on these issues contribute to developing an approach to establishing correspondences and reconstructing earlier stages of syntax. We argue that syntactic change is rule-governed and orderly. We pull together a variety of evidence to show that while several types of change that have been claimed to be unidirectional are not, the sorts of changes known as grammaticalization proceed in a single direction, with infrequent exceptions.

Chapter 12 in a sense develops a practical application of the framework developed here. It deals with the establishment of syntactic correspondences and with syntactic reconstruction. Various assumed obstacles to syntactic reconstruction are discussed and prospects for successful syntactic reconstruction are demonstrated. The chapter shows exactly how correspondences in syntactic pattern can be established, though some have claimed that this cannot be done. These correspondences are the first step in reconstruction, and the remainder of the chapter shows how the established principles of reconstruction (both internal and comparative reconstruction) can be successfully applied to syntax.

1.3 On the relation to synchronic syntax

We take the position that the syntax of natural languages is constrained by natural laws and that there are definable principles of syntactic change, some of them not derivable from the characteristics of the class of possible grammars. We suggest that it is not enough that input, output, and transitional stages be sanctioned by general (synchronic) linguistic theory. In an adequate theory of change, specific shifts must be characterized as lawful or unlawful for natural language. Such characterizations are stated in this work, especially in chapters 4–6 and 7–11. These characteristics include constraints on the changes from one possible syntactic system to another.

Some recent approaches to diachronic syntax have explored the implications of one or another theory of (synchronic) syntax for diachrony. We consider the results of these studies relatively unproductive and unrevealing of the real nature of syntactic change. Instead, we have tried to explore the nature of
1.3 On the relation to synchronic syntax

syntactic change first and then consider the implications of these facts for a comprehensive theory. We are therefore interested in discovering what characteristics of a given change are shared across languages, and what characteristics are language-particular. We are interested in specifying what changes and what stays the same in a given diachronic process, and ultimately in explaining why and how changes take place. Our primary concern is not with how these facts can be accommodated within current theories, but we are attentive to the question of what these historical properties can tell us about linguistic theory. In this sense, our approach is not theory-driven, but data-driven.

1.4 On prediction

Absolute prediction of change is not, as sometimes suggested, the major goal for diachronic syntax, or indeed for any retrospective science. It is sometimes objected that prediction is necessary for explanation, and that theories of linguistic change which do not predict are therefore inadequate. For example, from this point of view, it might be objected that a theory that recognizes reanalysis of a syntactic construction in the face of surface ambiguity (or multiple possible analyses, see chapter 4) cannot predict when such a change will take place or what exact form it may take, or when it may fail to take place even though the appropriate condition of multiple possible analyses holds. The quick but accurate answer to this objection is that prediction is not necessary for valid explanation. Evolution by natural selection is recognized as scientifically legitimate explanation in spite of the fact that it permits no prediction of the evolutionary changes it is almost universally acknowledged to explain.

A longer and perhaps more satisfying answer is that both explanations of evolution/biological change by natural selection and of various reanalyses and certain other syntactic changes do permit certain predictions within the limits described below. The matter of prediction, with the closely associated concerns of causation and explanation, is considered at length in chapter 11, and therefore we only introduce the topic here.

Attempting to predict that some change will occur or which change will take place in a language is akin to attempting to predict that someone will speak or predicting what they will say. A synchronic theory should state the limits on what a speaker can say, in the sense that it will characterize the grammatical utterances of natural languages. This, however, is very different from predicting a specific utterance. Similarly, it should not be an aim of a theory of language change to predict that a particular change will occur. It is, however,
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appropriate that such a theory should predict the limits of such change, by characterizing the possibilities of change.

Perhaps for some the view that a theory should predict change stems from the belief that change takes place “only when necessary” (Lightfoot 1979a: 124). Romaine (1981: 287) points out that the view that change takes place “only when necessary” is falsified by the existence of any two closely related languages which differ syntactically (see chapter 2 for additional discussion of this point). If two languages (or dialects) exist, they differ; one or both must have changed with respect to the pattern(s) wherein they differ. According to the claims in Lightfoot (1979a), this change must have been triggered by specific conditions, which made the shift “necessary.” But if the dialects differ only with respect to a single syntactic pattern, the conditions which are seen as triggering the change existed in both dialects; the change was thus “necessary” for both, but only one underwent it. In his later publications (see Lightfoot 1988a, 1988b, 1991), Lightfoot concedes that syntactic change does not occur solely when “necessary.” He says:

These environmental changes, on the other hand, typically do not result from the genetically determined acquisition process, whereby something triggers some structural property with systematic effects [i.e. sets a parameter]. Rather, they are induced by contact with other languages and dialects or introduced for stylistic reasons . . . For such environmental changes we have no systematic explanations, and as far as grammarians are concerned they may as well be attributed to chance.

(Lightfoot 1991: 169–70; see also Lightfoot 1988a: 319)

If a particular (perhaps “environmental”) syntactic change is not necessary, it follows that change cannot be predicted.

While a theory of language change cannot predict that a particular change will occur, it can be predictive in the sense that we can state to an extent what the course of a particular change will be if it does occur, according to the universals. From general principles, once they are stated, one should be able to deduct the characteristics of a particular change that falls within the parameters of a well-understood type.

That the fact of change is not fully predictable does not entail either that change is random or that the limits of change cannot be stated. We discuss the latter of these first, returning to the question of randomness below. We believe that while the fact of change cannot be predicted, the bounds on change can be stated. It is neither possible nor desirable that linguistic theory predict that a particular syntactic change will occur; it is both possible and desirable that a theory sanction changes that do occur and rule out those that do not, and that it characterize the mechanism(s) possible in such a shift. Examples of
ways in which a theory can differentiate changes that may occur from those that may not are given in the chapters that follow, especially chapters 7–10; examples of characterizations of the mechanisms possible in particular changes are also given there.

1.5 On explanation

Explanation of linguistic change has been a hotly contested matter in the linguistic literature. We take up the issues in detail in chapter II, where, hopefully, we contribute to understanding explanation in syntactic change, but also to epistemology in general with regard to linguistic change. In the present chapter we merely introduce the topic of explanation to indicate our general orientation in this book. Explanation can take many forms. Many approaches have been criticized in recent literature as not offering “true” explanations, even those that increase our basic understanding of some phenomenon. We embrace a variety of strategies that advance an understanding of diachronic syntax, among these are an examination of causes of syntactic change (see chapter II), scrutiny of the mechanisms that implement syntactic change (chapters 3–6), relating a change in one language to a parallel change in another and relating these to a more general type of change (both in chapters 7–10). Causation, argumentation, and explanation in diachronic syntax are discussed in several places below, and in considerable depth in chapter II.

1.6 Characteristics of a theory of syntactic change

Previous work has resulted in a partially shared set of assumptions about diachronic syntax, but there has not been an integrated theory or framework for research in this field. A number of scholars have put forward hypotheses about the nature of specific changes, but these are not necessarily mutually consistent (see chapter 2). Some hypotheses that have been proposed have been formulated in such a way that they are too vague to be tested, while others are simply inherently untestable. A hypothesis that is untestable is without value. A theory should have empirical consequences; it should provide for hypotheses that are testable; and it should define a set of facts which, if discovered to be true, would disprove the hypotheses. Clear statements of hypotheses and testing of them are essential to the further advancement of the field; however, it is also necessary to value philosophical and historical understanding of the issues. In the last fifteen years some very negative views have been expressed in the literature on the very possibility of
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doing diachronic syntax, variously questioning or denying the possibility of
identifying syntactic change, doing syntactic reconstruction (see chapter 12),
and of formulating a theory of language change.

In order for the field to advance further, a single overarching framework at
least for diachronic syntax is needed, with a set of hypotheses that make clear
statements about the limits of change. A complete theory of syntactic change
should do at least the following:

(a) describe the range of causes of a change from A to A';
(b) provide an understanding of the mechanisms that carry out a change
from A to A';
(c) characterize the set of changes that languages undergo and those they
cannot;
(d) provide an understanding of why languages undergo certain changes and
do not undergo others;
(c) characterize the source of new structures, including both old patterns that
spread to new domains and patterns that are entirely novel in the
language.

Naturally, it is too soon to meet any of these goals in a complete way.
However, these should be long-term goals of the field, and the theory should
continue to evolve, taking into consideration new findings on particular
changes. This book attempts to draw nearer to meeting these goals.

1.7 The method employed

The method we have used involves the cross-linguistic comparison of
changes in the syntax of different languages. This permits us to make hypothe-
oses about universals of change in the areas examined. Of course, many other
researchers have used cross-linguistic data in the search for linguistic univer-
sals, but the approach we follow has not been employed in diachronic
syntactic research.

First, we have concentrated on comparing changes that a number of unre-
lated or distantly related languages have undergone. Changes that recur in
language after language are subject to study, generalization, and, at least in
some instances, explanation. Second, we have looked at details of these
changes, rather than concentrating exclusively on the grand schema. For
example, in the area of complex sentences, we have not been exclusively inter-
est in the issue of whether these originate in parataxis, but have examined
subtypes of embedded clauses, linking individual types to differing types of
assertions. By studying individual types we can provide a more accurate and
detailed picture of origins of embedded clauses. Third, in addition to looking
at details, we have examined broad categories of change: for example, we have
1.7 The method employed

not focused our attention exclusively on a common individual change such as an independent modal verb becoming an auxiliary, but have compared this with other independent verbs that have become auxiliaries, and have examined all these in the still larger category of the elements of biclausal structures becoming a variety of grammatical words, clitics, or affixes. Fourth, we have examined the parts of structures in the context of complete structures. For example, we have not been content to consider the fate of modal verbs, but have taken into consideration the complete change of structures containing independent modal verbs into structures containing modal auxiliaries.

This method may be termed **Intersystemic Comparison**. “Intersystemic” should be understood as denoting a number of ideas simultaneously. The “comparison” is among languages cross-linguistically. At the same time, “intersystemic” refers to the (sub)systems involved in broad categories of change. The term emphasizes that it is whole syntactic systems that must be compared, not isolated facts. Finally, it refers to the fact that we must take into consideration all styles and registers of language – literary language, oral literature, conversation, and others.

We use these data from a wide variety of languages to formulate generalizations about syntactic change. These generalizations are hypotheses about the very nature of syntactic change, and as such they are subject to testing, verification, and revision.

1.8 The syntactic framework

We have attempted to approach the data with as few assumptions as possible, primarily restricting those made to ones shared by many or most investigators. We assume that the structure of a clause includes information about (i) constituency, (ii) hierarchical structure, (iii) category labels, and (iv) grammatical relations. To the extent possible, our discussion does not rest upon assumptions concerning which characteristics of clauses may be present in underlying levels of structure and which may be derived or assigned by other rules. We do assume that the syntactic structure of a clause may contain more than one level.

No *a priori* assumption is made concerning the basis for the generalization of cross-linguistic diachronic facts; that is, we look for generalizations in terms of any one of the elements of clause structure listed above or in terms of others. We have found that assuming just this much provides a framework within which we can make comparisons of specific structures cross-linguistically, while not encumbering ourselves with theoretical problems which would make comparison impossible.
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1.9 The evidence

The problems of obtaining evidence for diachronic studies in syntax have frequently been addressed (see, for example, Lightfoot 1979a, 1981a; Allen 1980[1977]; Faarlund 1990b; Joseph 1983). Often cited are the lack of a native speaker's intuitions, accidental gaps in the corpus, the need for philological skills and thorough knowledge of the languages under investigation, and the small number and variety of languages attested over a long period of time. We believe that the collaboration of scholars versed in languages of different families, each attested over a long period, can help to overcome the last two problems cited.

Attested evidence of changes must be considered the single most reliable source of data on language change of any kind. Yet various aspects of the attestations are sometimes unclear. A case in point is do-support in English. This construction originated in Middle English, so in theory it should be possible to identify clearly its Old English source and to trace the development of its present distribution, given the abundant documentation for the history of English. In fact, however, there is no consensus as to whether it resulted from contact, developed internally from causative do, or developed from aspectual do (see Garrett 1992 on the last and on summaries of other recent proposals), or concerning how it achieved its current distribution. Thus, attested evidence of change, while it is the most reliable data we have, is not without its problems.

It has been suggested that there is so much disagreement about changes in English and, to an extent, other European languages only because there are so many linguists with different views working on these languages, while there is sometimes more consensus about change in more exotic languages precisely because there are only a few linguists working on those issues. Lightfoot (1988a: 316–17) urges this view strongly and very critically; he has even given it a name:

the "data" do not lie pristine [sic] pure in a well-organized supermarket awaiting collection by a conscientious scholar. Often it is not enough simply to go to the handbooks and look up the facts, as if they exist independent of interpretation, analysis, and debate. In the case of illuminating changes, things are rarely that simple.

This commonplace idea, unfortunately, is less well entrenched amongst historians of language than what I have dubbed the "Ebeling Principle" (Lightfoot 1979b): the more exotic a language and the fewer the linguists who have analyzed it, the more tractable and self-evident its grammar. This powerful and damaging principle has misled historians.