

Introduction

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The study of historical linguistics has long been a concern of linguistic theory. Although it has antecedents in the Middle Ages, historical linguistics was not systematically studied until the nineteenth century, when it came to dominate the field. In the past sixty years, the development of both Greenbergian language typology and Chomsky's generative grammar (which has developed an explicitly comparative programme since the early 1980s) has led, at first independently but arguably with growing convergence, to a huge increase in our knowledge of cross-linguistic variation. Our notion of how grammatical systems vary and our ability to provide detailed, sophisticated analyses of this variation across a range of languages and grammatical phenomena is probably greater than it has been at any time in the past. Since synchronic variation reflects and is created by diachronic change, the study of historical syntax has also flourished and continues to do so.

The pioneering work in historical syntax includes, but is not limited to, Kuryłowicz ([1965] 1976), Traugott (1965, 1969), Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968), Givón (1971), Andersen (1973), Lehmann (1973, 1974), Li (1975, 1977), Vennemann (1975), Allen ([1977] 1980), Langacker (1977), Timberlake (1977), Moravcsik (1978), Lightfoot (1979) and Lehmann ([1982] 1995). As has often been observed, change appears to be almost an inherent feature of all aspects of language, and syntax is certainly no exception. While the synchronic study of syntax, albeit from a comparative perspective both within and across different language families, does undoubtedly allow us to ask important questions and make insightful and enlightening hypotheses and discoveries about the nature of syntactic structure, the study of historical syntax arguably offers the linguist greater possibilities.

Among other things, through the detailed comparison of different periods of the same language or language family we are able to track and document the individual stages in the development of particular syntactic

structures, potentially allowing us to identify, pinpoint and explain the causes – whether endogenous or exogenous – of such changes, their overt reflexes and potential effects on other areas of the grammar, and the mechanisms involved therein. While successive historical stages of individual linguistic varieties are naturally closely related to each other, manifestly displaying in most cases a high degree of structural homogeneity, they often diverge minimally in significant and interesting ways which allow the linguist to isolate and observe what lies behind surface differences across otherwise highly homogenized grammars. By drawing on such historical microvariation, it is possible to determine which phenomena are correlated with particular linguistic options and how such relationships are mapped onto the syntax. In short, the results of the study of historical syntax over recent decades have shown how investigation of structured variation along the diachronic axis can be profitably exploited as a scientific tool of enquiry with which to test, challenge and reassess hypotheses and ideas about the nature of syntactic structure which go beyond the observed limits of the study of the synchronic syntax of individual languages or language families.

Given therefore the central role of syntax and, in turn, historical syntax assumed today within the study of linguistics and the many new and exciting perspectives that it continues to afford us in shaping and informing our theoretical understanding of the nature of language, it seemed timely to the editors to bring together in a single volume a comprehensive and detailed treatment of a number of the key topics and issues in historical syntax. In particular, *The Cambridge Handbook of Historical Syntax* provides an opportunity for some of the foremost scholars in the field to reflect in fresh ways on the major issues in historical syntax in the light of contemporary thinking across a wide variety of syntactic approaches and in relation to a large body of empirical research conducted on a growing number of individual languages and language families. This volume is therefore aimed principally at fellow scholars and researchers in the fields of historical linguistics, and in particular historical syntax and syntactic theory, but will no doubt also be well suited to the needs of advanced undergraduates and postgraduate students specializing in historical linguistics and syntax. Given the enormous surge in interest in historical syntax over the course of the last thirty years which has placed work on syntactic change at the forefront of the research agenda, it is envisaged that the volume will find an extensive international readership.

The *Handbook* aims at originality in two respects. First, we seek, wherever possible, to integrate the results and findings of different theoretical frameworks, models and approaches to changes in syntax. There has been a tendency for different models and approaches to develop separate research agendas and fora (e.g. conferences, journals) and to be pursued by scholars with different types of background and training. The multi-author format of the present *Handbook* allows us to bring together in one place the best of

recent international scholarship from across many frameworks and approaches and, through careful editorial intervention, to show how each may cast new and necessary light on the other. While the individual chapters admittedly often embrace a number of quite different perspectives, ranging from the purely descriptive to the more formal (including enlightening analyses of novel data from acquisitional, biolinguistic, emergentist, functionalist and typological perspectives as well as in terms of such frameworks as Cartography, Lexical-Functional Grammar, Minimalism, and Principles and Parameters), this variety of approaches duly reflects the extraordinary breadth and diversity of the issues of interest in historical syntax for the wider linguistic community. We therefore see the eclecticism of the present volume as a strength, insofar as it illustrates how clear and systematic descriptions of the historical data can consistently be exploited to yield and test empirically robust generalizations, as well as profitably inform and challenge highly diverse sets of theoretical assumptions.

Second, the *Handbook* has been conceived in such a way as to break away from a traditional format in which the foci are individual languages or particular grammatical phenomena. By contrast, we have deliberately decided to divide the volume, parts and chapters along complementary thematic lines. In particular, the thirty-one chapters of the present volume variously focus on individual themes, questions and approaches and are arranged in six different parts which specifically deal with I: Types and Mechanisms of Syntactic Change; II: Methods and Tools; III: Principles and Constraints; IV: Major Issues and Themes; V: Explanations; and VI: Models and Approaches. The volume is thus intended to form a coherent whole, in that the rich overview of types and mechanisms of syntactic change critically reviewed in Part I, coupled with the detailed examinations of traditional and new methods and tools of inquiry presented in Part II, provide the necessary broad empirical and theoretical background and context to understand the significance of the discussion of individual principles, constraints, issues and explanations developed in detail in Parts III–V. Finally, the overviews of individual models and approaches to historical syntax presented in Part VI offer the opportunity to see and compare in detail how many of the empirical and theoretical issues and problems explored earlier in the *Handbook* may be approached, interpreted and resolved within a single coherent formal model.

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