

Forty years of diachronic generative syntax

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In 1983, the seeds were being planted for a community of scholars working on diachronic syntax from a generative perspective. The publication of Lightfoot's provocative *Principles of Diachronic Syntax* (1979) had fed into a broader conversation about the nature of explanation in historical linguistics. At the same time, the Principles and Parameters framework was fueling renewed interest in cross-linguistic variation among generative syntacticians. Thus the first few years of *Diachronica*'s existence were fertile ground for the emergence of diachronic generative syntax as a shared endeavor. Fast forward forty years, to 2023, and that community has taken root and flourished. The Diachronic Generative Syntax (DiGS) conference, founded in 1990, now takes place annually, and has visited four continents (see Crisma & Longobardi, 2021). Today's diachronic generative syntax draws on (and creates) state-of-the-art parsed corpora, and incorporates mechanistic models of language learnability into its explanatory apparatus. It is also informed by work in sociolinguistics and language acquisition, and the assumption of competing grammars (Kroch, 1994) makes it possible to capture probabilistic variation. There is little sign here of Chomsky's (1965, 3) famous "ideal speaker-listener" in current work; idealizations like this may be useful for some purposes, but not for others (Alexiadou & Lohndal, 2016).

At the same time, current work in diachronic generative syntax remains true to some of the tenets articulated in the earliest work (see Whitman et al., 2012): in particular, there is an emphasis on careful formal description of synchronic language stages, and a scepticism towards purported independent diachronic principles since languages are not "objects floating smoothly through time and space" (Lightfoot, 1979, 388). The challenge, then, is to explain recurrent cross-linguistic, cross-generational tendencies as emerging from the properties of individual language acquirer-users in a population setting. The formal approaches to grammaticalization of Roberts & Roussou (2003) and van Gelderen (2004) are prime examples of researchers rising to this challenge. Work in diachronic generative syntax has also attempted to address traditional questions of historical linguistics in novel ways, such as the feasibility of syntactic reconstruction (Walkden, 2013) and linguistic relatedness (Longobardi et al., 2013). Roberts (2021) provides an overview.

The field also has its blind spots. Despite a broadening of empirical scope, there is still a heavy bias towards Indo-European in diachronic generative work. Moreover, since Lightfoot (1979), this work has mostly focused on the child language acquirer as the locus of change – but the rather different process of adult language acquisition may also play an explanatory role. Walkden & Breitbarth (2019) outline a program for investigating syntactic changes that may be driven by adult neanalysis, hypothesizing that there exist a class of "responsive" features yielding nontargetlike outcomes in adults. It is also important for diachronic generative syntacticians not to become isolated from developments in the study of language change outside the generative framework. However, here there are encouraging signs: at the most recent DiGS conference in Paris, keynote talks were presented that included a crucial role for information-theoretic motivations (Simonenko, 2023) and for pragmatic inferencing (Sanfelici, 2023), neither of which traditionally belongs to the diachronic generative syntactician's explanatory toolbox.

Overall, the field is in good shape, and it will be interesting to see where another forty years of research take us.

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