Universität Konstanz

Generative historical syntax

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Panel: Linguistic models for morphosyntactic change
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Generative historical syntax?

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- **Generative:** using tools adapted from formal logic (Tomalin 2006) to characterize the set of sentences of a language and their structural descriptions (Chomsky 1986)
  - Usually, but not necessarily, adopting a mentalist perspective
  - Broadly construed like this, includes related formal(ly-inspired) approaches to (morpho)syntax such as LFG, HPSG
- **Historical:** includes both diachronic change, and the synchronic description of historically-attested language states
- **Syntax:** how form and meaning relate, above the level of the lexicon
  - Under the Single Engine Hypothesis as assumed within Distributed Morphology (Marantz 2001), morphology and syntax are governed by the same operations (see e.g. Grestenberger 2020)

Key features

Diachronic Generative Syntax (DiGS): an annual conference on generative historical syntax (see http://walkden.space/digs)

- Next year: Mannheim (25th-28th July 2024)!

The "basic methodology of generative work on syntactic change" (Jonas, Whitman & Garrett 2012)

- Careful **formal description** of synchronic language stages
- Emphasis on **reliable and well-understood data** (and languages)
- **Scepticism** towards **independent diachronic principles**

"Languages" as the Ship of Theseus

Select all squares with
the ship of Theseus
If there are none, click skip

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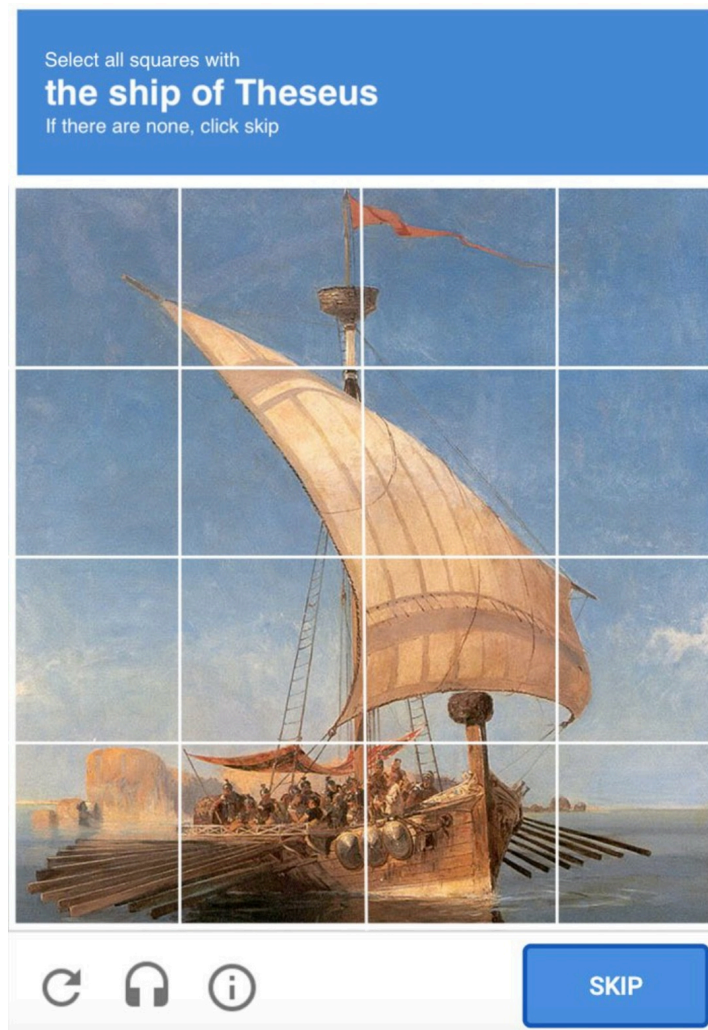
"Writers seem to regard grammars as historically transmittable, as objects floating smoothly through time and space … this is essentially a mystical view; grammars are discontinuous—created afresh by each language learner, who is influenced only by the data to be mastered and the theory of grammar restricting available hypotheses"
(Lightfoot 1979: 388)

"the Ship of Theseus is simply a case where our concepts just don't give an answer … the objects that we talk about are really objects of thought which are constructed by mental operations"
(Chomsky 2009)

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Generative historical syntax today: strengths

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- **Since the 1980s: an in-house model of variation and change, "competing grammars"** (Kroch 1989, 1994)
- **Since the 1990s: parsed historical corpora** (see Taylor 2020)
- **Since the 1990s: formal models of learning and learnability** (e.g. Niyogi & Berwick 1995, Yang 2002, Kodner 2020)
- **Since circa 2000: formal approaches to grammaticalization** (Roberts & Roussou 2003; van Gelderen 2004, 2011, 2021)
- **Since the 2010s: direct engagement with work on child language acquisition** (see esp. Cournane 2014, 2017)

Overview works:
van Kemenade (2007), Biberauer & Walkden (2015), Roberts (2021)

Generative historical syntax today: the third factor

Chomsky (2005: 6): **"three factors that enter into the growth of language in the individual:**

1. Genetic endowment, apparently nearly uniform for the species ...
2. Experience, which leads to variation …
3. Principles not specific to the faculty of language. …
    a) principles of data analysis that might be used in language acquisition and other domains;
    b) principles of structural architecture … including principles of efficient computation"

The third factor has not been extensively explored with regard to diachrony, but see Biberauer (2019) and van Gelderen (2021) for exceptions.

Generative historical syntax and reconstruction

Lightfoot (2002), notoriously:

- "one can no more reconstruct the syntax of a proto-language than one can reconstruct last week's weather" (2002: 135)
- there is "no basis for reconstructing proto-languages where the most archaic languages do not agree" (2002: 134).

This is not the consensus view in generative historical syntax today (see Pires & Thomason 2008; Walkden 2009, 2013, 2014; Willis 2011; Roberts 2021: §4.4).

Syntactic theories developed within the Minimalist Program are perfectly compatible with syntactic reconstruction, provided that you know what to compare.

# Generative historical syntax today: weaknesses

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Little attention has been paid to sources of change other than child language acquisition.

– The possibility of **lifespan change** (e.g. Anthonissen & Petré 2019) has largely been denied or otherwise neglected

– Any role for **adult language acquisition** has also generally been minimized (important exceptions: Weerman 1993, Meisel 2011)

– How **social factors** interact with acquisition situation has also largely been left aside (largely intentionally)

– Theorizing of **language contact** is all over the place

"Languages in contact" is not a useful idea
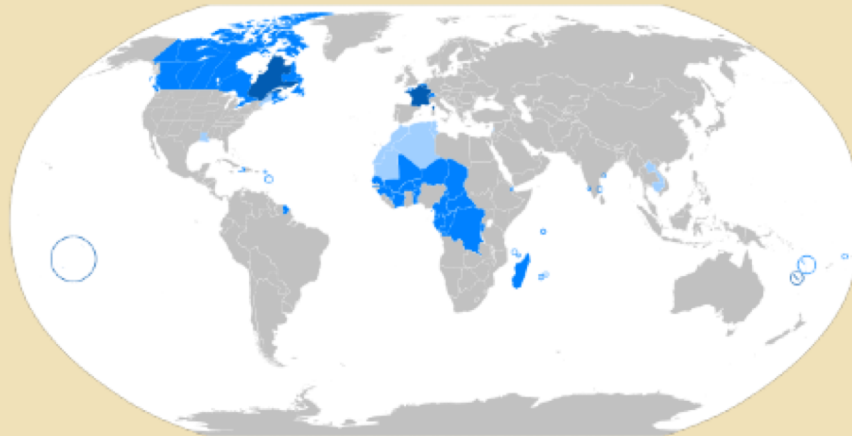
Ceci n'est pas une langue.

"**what we mean by 'languages in contact' is 'users of language in contact' and to insist upon this is much more than a mere terminological quibble and has far from trivial consequences**" (McIntosh 1994: 137)

Generative historical syntax and adult language acquisition

Walkden & Breitbarth (2019) outline an approach that links diachronic generative syntax with Trudgill's (2011) sociolinguistic typology.

Core idea: certain types of syntactic feature are "responsive" to the difference between child and adult language acquisition. We therefore expect different outcomes in different sociohistorical situations.

The project STARFISH (2020–2025) is an attempt to put this to the test using historical corpus evidence.

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SOCIOLINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY AND RESPONSIVE FEATURES IN SYNTACTIC HISTORY

Ending on an optimistic note

Framing question: "Do you think there is sufficient interaction and cross-referencing between different sub-communities working in the field of morphosyntactic change?"

There clearly isn't! But perhaps there is progress in this direction.

The last DiGS conference (Paris, July 2023) featured explanatory roles for:

- **Pragmatic inferencing** (Sanfelici 2023)
- **Distributional learning** (Trips & Yang 2023)
- **Information-theoretic** motivations (Simonenko 2023)
- **Adult language acquisition** (Walkden 2023)

Hopefully the future holds potential for cross-pollination in all directions!

Journal of Historical Syntax

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http://historicalsyntax.org

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