

When can misparsing cause syntactic change?

The idea that misparsing of the input is a source of change plays a major part in many theories of diachrony. It has been unquestioned in morphology since neogrammarian days, and recently gained new prominence as an explanation of sound change (Ohala 1981) and semantic change (Eckardt 2011). However plausible it may be in those domains, there is little empirical evidence to support it in historical syntax. The core exhibits for the claim that phrase structure can change by spontaneous rebracketing have been convincingly reanalyzed by Whitman (2011) and Garrett (2011). Whitman proposes the *Conservancy of Structure* constraint, understood as an upper bound on misparsing in syntactic acquisition, according to which learners conserve hierarchical (c-command) relations but may lose or gain movement (or the features that force it) or misparse categorial or projection ([+max, +min]) features.

This talk addresses an as yet outstanding instance of rebracketing in Finnish syntax, which contravenes Conservancy of Structure. I argue that there is indeed a syntactic rebracketing, but it is forced by an independent change which makes the original analysis inaccessible to learners.

In Old Finnish, perception verbs took small clause complements, as in (1a). These were replaced by gerunds like (1b) (participial clauses with genitive subject) when the the predicative construction that was the basis of small clauses was lost.

- (1) a. Kuul-tiin kala-t kute-va-t
hear-PAST.PASS [fish-ACCPL spawn-PRTC-ACCPL]_{SC}
'One heard the fish spawn'
- b. Kuul-tiin kalo-jen kuteva-n
hear-PAST.PASS [fish-GENPL spawn-PART-COMP]_{CP}
'One heard the fish spawn'

The object of perception verbs is reanalyzed as the embedded genitive subject of a participial complement clause. The object status of *kalat* in (1a) and the subject status of *kalojen* in (1b) is established by anaphora and possessor agreement, agreement, case (Jahnsson's Rule), extraction (the Left Branch Condition), and *pro_{arb}* (Kiparsky 2019).

The origin of this innovation has been attributed to a reanalysis invited by a phonological merger of accusative *-m and genitive *-n (Campbell 2013: 175). It made the genitive look like the accusative in certain environments.

One problem with this account is that the phonological change was completed long before the change it supposedly triggered. Secondly, the phonological change merged the genitive and accusative case endings only in the singular, and only in the presence of an overt syntactic subject. In the plural, and in subjectless sentences even in the singular, structural Accusative case is realized as morphological nominative case, which remains distinct from morphological genitive case.

I argue that the reanalysis is a of another concurrent syntactic change of Finnish, the loss of small clause complements consisting of an object plus an agreeing predicative participle, such as (2).

- (2) he edhesto-i-t yhden Haluatu-n woote-s sairasta-ua-n
they bring-forth-PAST-3SG one-ACC paralytic-ACC bed-INESS be-sick-Prtc-Acc
'they brought forward a paralytic lying sick in bed' (Agricola Mt-9:2)

- a. (Jona) maca-is une-sta rascautettu
 (Jonah) lie-PAST-3SG sleep-ELAT weigh-PRTC-NOM

‘Jonah lay weary with sleep’ (Biblia 1642 Jon-1:6-467b)

- b. hei-lle ilmesty-i-t Moses ia Elias hene-n cansa-ns
 they-ALLAT appear-PAST-3PL Moses and Elijah (s)he-GEN with-3SG
 ynnepuhuu-ise-t
 together-speak-PRESPART-NOMPL

‘Moses and Elijah appeared to them speaking with him’ (Agricola Mt-17:3)

This predication construction became obsolescent in literary Old Finnish and no longer exists in modern Finnish. As a result of its disappearance, the small clause complement of perception verbs was no longer syntactically available; complements of perception verbs adopted the participial clauses with genitive subjects that already existed in the language for verbs of saying and thinking.

- (3) Seurakunna-n hen lupa-pi pysyueise-n ole-ua-n
 congregation-GEN (s)he promise-3SG permanent-GEN be-PresPart-COMP

‘as for the congregation, he promises that it will be permanent’ (Agricola Ps-75:0)

I conclude that rebracketing can take place when other changes make the old structure unattainable to learners. If this is correct, the *Conservancy of Structure* constraint must be relativized, so that it rules out only *spontaneous*, unmotivated reanalysis. This is not unreasonable since it is intended to constrain acquisition rather than grammar directly.

The question then arises what is the source of the special stability of hierarchical syntactic constituent structure in language acquisition. An obvious answer is that it is the only aspect of syntax (and indeed the only aspect of linguistic structure) that is robustly anchored in both the phonological interface (phrasing, prosody) and in the semantic interface (compositional semantics, scope) as well as within the syntax itself in C-command effects on the distribution and construal of anaphors, NPIs, quantifiers and other structure-sensitive elements.

References

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