Workshop Call: 22nd International Conference on Historical Linguistics (ICHL 22)
Diachronic syntax and (modern) parametric theory

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The central idea in generative approaches to diachronic syntax has always been that syntactic change results from children’s reanalysis of their parents’ grammar (G1): because they have only indirect access to G1, via its output, the grammar that they postulate (G2) may differ from that of their parents, with the result that syntactic changes emerge inter-generationally. The advent of the Principles and Parameters (P&P) era in the late 1970s/early 1980s led to the specific expectation in the diachronic context that at least some syntactic changes might be parametric in nature, entailing parameter resetting (see i.a. Roberts 1985, van Kemenade 1987, Lightfoot 1991, Pintzuk 1991, Battye & Roberts 1995). From the outset, however, the challenges facing a parametric approach to syntactic change were apparent. To begin with, a model based on binary parameters, set to one of two prespecified values, seems to predict catastrophic change, rather than the gradual changes that we observe (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968). Even a model that permits one or more parameters to be set twice in order to accommodate variation (e.g. the so-called “Double Base Hypothesis” first advanced in the late 1980s by Tony Kroch, Susan Pintzuk, Beatrice Santorini, and Ann Taylor) does not straightforwardly resolve this tension, as it leads to the expectation that “double base” grammars will, all other things being equal, be shortlived (Kroch (1994) on the expected fate of syntactic “doublets”), and it also seems to predict the existence of impossible grammars (Fuss & Trips 2002). Further, parametric approaches encounter a serious challenge in addressing the so-called Actuation Problem: as change crucially requires reanalysis of G1 input by a following generation, it is clear that this input must differ from that on the basis of which the parent generation postulated G1, raising the question of the origin of this difference (the Actuation Problem), and also of its nature (what type and what frequency of data gives rise to a reanalysis?). Additional questions that arise are familiar from critiques that have been levelled against parametric approaches to synchronic phenomena (see i.a. Newmeyer 2005): hypothesized parametric clusters do not break down or arise in the expected way, the readily accessible cues assumed to trigger parameter setting (e.g. inflection) change and remain constant independently of their hypothesized reflexes, and it seems necessary to postulate rather more specialized parameters than one might think are compatible with P&P’s initial rationale as a model of Universal Grammar that might offer a genuine solution to Plato’s Problem.

In the current generative context, it is fair to say that opinion is divided regarding the feasibility of a “post-GB” parametric approach to the understanding of syntactic variation: on the one hand, the empirical failures of GB parameters and/or the conceptual reorientation of the Minimalist Program(me) are taken to argue against pursuing further parametric work (see i.a. Newmeyer 2005, Boeckx 2014); on the other, there is the argument that GB parameters should be viewed as “first-pass” parameters, with empirical and theoretical advances since the late 1970s and, particularly, in the minimalist context, pointing towards the kinds of modifications that could lead to a genuinely explanatory theory of parametric variation (see i.a. Cinque & Kayne 2005, Longobardi 2006, Baker 2008, Biberauer 2008, Gianollo, Guardiano & Longobardi 2008, Roberts & Holmberg 2010, Roberts 2012, Biberauer & Roberts 2014). The purpose of this workshop is to consider the question of whether or not parametric explanations should be pursued from the perspective of diachronic syntax. More specifically, we welcome contributions including, but not limited to the following:
1. “Big picture”-oriented papers evaluating the evidence for and against the value of parametric approaches in the domain of diachronic syntax:
   • What are the biggest achievements/insights of generative diachronic syntax to date, and to what extent does parametric work contribute to these?
   • How does the vision of what generative diachronic syntax has to offer the study of historical and diachronic syntax alter in view of what we have learned from GB parameters?
   • Assuming the feasibility of continuing to pursue a parametric model, what might diachronic data contribute to modern parametric syntax? Are there unique insights to be had that do not emerge (as readily) from comparative synchronic or acquisition-oriented study (e.g. whether all variation is parametric and, if not, what the hallmarks of parametric vs non-parametric variation are)?
   • Are there domains where parametric approaches might produce insights that are not otherwise available (cf. i.a. Gianollo, Guardiano & Longobardi 2008, Longobardi & Guardiano 2009, Longobardi, Guardiano, Silvestri, Boattini & Ceolin 2013 on parametric insights into historical relatedness and linguistic phylogenies, and Willis 2011 and Walkden 2014 on parametrically informed reconstruction)?

2. Papers considering diachronic syntax in the context of a “three factors” approach to language (Chomsky 2005):
   • Does the “three factors” approach have anything to add to “classic” “two factors” (UG + PLD)-based approaches to diachronic syntax (see Biberauer & Zeijlstra 2012, Duguine & Irutzun 2014, Biberauer & Roberts 2014)?
   • Might diachronic work shed novel light on the currently still quite mysterious nature of the “third factors”?
   • Might a “three factors” perspective facilitate insights into respects in which the changes affecting (morpho)syntax and (morpho)phonology are similar and different?

3. Papers considering the role of learning theory in diachronic generative syntax (see i.a. Lightfoot 1993, Clark & Roberts 1993, Roberts 2001, Yang 2002, Yang 2013), and how this relates to our modern perspective on parametric syntax. Among the more specific issues relevant here would be (re)consideration of matters such as (parametric) cues/triggers, assumptions about learner conservativity and the acquirer's approach to data analysis, etc.

4. Papers revisiting one or more specific GB parameters and considering what we have learned about the ways in which the associated phenomena vary over time. Relevant domains include:
   • “OV” and “VO” word-order: Are Head Parameter-based approaches feasible in the diachronic domain? What about Kaynian approaches, and can these be interpreted in parametric terms (see Ledgeway 2013 for an explicit attempt to do so)? Are mapping considerations (i.e. to the PF and LF interfaces) relevant (see Hinterhölzl 2013) and, if so, can they define parameters? Can we identify (preferred) pathways of change, potentially also including “drift”-like phenomena (Sapir 1921) and, if so, can these be accounted for, via parameters or otherwise?
   • Head-movement parameters (e.g. V-to-I, V2, N-to-D): Is it helpful to think about changes in head-movement in parametric terms? Can cartographic insights help us to refine GB analyses of the way in which head-movement was lost or gained? Can we identify a (parametric) role for inflection? Can we identify properties that appear to change along with changes in head-movement behaviour?
• Null arguments: Building on insights into the typology of null-subject/-argument languages (Biberauer, Holmberg, Roberts & Sheehan 2010, Camacho 2013, Barbosa 2014), is it possible to understand diachronic changes in the distribution of null-argument phenomena in parametric terms? Can we identify (parametric) roles for verbal and/or (pro)nominal morphology and/or formal discourse encoding (Frascarelli 2007) and/or ellipsis licensing (Duguine 2013)? Can diachronic studies shed new light on the formal similarities/differences between different types of null-argument languages?

• Negation: Is it possible to formulate one or more negation-related parameters, e.g. the Negative Concord parameter of Zeijlstra (2004), and is it useful to think about changes in this domain (e.g. Jespersen’s Cycle) in parametric terms (Willis, Lucas & Breitbarth 2013)? Given how much we know about the acquisition of negation (see i.a. Dimroth 2010), can we draw a (parametric) link between acquisition and diachronic change? Can our quite detailed knowledge of negative changes, many of which relate to changes in the behavior of specific lexical items, give us insight into the feasibility of pursuing a lexico-centric (“Borer-Chomsky”-type; Baker 2008) approach to parameters?

5. Papers considering “clustering failures” and what diachronic studies can teach us about the nature of the links between superficially unrelated properties: Do diachronic studies point to properties that frequently co-vary over time? Does diachronic work highlight new clusters that have not previously been considered? Does our current empirical and theoretical understanding suggest novel clusters that might be testable in the diachronic domain?

6. Papers considering the relevance of parametric ideas in understanding change in areas that were not a primary focus during the GB era, e.g. argument structure, alignment, discourse-configurationality/information structure, word-structure, ellipsis, cyclic changes beyond Jespersen’s Cycle (van Gelderen 2009, 2010), etc.

7. Papers revisiting diachronic postulates that crucially rely on the existence of parameters of some kind, e.g. the Constant Rate Effect (Kroch 1989).

8. Papers considering whether parameters have anything to contribute to generative investigations of the factors determining stability/continuity versus change in (morpho)syntax (see i.a. Breitbarth, Lucas, Watts & Willis 2010). Is it, for example, feasible to link parameter ‘size’ (macro, meso, micro, nano – Biberauer & Roberts 2012) to stability, with larger parameters being more resilient, even in the face of contact, and smaller parameters less so? Or, assuming a distinction between “deep” (i.e. syntax-internal) and “superficial” (i.e. PF) parameters, can one type be said to be more/less stable than the other?

9. Papers seeking to exploit our more sophisticated understanding of the synchronic differences between very closely related varieties: Taking into account that acquirers are not exposed to the speech of only one generation of speakers and that they may also be exposed to speakers from different regions and social backgrounds, can our knowledge of differences between closely related systems inform our understanding of how G1 may be reanalyzed as G2? Is it meaningful to talk of ‘micro- or nanoparametric change’ in this case? Is it possible to specify types of formal levelling that occur in these contexts?
10. Papers considering what the types of optionality evident in changing systems may teach us about the feasibility of a parametric approach to change: Closer investigation of the OV/VO alternations in earlier English has, for example, revealed information-structural word-order regulation (see much work by i.a. Ans van Kemenade, Susan Pintzuk, and Ann Taylor). Can this type of regulation be insightfully captured in parametric terms? Is it always the case that optionality is only apparent, or are there genuinely cases where different structures are in free variation, creating a challenge for minimalist explanation, parametric or otherwise? What is the status of competing grammars (Kroch 1989) and of combinatorial variation (Adger 2006) in diachronic explanation?

References


