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Internal and External Factors in Syntactic Change

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Introduction: On “internal” and “external” in syntactic change

Marinel Gerritsen — Dieter Stein

0. The purpose of this volume

The present volume contains a selection of papers that were presented at the workshop on internal and external factors in syntactic change held during the Ninth International Conference on Historical Linguistics at Rutgers in August 1989. The workshop aroused such interest and enthusiasm among the participants of the conference that the character of the sessions of the workshop was far from private. The role of external factors in syntactic change has long been denied, but historical linguists now seem to be much more interested in them and their interaction with internal factors. This emerges not only from the great interest in the workshop, but also from recent publications such as Romaine (1982), Gerritsen (1989), Thomason—Kaufman (1988), and Stein (1990).

The following discussion will first put internal and external causation of syntactic change into a historiographical perspective (section 1). Subsequently we will try to define internal and external factors as precisely as possible (section 2), and finally we will summarize what the research presented in this volume tells us about internal and external factors in syntactic change and about the course which further research on this topic should take (section 3).

1. Internal and external factors of syntactic change in historiographical perspective

At the end of their famous article “Empirical foundations for a theory of language change” Weinreich—Labov—Herzog (1968) give seven general principles which define the nature of language change and which

have to be taken as central to our thinking on diachronic linguistics and to studying it in the future. The last principle touches on the relationship between internal and external factors of language change.

Principle 7. Linguistic and social factors are closely interrelated in the development of language change. Explanations which are confined to one or the other aspect, no matter how well constructed, will fail to account for the rich body of regularities that can be observed in empirical studies of language behavior.

Briefly, the question of why a change occurred will never be answered if one does not reckon with both internal and external factors of language change. Weinreich — Labov — Herzog call this the actuation problem. This problem is, according to them, the most recalcitrant among all the problems that have to be solved in diachronic linguistics: the transition, embedding, evaluation, and actuation of linguistic changes. Their article has brought about an avalanche of studies on language change which build on these general principles and which have largely contributed to a deeper insight into the problems that diachronic linguists had to solve. Labov (1982) presented an overview of the results, from which he concludes that progress has been made toward answering all these problems except one, the actuation problem. The question of why a change has been initiated or actuated at a particular time and place was, according to him, far from being solved. Almost a decade later we still find ourselves in the same situation. Why a change occurs is more often than not an open question. This holds for changes on all linguistic levels, but certainly more so for syntactic than for phonetic and morphological changes. This can be ascribed to two factors.

In the first place it is a result of the very simple fact that we know less about syntactic changes than about other changes. This is mainly due to a combination of the following three factors:

a. Syntactic data in texts

The most reliable method for the study of linguistic change during a period for which there are only written records is to study texts. Any one text, however, represents infinitely more information about phonetic and morphological elements than about syntactic elements. In a relatively short text we usually find representations of practically all the sounds and morphemes of a language, but seldom of all the syntactic constructions. This is because a text contains infinitely more representations of phonemes and morphemes than of constructions. In addition, the occur-

rence of certain constructions depends largely on the sort of text studied. Questions and imperatives, for example, will hardly occur in essays.

b. Theories of syntactic change

Theories of syntactic change were developed only recently. Therefore there was no stimulus to study syntactic changes in order to put these theories to the test and/or to refine them.

c. Sameness of propositional meaning

Lavandera (1978) has indicated that the study of variation and change on the non-phonological level is much more complicated than the study of change on the phonological level since non-phonological elements carry referential meaning but phonological elements do not. If we find, for example, [m·ðər] and [naɪðər] side by side, we can be sure that they represent two phonetic variants of one phoneme, the (ei) in *neither*. Since the [i·] and [aj] do not bear referential meaning by themselves, it is clear that they represent two forms with one and the same referential meaning: *neither*. If we find, however, in one period construction (1) and later on construction (2), we cannot state a priori that (1) changed into (2) since the constructions may not have the same referential meaning.

- (1) *Hij is gegaan naar Amsterdam*
he is gone to Amsterdam
- (2) *Hij is naar Amsterdam gegaan*
He is to Amsterdam gone

In this context Lavandera does not mention Humboldt's principle (different forms always represent different referential meanings), but in view of this leading principle in diachronic linguistics we have to assume that (1) and (2) have a different referential meaning and that the two constructions are consequently not variants of one syntactic variable. Lavandera argues that due to the fact that elements on levels other than that of phonology have a referential meaning, the methodology used for the study of phonological variation and change cannot be applied blindly to the study of change on other linguistic levels. We should show first that two possible variants have the same referential meaning. It is clear that a strict application of Lavandera's observation complicates the study of syntactic change considerably. She suggests, however, that for the study of variation and change of non-phonological elements the condition of sameness of referential meaning could be relaxed to the condition of

functional comparability – construction, that have a comparable function could be considered variants of one another. This facilitates the study of syntactic change somewhat, although the question of whether two constructions do have a comparable function is an issue in diachronic syntax.

The second reason why we have only a rudimentary knowledge of the causes of syntactic change is the lack of agreement on what is to be considered a syntactic change. We will first try to show which types of syntactic change can be distinguished on the basis of the classical generative model of syntactic change (figure 1; see Traugott 1973). Secondly we will go into the type of factors that are said to be involved in these different syntactic changes:

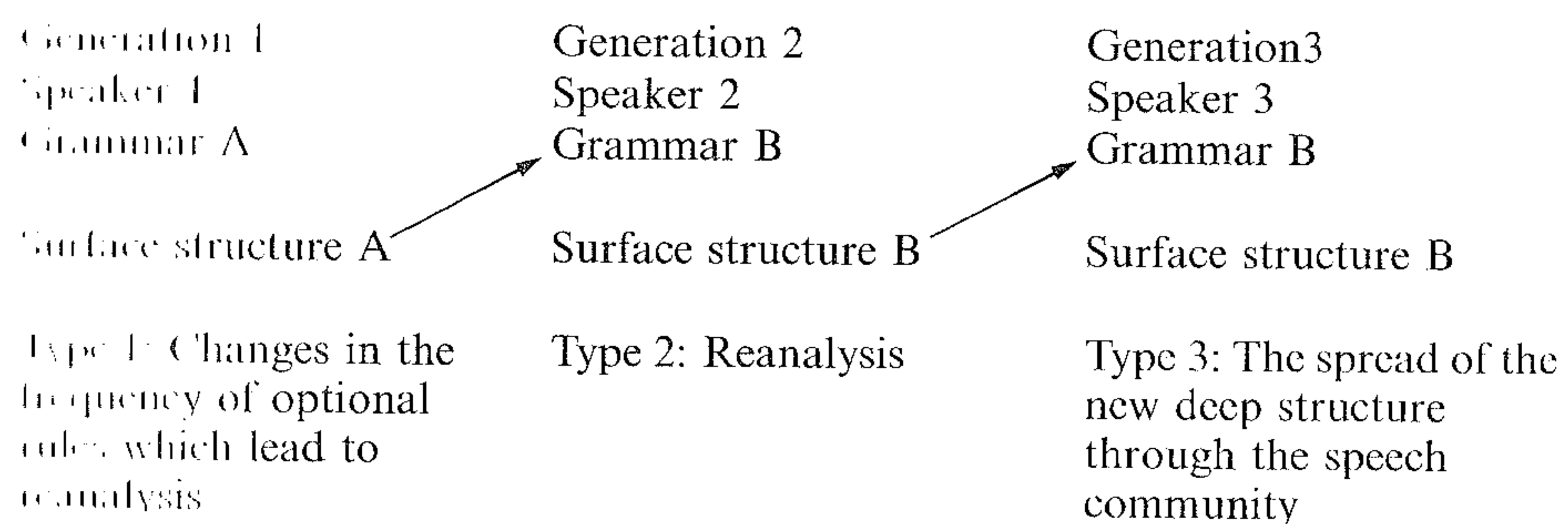


Figure 1. Three types of syntactic change

According to generative grammarians, only reanalysis can be considered a syntactic change (type 2 in figure 1). A child acquiring its language constructs deep structure B from the language input to which it is exposed, whereas those who produce that language input have deep structure A. The reason for this reanalysis is that speakers with deep structure A produce so many structurally ambiguous surface structures that the language learner acquiring the language constructs a deep structure different from that of the speaker. In a verb-final language constituents may, for example, occur after the verb for language-production reasons. If this optional rule occurs frequently, it may lead to reinterpretation of the language as a non-verb-final language. A change in the application of such optional rules is another type of syntactic change (type 1 in figure 1). A change of type 1 may lead to a change of type 2, reanalysis. An important point to notice here – and one which will be taken up in both of the following sections – is that the forces that cause a situation

that is open to structural reanalysis are entirely different in their nature and motivations from the very act of analysis itself. The issue here is at which point to locate syntactic change. A third type of syntactic change is the spread of the new deep structure through the speech community (type 3). Which children or adolescents, or other members of a speech community, deduce the new deep structure first and which later? This is the issue of social diffusion.

The factors that are adduced for the explanation of syntactic change vary over time, depending on the type of syntactic change that is studied and the theory that predominates in a certain period.

Regarding the type of syntactic change, the following can be said. Reanalysis (type 2) is caused mainly by internal factors, although in some very special cases external factors, such as foreign influence and expressivity, may also play a part. Those external factors may be adduced, though, only if they are very well documented (Lightfoot 1979: chapter VII). Syntactic changes of type 1 may be caused by both internal and external factors. The occurrence of structurally ambiguous surface structures may, for example, be a result of the decay of inflectional endings on verbs and nouns. It can, however, also be caused by foreign influence. Borrowing of a subordinating conjunction from English into Dutch, for example, often entails English VO instead of Dutch OV order (see Appel–Muysken 1987: 153–163 for further examples). Syntactic changes of type 3 are determined by external factors. From which language the deep structure is deduced depends on external factors, such as social standing, age, sex, and prestige.

With regard to the influence of linguistic theory on the types of explanations that are given, the following can be said. In what one could call the “prestructuralist period”, changes in optional rules (type 1) are studied and both internal and external factors are given. Behaghel (1932) attributes the stabilization of verb-final order in German to imitation of humanistic Latin patterns. Jespersen (1922) explains the disappearance of verb-final order in English as due to the erosion of case-markings. In the structuralist period it is assumed that language is a system “où tout se tient” and that only internal factors may play a role in syntactic change. We find this opinion especially among generative grammarians who are concerned mainly with reanalysis (type 2). The impact of the generative theory, though, has been very strong, since the influence of external factors on syntactic change is also strongly denied in studies on syntactic change in other frameworks. Mühlhäusler (1980), for instance, considers syntax to be relatively independent of substratum or superstra-

tion influences. Similarly, Polome (1930) views interference through shift as "limited essentially to phonology and the lexicon".

The revival of the opinion that external factors could play a role in syntactic change is of recent date. This change in view is partly due to the study of the syntax of creole languages which showed that reanalysis caused by syntactic borrowing is in no way exceptional (Appel – Muysken 1987). It is also due in part to the results of sociolinguistic studies of languages in more or less close contact and to the few Labovian sociolinguistic studies of the internal and external factors that affect the occurrence of the variants of a syntactic variable. These studies show that external factors can indeed play a part in changes in the use of optional rules (type 1).

A sign of the renewed interest in external explanations of syntactic change is Thomason – Kaufman (1988). The authors deal extensively with external factors in syntactic change. According to them, the prejudice in favor of internal explanations of syntactic change is due to the fact that, formerly, external explanations were offered without fully exploring internal explanations. They show that the criticism of the use of external factors for explaining syntactic change does not always cut ice. The statement that language A has borrowed feature X from language B cannot take the edge over the argument that language C with feature X has never had any contact with language B. It is quite possible that a syntactic change is caused by external factors, such as borrowing, in one language but by internal factors in another language. Furthermore, one has to realize that a syntactic change caused by borrowing does not have to result in the same construction in the receiving as in the giving language. Thomason – Kaufman call into question the methodological inclination to consider the possibility of external causation only when all efforts to find an internal motivation for a change have failed. A weak internal motivation for a change is less convincing as a cause than a strong external motivation, and the possibility of multiple causation should be kept in mind. We can then arrive at an explanation that is as complete as possible. It is a matter of course that external explanations given for a change should be very well documented and that it should be shown that a certain external cause has effected not only one change in a system, but several changes, since it is highly improbable that an external factor would affect only the level of syntax, but no other levels. Furthermore one has to keep in mind that a syntactic change that is related to the borrowing of a lexical element may occur sooner than a syntactic change that is not related to it.

Although the contribution of external factors to syntactic change is no longer denied, we do not yet have much insight into the precise influence of external factors, let alone into the interaction of internal and external factors in syntactic change. More than twenty years after Weinreich – Labov – Herzog (1968) suggested that we concentrate our thinking on diachronic linguistics, the question of which internal and external factors play a part in a change still remains unanswered with regard to syntactic change. It seems that time is now ripe for a fuller exploration of the interaction of internal and external factors in syntactic change.

2. "Internal" and "external": Definitions and problems

Up to now we have behaved as if the notions "internal" and "external" were clear-cut terms which could be used in a straightforward way. One thing which the contributions in this volume illustrate is the heterogeneity of conceptions of this dichotomy. "Internal" and "external" are deictic terms, if not gradient deictic terms. The following discussion will try to establish how these terms can be defined.

The terms "internal" and "external" are members of a semantic field which includes nearly half a dozen terms ("natural", "social", "autonomous", "structural"). For an initial definition of the two terms we will follow the distinction made by Campbell (1980: 18 ff.), which is coterminous with that made by Coseriu (1974: 195) between *natürlich* (natural) and *künstlich* (artificial). By "internal factors" are meant those inherent in, and arising out of, any given synchronic state of the language system. By "external" factors are meant the forces arising out of the location and use of language in society.

An interesting point arises with processes such as grammaticalization, syntacticization, and automation of pragmatically, or otherwise internally induced, preferences, which figure prominently in a number of contributions in this volume. Are these processes to be called "internal" factors, as would normally be assumed? Rather, there seems to be a good case for calling such processes externally induced with syntactic results (cf. Dubois 1985). The factors involved may also be called "external" (see Giacalone Ramat, Lehmann, this volume) in the sense that the driving forces involved are "broader-than-linguistic" tendencies, such as economy, to create standard, ready-made, prefab-like procedures instead of having to compute individual solutions for each case.

If this type of factor is to be reduced to its more general behavioral base, then where should the line be drawn between “external” and “internal”? This would lead to a dividing line between what are specifically linguistic faculties and what are more general tendencies which form part of linguistic faculties. The latter would be what is commonly referred to as “natural” tendencies (see Stein 1990: chapter XIII). The borderline here would then be reduced to natural vs. non-natural tendencies. This argumentation shows the extreme extent to which the dichotomy “external” vs. “internal” is theory-laden.

In fact, the very dichotomy between “external” and “internal” has as its long-standing theoretical underpinning the idea that it is possible and useful to hypostasize an abstract, non-observable entity as something logically separate from use, speakers, and speech community. If we do as most linguists probably do, i. e., accept the useful existence of that figment, then the borderline between the two terms under discussion seems at first perfectly clear: the locus of a given force decides on which side of the fence it belongs. However, the abstract system, too, is located in society, is a social possession — which annihilates the usefulness of this criterion of location in society.

An important point of principle that arises if such a stand is adopted, is what is left over as purely linguistic (i. e., internal) factors. Judging from the papers in this volume, there are two main groups of such internal factors: structural patterns and typological constraints. But here again it could be argued that motivation to fall in with a pre-existing pattern is merely a version of behavioral economy.

If these deliberations sound like an atomization of the notion of syntactic change, it must be stressed that the notion of syntactic pattern is primarily a synchronic one, and the question of the internal/external factors is part of a developmental frame of reference. The question of whether language change can be explained internally is an extrapolation of that syntactic position into an area of inquiry to which it was not geared. The classical autonomous position here is that of Lightfoot (1979).

After having analyzed the dichotomy fairly radically, for the purpose of the present discussion we will adopt the traditional view of external factors like prestige, acts of identity, taboo, and forces that are part of standardization, such as reduction of variation, types of varieties, especially written varieties, etc. Everything else discussed in the previous paragraph, including so-called natural forces, will be subsumed under “internal”.

The very fact that there is a workshop and a conference volume on this topic implies that at least the contributors would not subscribe to an extreme internalist view. If, as pointed out above, Lightfoot (1979), as an extreme internalist, would barely admit the possibility of external influence, the contributors to this volume represent a considerable range of positions on that question, if not all of the possible positions between that of Lightfoot and the extreme external end of the spectrum. The most autonomous internal position is represented by Stockwell and Minkova, who are only considering another linguistic level (prosody) in its effects on syntactic change. Compared to syntax, prosody is relatively external in a notion of levels. The two levels, however, are still internal, as the authors themselves point out. The other end is represented by Lehmann, the tenor of whose paper tends toward a relativization of syntax as an autonomous level — a (necessarily?) typical result of a developmental view. The other papers range between these two poles.

3. Results and prospects

The volume represents a fairly wide cross-section in several respects. The papers deal with processes of syntactic change in many languages and types of languages. That there is a certain bias on English will not be surprising in view of the above-mentioned difficulties in obtaining empirical data, English being a language with a comparatively well-documented history. Secondly, the papers deal with a wide range of syntactic phenomena, from conjunctions (Mithun, Betten, Schlieben-Lange) to the “classical” topics of syntactic change, such as word order. Thirdly, the papers clearly represent different “schools” of linguistic thought, ranging from more functionalist, via formalist, to more independent positions.

To what extent is it possible to pinpoint any regularities in syntactic change? More precisely, to what extent is it possible to predict which type of force will prevail or gain the upper hand?

There seems to be an overriding tenor that would tend to give logical priority to internal factors, in particular, structural prerequisites, pre-existing tendencies, “structural niches” (Mithun, Aitchison, Fischer, Gerritsen, Rickford, Stein, Giacalone Ramat, Fuji) which are activated by external conditions. No case is treated in which the result of an external factor would introduce linguistic forms that go against the typological or structural grain of the language. But beyond this statement the indi-

vidual answer, given — not unexpectedly — do not at all provide a unanimous picture. Because of the multiplicity of internal and external factors involved, no hard and fast rules emerge for which type of factor will dominate. It also emerges that — within one developmental process

different types of internal and external factors may interact at different stages. Whereas analysts of syntactic and other changes have tended to conceive of linguistic change as long-term monodirectional, it can be shown that there are changes with a complicated interaction of different forces with several changes of direction, caused by different forces in changing “feeding” relationships (Schlieben-Lange, Stein). For predicting what will happen under which constellation of external and internal factors, the central problem seems to lie in a kind of selectivity: under what at first glance seem to be “the same conditions” the same process is not bound to result. To illustrate this problem we would like to take an example from Rickford’s paper, because his case from contemporary English highlights the problem for historical linguistics. A study of classic variables in Black English with material from research to East Palo Alto draws attention to the effect of rising black self-awareness in not complying with the forms of white speech. However, the divergence is not across the board with all eligible variables (e. g., possessive and plural *-s*, absence of third singular *-s*, invariant *be*), but there is selectivity — only the last-mentioned variable is socially semiotized. The reason why particular variables are chosen among several candidates, and which ones are not chosen to serve as identity markers, highlights the delicate interaction of acts of identity as external, and of linguistic selectivity, as internal factors.

The relative unpredictability of the resulting process is related to the incomparability of the cases and constellations considered. In section 2 it was shown that the very notions of “internal” and “external” employed in the individual contributions may differ considerably. This incompatibility holds true with a vengeance for the factor constellations themselves, even if the same basic conception of the two terms is adopted. From a functional point of view, different conjunctions do entirely different jobs in communication, e. g., if we compare conjunctions and verb phrases or syntactic relations (cases vs. prepositions). On top of the different jobs they do, some are more expendable in surface terms than others. Given the very same type of external factor constellation, different structures will be susceptible in different degrees to those external factors, because of the fundamental differences in function in communication. In other words, there is such a great diversity in “internal” factors that it is

a priori unlikely that there will be identical reactions to the same external factor. In addition, the same constellation of external factors will never be present in any two cases, with factors ranging from acts of identity, via literacy, to contact. The case that probably comes closest to such a situation is that of two genetically closely related languages where development differences can be surmised to be attributable to external causes. Classic cases are the Romance or Germanic languages (Schlieben-Lange, Ebert, Gerritsen, Giacalone Ramat).

If the diversity of syntactic functions as an underrated internal factor makes for diversity of results, this is the more so in view of the probably much larger diversity in potential external factor constellations. There are probably only very few cases where external factors lead to internal effects in a fairly predictable way. One of them seems to be language death. All types of language contact — as an external factor — seem much less predictable in their effects on the structure of the language (Aitchison, Fischer, Mithun, Giacalone Ramat). The clearest statement concerning language contact can be found in Aitchison.

A very specific type of factor crops up in several contributions and has also been discussed in a more general context: the effect of literacy. Discussions about the cognitive divide and related issues have included syntactic phenomena, but not specifically focused on them. In her discussion of changes in marking conjunction Schlieben-Lange points to the fact that this issue is also related to that of social (restricted vs. elaborated) code and to the wider area of autonomous vs. non-autonomous styles. Again, in discussing the impact of literacy, the contributions which consider external factors tend to imply that it is a question of triggering, accelerating or slowing down existing or latent tendencies, and not one of imposing innovations which go against the structural grain of the language (e. g., Fischer). However it is still an open question to what extent there is something like a uniform effect of literacy. The effect of this type of external factor — varieties, standardization — is brought out in the papers by Betten, Ebert, Gerritsen, Fuji, Mithun, and Schlieben-Lange. All these papers indicate that standardization accelerates syntactic change. The papers by Denison and Giacalone Ramat are interesting in this respect, since they show that the decrease in dominance of standard languages furthers syntactic changes.

The question of different syntactic styles as part of different social and communicational codes and styles seems to be a central one for the study of syntactic change, and also one that takes us back to the data question. Schlieben-Lange’s and Betten’s contributions point to the central issue

of the existence of text traditions in written "high style." Most of our data on the European languages discussed here come from such texts. For instance, ever since the inception of written English there has been a distinct and linguistically relevant awareness of high style, as witnessed by histories of English prose style, widely neglected by linguists. It is difficult to gauge to what extent, for instance, discussions of word-order changes should take account of such a factor (but see Ebert). This may mean a permanently built-in data bias by this type of external factor.

If, in a wider perspective, we compare change in syntax with change in other components of language (morphology, phonetics, lexicon) with respect to general susceptibility to external factors, it emerges that syntax is the most difficult and complex case. Syntax is the most central component of language in the sense that it is most open to interaction with other components. In other words, syntax is too much the opposite of a closed system for the effects external factors can have on it to be easily predictable. Syntax interacts more with other levels and is therefore more difficult to guard against the effects of any one external factor. This, it seems, is the reason why the identification and prediction of the relative strengths of factors in a given conflicting factor constellation is more difficult for syntax than for other levels of language, a feature highlighted in some of the papers (Lehmann, Fischer, Giacalone Ramat, Stein).

Apart from the merits of the individual analyses themselves, their contribution to the general topic and their results certainly include catalyzing questions and sharpen the focus for further research, which should concentrate on the following issues:

In view of the fact that it is very difficult to obtain the right data to explore fully the causes of syntactic changes in the past, it seems fruitful to study the factors which affect syntactic change in the present (Denison, Rickford). In this way, one will also get an instrument to evaluate the causes that are given for changes in the past. Since the data for the explanation of syntactic changes in the past are very scarce, one runs the risk of assuming too easily that a certain change was caused by particular external factors. The uniformitarian principle also prevails here. One can only say that a certain factor effected a change in the past if it can be proved that such a factor effected a change in the observable present.

Another aspect that seems promising and needs further elaboration is the introduction of a methodology grafted on sociolinguistics (Ebert, Gerritsen, Rickford), although we have to realize that the present is not the same as the past and that the methodology of modern sociolinguistics cannot be applied blindly to the past. The role of socio-economic class

in language use, for instance, cannot be studied for the past since only members of the upper class mastered the ability to write. De facto it is also difficult to study stylistic differentiation since there are hardly any documents in different styles that are written by one and the same person. Ebert demonstrates clearly what precautions have to be taken in using the present to explain the past. He convincingly shows, for example, that the role of women in language change was different in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Nuremberg than it is nowadays. They did not play a part in a change caused by norms since they had less contact with the norm, in comparison with men.

The results of the papers in this volume indicate furthermore that more research is needed on periods in which the standardization of language had a major impact. It seems that this process affected the path of a syntactic change enormously (Ebert, Fuji, Gerritsen).

If it is the case that the identification of the effect of individual factors is hampered by incomparability of cases, a fourth thing to do is to opt for more control of variables, in other words, to compare, for example, only conjunctions in structurally similar languages under the impact of, say, language contact or literacy, or both. Obviously, because of the data limitations that goal will only rarely be achieved.

A last suggestion is to consider cases for which both so-called "formal" and "functional", discourse-based analyses exist, assuming that this pair of terms is parallel to "internal" and "external", systematically allowing external influences, but taking over from "internal" the freezing of pragmatically determined use preferences. In this way, controlling for variables would at least be carried out for the specific historical process at hand.

It is our wish that the present volume will lead to a better understanding of internal and external factors in syntactic change and the problematic aspects of investigating them. We hope that this volume will be as stimulating for further research in these fascinating aspects of syntactic change, as the workshop and its atmosphere turned out to be for the participants.

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