

# Preface

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**Exaptation and Language Change**

**Edited by Muriel Norde and Freek Van de Velde**

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## Preface

The year 2015 marked the 25th anniversary of the publication of a paper in *Journal of Linguistics* with the intriguing title *How to do things with junk. Exaptation in language evolution*. In this paper, Roger Lass introduced the concept of ‘exaptation’, which he borrowed from evolutionary biology, into historical linguistics, to refer to a specific type of language change whereby ‘junk’ morphemes acquire a new function. Soon after, the new term was both embraced and vilified by the linguistic community. On the one hand, new examples were suggested, and the concept seemed relevant as a possible counterexample to the unidirectionality of language change, as advanced in grammaticalization studies. On the other hand, there were critical voices, claiming that there exists no such thing as functionless morphology, or that these kinds of change were already well covered by other terms, such as reanalysis. In the debate that ensued the concept was substantially modified – some relaxed the junk constraint, others extended it to syntax and phonology – up to the point where it had become so polysemous that it seemed to have lost its descriptive force.

In order to explore how, and indeed whether, the term ‘exaptation’ could enhance our understanding of complex language change, we decided to organize two workshops devoted entirely to this theme, one at the 20th *International Conference on Historical Linguistics* (Osaka, 2011), and one at the 45th meeting of the *Societas Linguistica Europaea* (Stockholm, 2012). The papers and vivid discussions were well received, and seeing that there were no monographs or collective volumes on the topic, we decided to produce one ourselves. The result is this volume, which brings together theoretical and empirical approaches to exaptation in language change, including supportive papers as well as (very) critical ones.

We could not have compiled this book without the help and encouragement of a great number of colleagues and friends. First of all, we want to thank the authors and the other workshop participants for their thought-provoking contributions, which have helped us shape our own ideas. Further, this book would not have been possible without the terrific assistance of the reviewers: Jenny Audring, Alexander Bergs, Anne Carlier, Ludovic De Cuypere, Hendrik De Smet, Bridget Drinka, Peter Harder, Bernd Heine, Satoshi Kinsui, Harry Perridon, Martha Ratliff, Wyn Roberts, Joe Salmons, Alan Scott, Rumiko Shinzato, Elly van Gelderen, Toon Van Hal, Nigel Vincent, and Arndt Wigger. Special thanks are due to Katharina Müller

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