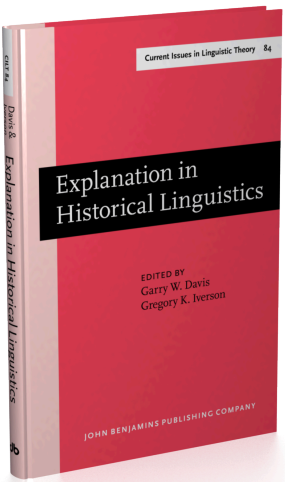
Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 84

Preface

Garry W. Davis
Gregory Iverson

https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.84.01dav



Pages vii–xiv of
Explanation in Historical Linguistics
Edited by Garry W. Davis and Gregory Iverson
[**Current Issues in Linguistic Theory**, 84] 1992. xiv, 238 pp.

Preface

The following collection of essays constitutes the first of two publications to result from the Nineteenth Annual University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee Linguistics Symposium, held April 20-22, 1990 on the topic, Explanation in Historical Linguistics. The papers that appear in these volumes were selected from among the seventy-nine presented at the conference, including eight by invited speakers; the present anthology, in addition, includes special solicited articles by Eric Hamp and Joseph Salmons (in lieu of his symposium paper) on the validity of such remote reconstructions as Nostratic and Proto-World. The editors would like to take this opportunity to thank all who attended or helped to organize the symposium, especially the members of the symposium organizing committee itself and those who served as session chairs or worked the registration tables. Special thanks go to the College of Letters and Science (and several of its affiliated departments) at the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee for continued financial as well as intellectual support of the annual UWM linguistics symposia. The contributions in this first volume, which continues the name of the symposium that inspired it, investigate the general question of what constitutes an explanation of diachronic change and illustrate their proposals within the context of various specific problems in historical linguistics, including the role of typology in linguistic reconstruction and the place of language contact, standards, and analogy. (The second volume comprises papers that deal particularly with the process of grammaticalization.) In the remainder of this preface, we summarize each contributor's major findings.

In "Event structure accounting for the emerging periphrastic tenses and passive voice in German," Werner Abraham illustrates how full lexical verbs such as German *haben* 'have', *sein* 'be' and *werden* 'become' were reduced to mere auxiliaries when they became a grammaticalized part of the developing periphrastic structures in the history of German, such as the periphrastic perfect, passive and future tense. A major strength of Abraham's study is that he also treats periphrastic structures that are not

allowed in the modern standard language, e.g. the so-called dative passive that uses the verb *bekommen* 'receive' as an auxiliary verb (*er bekam jedes Wort wiedererzählt* 'every word was repeated to him; he got every word repeated'), which is too often omitted from scholarly discussion. Abraham also deals with the 'double perfect' and 'pluperfect' that occur in the Upper German dialects (*er ist schon angekommen gewesen* 'he had arrived'; *er hat genommen gehabt* 'he had taken'). He concludes that auxiliaries in the periphrastic structures in question retained their original lexical status and Aktionsart properties in the earliest stages of grammaticalization. This enables an explanation of how these verbs gradually developed into auxiliaries as the process of grammaticalization advanced, and how the embedded full verbs in periphrastic structures simultaneously became less sensitive to their Aktionsart properties.

Raimo Anttila's paper, "Historical explanation and historical linguistics," contends that historical linguistics cannot be separated from history and pragmatics, which he refers to as "contexts". Thus, for Anttila, history is theoretically primary in regard to language and its use, and the explanation of language change must basically rely on rational explanation, such as analogy and abduction. One aspect of Anttila's explanation of historical change is that the individual actions of speakers are "telescoped" into a collective aggregate that in turn gives rise to change via what he (following Smith) calls "invisible hand processes". In Anttila's view, invisible-hand explanations are historical explanations in the strictest sense (even though the dimension of predictability may be lacking), and language change is part and parcel of socio-cultural change. Anttila thus argues against the separation of philology from linguistics on the grounds that philology is a useful tool in the elucidation of the collective linguistic actions of speakers that cause language change.

The role of speakers in causing language change is also addressed in Brian Joseph's paper, "Diachronic explanation: putting speakers back into the picture." Joseph contends that linguists' explanations of language change often fail to include reference to social factors, and to the type of linguistic behavior that adult native speakers are known to exhibit. He also criticizes an often imprecise use or overuse of language contact for the explanation of historical change. According to Joseph, this problem is particularly evident in explanations of linguistic similarities in the Balkan region, where there is often a tendency to say that a certain situation is caused 'by contact between language X and Y' when, of course, the contact is

really between speakers of the languages involved. This means that factors such as the prestige of one language in the speech community of another language, the communicative needs that would arise in a contact situation, and the effects of language shift must be considered if we wish to show that similarities between two languages are due to contact.

J. Clancey Clements's paper, "Elements of resistance in contact-induced language change," deals in detail with the results of a long-term language contact situation, that of the Korlai Creole Portuguese spoken in an isolated village on the Indian west coast. Korlai has existed alongside the regional language, Marathi, since its inception around 1540-50. Clements seeks to explain a distinction that is made between the habitual and continuous aspects in the Korlai tense/aspect system, a distinction which is perplexing because neither input language, Old/Modern Portuguese or Old/Modern Marathi, generally maintains it. He concludes that aspectual differentiation may be more basic and develop before tense/mood contrasts in the pidginization process, which may render it more resistent to change than either tense or mood.

In "Grammatical prototypes and competing motivations in a theory of linguistic change," Suzanne Kemmer explains the historical fluctuation between systems in which there is a single marker for reflexive and middle voice situations, and systems in which the reflexive marker is distinct from the middle marker. This difference results, according to Kemmer, because surface expression in human language is characterized by two competing motivations: the tendency to mark events with similar semantic properties similarly, and the counter-tendency to give distinctive marking to all significant semantic distinctions. Kemmer's explanation is based on the notion of grammatical prototypes, which she views as categories whose special status is evident typologically. This is because grammatical prototypes represent situation types (i.e. kinds of conceived situations) that tend, across languages, to be associated with a characteristic morphosyntactic type, and are most often kept formally distinct from one another in the languages of the world. The category of reflexive is a prototype for which languages overwhelmingly tend to have an overt marker. In the course of time, reflexive markers tend to become middle (voice) markers, which thus expand their semantic range to include more and more non-reflexive situation types. Kemmer finds, however, that often when the process of extension has proceeded very far, the formal contrast between the reflexive and middle categories is reestablished by means of renewal, that is, the development of

an emphatic marker into a new reflexive marker. Alternatively, she shows, the contrast can also be reestablished by repartition, whereby the original reflexive marker is split into two forms, one a reflexive marker, the other a middle marker.

In "Understanding standards," Flora Klein-Andreu finds that the preference of speakers for one or another "standard" usage can be linked to interaction between linguistic and socio-cultural conditions. Klein-Andreu examines two case-studies from Modern Peninsular Spanish, one involving third person pronominal clitic reference, the other the development of women's occupational names. In each case, she seeks to explain why the current standard usage should have come about as it did. Klein-Andreu determines that the practice in standard Peninsular Spanish, whereby case is distinguished in third person pronominal clitic reference except with animate masculines (which are marked by the etymological dative form *le* irrespective of their case-role in the utterance) is a relatively recent innovation. This innovation apparently arose as a compromise between the etymological usage and the Castillian caseless system. But Klein-Andreu questions why this compromise should have been made at all, since early grammarians from each dialect area had been quite uncompromising in accepting only the local usage. She concludes that an explanation of the compromise must be sought in the changing demographic and social conditions resulting from the fast expansion of the hegemony of Castillia over non-Castillian populations. With regard to women's occupational names, Klein-Andreu concludes that socio-cultural factors of two different kinds play an important role. The first of these is the typical non-parallelism of the occupations of men and women, which often leaves the masculine version of the occupation with a relatively more prestigious connotation (cf. *secretaria* 'office secretary' and *secretario* 'governmental secretary, administrator'). One result of this is that females in traditionally male occupations tend to use the masculine form. The second is a recent development whereby more "progressive" publications have reversed the trend, and prefer feminine forms for women, seemingly reflecting feminist concerns.

In their paper, "On the historical development of marked forms," Monika Forner, Jeanette Gundel, Kathleen Houlihan, and Gerald Sanders extend their investigations of markedness into the diachronic arena, posing the question of how, given the apparent gravitation toward unmarked structures over time, languages come also to acquire marked configurations as a consequence of linguistic change. They note the now commonplace obser-

vation that much of language change seems to originate as "imperfect learning" on the part of children, hence the drive toward grammar simplification and the context-free substitution of unmarked for marked forms (e.g. front unrounded for front rounded vowels in the history of English). The genesis of marked forms, however, they ascribe to the linguistic behavior of adults: through borrowing, as in the emgergence in medieval English of phonemic, relatively marked voiced fricatives due to the combined influences of French (cf. *veal*, etc.) and the dialect of Kent (*vixen*); through semantic bleaching, as in the appearance in Germanic and Romance of presumably marked definite articles (like German *das*) from unmarked demonstratives (cf. *daß*); and, perhaps most commonly, through fossilization of rapid speech patterns, as in the phonemicization of vowel nasalization in French (*bon* [bõ], etc.). This last category includes the many cases in which the predictably marked results of one "natural" development (vowel nasalization before nasal consonant) lead to their appearance in an unpredictable context due to operation of subsequent, equally natural developments (consonant apocope). The hypothesis throughout is that borrowing, bleaching, and stylistically moderated speech rates are characteristic of adult speech alone; and as the historical source of marked forms, these mechanisms serve as counterbalance to the simplifying effects of imperfect learning on the part of children.

In "Reconstruction and syntactic typology: a plea for a different approach," Hans Henrich Hock identifies another kind of counterbalance at play in historical linguistics, namely, the realization that grammatical systems may have existed which today are not reflected in any of the extant typologies. Thus, Greenberg's familiar work on word order shows that "strict" SOV languages (Japanese, Turkish) have prenominal relative clauses, but without relative pronouns; taking this correlation seriously, Hock points out, entails a typologically anomolous status for Proto-Indo-European, because it seems justified to reconstruct both SOV order and relative pronouns for this language. Rather than reject the reconstructions on the grounds they are not supported by typology, however, Hock argues for the possibility of typologically "mixed" languages, and in the present case identifies a distinct kind of relative clause structure, the relative-correlative type, which is marked in part by the optionality of relative pronouns. He concludes on the basis of evidence from Sanskrit, Old Latin, and Hittite that Indo-European likely was of this type, too, but maintains that this result could not have been arrived at by a "straight-jacket" approach to

diachronic typology which dismisses all irregularities of reconstruction at the outset.

The typological theme is continued in Mary Niepokuj's contribution, "The development of perfect reduplication in Indo-European: some typological considerations." Based on a comparison of the development of reduplicated affixes in a number of language families, Niepokuj identifies one clear directional tendency: out of systems in which the vowel is copied from the base, languages tend to develop systems in which the affixal vowel stays the same regardless of the vowel found in the base. With respect to Indo-European, this directional tendency lends support to reconstructing a Sanskrit–like vowel-copy pattern for the proto–language and treating the invariant vowel /e/ of Greek reduplications as a later development. On the strength of this typology (which relates to the recent proposal by Donca Steriade that even synchronic partial reduplication always derives from full), similar forms found elsewhere in Sanskrit and in Italic and Celtic should be characterized as archaisms rather than innovations, as Meillet first suggested.

In "Rules and analogy," Carol Modor investigates "...the ways in which the factors affecting the productivity of morphological classes can be related to analogical changes in morphology." A specific study she brings to bear on this question evaluates the productivity of sixteen past tense formations in English verbs. The most productive pattern speakers seem to employ in the derivation of nonce preterites involves the allomorphs of the (weak) dental suffix, e.g. *spling/splinged*, followed by, in decreasing order of preference, and hence productivity, preterites analogous to those for the (generally strong) verbs *string*, *ride*, *break*, *sing*, *feed*, *build*, *find*, *blow*, *catch*, *take*, *slide*, *sweep*, *spell*, *hit*, *bear*. Modor then notes that these psycholinguistically determined productivity judgements have a mirror in historical change, for only the most synchronically productive of the strong verb patterns — *string*, *ride*, *break* — have generally tended to attract rather than lose members between the Old or Middle English periods and the present. She concludes that the popular three-way characterization of morphological processes as either rote, analogy, or rule is too gross, both synchronically and diachronically, and proposes instead that morphological processing be considered a continuum which ranges gradually, via analogy, from one of these extremes (rote) to the other (rule).

Alice Faber's contribution to this volume ("Articulatory variability, categorial perception, and the inevitability of sound change") argues that it

is misguided to place the burden for actuation of sound change always on the side of performance, then regularly to explain the phenomenon as a consequence of human frailty, of speaker carelessness or hearer misperception. Instead, she suggests, sound change is an inevitable result of the linguistic competence of language users. One example she cites of competence variation is the categorial perception of the initial consonant in *tree* by many, perhaps most, speakers as an aspirated stop, but by others as an affricate. Her comprehensive study of the merger of tense and lax vowels before tautosyllabic /l/ among younger speakers in Utah's Salt Lake Valley (*peel* = *pill*, *pool* = *pull*, etc.), moreover, shows how acoustic detail may escape even the phonetician's measurements, yet be salient to speakers. In the Utah case, the tense/lax merger appears to be quite complete, even under acoustic analysis of the vowels' formant space, but many speakers of the dialect appear able to distinguish the tense from the lax vowels nonetheless. Faber observes that the etymologically tense vowels do exhibit a special spectral property in comparison to the lax ones, however, viz. increased prominence of the first harmonic (or fundamental frequency), which produces a distinctly breathy quality. This otherwise noncontrastive breathiness, which is naturally exaggerated in speakers with high fundamental frequencies and large heads (who then would be more likely than other speakers to have a first formant for /i/ or /u/ low enough to amplify the fundamental) can be appealed to, not as performance, but as a basic aspect of competence which varies among individuals and determines their perception of linguistic categories.

Finally, Joseph Salmons and Eric Hamp each take under consideration the place of "remote reconstruction" in current historical linguistics, a very bold part of the comparative enterprise which, as they both note, has also caught the attention of the popular press on several recent occasions. Salmons comprehensively reviews the range of data taken to support reconstruction of one particular root posited for the presumed ancestor of all human language, the Proto-World form **tik* meaning 'finger', 'one', or 'to point'. Though "...the similarities are honestly intriguing on many points and across many languages...", Salmons concludes that in this case, which would appear to be the strongest of the several proposed Proto-World etymologies, cross-linguistic repetitions of its simple, unmarked CVC pattern are very likely due merely to chance. Hamp underscores this finding with the observation that the degree to which phonological structure among the known languages of historical times has changed is very considerable

indeed, and, naturally, highly obscuring of genetic affinities (cf. e.g. Grimm's Law in Germanic). But the historical period constitutes only four or five thousand years. To reconstruct linguistic forms from ten times as many millennia in the past, or even more, is certainly speculative; but Hamp points out that, because of the pervasiveness of ordinary sound change, phonetically similar forms of the present day (unless borrowed, or supported by systematic sound correspondences) are precisely the ones which are most likely **not** to be related genetically. Paradoxically, then, the more apparent a remote relationship is, the more likely it is to be wrong.