

Preface

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/z.192.preface>

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The Diachrony of Grammar

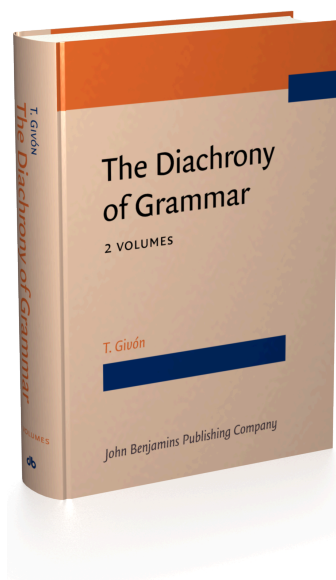
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2015. 928 pp. (Hb in 2 vols.)

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Preface

In the summer of 1976 I spent six weeks at the LSA summer institute at SUNY, Oswego, teaching a class on diachronic syntax. It was a heady time. Carol Justus hosted the Institute, doing the legwork for the official director, her mentor Win Lehmann. Charles Li came up, having just put on the third and, as it turned out, last of his Santa Barbara symposia, where we all got together for three years running, striving to integrate functionalism, typology and diachrony. Tim Shopen brought in his just-funded NSF project, Language Typology and Linguistic Field Work, with a conference celebrating Joe Greenberg. Marianne Mithun ran a summer-long workshop for her Mohawk speakers. For a lighter touch, Lisa Menn and I organized a two-day conference on Middle Earth Linguistics, with the opening remarks delivered by Win Lehmann wearing his inimitable formal deadpan, and Woopsy Wolfram wowing the gallery with Middle Earth dialectology. My own paper dealt with diachronic change in Entish phonology and the puzzling consequences of hyper-slow delivery speed.

Also teaching at the Oswego institute were fellow travellers Paul Hopper, Bernard Comrie, Wally Chafe, Joan Bybee and many others, some of whom sat in on my class and enriched the rather skeletal offering. My plan was to rework the materials into a textbook. Fortunately, I didn't. All I had to offer at the time were disparate case studies and a rather wobbly theoretical perspective. Those case studies, with the data still shining bright, did find their way into a book though, as the first 10 chapters of this work.

Fifteen years later, my friend and editor John Verhaar, S.J., suggested that I gather all my work on diachronic syntax and grammaticalization into a single venue. I told him I would think about it. In the intervening years, Paul Hopper and Elizabeth Traugott had published their textbook, as had Bernd Heine and his associates in Koeln. The very same year, the two volume of our 1988 Oregon symposium on grammaticalization came out, edited by Elizabeth Traugott and Bernd Heine, and a few years later the book by Joan Bybee and her colleagues. I told John I wasn't sure I could add much to what my colleagues had already done. When I saw him for the last time, in Nijmegen in the late 1990s, he was blind and failing. Are you still thinking? he asked me. I told him yes, but that I was still learning more about the subject, working primarily with two North American languages, Ute and Tolowa-Athabaskan.

Fifteen years later, it has finally dawned on me that the kind of book that should be ideally written could not in fact be written, leastwise not by me. Sure, I have learned some more, who wouldn't? More data, an expanded theoretical perspective. But this is precisely why, as much as I admire what my colleagues have done, I am still reluctant to produce a definitive didactic tome. In the interim, *en attendant Godot*, I have chosen to bring together all the case-studies that ought to lead someone smarter, or bolder, than myself to nail down the grand design. The data in these two volumes – much revised, corrected and expanded – are still the gist of what stands firm and shines bright as theories rise and fall.

I have attempted, first, to recast these case studies in as coherent a theoretical perspective as I could muster after 45 years of trying to make sense of the diachrony of grammar. If this work is about anything, it is about how theory emerges out of the data, and how tentative the theory remains in spite of the solidity of the data that prompted it. By the same token, the work is also about how the data, solid as it may seem, is not independent of the theory within which it is embedded. Its meaning, its very significance, changes as it is recast in a new or expanded framework. In the philosophy of science, we owe this dynamic perspective to Russell Norwood Hanson, and ultimately to Charles Sanders Peirce.

While the data remains the backbone of these two volumes, the theoretical perspective is not exactly absent. If one had to boil it down to one sentence, it would run as follows: This work constitutes a frontal assault on F. de Saussure's corrosive legacy in linguistics, beginning with his cutting off of linguistics' cross-disciplinary lifelines, urging us to lower our sights to "internal linguistics" (latter days' "pure linguistics"). Then onward to his three core dogmas of Structuralism: The arbitrariness of language structure, the idealization of the data – enshrining *langue* and disdaining *parole*, and last but not least, the arbitrary firewall between synchrony and diachrony.

One of the things I hope to show here is that the clustering of Saussure's four dogmas is far from arbitrary. Rather, the four sit well together, organically, inevitably, being a strange amalgam of the two worst features of reductionist epistemology – the theory-shyness of extreme Empiricism, and the data-aversion of Platonic Rationalism.

Over the years, reviewers have slapped my wrist periodically for daring to commit, brazenly, that most heinous of offenses against Saussure's revered legacy – panchronic grammar. The truth is, I stand guilty. *Mea maxima culpa*. After which a confession is perhaps in order, one that will animate this work: I have never seen a piece of synchronic data that didn't reek – instantly, to high heaven – of the

diachrony that gave it rise. Reek in two distinct ways: First, with the frozen relics of diachrony that prompt us to reconstruct prior states. And second, with synchronic variation that hints at the early stirrings of ongoing change and intimations of things to come.

Conversely, I have never seen a piece of diachronic data that didn't demand, indeed insist on, an understanding of the non-arbitrary, adaptive general principles – Carnap's general propositions – that govern synchronic language behavior. The synchrony and diachrony of grammar are but twin faces of the same coin. To study the one in artificial isolation from the other is to gut both. If we let de Saussure's seductive siren song continue to bewitch us, we will never understand how synchronic grammars came to be the way they are. Nor would we unearth the cognitive, communicative, neurological and developmental universals that guide diachronic change.

White Cloud Ranch
Ignacio, Colorado
March 2014