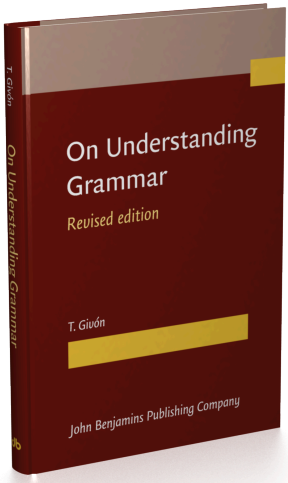
Preface to the revised edition

https://doi.org/10.1075/z.213.pre2



Pages xix–xxii of
On Understanding Grammar: Revised edition
T. Givón
2018. xxi, 299 pp.

Preface to the revised edition

The first edition of this book, assembled somewhat chaotically in the late 1970s and published – no-doubt prematurely – in 1979, was produced under a wholly self-imposed time-pressure. Ever since, I have been aware, progressively and often to my great embarrassment, of how tentative, preliminary and ungainly the original book was, especially when people kept citing it and thus, intentionally or not, re-exposing its numerous insufficiencies. In the intervening decades, I have labored to remedy these faults in numerous research projects and publications, and have come to consider the work a youthful promissory note, executed in great innocence of how long it would take to redeem.

In spite of its many faults, the original book nonetheless strove for a coherent view of language, a view that, in retrospect, harkens back to our towering 19th-and early-20th-Century antecedents – F. Bopp, W. von Humboldt, H. Paul, A. Meillet and O. Jespersen. The cumulative thrust of their work situated human language in a complex and unabashedly inter-disciplinary context, where to understand the structural properties of language one had to also account for its cognitive and communicative functions, its protracted diachrony, its ontogeny and phylogeny and, last but not least, the oft-elusive balance between its unimpeachable universality and incredible diversity. To any discerning evolutionary biologist, anthropologist or psychologist, this heady mix should look familiar. But the challenge remains, now as before, how to illuminate, coherently, the complex inter-dependencies between the disparate parts, and in the process show how necessary they all are.

The theoretical approach that animates this work is complex but, at least in principle, coherent. It notes, first, that grammar-coded domains must be functionally defined (chs 2, 3, 4, 5). That is, any mundane grammatical construction – passive, REL-clause or V-complement – is not defined by its structural properties, but rather by its cognitive-communicative function(s). Logically, this turns out to be the direct consequence of cross-language typological diversity; that is, the fact that the very same function is performed in different languages by starkly-different structures. But it is also the direct consequence of the fact that the diverse structures that code the same function cross-linguistically tend to resemble their diachronic source construction. A purely structural definition

of grammar-coded domains would, therefore, be a hopelessly circular enterprise (Givón 1981; 1995; 2001; 2009; 2015a).

Second, this approach notes that cross-language typological diversity is not arbitrary, but is rather severely constrained and highly motivated (chs 1, 4). It is constrained first by the relatively limited number of source constructions that can be recruited to code the same functional domain. And the choice of such constructions turns out to be constrained, primarily, by the functional similarity – or partial functional overlap – between the source and target domains. But the choice is also constrained by universal principles of form-function iconicity (Haiman 1985; Haiman ed. 1985; Givón 1989).

And third, this approach takes it for granted that the diversity of structures that code the same functional domain is the direct consequence of the diversity of diachronic pathways that gave them rise. Synchronic cross-language diversity is thus the direct product of diachronic diversity, in turn thus constrained by the universal principles that govern diachronic change (Traugott and Heine eds, 1991; Hopper and Traugott 1993; Heine and Kuteva 2007; Givón 2009, 2015a). And as noted above, at the very start of the diachronic rise of new grammatical constructions lies the functional similarity, or partial functional overlap, between the source and target domain.

Empirical science is a progressive, cumulative, ever-tentative enterprise, whereby new facts and novel perspectives most often manifest themselves in complex and oft-unpredictable interactions. To paraphrase Karl Popper (1934/1959), the game of science is endless. He who tires, retires, but the game goes on. In a fairly transparent way, the gradual progression of organized science thus recapitulates the gradual growth of human cognition. However mightily we may strive to get it right the first, second or umpteenth time, our results remain tentative and incomplete. While in the past this used to frustrate me to no end, I find it now strangely comforting.

In an interview published in Time magazine ca. 1964, Ingmar Bergman was asked how he viewed his place in movie-making. His answer, as I recall it, was instructive, indeed illuminating: I see myself, he said, as one of the artisans who came to build the great cathedral in Chartres. Each worked for a year, seven years, ten years, on a ledge, a bas relief, a gargoyle, a freeze, a corner. At the end of their self-allotted time, they each packed their tools, climbed off the parapets and went home. Hopefully, as my late friend and mentor Dwight Bolinger most-generously suggested, this book can still stimulate beginners not to give up too early.

The book has been thoroughly revised, corrected and updated. Fortunately, science is a communal enterprise, where it is human to err and just as human to lend a helping hand. The generous help I received over the years from various commentators and friends is acknowledged at the appropriate loci throughout the text. I must still record, however, my special indebtedness to my long-time publishers, John Benjamins of Amsterdam; and most of all to my long-suffering and most-patient editor, Kees Vaes.

White Cloud Ranch
Ignacio, Colorado
June 2017