

Book Review

Lynn Anthonissen. 2021. *Individuality in language change* (Trends in Linguistics 360). Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. xvi + 323. ISBN: 9783110725711.

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Language is a tricky thing. On the one hand, it's a matter of convention, of speech communities and their shared communicative systems. On the other hand, it's a cognitive activity of individual speakers, and no two people talk alike. How do these two levels interact? What is the relationship between the macro speech community and its language, and the micro level of individual speakers and their language? For a long time, linguists have shunned that question and have concentrated on the conventionalized linguistic system, emphasizing the goal to achieve greatest possible generalizations with their findings. Notable exceptions are mostly found in sociolinguistic studies such as Bergs (2005), Johnstone (1996), or Milroy (1992). Pentrel (2017) was among the first to highlight and investigate the cognitive mechanisms of individual language use in history – in that case the language of Samuel Pepys. The *Mind Bending Grammars* project¹ (initiated by Peter Petré) was probably the first large scale research project focusing on both the sociolinguistic and cognitive underpinnings of individual and communal language use, and Lynn Anthonissen's study *Individuality in language change* is the first book-length culminating point for these developments.

Anthonissen singles out two particular case studies of constructional change in English that illustrate the interconnectivity of individual and community grammars. These two are the prepositional passive construction (*The issue was frowned upon*) on the one hand, and the nominative and infinitive construction (NCI; *She is said to be a hero*) on the other. She investigates these constructions and their changes on the basis of the Early Modern Multiloquent Authors corpus (EMMA). The EMMA corpus comprises about 90 million words from about 50 different, but interconnected seventeenth-century authors across five generations.

This book is divided into two main parts and a concluding section. Part II (Chapters 2–4) focuses on the two special passive constructions at hand and their historical developments. Part III (Chapters 5–8) then concentrates on the relationship and interplay of individual speakers and the language community with regard to the findings of part II. Part IV (Chapters 9 and 10) offers some concluding remarks.

¹ <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/mind-bending-grammars/>.

In Chapter 2, Anthonissen discusses some previous approaches to language variation and change and how these relate to the individual-community question. In particular, she shows that grammaticalization, for example, while acknowledging language as an individual phenomenon, and therefore not being incompatible with the idea that language change is both a cognitive (individual) and a social (community) phenomenon, has usually focused on the interindividual (macro) linguistic system. Historical sociolinguistics, in turn, typically focuses on questions of language in the community, including phenomena such as social diffusion, rather than the underlying cognitive processes in individual speakers. A comprehensive theory that acknowledges both perspectives and puts these into practice is thus still a gap in our research that Anthonissen seeks to fill. She suggests a complex adaptive system approach for language as such, in combination with cognitive, usage-based Construction Grammar as a theoretical and methodological framework for concrete analyses. The latter, especially in combination with an entrenchment and conventionalization model, allows for a detailed and intriguing analysis of language in the individual and the community as well as linguistic changes across a lifespan of speakers.

Chapter 3 generally deals with the question of syntactic change and the rise of the passive in Early Modern English in the light of the interplay between information structure on the one hand and syntax on the other. As the development of modern English syntax implies a fixation of word order and an association of unmarked topics with grammatical subjects, this posed certain “functional demands” on the subject. Essentially, passives in modern English allow speakers to turn non-agent referents into discourse topics by promoting them to subject position. Passives thus serve important discourse-structural functions in modern English, which explains their general increase in frequency in Early Modern English.

Chapter 4 takes the macro perspective from Chapter 3 further and details the development of the two constructions in question: the prepositional passive, and the nominative and infinitive construction. While both constructions seem to have originated in the Middle English period, the main phase of their development took place in the Early Modern English period. Through “fundamental cognitive processes” (p. 112) like analogy and routinization we see the relaxation of early constraints and the spread of the prepositional passive into new verb-preposition combinations and new, complex syntactic configurations. The NCI and its active counterpart ACI (accusative with infinitive) first appeared in Latin translations or “Latin inspired prose” (p. 113). Information structuring demands finally led to the rise and spread of the passive construction, the NCI, which allowed objects to be used as topical subjects even with stricter word order restrictions. Most importantly, however, both these case studies show that syntactic change is “multifaceted” and can be

“non-disruptive”, i.e., gradual and without disruptive leaps between generations and speakers.

While Chapter 5 gives an introduction to the EMMA corpus, which forms the basis for this study, Chapters 6 and 7 are the heart of the matter. Chapter 6 deals with the prepositional passive, Chapter 7 with the nominative and infinitive (NCI) construction.

In her analyses of the prepositional passive in Early Modern English, Anthonissen shows very clearly that the macro-level changes (a general increase in the frequency of this construction) are built up out of both inter- and intraspeaker variability. We see generational shifts as well as lifespan changes. Constructional change happens in first language acquisition and across a lifetime, and generations with high interspeaker variability show the strongest growth in frequency. In a second step, Anthonissen relates this to frequency effects, i.e., type and token repetition. Type frequency is generally associated with productivity and we see that individual speakers may have different representations of the underlying schema, which in turn results in different levels of productivity. In a third step, individual language use was correlated with social factors. Anthonissen finds that the usage profiles of the 50 authors more or less pattern with two different communities of practice, and that – at least tentatively – close social links between authors also seem to correlate with greater linguistic similarity.

Anthonissen begins her analysis of the NCI in Chapter 7 by introducing a two-fold distinction between what she calls Evidential NCI and Modalized NCI constructions. Evidential NCI constructions are typically reportative in nature, i.e., they relate the speaker's knowledge based on some external entity. Modalized NCIs, in contrast, involve the personal, internal assessment of the speaker, rather than any external source of evidence or modes of access to it. Example (1) illustrates an evidential NCI – there is some (unmentioned) external source for the claim; example (2) is a modalized one, the speaker assesses the possibility of such an assertion in relation to his/her current knowledge (p. 183):

- (1) *Black cats are said to be a symbol of misfortune*
- (2) *Black cats may be said to be a symbol of misfortune*

Anthonissen notices two different pathways of development for evidential and modalized NCIs in the EMMA corpus. The number of evidential NCIs steadily increases between generations 1 and 3, when it reaches a stable plateau. Modalized NCIs, on the other hand, appear to maintain a stable 30 % rate of all NCIs at that time. Just like with the prepositional passive construction, we see that individual speakers change their grammars with respect to NCIs even after first language acquisition, i.e., throughout their lifetime. These changes typically correspond to what we also see

in the community grammar(s), including a general spread of the evidential NCI construction in favor of modalized NCIs. The detailed study of individual language users as well as inter-and intragenerational trends reveals another fascinating phenomenon. Some speakers, like Thomas Fuller from the first generation of authors, are already very strong evidential NCI users towards the beginning of their written records, but then – against the general trend – specialize with their *say* NCI constructions on modalized uses. Such surprising findings illustrate quite clearly that not all longitudinal changes can be captured by the traditional models, but rather appear to be quite messy, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable.

Chapter 8 finally focuses on constructional networks in adult cognition. Here, Anthonissen shows that what can be established as an abstract constructional network of different passive constructions in linguistic theory, has some real-life counterpart in the language use and cognition of individual speakers. While there is considerable interindividual variation, there is still a surprising amount of similarity between speakers. Lifespan data further supports the view that the two passive constructions are somehow associated and tend to move in tandem. However, a small group of speakers in the corpus showed the opposite tendency. Rather than association of the two passive constructions, they exhibited some dissociation across time, both intergenerationally and across individual lifespans. These increasing dissociations in a few speakers, however, can be explained with reference to “a number of construction-specific developments that reflect the outcome of a subtle interaction between entrenchment processes and constructional semantics” (p. 263).

In sum, Anthonissen’s book really lives up to its promises. For one, this is an excellent account of the developments of the prepositional passive and the NCI from a constructional perspective. It not only describes the changes in the constructional patterns themselves, but it contextualizes these in the wider constructional network of passive constructions, which also sheds new light on constructional networks as well as issues such as entrenchment and conventionalization in language change. More importantly however, this is one of the first comprehensive and systematic attempts to investigate language and language change on the level of the individual and the community. As mentioned above, a number of studies have already probed into this complex problem, but they have usually either focused on cognitive or on sociolinguistic matters. Anthonissen’s study combines these two aspects in intricate and pioneering ways that will surely motivate and influence research for years to come. One of the most intriguing aspects, for me at least, is her discussion of language use on the level of the individual and the community and, most importantly, what we, as linguists see as our object of study. We may find plausible patterns of language use on the level of the speech community, e.g., in single generations, or even across generations. But we constantly need to remind ourselves that these are only abstractions and averages. In some cases, as Anthonissen’s case studies show, these

averages graft onto what we find in individual speakers. In other cases, however, these averages on the macro-level do not (exactly) mirror what we see on the micro-level of the individual speaker. Some speakers may actually use language in very different ways, some others may change their language use across a lifetime. It is only when we lump all of this together that we see the (abstract) communal patterns. This is not necessarily bad or uninteresting, but Anthonissen's book now gives us more than a glimpse behind the curtain, so that we may look at the underpinnings of the micro-macro divide in greater detail and can arrive at much more informed conclusions concerning what we actually want to describe and talk about.

All in all, this book turns out to be (delicious) food for thought for anyone interested in language variation and change, Construction Grammar, and language as a complex adaptive system – not even to mention seventeenth century English and the EMMA corpus.

References

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