

SPONTANEOUS SYNTACTIC CHANGE: AN ANTI-INERTIA APPROACH

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1. THE ANALYTICAL CHALLENGE OF SYNTACTIC CHANGE. The question why and how languages change has preoccupied linguists for a long time. An early systematic attempt to resolve some of the central questions posed by diachronic change had been undertaken by the Neogrammarians, who in the mid/late nineteenth century argued that phonological changes (so-called sound laws), insofar as they apply mechanically, hold without exception (“*die Ausnahmslosigkeit der Lautgesetze*”). No such regularity and thoroughgoingness had been accorded to syntactic change, which was rather conceived of as an indication for the weakening of the language system through system–external forces. As Hermann Paul (1880: 251 §173) formulates this idea, “There is in language no precaution at all against imperfections (“*Übelstände*”), which penetrate it, but only a reaction against those already present”. Paul’s statement sounds surprisingly modern in the context of what has been called the logical problem of language change (Roberts & Roussou 2003). The historical reality of language change also poses a challenge for one of the central guiding principles of the minimalist program, namely that human language faculty displays signs of optimal design and a highly-advanced level of organization (Chomsky 2000: 1–2, 2001: 2). However, if natural language syntax were designed optimally for the interface with the cognitive systems already in place (i.e. those included in the sensorimotor and in the conceptual-intentional system), how come languages are prone to change over time, sometimes with far-reaching consequences for the system at large? The need to address the logical problem of language change thus defined becomes even more pressing, when there are no clearly detectable therapeutic or optimizing factors, motivating a particular change as leading to a more economic system. In recent years, historical linguists have expressed the view that the syntax is in a state of equilibrium and does not change by itself. Accordingly, syntactic change can only occur when forced by changes in the phonology, the morphology, and the lexicon or else by contact-induced language change (Keenan 2000; Longobardi 2001). In other words, syntax change always originates as an interface phenomenon.

2. THE ANTI-INERTIA THEORY. In Reintges (2009) and subsequent work, I advance an alternative proposal, call it Anti-Inertia Theory, which attempts to explain the multiple facets of syntax change from language design. The locus of syntactic change is syntactic variation, to wit, the availability of a rich inventory of sentence structures and word order alternations to express the same propositional content in somewhat different ways. In enhancing the expressive power of the language, syntactic variation must be considered an integral part of the narrow syntax and so must be syntactic change. Actual changes in sentential structure can be brought about by interface pressures (e.g. by phonological, morphological, and lexical-semantic changes) or by syntax-external, contact–related factors, as assumed by the proponents of the Inertia Theory, but—and this is a new hypothesis—it can also arise endogenously, spontaneously without outside factors playing any role. If syntactic change follows from syntactic variation whatever the source of the variation may be, we arrive at an understanding of the regularity and the systematic patterning that we see with historical grammar change. Synchronic syntactic variation is restricted, because it is tied to computational processes, which trigger the displacement of word and phrases to positions other than where they are interpreted. According to Chomsky (2001:3), the displacement property has “(at least) plausible motivation in terms of distinct semantic interpretations and perhaps processing. If so, displacement is only an apparent imperfection of natural language, as are the devices that implement it”. Provided that movement and possible targets thereof are constrained by general principles of grammar, we arrive at an understanding of why syntactic change that comes forth from syntactic variation is in and by itself constrained and not random. Since movement applies without altering the form and meaning of lexical items, “pure” variation-based syntax change is predicted to occur without concomitant morphological and semantic changes. Vice versa, irregular syntax change cannot be derived from regular syntactic variation, but must rather be derived from irregular morphological and lexical–semantic changes.

3. TWO KINDS OF WORD ORDER VARIATION IN EARLY EGYPTIAN. To lend credence to these claims, I shall examine two kinds of word order alternations in Early Egyptian, the initial stage of Ancient Egyptian language history (2600–200 BCE). The first kind involves word order variation that is correlated with morphological variation. On the surface, Early Egyptian meets the profile of Greenberg’s (1963: 79) Sixth Word Order Universal, according to which “all languages with dominant VSO order have SVO as an alternative or as the only alternative basic word order”. However, these are not “simple alternatives”, since verb–initial Verb–Subject–Object (VSO) and subject–initial Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) clauses differ systematically from each other in morphological shape of the finite verb as well as in their situation aspect. The VSO clausal pattern is used for the description of events, actions, and accomplishments. As shown by example (1), the event–related interpretation of a verb of knowledge and acquisition of knowledge such as *rx* may come close to a perception verb ‘to recognize’.

- (1) Basic verb–initial (VSO) order with an event–related interpretation
j-rx Ppjj pn mwt=f
 AUG–learn.PFV Pepi DEM.M.SG mother.F.SG=POSS. 3M.SG
 “This (King) Pepi (here) recognizes his mother” (Pyramid Texts 910a/P)

The alternative SVO order is used for the description of states as the result of a prior event or states irrespective of their origin. In example (2), the finite verb *rx(-w)* appears in the Stative inflectional paradigm and displays a possession of knowledge sense ‘to know through learning’. The possessive sense of transitive–active Statives is crosslinguistically not uncommon and particularly pronounced with verbs of knowledge and acquisition of knowledge.

- (2) “Alternative” subject–initial (SVO) order with stative interpretation
 D³hwt(j)-nxt pn **rx(-w)** rn n(j) whf-w
 Thoth-nakht DEM.M.SG learn-STAT.3M name.M.SG LINK.M.SG fowler-M.PL
 “Thoth-nakht (here) knows the names of the fowlers.” (Coffin Texts VI 22o/B1Bo)

The second case of word order variation addressed in this study is not related to grammatical variation anywhere else. This kind of variation can be found in verb–initial structures, where one VSO pattern may differ from another VSO pattern in terms of the precise hierarchical position of the different items. The availability of more than one position for the nominal subject is shown by the word order contrast between examples (3) and (4). The subject NP *Hemen* in example (3) follows the finite verb form *fzp* ‘to accept’ and the clause-internal negation adverb *w* ‘not’ in linear order. Further note that the main verb *fzp* appears in its default, perfective–neutral aspect form, with the obtained future denotation being a contextual feature.

- (3) VERB > NEGATION *w* > SUBJECT NP > DIRECT OBJECT NP
fzp w Hmn jft=f nb
 accept.PFV NEG Hemen thing.F.SG=POSS.3M.SG each.M.SG
 “(The god) Hemen will not accept any of his property.” (Mo^calla Inscription nr. 8, III.6)

By contrast, the subject NP *Thoth-nakht* in (4) precedes both the clause-internal negation *w* and the emphatic particle *js* in linear order. Once again, the finite verb *swr* ‘drink’ occurs in its “bare” stem form as a perfective–neutral aspect and conveys future time reference.

- (4) VERB > SUBJECT NP > NEGATION *w* > EMPHATIC PARTICLE *js* > DATIVE CLITIC > DIRECT OBJECT NP
swr D³hwt(j)-nxt w js n=sn wzft
 drink.PFV Thoth-nakht NEG EMPH for=3PL urine.F.SG
 “Thoth-nakht will surely not drink urine.” (Coffin Texts VII 115j/B4Bo)

The negation adverb *w* serves as a landmark for determining the position of the subject NP vis-à-vis the finite verb. The contrast between *Verb > NEG w > subject NP > direct object NP* and *Verb > subject NP > NEG w > EMPH js > direct object NP* constituent order therefore points in the direction of two syntactic positions for the subject NP—a lower subject position within the verbal domain, which is reserved for canonical subjects, and a higher subject position in the inflectional domain, which is targeted by non-canonical subjects.

4. FINAL REMARKS. Chomsky (2001: 33–35) proposes that positions associated with optional movement are assigned a special interpretation. This seems to fit the bill for the case at hand, with subject raising being restricted to non-canonical subjects. A more interesting look at the distribution of subject properties in Early Egyptian would be from an economy perspective on rule application, as advanced by Fukui (1993), according to which grammatical operations are “costless” whenever they produce structures consistent the language’s basic typological parameters. In other words, the diversity that we see with VSO sentences does not interfere with the positive setting for the head-initial parameter as well as the canonical precedence relations.