
REVIEW OF FISCHER, DE SMET & VAN DER WURFF (2017), *A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH SYNTAX*

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1 SUMMARY

A Brief History of English Syntax is a slim volume, which aims to present an outline of major grammatical changes in English. Rather than providing a synchronic overview of Old, Middle, or Modern English syntax, the book is organized thematically, describing diachronic lineages within different components of English syntax. Before these components are dealt with, the book sets off with three more general chapters on the study of historical syntax, dealing with data and theoretical frames. Chapter 1 is an introduction, in a nutshell, to the aims and scope of the book. The authors emphasize here that their aim is not to be exhaustive, but rather to zoom in on the phenomena that they have identified as most interesting and important, and they provide a useful overview table of the issues discussed in each chapter. In Chapter 2 the focus is on sources of evidence and what to do with them, with detailed discussion of electronic corpora, dimensions of variation, and potential pitfalls. Chapter 3 deals with different theoretical approaches to historical syntax, in particular contrasting Principles & Parameters (P&P) with Grammaticalization Theory (GT) and Diachronic Construction Grammar (CxG).

With chapter 4 the book starts to engage in earnest with concrete instances of changes that have taken place. This chapter is an outlier, since rather than

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dealing with a single component of grammar it takes a broad causal factor - language contact - and investigates its implications in all corners of English syntax. Contact effects of Scandinavian and (especially) Latin get the most attention here, with a few pages each on possible Celtic and French influence too. The five remaining chapters each deal with a component of grammar: the noun phrase (chapter 5), the verb phrase (chapter 6), clausal constituents (chapter 7), subordinate clauses (chapter 8), and clausal word order (chapter 9). As mentioned, each chapter aims for detailed and evaluative discussion of individual phenomena rather than comprehensive coverage. Thus, in chapter 5 the focus is mainly on articles, demonstratives, genitives, and adjective placement. Chapter 6 is about the development of auxiliaries and periphrastic constructions, in particular for tense, mood and aspect. Chapter 7 is a mixed bag, but its main focus is on argument structure and grammatical relations. Chapter 8 addresses the history of complement and adverbial clauses, both finite and non-finite, while chapter 9 discusses the relative ordering of various clausal constituents (noun-phrase-internal word order having been dealt with in chapter 5).

The primary goal of this review article is to assess Fischer et al's *Brief History of English Syntax* in light of its suggested potential as didactic material. In the Preface and Acknowledgements, the authors state that the compact overview of changes in historical syntax "can be used as a textbook but has not been set up as one" (pvii). With there being something of an abundance of textbooks detailing the history of English syntax (albeit most commonly embedded in a larger 'history of English language' and to a much lesser extent by itself), it is not unfathomable that its intended target audience (i.e. lecturers in the history of English and, more generally, "everyone who has an interest in the way English has changed syntactically over a period of more than 1,000 years") would need some convincing as to why they should add *A Brief History of English Syntax* to their reading list. In this review, we will discuss the volume's merits and drawbacks, focussing specifically on its organization/narrative structure/design (Section 2.1), its treatment of theoretical frameworks (Section 2.2), and its usefulness as a textbook in historical syntax research (Section 2.3).

2 EVALUATION

2.1 Structure and set-up

To assess the volume's suitability for a course on (the syntactic features of) historical English, it is helpful to draw attention to the volume's set-up and narrative structure. It is, to a certain degree, common practice to structure

textbooks in historical English as a chronological sequence of synchronic descriptions at different stages in time. Such volumes – as for instance Taylor (2014) in Ringe’s *Linguistic History of English*, Kohnen’s (2014) *Introduction to the History of English*, or the chapters by Traugott (1992), Fischer (1992) and Rissanen (1998) in the *Cambridge History of English* – follow a design that separates the descriptions of Old, Middle, and Modern English with chapter boundaries, and invite readers to join the dots themselves. In contrast, *A Brief History of English Syntax* is organized thematically, describing diachronic lineages of syntactic change in the English language. In this respect it is closer in approach to Denison (1993), Fischer, van Kemenade, Koopman & van der Wurff (2000) (which shares two authors with this book), and Los (2015).

Concretely, this means the volume is a great fit for courses on diachronic syntax with a thematic design. In particular, the chapter structure (in particular, chapters 4 to 9) easily translates into a chapter-a-week course structure where selected changes in a particular area of syntax are (i) scrutinised and (ii) clarified making reference to (possible) mechanisms (and motivations) of syntactic change, following a more or less consistent *what > how > why* structure. A nice example is the section on aspect in Chapter 6: the section starts with a short introduction on two distinctively English features, the progressive and verb particles, followed by separate subsections dealing with their developments. The subsection on the progressive, then, starts with a description of the possible origins of the [*be Ving*]-progressive in Old English, subsequently summarises the semantic and structural changes that took place in Middle and Modern English, and, ends with a short paragraph offering some reflection on the possibility that there are some “deeper, system-internal causes” (p126) for the apparent success of the English [*be Ving*]-progressive. Of course, due to its thematic-diachronic structure, the volume is perhaps less suitable for courses that either follow a strictly chronological structure, or aim to give a comprehensive synchronic overview of Old, Middle, or Modern English. However, precisely because the book is explicitly designed as a description of ‘connected dots’ in diachronic lineages and offers reflections on the motivations of syntactic change where possible, it can in fact be a helpful complementary resource when combined with a synchronic-historical textbook (e.g. Hogg & Alcorn 2012, Horobin & Smith 2002) or time-period-by-chapter textbook (e.g. van Gelderen 2014, Brinton & Arnovick 2016). Both student and teachers who read the book will also benefit from its use of tables to give a transparent and illuminating overview of chapters, arguments, and structures (e.g. pp4–6, p55, p79).

2.2 *The treatment of theory*

The present volume also stands out from other potential history of English (syntax) textbooks through its chapter on Theoretical Models and Morpho-syntactic change (Chapter 3). Denison (1993), for instance, discusses a variety of theoretical approaches in the context of the literature on particular phenomena, but does not undertake to compare theories in terms of their overall approach and underlying assumptions, as is done here. Los (2015) does not contain a section on theories, and Fischer et al. (2000) and Taylor (2014) are presented from the point of view of a single theoretical perspective, that of generative syntax in the P&P mould.

It could be argued that the inclusion of this chapter goes against the book's aim of trying "to avoid theoretical jargon as much as possible" (pvii). Of course, the use of jargon must be excused: any chapter that deals with theoretical approaches in any depth must clarify at least some of the frequently used jargon. Yet, note that the chapter is not an easy read. The primary aim of the chapter is to contrast approaches, not to give a detailed in-depth explanation of all terms and concepts attached to them. This means that they use terms such as *X-bar principle*, *Government*, *Binding*, *Bounding*, *continuous dynamic process*, or *contiguity with cognition* to exemplify principles or illustrate core features of the different theoretical approaches without necessarily providing examples or explicit definitions of what those terms entail. At the same time, as indicated in the introduction of the volume, the narrative also relies on a certain degree of prerequisite knowledge: for instance, the chapter devotes some discussion to the role of reanalysis (as well as analogy, metaphor, and metonymy) as understood in P&P, GT and CxG, but it does not give an *ab ovo* description of what reanalysis is. Finally, for other concepts and terms (e.g. *syntagmatic axis*), brief descriptions or clarifications are offered between parentheses, but these are intended to refresh the reader's memory rather than to fully introduce and define the concept.

Still, by including this chapter the book addresses a topic that is not often dealt with in textbooks. This jibes well with the current pedagogical trend to place more emphasis on research-led teaching, often involving student-led research projects. Especially for more advanced groups, such student-led research crucially involves the formulation of an interesting theory and hypothesis that can help understand phenomena such as syntactic change. While the purpose of investigating theories is ultimately to explain observed syntactic changes, it is undeniable that theories and explanations of observed phenomena differ from theoretical framework to framework, and it is not always the case that the structure provided by one framework can also

support or hold the theories and explanations supported by another (p31). Similarly, a research problem that exists in one framework might not exist in another. This is indeed complicated, but it is nevertheless interesting to familiarise students with these matters, especially for those students who will go on to postgraduate study. Anyone who ends up working on English historical syntax will at some point need to come to terms with the variety of frameworks that crop up in teaching and research at different institutions and conferences, and institutions are doing their doctoral students no favours if they keep them inside the theoretical bubble.

In principle the inclusion of this chapter is a good thing, then. Nevertheless, we feel that it only partially does justice to the current theoretical landscape. The chapter is structured as a dialectic between ‘formal’ P&P and ‘functional’ GT, supplemented with some comments on diachronic Construction Grammar (CxG). The description of these theoretical approaches is quite abstract – that is undeniably difficult to avoid – but relies on a wide range of more concrete examples to further explain and occasionally problematize stances (possibly, some additional, ‘shared’ examples considered from both a ‘formal’ and a ‘functional’ point of view could have been added for clarification purposes). Ultimately, the authors conclude that both have their advantages and disadvantages, but that a central role must be imputed to analogy (cf. Fischer 2007). However, the presentation of the formal approaches, and to some extent also CxG, is lacking in some ways.

Starting with P&P, the discussion in chapter 3 is heavily based on Lightfoot (1991, 1999). Though Lightfoot has indeed played a leading role in the development of diachronic generative syntax, the approach outlined in these works is just one way of cashing out P&P historically. Other general treatments – such as those presented in e.g. Hale (1998, 2007), Kroch (2001), Longobardi (2001), Pintzuk (2003), van Kemenade (2007), and Roberts (2007) – are given short shrift where acknowledged at all. In particular, the influential competing-grammars approach introduced in Kroch (1989, 1994) and adopted in a large amount of empirically responsible P&P work on English historical syntax is mentioned only in a footnote (note 3, p33), where it is dismissed rather cursorily. Another case in point is the sweeping statement that in P&P “possible semantic-pragmatic motivations or indeed phonetic or phonological ones ... are neglected because the syntactic system is deemed to be autonomous” (p33). Longobardi (2001: 277–278) argues for the exact opposite position: that syntactic change may only arise as a consequence of such motivations (or because of prior syntactic changes).

In the cognitive-functionalist corner, the discussion in Chapter 3 provides a thorough summary of GT, with the occasional mention of CxG (in reference

to Traugott 2011, Traugott & Trousdale 2013, Hilpert 2013). Overall, while it is impressive how the core ideas of GT (and, by extension, some of the ideas of cognitively-oriented frameworks in general) are accurately captured in such a short chapter, it could again be argued that only partial justice is done to the field. More specifically, the impression one could get from the presentation of CxG in this chapter is that CxG is not discussed as a theory in its own right, but rather as an ‘updated version’ of GT: when CxG is mentioned, this involves a comment explaining how it differs from GT, i.e. that in CxG more of an emphasis is placed on the role played by form, frequency, and analogy (p32-33, p44-45), and that the unidirectionality of GT is downplayed (p33). What the chapter does not treat is the role played by constructional networks in motivating and constraining language change within diachronic CxG, which opened the door to competition-based reasoning (e.g. De Smet 2012). It is, of course, undesirable to overburden the student audience with too much abstract theory, but at the same time competition-based reasoning is a major feature of a large body of CxG studies, some of which are discussed in the book’s later chapters (e.g. see the mention of ‘competition’ in the discussion of the subjunctive (p109), passive (p122), word order (p195), and ditransitive (p198)).

In sum, what Chapter 3 does (and does well) is present a core contrastive survey of two theoretical approaches as current in the 1990s and early 2000s, which, as the authors explain, “provides a rather general picture of some of the central points involved and will therefore not always do justice to all the variants that exist between linguists and their treatments” (p32). We agree with the authors that it would be too much to ask for the book to take all these nuances into account in detail; it would probably not be helpful to the student reader, and despite its generality, the chapter still serves well to sketch out the histories of two important grammatical theories, which is crucial for understanding the debates that are ongoing today. The problem is that if the battlelines are drawn this way, essentializing the positions of the Generative and Functionalist approaches where convenient, the student will be socialized into precisely this view of the field, and that may not be productive. This is especially true given that – if anything – the two sides of the debate represented here have been experiencing a rapprochement this millennium. For instance, inspired by Chomsky’s (1995) Minimalist Program and by critiques of the traditional notion of parameter (e.g. Borer 1984, Pica 2001, Newmeyer 2004), the focus within P&P has shifted over the last fifteen years towards a more fine-grained treatment of syntactic variation and change, and this is clearly visible in the volumes that have emerged from the Diachronic Generative Syntax (DiGS) conference series: see the

introduction to [Biberauer & Walkden \(2015\)](#) and [Mathieu & Truswell \(2017\)](#) for discussion. Where parameters are still assumed, be they ‘macro-’ or ‘micro-’, for the most part they are no longer irreducible syntactic primitives but rather epiphenomena of the interaction between invariant elements of the language faculty and a learning process that is domain-general in its essence ([Westergaard 2009](#), [Biberauer & Roberts 2015](#), [Biberauer 2017](#)). At least some of these developments could have been reflected in the present volume, since their seeds are present in major works that are now over a decade old, such as [Kayne \(2005\)](#), [Hale \(2007\)](#) and [Roberts \(2007\)](#). Even analogy, which is here described as “completely neglected” in P&P (p45), plays a major role in [Roberts \(2007\)](#) under the guise of Input Generalization, and is the star of the show in DiGS volume chapters by [Kiparsky \(2012\)](#) and [Garrett \(2012\)](#).

2.3 *Introducing empirical historical syntax research*

Chapter 2, on sources of evidence, is likely to be a tremendously useful chapter for students, even given the fast-moving nature of quantitative historical corpus methods. One point that perhaps deserved discussion, however, is the nature and quality of editions. As mentioned on p9, historical syntactic research very rarely involves use of the actual manuscripts themselves, instead relying on printed or electronic editions. Whether working with corpora or engaging in close reading of individual texts, these editions have the potential to be misleading ([Lass 2004](#)), especially critical editions that conflate the evidence from multiple different manuscripts ([Grund 2006](#)). Nineteenth-century editions in particular include emendations and normalizations that are driven more by ideology than by any kind of linguistic reality, and even a modernized punctuation can mislead the reader/researcher by guiding them towards an (implicit) syntactic analysis. Some mention of this problem might be warranted, as it is a part of Rissanen’s (1989) ‘philologist’s dilemma’ that has not gone away in the intervening years.

Yet, the volume still does a remarkable job in walking its readers through what it entails to research historical syntax. The volume is certainly not organised as a step-by-step guide of how to go about data analysis, but the magic resides in the details. Chapter 8, for instance, starts with a brief and basic introduction on clausal subordination, using a few examples from present-day English to refresh the reader’s memory. Subsequently, the authors draw attention to the fact that discussions of subordination often rely on “an idealized notion of the sentence that developed with written languages” (p162), aptly pointing out that sentence structure in historical written texts are sometimes closer to “the anacoluthic character of clause-combining in spontaneous conversation” (p163). Such comments are vital

for students (or anyone else) who are about to embark on their first research project: it is quite easy for students to be discouraged if even the most basic analytic tasks – such as determining sentence boundaries – appear difficult, and they often resort to questioning their own understanding and abilities rather than the text itself. It is, therefore, very pleasing to see how the authors have included sections that clarify how ‘real’ historical data can be problematically messy, while at the same time also de-problematizing the issue by comparing it to a less ‘daunting’ text type (e.g. present-day spontaneous speech). A further positive feature is that the authors do not present the history of English syntax as a closed book: where a phenomenon is insufficiently well understood, or where there is scope for further research, the authors make sure to flag this up and provide suggestions (p1). Some nice examples are the comment on the scarcity of historical research on the dative alternation (p144; but note recent studies on the dative alternation in Middle English by [Zehentner \(2018, 2016\)](#)), the question raised regarding the remarkably slow rise of the indirect passive (p150), and the suggestion that it is valuable to approach the study of English historical syntax from a comparative, cross-linguistic perspective (p189).

3 CONCLUSION

The back cover describes the book as “for students who have been introduced to the history of English ... and for linguists in general with a historical interest”. Our assessment is that the book is indeed not ideally suited for beginners, though could be pointed to as extra reading for the more adventurous or grammatically inclined. In light of the book’s discussion of data and methods, the book particularly recommends itself for students who are to conduct a (historical corpus-based) research project themselves (both of the authors of this review have experience teaching such a course): Chapter 2 is a handy starting point for the budding historical corpus linguist. Chapters 4–9 are accessibly written, clearly presented, and well structured, and it is easy to see how each of these could be turned into a single teaching session (or more than one).

Incorporating Chapter 3 into a lecture could prove to be more challenging. As we argued above, we truly believe that the inclusion of a chapter on theoretical approaches is valuable, and indeed tackles what appears to be a niche in the textbook market. Yet, even for students who have been introduced to the history of English Chapter 3 might be a tough nut to crack, as the chapter works best for readers with a good-to-thorough understanding of the core concepts of syntactic change (including grammaticalization, reanalysis, analogy, metaphor, metonymy, and how these relate

to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language). As such, Chapter 3 caters best for advanced students, or, alternatively, given its historical and explicitly contrastive perspective, can be used as a supplementary reading to introduction-level chapters on theoretical approaches to historical syntax. A good suggestion could be the recent chapters on Generative Approaches (Allen 2017), Grammaticalization (Brems & Hoffmann 2017), and psycholinguistic processes in linguistic theory of language change (Hilpert 2017) in Brinton's (2017) edited volume on approaches and perspectives to English historical linguistics, although it should be noted that this edited volume is not restricted to syntactic change. Some of the chapters in the *Cambridge Handbook of Historical Syntax* (Ledgeway & Roberts 2017a), such as those on Endogenous and Exogenous Theories of Syntactic Change (Willis 2017), Principles and Parameters (Ledgeway & Roberts 2017b), and Functional Approaches (Mithun 2017), may also complement this book well.

Given the required prerequisite knowledge, as well as the book's research-oriented approach, our assessment is that the target audience, at least as far as teaching is concerned, consists of more advanced students who have already taken an introductory course in the history of English, hence perhaps advanced undergraduate or Masters students. For a course at this level, *A Brief History of English Syntax* would be perfect as core or supplementary reading on grammatical change in English.

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