

Workshop proposal for Societas Linguistica Europaea 2015 Parameters in Diachronic Syntax

Workshop organisers

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The central idea in generative approaches to diachronic syntax has always been that syntactic change results from children's reanalysis of their parents' grammar (G1): because they have only indirect access to G1, via its output, the grammar that they postulate (G2) may differ from that of their parents, with the result that syntactic changes emerge inter-generationally. The advent of the Principles and Parameters (P&P) era in the late 1970s/early 1980s led to the specific expectation in the diachronic context that at least some syntactic changes might be parametric in nature, entailing parameter resetting (see i.a. Roberts 1985, van Kemenade 1987, Lightfoot 1991, Pintzuk 1991, Batty & Roberts 1995). From the outset, however, the challenges facing a parametric approach to syntactic change were apparent. To begin with, a model based on binary parameters, set to one of two prespecified values, seems to predict catastrophic change, rather than the gradual changes that we observe (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968). Even a model that permits one or more parameters to be set twice in order to accommodate variation (e.g. the so-called "Double Base Hypothesis" first advanced in the late 1980s by Tony Kroch, Susan Pintzuk, Beatrice Santorini, and Ann Taylor) does not straightforwardly resolve this tension, as it leads to the expectation that "double base" grammars will, all other things being equal, be shortlived (Kroch (1994) on the expected fate of syntactic "doublets"), and it also seems to predict the existence of impossible grammars (Fuss & Trips 2002). Further, parametric approaches encounter a serious challenge in addressing the so-called Actuation Problem: as change crucially requires reanalysis of G1 input by a following generation, it is clear that this input must differ from that on the basis of which the parent generation postulated G1, raising the question of the origin of this difference (the Actuation Problem), and also of its nature (what type and what frequency of data gives rise to a reanalysis?). Additional questions that arise are familiar from critiques that have been levelled against parametric approaches to synchronic phenomena (see i.a. Newmeyer 2005): hypothesized parametric clusters do not break down or arise in the expected way, the readily accessible cues assumed to trigger parameter setting (e.g. inflection) change and remain constant independently of their hypothesized reflexes, and it seems necessary to postulate rather more specialized parameters than one might think are compatible with P&P's initial rationale as a model of Universal Grammar that might offer a genuine solution to Plato's Problem.

In the current generative context, it is fair to say that opinion is divided regarding the feasibility of a "post-GB" parametric approach to the understanding of syntactic variation: on the one hand, the empirical failures of GB parameters and/or the conceptual reorientation of the Minimalist Program(me) are taken to argue against pursuing further parametric work (see i.a. Newmeyer 2005, Boeckx 2014); on the other, there is the argument that GB parameters should be viewed as "first-pass" parameters, with empirical and theoretical advances since the late 1970s and, particularly, in the minimalist context, pointing towards the kinds of modifications that could lead to a genuinely explanatory theory of parametric variation (see i.a. Cinque & Kayne 2005, Longobardi 2006, Baker 2008, Biberauer 2008, Gianollo, Guardiano & Longobardi 2008, Roberts & Holmberg 2010, Roberts 2012, Biberauer & Roberts 2014). **The purpose of this workshop is to consider the question of whether or not parametric explanations should be pursued from the perspective of diachronic syntax.** More specifically, we welcome contributions:

1. evaluating the evidence for and against the value of parametric approaches in the domain of diachronic syntax (e.g. to what extent has parametric work contributed to insights in the diachronic domain? Are there domains where parametric approaches might produce insights that are not otherwise available (cf. i.a. Gianollo, Guardiano & Longobardi 2008, Longobardi & Guardiano 2009, Longobardi, Guardiano, Silvestri, Boattini & Ceolin 2013 on parameteric insights into historical relatedness and linguistic phylogenies, and Willis 2011, Walkden 2014 on parametrically informed reconstruction)?
2. considering diachronic syntax in the context of a “three factors” approach to language of Chomsky (2005), e.g. Can diachronic work shed novel light on the currently still quite mysterious nature of the “third factors”?
3. considering the role of learning theory in diachronic generative syntax (see i.a. Lightfoot 1993, Clark & Roberts 1993, Roberts 2001, Yang 2002, Yang 2013), and how this relates to our modern perspective on parametric syntax.
4. revisiting one or more specific GB parameters and considering what we have learned about the ways in which the associated phenomena vary over time (e.g. “OV” and “VO” word-order, head-movement parameters such as V-to-I, V2, N-to-D, etc., null arguments, negation, etc.)
5. considering what diachronic studies can teach us about the nature of the links between superficially unrelated properties: Do diachronic studies point to properties that frequently co-vary over time? Does diachronic work highlight new clusters that have not previously been considered? Does our current empirical and theoretical understanding suggest novel clusters that might be testable in the diachronic domain?
6. considering the relevance of parametric ideas in understanding change in areas that were not a primary focus during the GB era, e.g. argument structure, alignment, discourse-configurationality/information structure, word-structure, ellipsis, cyclic changes beyond Jespersen’s Cycle (van Gelderen 2009, 2010), etc.
7. revisiting diachronic postulates that crucially rely on the existence of parameters of some kind, e.g. the Constant Rate Effect (Kroch 1989).
8. considering whether parameters have anything to contribute to generative investigations of the factors determining stability/continuity versus change in (morpho)syntax (see i.a. Breitbarth, Lucas, Watts & Willis 2010).
9. seeking to exploit our more sophisticated understanding of the synchronic differences between very closely related varieties: is it meaningful to talk of ‘microparametric change’ in this case?
10. considering what the types of optionality evident in changing systems may teach us about the feasibility of a parametric approach to change. Is it always the case that optionality is only apparent, or are there genuinely cases where different structures are in free variation, creating a challenge for minimalist explanation, parametric or otherwise? What is the status of competing grammars (Kroch 1989) and of combinatorial variation (Adger 2006) in diachronic explanation?

Abstract submission

Deadline: Friday 21 November

Please send a titled abstract of **no more than 300 words**, along with your name and affiliation, to **Theresa Biberauer (samtb23@gmail.com)**.

Following the specifications of the SLE, we will then submit our workshop proposal, along with a list of potential participants and their abstracts, to the SLE Committee. By 15 December 2014, they will notify us as to whether the proposed workshop has been accepted or not. Acceptance will entail that those who wish to participate in the workshop submit to the SLE Committee, by 15 January 2015, full 500-word abstracts, which will then be externally reviewed.

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