

SPONTANEOUS SYNTACTIC CHANGE

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1. BACKGROUND. On the face of it, syntactic change challenges the key assumption of the Minimalist Program that language approaches optimal design (Chomsky 2000, 2005). If it is designed as a perfectly economical system, how come that languages change over time, sometimes dramatically? To come to terms with the logical problem of language change, recent work on diachronic linguistics has put forward the ‘INERTIAL THEORY’, according to which syntax as the core component of grammar is in equilibrium. Accordingly, syntactic change can only occur when forced by internal changes in the phonology, the morphology, and the lexicon or when forced by external pressures such as diglossia and language contact (see, most notably, Lightfoot 1999; Keenan 2000; Longobardi 2001; Roberts & Roussou 2003; Gianollo et al. 2004).

2. SYNTACTIC VARIATION. I propose an alternative account to the Inertia Theory. Its central hypothesis is that syntactic change comes from SYNTACTIC VARIATION, which either is due to syntax-external factors (interface pressures with morphology, dialect interference and language contact), or can occur spontaneously. Syntactic variation, the co-existence of different word orders to express the same content with subtle distinctions in meaning, is an inherent part of the syntax. If syntactic variation can arise spontaneously and syntactic change follows from syntactic variation whatever the source of the variation is, then syntactic change can happen without outside factors playing any role. Syntactic change results from syntactic variation, as the different word order patterns compete with, and eventually replace, one another. Syntactic variation itself is restricted, because it is tied to syntactic movement processes and therefore constrained. On this view, it is explained why syntactic change is restricted and not random. The prediction is that syntactic change is invariably preceded by periods of syntactic variation where particular syntactic patterns are in competition with one another. In a sense, then, syntactic change is a by-product of competition and selection, which are made possible by syntactic variation.

4. WORD ORDER VARIATION IN OLD EGYPTIAN. To verify these hypotheses, I present two cases of syntactic variation in Old Egyptian (2600-1650 BCE). The first case involves word order differences that correlate with morphological variation and aspectual interpretation. As shown in (1), VSO order is used to describe events, activities and accomplishment (i.e. the *acquisition* of knowledge).

(1) **j.rx** **Pjjj** **pn** **mwt-f**
i-.rekh *Pipi* *pen* *maût-ef*
AUG-learn_{EVENT} Pepi this.SG.M mother-3SG.M
“(King) Pepi will learn about his mother.” (Pyramid Texts 910a/P)

By contrast, the SVO alternative in (2) describes the resultant state (i.e. the *possession* of knowledge).

(2) **n-ntt** **D'fwt(j)-nxt** **pn** **rx(-w)** **rn** **n(j)** **wf̄f-w**
en-entet *Djehûti-nakht* *pen* *rekh-û* *ren* *ni* *weha 'a-we*
Since Thoth-nakht this.SG.M learn-3M_{STAT} name of.SG.M fowler-PL.M
“Since Thoth-nakht knows the names of the fowlers” (Coffin Texts VI 220/B1Bo)

The event- and state-related reading of respectively VSO and SVO structures is registered by changes in the verbal morphology. The finite verb in VSO clauses occurs in the Eventive and

the finite verb in SVO clauses in the Stative paradigm (*j-rx* ‘to learn about’ vs. *rx(-w)* ‘to know (by learning)’). Reintges (1997) shows that subject-verb agreement proper is only represented by the Stative paradigm, while the Eventive paradigm lacks agreement inflection altogether. Regardless of the analysis of VSO–SVO contrast in configurational terms, what is relevant here is that we see word order variation that is correlated with variation in other domains, viz. morphology and aspectual meaning.

The second case of word order variation is not related to variation anywhere else. Such variation is found in verb-initial clauses, where one VSO pattern may differ from another VSO pattern in terms of the precise position of the subject and the main verb. The availability of more than one position for the subject is shown by the word order contrast between (3) and (4). In (3), the subject DP *Hemen* appears in a position lower than the verb and the negation adverb *w* ‘not’.

- (3) VERB > NEGATION *w* > SUBJECT > DIRECT OBJECT
jzp **w** **fmn** **jft-f** **nb**
shezep wa Hemen ishet-ef Neb
 accept_{EVENT} NOT Hemen thing-3SG.M every.SG.M
 “Hemen (name of a deity) will not accept any of his property.” (Mo^calla Inscr. 8 III.6)

By contrast, the subject *Thoth-nakht* (a proper name) in (4) appears in a position higher than both the negation *w* and the emphatic particle *js*.

- (4) VERB > SUBJECT > NEGATION *w* > EMPHATIC *js* > DIRECT OBJECT
wnm **Dfiwt(j)-nxt** **w** **js** **fis-w**
Wenem Djehuti-nakht wa is has-we
 eat_{EVENT} Thoth-nakht NOT EMPH faeces-PL.M
 “Thoth-nakht (the deceased) will surely not eat faeces.” (Coffin Texts VII 115i/B4Bo)

The fact that the word order variation does not correlate with variation in the verbal morphology and aspectual interpretation strongly suggests that the variation is made available by the syntax itself without any involvement of outside factors. (For an analysis of (3) and (4), see Reintges 2005.) A similar case can be made for the positioning of the finite verb. Verb movement in Egyptian VSO structures is not correlated with agreement morphology, if only because Eventive verb forms have no agreement to begin with.

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