Language use and syntactic change

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The aim of this talk is to investigate to what extent usage-based factors–broadly defined–can be implicated in syntactic change. In the generative paradigm, syntactic change is standardly taken to be actuated when part of the Primary Linguistic Data are reanalysed by L1-learners (see Lightfoot 1979, and much subsequent literature). In the same framework, the propagation of a change across a speech community tends to be less intensively investigated. Some approaches assume propagation to be driven by learning too (see in particular Yang 2002), whereas others would consider the issue not to belong to the core domain of syntactic investigation (the idea being that the propagation question pertains to E not I-language).

This family of analyses contrasts with many functional and usage-based approaches to language change, which tend to assume that the properties of grammars emerge from language in use, and that change can take place both during and after the critical period of L1 acquisition (see e.g. Bybee 2010). Factors held responsible for shaping grammars are related to the communicative needs of speakers and hearers: they typically belong to the realm of speech production, comprehension (parsing), and (Gricean) pragmatics.

Following earlier work in diachronic generative syntax (see e.g. Hinterhölzl & van Kemenade 2012; Pintzuk & Taylor 2012), in my talk I (re-)consider how deep the water between formal and usage-based approaches really is, and what the theoretical implications would be of empirical evidence in favour of usage-driven syntactic change (with special reference to the propagation question). The empirical domain of study is the OV/VO alternation in the history of Latin (as documented and analysed in Danckaert 2017a,b). Specifically, I will investigate whether certain usage-based factors which have been mentioned in the literature on word order change can be shown to be correlated with the development of a strict VO system. The factors that I will take into account are (i) information structure (see also Struik 2021), (ii) prosodic weight, and (iii) explicit marking of syntactic functions by means of case morphology.

References   Danckaert (2017a). *The development of Latin clause structure*. OUP | Danckaert (2017b). The loss of Latin OV. In: *Elements of comparative syntax*, 401-446 | Hinterhölzl & van Kemenade (2012). The interaction between syntax, information structure, and prosody in word order change. In *The Oxford handbook of the history of English*, 803-821 | Lightfoot (1979). *Principles of diachronic syntax*. CUP | Struik (2022). Information structure triggers for word order variation and change. PhD diss., Nijmegen | Taylor & Pintzuk (2012). Rethinking the OV/VO alternation in Old English. In *The Oxford handbook of the history of English*, 835-845 | Yang (2002). *Knowledge and learning in natural language*. OUP.