

Traces of Grammar Evolution

Protoconstructions, Patches and
Mismatch Effects

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Overview: Grammar Dilemmas

- Within any given speech community, some people have different linguistic generalizations from others.
- For example, some people would say (a), others (b):
 - (a) It is you who **are** confused.
 - (b) It is you who **is** confused.
- A language critic could say that (b) is the wrong generalization: it fails to take into account that *you* is a second-person pronoun, and therefore selects *are*.
- Another could say that (a) is the wrong generalization: the subject of the second verb is not *you* but *who*, a third-person singular.

Overview: Grammar Dilemmas

- In fact, it is the cleft construction that is at fault: *is* and *are* are equally valid solutions.
- This is why both solutions are attested:
 - *It is you who are displaying distinct Talibanistic characteristics.* (tenets.zoroastranism.com)
 - *You are wrong, Mr. Blair: It is you who is prejudiced about science.* (newstatesman.com)
- When one solution gets adopted, we could say that grammar has changed, but it's more accurate to say that a construction has changed.
- Grammar change occurs on a construction-by-construction basis.

Grammar by Increments

- The view that grammatical generalizations are construction-bound accords with Jackendoff's claim that
grammar is not a single unified system, but a collection of simpler systems. [...] Hence the evolution of the language capacity can be seen as deeply incremental. (2002: 264)
- Incremental development results in layers, which contain patterns I will call protoconstructions.
- Protoconstructions resemble early strategies in language development: they lack inflection and hierarchical structure and have context-dependent meanings (Bickerton 1990, Jackendoff 1999).

Protoconstructions

- Protoconstructions can sometimes be embedded in other constructions, but when they are, they are typically (1) on the margins of the clause, (2) dispensable and (3) intonationally separate:
 - Vocatives: *Sandy, your pizza's ready. Your pizza's ready, Sandy.*
 - Interjections: *Wow, are YOU in trouble. GOD it's hot.*
 - Detached topics (Lambrecht 1994, 2001, Deulofeu forthcoming): *Moi, ma mère, le salon, c'est de la moquette, le sol.* 'Me, my mother, the parlor, it's carpet, the floor.'

Problem Solving

- Protoconstructions are not adaptations per se; they are the vestigial organs of the grammar.
- But adaptations can be seen in the (re)use of old forms to solve current communicative problems.
- The demands of speech production require speakers to use or adapt established routines wherever possible (Bolinger 1976).
- The recycling strategy is seen in *grammaticalization*, the creation of a grammatical marker from a word (Hurford 2003, Heine & Kuteva 2002), e.g., the English *like* quotative.

Problem Solving

- The recycling strategy is also seen in certain syntactic innovations, which I will refer to as **patches**.
- I will focus on two kinds of patches:
 - **Amalgams**. Nonstandard grammatical patterns that contain two contiguous or overlapping syntactic units that cannot otherwise be combined.
 - Example: **Ample negatives** (Lawler 1974). *Not in MY backyard you won't. Not THIS time you won't.*
 - **Mismatch effects**. Constructions that are used without their originally associated meanings.
 - Example: Clausal complements with *I think* (Thompson & Mulac 1991). *I think it's working, isn't it/*don't I?*

Problem Solving

- What kinds of communicative problems are speakers using patches to resolve?
- I will discuss three such problems:
 - Signaling a shift to a new topic while avoiding prolixity (Lambrecht 1994, Michaelis & Francis 2007).
 - Keeping intonation breaks (pauses) aligned with the edges of grammatical units (Croft 1995).
 - Making optimal use of a construction when it has narrow combinatoric potential.

Topic Shifting

- The sentence topic is the predictable participant in the predication; as such it is expressed by a pronoun or a zero:
He never meows. He he doesn't have any front claws. I had him declawed but he doesn't bite anybody. He's just he's just kind of there—real friendly and docile. (Swbd)
- Topics can be direct objects, but they are far more likely to be subjects: 91% of subjects in English conversation are pronouns while only 34% of objects are (Michaelis & Francis 2007).
- Subjects are “grammaticized clause topics” (Mithun 1991: 160).
- A topic tends to persist over several predications, but speakers must also occasionally introduce a new topic (Walker & Prince 1996). How?

Topic Shifting

- The simplest strategy is to introduce the new topic in subject position:
A: *Wh[en]—when I got older I liked things like Caesar's Palace. You know, that's where I like to stay and and*
B: *Oh yeah and oh okay you can't you're gonna camp out at Caesar's Palace huh*
→ A: *Uh right exactly so this summer um my boyfriend lives in California*
B: *Alright.*
A: *and he loves to go camping and he s[aid]: "Let's go camping", and I went.* (Swbd)
- But this practice runs afoul of Lambrecht's Principle of Separation of Reference and Role (1994: 146): “Do not introduce a referent and talk about it in the same clause”.

Topic-Shifting Patches

- An alternative strategy is: introduce a new entity in direct-object position, then comment about that entity in later clauses:
Like I saw someone at a Halloween party. This lady was from Turkey, and she'd been belly dancing since she was four years old. (Swbd)
- But effort conservation disfavors such explicit strategies, and favors patches, including **left dislocation** (Prince 1984):
I mean, if it was really a deterrent, I mean, I think, like, horse thieves in the old West, you know, they saw other horse thieves hanging by their necks. (Swbd)
- All topic-shifting patches prevent a new participant from being sentence subject, including those patches that are amalgams.

Topic-Shifting Amalgams

- English:
There was a ball of fire shot up through the seats in front of me. (Lambrecht 1988: 319)
Or, you know, I have a friend of mine that he hasn't seen one of his cats for, you know, like going on six weeks now. (Fisher)
- French (Lambrecht 2000):
J'ai eu mon beau-frère qui a fait Paris-Nice. 'My brother-in-law did Paris-Nice.' (lit. 'I had my brother-in-law who did P-N.')
- Y a le téléphone qui sonne.* 'The phone's ringing.' (lit. 'There's the phone which is ringing.')
- Je vois le facteur qui arrive.* 'I see the mailman coming.'

Aligning Grammatical and Prosodic Units

- A common conversational strategy is to introduce a forthcoming assertion by means of a **set-up clause** (Massam 1999):
*Yeah, well, **that's another problem**: I think to really correct the judicial system you have to get the lawyers out of it.*
***That's the problem** is that they all ask for so much up front.*
Well, the problem is uh minimum wage is not enough to live on.
- The last strategy is the simplest, but it is problematic for speakers.
- Why?

Aligning Grammatical and Prosodic Units

- The construction in question is Simplex Apposition (Brenier & Michaelis 2005); its structural properties are as follows:
But-_[NP the thing] [_{VP IS} [break] I always carry it with my checkbook].
- Simplex violates the strong tendency for intonational breaks to align with the edges of syntactic constituents (Croft 1995, Watson & Gibson 2003).
- Simplex has an intonation unit that is not a grammatical unit (the set up) and it breaks the VP by putting a pause in it.

Aligning Grammatical and Prosodic Units

- There is another respect in which Simplex is weird prosodically: its finite verb is a prosodic peak, but not for the usual reason, *accent deflection* (Ladd 1996: ch. 5).
- In accent deflection, prominence shifts to the verb just in case its complement denotes a topical entity:
A: I found an article for you in a German journal.
B: I don't READ German. (Ladd 1996: 175)
- Simplex marks *is* as prominent, but this can't be explained by deflection: the clausal complement is not topical but focal.

Patching an Alignment Problem

- The problems with Simplex comes from the dual function that the verb *be* is forced to perform:
 - Syntactic: the verb *be* introduces a complement clause, e.g.,
I always carry it with my checkbook.
 - Discourse-pragmatic: the verb *be* is a focus marker, signaling forthcoming propositional content.
- Speakers have created a nonstandard pattern to fix the Simplex defects; I will call this pattern ISIS.

Patching an Alignment Problem

- ISIS is an amalgam:
 - *But* [_{S₂} *the thing IS*] [_{VP} *is that that's the only trick it knows*].
 - *But the problem IS is that like most things it usually gets taken way out of context.*
- ISIS contains the front end of Simplex and the back end of an ordinary subject-predicate construction:
- ISIS solves Simplex problems: ISIS has an unbroken VP and an accentless *is*.
- But it creates another: what is the syntactic category of the 'set up' clause?
- The moral of the story: patches aren't perfect.

Expanding Combinatoric Potential

- Constructions call for specific semantic and syntactic types, e.g., the English indefinite article seeks a count entity: **a foliage*, **a furniture*, **a mud*.
- Speakers may intentionally violate these restrictions in order to create new semantic types (Jackendoff 1997, De Swart 1998).
- Examples include: *a strip of towel*, *some pillow*, *a ketchup*, *Suddenly*, *I knew the answer*, *I'm loving it*.
- Such mismatch effects are patches because they solve a communicative problem by leveraging existing resources.

Conclusions

- Under a construction-based view of grammar, grammar is a set of patterns, of varying degrees of internal complexity, that people use to do things.
- Old patterns exist alongside newer ones.
- Talking is hard, and part of the problem is caused by constraints on the constructions at hand.
- The easiest solution to a communicative problem is to create a new construction from old ones.

Conclusions

- The prevalence of the patching strategy illustrates Slobin's (1992) point about children, adults and syntactic change:
- Adults are the major drivers of syntactic change because they know the grammar better and therefore know best how to extend its potential.
- If we want to examine grammar change, we should look at the strategies that speakers use in conversational speech.