

## *Synchronic and diachronic explanation*

PhD workshop, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2008

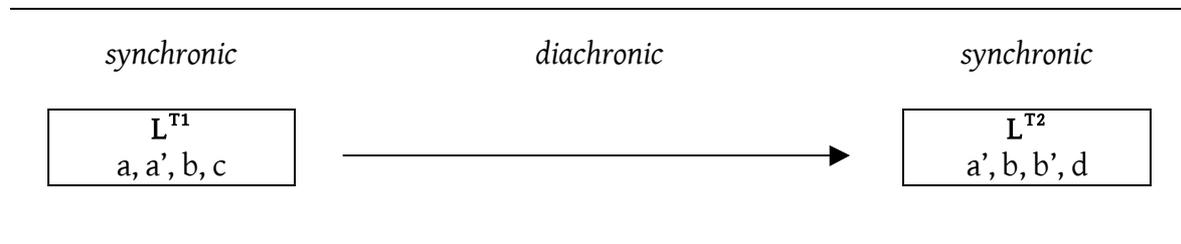
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### 1. Why the division between diachrony and synchrony?

- Synchronic - the study of language at a given point in time
- Diachronic - the study of linguistic development through time.

Here it is evident that the synchronic viewpoint predominates, for it is the true and only reality to the community of speakers. The same is true of the linguist: if he takes the diachronic perspective, he longer observes language but rather a series of events that modify it. (Saussure 1959:90, cited in Lehmann 1968)

Figure 1: Language as a synchronic and diachronic entity



### 2. What are we explaining?

- What is it we are explaining in terms of synchrony and diachrony?
- 'True' explanations versus generalisations
- Can 'true' explanations of language be described as synchronic versus diachronic?
- Do the same external factors explain both synchrony and diachrony?

### 3. Are synchronic and diachronic explanations of language contrastive or complementary?

- Two opposing views:
  - (i) typological universals are a synchronic phenomenon that constrain the way in which languages can change over time; or
  - (ii) typological universals are a diachronic phenomenon that result in synchronic patterns of grammar.
- Givón (1984): the correlation between VO word order and prepositions, and OV word order with postpositions reflects the frequently occurring origin of adpositions as verbs within serial verb constructions.

Yoruba

- 1) Mo **fi** **àdé** gé nàkà.  
 I **took machete** cut wood  
*I cut the wood with the machete.*

(Givon 1984:229)

Ijo

- 2) Erí **ogidí** **akí-ní** indi pẹ̀j-mí.  
 he **machete take-ASP** fish cut-ASP  
*He cut fish with the machete.*

(Givon 1984:229)

- Do we also need explanations for these recurrent patterns of language change?
- Dryer’s (1992): synchronic explanation of the correlates of word-order patterns.

Table 1: Word order correlation pairs (Dryer 1992:108)

| VERB PATTERNER | OBJECT PATTERNER | EXAMPLE                     |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| verb           | object           | <i>ate + the sandwich</i>   |
| adposition     | NP               | <i>on + the table</i>       |
| copula verb    | predicate        | <i>is + a teacher</i>       |
| complementizer | S                | <i>that + John is sick</i>  |
| article        | N’               | <i>the + tall man</i>       |
| noun           | genitive         | <i>father + of John</i>     |
| noun           | relative clause  | <i>movies + that we saw</i> |

The Branching Direction Theory (BDT): Verb patterners are nonphrasal (non-branching, lexical) categories and object patterners are phrasal (branching) categories. That is, a pair of elements X and Y will employ the order XY significantly more often among VO languages than among OV languages if and only if X is a nonphrasal category and Y is a phrasal category. (Dryer 1992:109).

- Is further explanation needed?
  - Kiparsky (2008) argues that true universals require synchronic explanations, whereas typological generalisations require diachronic explanations.
  - Simple and complex reflexives can be explained diachronically.
    - (i) They allow object antecedents.
    - (ii) They must be bound locally within the same clause.
    - (iii) They typically lack possessive forms.
- 3) a. John hates him.  
 b. John hates himself.

- Split ergativity requires a synchronic explanation.

Table 2: Distribution of accusative and ergative case marking in some Australian languages (Kiparsky 2008)

|             | Pronouns   | Proper/Kin | Human    | Animate  | Inanimate |
|-------------|------------|------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Thargari    | Accusative |            |          |          | Ergative  |
| Arabana     | Accusative |            |          | Ergative |           |
| Gumbainggir | Accusative |            | Ergative |          |           |
| Dyirbal     | Accusative | Ergative   |          |          |           |
| Warlpiri    | Ergative   |            |          |          |           |

Ergative case is assigned to projections of the category of N, and not to projections of the category D. (Kiparsky 2008:43)

- Is a theory-internal explanation enough?

#### 4. Is it always clear which kind of explanation is more fitting?

- How do we determine which kinds of linguistic features are best explained synchronically and which are best explained diachronically?

A word-form which expresses by means of a non-zero marker a property which is typologically expected to be coded by zero is liable to be reanalysed as containing a zero marker. (Koch 1995:64)

Marovo

- 4) Ia      vasina   pu   balabala-e   ia   raka  
 ART:3SG   place   REL   think-TR   3SG   1SG  
 pata-[gu      la   **vagar-i-a**]<sub>VC</sub>   hua, ka-ni   gura      ta-vagara.  
 in.order-1SGS   go   **to.net-TR-3SGO**   HUA   NEG-3S   be.able   PASS-to.net  
*The area that I thought I'd net, can't be netted.*

- 5) [**Vagar-i-Ø**]<sub>VC</sub>   [raka]<sub>SUBJ</sub>   [ria   ihana   pu   malakihi,  
**to.net-TR-3PLO**   1SG           ART:3PL   fish      REL   parrotfish  
 oro   katiga   hokihokiti   ihana]<sub>OBJ</sub>.  
 and   some   different   fish  
*I netted fish like parrotfish and some different fish.*

Table 3: Object markers in Proto Oceanic and Marovo

|         | POC OBJECT MARKER | MAROVO OBJECT MARKERS |
|---------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1SG     | *=au              | -o                    |
| 2SG     | *=ko              | -ho                   |
| 3SG     | *=a               | -a                    |
| 1PLINCL | —                 | -da                   |
| 1PLEXCL | —                 | -ma                   |
| 2PL     | —                 | -mi                   |
| 3PL     | *=ra              | -di, -i, -∅           |

- 6) Ma-[ni lae ia asa-i-∅]<sub>VC</sub> [ria uvikola]<sub>O</sub>.  
 then-3sgS go 3SG grate-TR-3PLO ART:3PL tapioca  
*Then she went and grated the tapioca roots.*

- The creation of a zero 3PL object marker in Marovo can be explained in terms of a reduction of redundancy.
- But is this pattern best explained diachronically or synchronically?

### 5. How much do synchronic and diachronic explanations overlap? And are the external factors which underlie them both essentially the same?

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