

Jürgen Meisel, Martin Elsig & Esther Rinke. 2013. *Language acquisition and change: A morphosyntactic perspective*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Pp. xiii + 202. ISBN 978-0-7486-4225-0.

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The book *Language acquisition and change* seeks to come to grips with the widely accepted assumption in the diachronic generative syntax literature that changes over time which alter core structural properties of grammar emerge through language acquisition – the volume's first author is primarily a researcher in this field – and are indeed dependent on it. Hence, the results of recent research on L1, L2, monolingual and bilingual language acquisition are thoroughly reviewed and its implications for a theory of diachronic change are cleverly discussed.

The main thesis in the book is that parametric morphosyntactic change can only arise as a consequence of L2 acquisition in particular sociohistorical environments, a claim that undermines the role generally attributed to L1 acquisition as a potential trigger for language change. Important consequences follow from this thesis. As the authors put it,

Ascribing to L2 learners the role of agents of innovation in situations of language change, or more precisely of parametric change, implies that change should be restricted to those situations where the sociolinguistic context provides a favourable basis for an influential role of L2 speakers. In a reverse conclusion, parametric changes should occur much less often than is commonly assumed, since not every change which has been claimed to be parametric in nature can be related to the involvement of an important number of L2 learners. (p. 176)

The view that only L2 acquisition matters in accounting for parametric change may seem too radical, but actually forms a basis for a detailed reappraisal of well-known cases of morphosyntactic change that have long been of central interest to historical linguists. The discussion throughout the book is thought-provoking, supported by elegant logical arguments and presented in a clear readable style that makes the book accessible and interesting to a wide audience.

While the book deals extensively with the statement that parametric change depends on L2 acquisition, limited attention is paid to clarifying the sociolinguistic conditions under which L2 acquisition may drive grammatical change. What I missed in the book is a technical definition of "parametric change" as well as an empirical test of the authors' main thesis. Indeed, there is no consensus in the generative literature about what counts as a parameter, how parameters should be defined and identified or even whether parameters should be part of the theory of grammar and thus guide language acquisition (Boeckx 2011, Obata, Baptista & Epstein 2013). Given the current theoretical uncertainty over the concept of parameter, it is unclear what exactly the authors are leaving outside the scope of their thesis on morphosyntactic change. Further, to provide novel empirical evidence supporting the proposed central role of L2 acquisition in morphosyntactic change, it would have been desirable to include an experimental study specifically developed to that end. The authors identify the Basque linguistic community in Spain as a typical context prompting an impact of L2 speakers in language variation (because "the majority of today's speakers of Euskera learned it as an L2", p. 163), but they remain vague as to how the expectation that morphosyntactic change may arise in this context is actually fulfilled.¹ The Basque environment, or other appropriate contemporary sociolinguistic environments, could have been used to test the authors' thesis by putting the current research tools of theory-oriented diachronic linguistics and language acquisition to use in a creative interconnected manner.

¹ The authors refer to a study by Almgren Spare & Barreña Agirrebeitia (2005) on the development of the morphology of future tense, which does not seem to be the type of change that qualifies as morphosyntactic parametric change. In their words, "[s]tudies of ongoing grammatical changes in Euskera are still scarce, but the available research of this type, e.g. Almgren and Barreña (2005), supports the prediction that colloquial speech is influenced by these so-called 'new' speakers of Basque" (p. 163).

In sum, the book opens avenues for future innovative research which may bring the experimental know-how of language acquisition research into the study of syntactic change; this, in itself, is a remarkable contribution.

The book consists of seven chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, plus references and a thematic index. Chapter 1 offers a review of the literature starting with the neogrammarians, and lays out the main assumptions underlying the development and architecture of the book. The chapter focuses on the different theoretical approaches found in the literature to the relation between language variation and language change, on the one hand, and between language change and language acquisition, on the other.

Chapter 2 reviews the central tenets of variationist sociolinguistics and generative syntax with the aim of demonstrating that, even though there are important differences between these models of linguistic analysis, the two frameworks can be thought of as compatible and actually complementary. The variationist model is then used to quantify and describe the data illustrating the syntactic strategies in Canadian French to express polar questions. It is shown that Verb–Subject (VS) questions (displaying pronominal inversion) consistently decrease in frequency over time (dropping steeply in the last century), while the frequency of Subject–Verb (SV) questions increases. This is attributed to a change in language use, with the “underlying grammar” remaining unchanged. The hypothesis that parametric change resulting in the loss of verb movement to C might be at play is accordingly rejected. A question comes to mind here: when a certain syntactic structure ceases to occur in a given language, can this be anything else but grammatical change (be it parametric or not, depending on the concept of “parameter”)? The change discussed in Chapter 2 features a steady drop in the rate of VS polar questions between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries in Canadian French. More importantly, the decline in frequency is precipitous throughout the twentieth century, which indicates that the VS syntactic construction is on the way to becoming marginal in the language – an investigation of dialectal and idiolectal variation in spoken language might bring out significant results here. So, let us suppose that, as a consequence of the progressive change in usage that the authors describe, the occurrence of VS polar questions in the input for language acquisition drops beyond a certain critical threshold and the VS structures cease to be acquired.² At that point, a change in grammar arises, even if until then it implied only a change in usage rates of alternative grammatical options. This is the type of syntactic change where L1 acquisition matters. Should a theory of language change leave it outside its concerns?

In Chapter 3, the authors resort to insights from research on L1 acquisition to argue against theories of language change relying on the hypothesis of intergenerational transmission failure, which they seek to demonstrate is not actually attested in L1 development. The authors specifically refute the hypothesis that the structural ambiguity of the input data, the changes in the frequency of use of particular constructions and the exposure to conflicting evidence in contact situations might constitute a sufficient explanation for parametric morphosyntactic change, “for only what is possible in contemporary acquisition processes can reasonably be invoked as an explanation of processes which happened in the past” (p. 70).

Chapter 4 first points to the theoretical weaknesses of the concept of “parametric ambiguity” (Clark & Roberts 1993, Roberts 2007), and then discusses the loss of V2 in Old French, which has been taken by different authors to illustrate the effects of parametric ambiguity on language acquisition and change. A theoretically driven detailed analysis of the Old French data supports the authors’ conclusion that Old French was in fact not a V2 language and that, in consequence, there was no parametric change from a V2 to a non-V2 grammar. The different constituent orders found in Old French texts are shown to be compatible with an SVO grammar without (general) verb movement to C. The account provided for word-order variation in the diachrony of French is consistent with the view that only unambiguous triggers/cues guide language acquisition (Fodor 1996, Dresher 1999, Lightfoot 1999, 2006).

² In Chapter 3, the authors dispute the importance of changes in the frequency of use of particular structures for language acquisition and change (pp. 61-67), but they appear to endorse a different view in Chapter 6: “As for the question of what counts as sufficient input, it is currently not possible to quantify the lower limit, but that some threshold exists is more than plausible” (p. 148).

Chapter 5 offers a thorough review of the literature on contact-induced change and concludes that language contact by itself is not a trigger for morphosyntactic change. Contrary to lexical borrowing, borrowing of morphosyntactic structures is much less common and, on closer inspection, controversial indeed. The authors claim that "rather than transferring structural properties from one language to another, speakers perceive relations of structural equivalence in the contact languages and modify the semantic-pragmatic functions of the respective constructions to a limited degree" (p. 133). What changes is the way in which the constructions are used, while the grammars generating them are preserved unchanged. The authors then consider two phenomena of structural change in medieval French, namely the loss of null subjects and the loss of the so-called V2 property, which have been explained in the literature by resorting to (direct or indirect) Germanic influence. After discussing the arguments that have been advanced in the literature to support the hypothesis of contact-induced change in medieval French, and reevaluating the relevant available empirical data for Old/Middle French and Middle High German comparatively, the authors conclude that there is insufficient evidence for this hypothesis. They suggest, on the other hand, that word-order changes in Old/Middle English (the V2 property and the change from OV to VO) might be due to contact with Old Norse because in this case the innovators would be L2 speakers (Weerman 1993, Kroch & Taylor 1997).

In Chapter 6, the authors pay attention to acquisition in multilingual settings in an attempt to gather further support for their claim that L1 development is not affected by intergenerational transmission failure as regards core grammatical properties, no matter whether monolingual or bilingual acquisition is at stake.³ In contrast, L2 acquisition is likely to result in partial acquisition failure under drastically reduced exposure to the target language during the critical period for language acquisition. The authors then briefly consider the historical and social conditions under which L2 learners may have enough weight in a linguistic community to be the source of parametric changes that become historically visible.

Chapter 7 is a clearly written, informative overview of the book, which highlights its principal theoretical points, lines of reasoning and conclusions.

To sum up, in this book Jürgen Meisel, Martin Elsig and Esther Rinke make a case for the view that historical linguists, especially those in the field of diachronic generative syntax, should turn their attention from L1 acquisition to L2 acquisition, which is where, as they contend, the motivation for central morphosyntactic changes in particular grammars truly lies. Moreover, and just as importantly, historical linguists are challenged to be more attentive to the current trends and research results in the field of language acquisition so as to extract from them the right consequences for theories of language change. For both the sympathetic and the skeptical reader, the book offers stimulating judicious argumentation and enough novel explanations to become an inescapable reference for all those enthralled by the intriguing ways in which languages vary and change over time.

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³ Only on p. 158 do the authors somehow admit exceptions to their claim, but they do not develop this: "transmission of knowledge about grammatical core properties *rarely* fails across generations, even under less than optimal conditions" (my italics).

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