[REVIEW]

Information Structure and Syntactic Change in the History of English

Ed. by Anneli Meurman-Solin, María José López-Couso and Bettelou Los,
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1. Introduction

Since the advent of the Chomskyan revolution beginning in the mid-1950s, formal studies of syntactic structures have been abstracted away from functional or communicative aspects of the language under the thesis of “the autonomy of syntax.” Additionally, modern linguistics, which originated out of Saussurean structuralism, essentially focuses on the synchronic state of the language, excluding diachronic changes from the target of explanation. However, the past three decades have witnessed new trends running counter to these traditions. On the one hand, there has been a growing awareness that information structure plays a vital role in determining the well-formedness of linguistic expressions. On the other hand, since the pioneering work of van Kemenade (1987), it has been widely acknowledged that historical data can contribute to linguistic theorizing, and diachronic syntax has become recognized as a subfield of theoretical linguistics.

The volume under review is a collection of papers reporting the state of the art of these trends in linguistic studies. It is based on papers presented at the workshop “Information Structure and Syntactic Change,” held at the 15th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics in Munich in August 2008, with several additional contributions invited by the edi-

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tors. In this short review, I will first summarize the notions encompassed by the term “information structure” and then evaluate some of the papers in the collection from the following viewpoints: (i) information structure and word order variation, (ii) information structure and diachronic changes, and (iii) information structure and syntactic structure.

2. How to Define Information Structure

The most common way of defining the information status of a constituent is by considering whether the information it carries is already given in the discourse or whether it offers some extra, new information. In the volume under review, Javier Pérez-Guerra, in his paper “Discourse Status and Syntax in the History of English: Some Explorations in Topicalization, Left-Dislocation, and *There*-Constructions” (Chapter 6), proposes the following criteria for determining “given”/“new” status (pp. 123–124). First, a noun phrase is textually given if it or its head conveys information that is anaphoric in a preceding discourse domain of seven or fewer sentences. Second, a noun phrase is interpreted as partially given if (i) the referent of the noun phrase is derivable from a previous constituent, or if (ii) the distance between the noun phrase in focus and the anaphoric constituent is longer than seven sentences, or if (iii) a non-head part of the noun phrase is anaphoric in the discourse domain of seven or fewer sentences. Third, a noun phrase is regarded as expressing completely new information if either (i) neither the head noun nor a non-head component of the nominal constituent has been mentioned before, or (ii) the referent cannot be derived from previous nominal constituents. Pérez-Guerra categorizes noun phrases that fall into the second and third classes (i.e. “partially given” or “completely new”) as “textually new constituents.” On the basis of these criteria, he concludes that topicalized and left-dislocated elements in early Modern English (ModE) introduced textually given or new information, whereas the postverbal noun phrases in *there*-constructions were predominantly interpreted as expressing new information.

However, there are cases where simply counting sentences does not suffice to determine information status. In Chapter 7, entitled “Givenness and Word Order: A Study of Long Passives from Early Modern English to Present-Day English,” Elena Seoane discusses how to define “givenness,” a notion widely employed in analyses based on the information structure concept. For this purpose, she compares the approach of Givón (1983, et seq.) with that of Prince (1992). The former is reminiscent of Pérez-Guerra’s

criteria, in that the givenness of a noun phrase is measured by counting the number of clauses intervening between the noun phrase in question and a previous mention of it. In contrast, the latter takes into consideration not only whether the relevant information is given or new “in the discourse,” but also whether it is given or new “to the hearer.” The combination of these two gives rise to the following categories (p. 145).

(1)

	Discourse-new	Discourse-old
Hearer-new	<i>brand-new/brand-new anchored</i>	(non-occurring)
Hearer-old	<i>unused</i>	<i>evoked/situationally evoked</i>

Investigating passive sentences featuring *by*-phrases in ModE, Seoane argues that Prince’s approach more accurately captures the generalization that raised subjects are “more given” than nominals in *by*-phrases.

The significance of cognitive accessibility to the hearer is also emphasized in An Van linden and Kristin Davidse’s paper “The Role of the Accessibility of the Subject in the Development of Adjectival Complementation from Old English to Present-Day English” (Chapter 9). Van linden and Davidse classify the information status of subjects, whether morphologically explicit or implicit, into the categories of “general,” “specific speech participant,” and “specific third person” with reference to the following criteria: (i) whether the referent in question is general or specific, and (ii) whether or not the identity of the referent is accessible to the hearer. They survey the occurrence of *that*-clauses and of *to*-infinitives in the complements of deontic-evaluative adjectives, in constructions such as *it is important that .../to do*, and find that the prevalence of *to*-infinitives rapidly increased from late Middle English (ME) onward. On the basis of the criteria mentioned above, they account for this development by arguing that *to*-infinitives came to be preferred when the embedded subject was a general or specific speech participant referent, since both of these are highly accessible to the hearer and thus need not be overt, whereas *that*-clause complements became specialized for overtly realizing specific third person subjects, whose accessibility to the hearer is low.

While “information structure” in the narrow sense refers to the relation between constituents and the surrounding context, as described above, “discourse relations” can be understood to refer to the rhetorical relationships between sentences across a whole text. In Chapter 4, “Word Order,

Information Structure, and Discourse Relations: A Study of Old and Middle English Verb-Final Clauses,” Kristin Bech deals with the effect of discourse relations on word order within sentences under the framework of Segmented Discourse Representation Theory as presented by Asher and Vieu (2005), where discourse relations are broadly classified into “coordinating” and “subordinating” relations. Coordinating relations include Narration, Continuation, Result, Parallel, and Contrast, while subordinating relations are divided into Elaboration, Background, Explanation, and Commentary. Bech focuses on verb-final declarative main clauses in Old English (OE), which have attracted little attention in the literature, and reveals that this word order is connected to the coordinating relations.

Discourse relations are also discussed in Anneli Meurman-Solin’s “The Connectives *And*, *For*, *But*, and *Only* as Clause and Discourse Type Indicators in 16th- and 17th-Century Epistolary Prose” (Chapter 8). Meurman-Solin summarizes the relations introduced by these four linking items or connectives and their features as follows (pp. 172–173). (A) *Element order*: the connective is followed by either a subordinate adverbial clause, a cleft sentence, a fronted element, or some other marked word order. (B) *Narrative*: the connective connects utterances that report events or circumstances. (C) *First-person stance*: the following utterance expresses the writer’s personal attitude, either explicitly or implicitly. (D) *Assurance, suggestion, or request*: the following utterance contains one or more of these addressee-oriented expressions. The author’s survey reveals that *and* was commonly employed in her 16th- and 17th-century data to introduce each relation from (A) to (D), most frequently (A), and that *for* characteristically occurs in the contexts of (C) and (D) and *but* in the context of (C).

3. Information Structure and Word Order Variation

Although the papers in this volume concern a wide variety of topics and historical periods, the underlying view of the relation between information structure and syntactic structure on which their analyses are based is highly homogeneous. Their common stance is succinctly stated by the editors in Chapter 1, “On the Interplay of Syntax and Information Structure: Synchronic and Diachronic Considerations.”

- (2) [W]hen confronted with syntactic options in their data, speakers may converge on an information-structural or discourse motivation in selecting one of these options, on the basis of subtle differences in frequencies; and conversely, the lack of syntactic

options may compromise information structure to the extent that certain syntactic patterns develop as “escape hatches.” (p. 13)

This amounts to saying that syntax and information structure are autonomous systems independent from each other, and that information structure selects an optimal choice from among the options made available by syntax. This volume as a whole succeeds in proving that such a view can provide plausible explanations for synchronic word order variations and for the emergence of new constructions as a result of certain syntactic changes. These points are well documented by the following papers.

“The Loss of Verb-Second and the Switch from Bounded to Unbounded Systems,” by Bettelou Los (Chapter 2), considers how the gap in information structure created in English by the loss of Verb Second (V2) was compensated for by new constructions that developed as “escape hatches,” in the sense mentioned above. The clause-initial position in OE was assigned to an element that could be interpreted as either topic or focus; this position was demarcated by the finite verb from the comment or non-focus domain of the sentence. However, along with the loss of V2, the grammatical system of English changed into one where the subject served as the unmarked position for given information. Los convincingly argues that prepositional passives like *the doctor was sent for* and Exceptional Case-Marking passives like *John was said to be lying* emerged in late ME and early ModE as a result of the relocation of the former non-subject topic to the subject position, and likewise that *it*-cleft constructions developed as an alternative means to posit focus elements on the left periphery of the sentence.

“The Effect of Information Structure on Object Position in Old English: A Pilot Study,” by Ann Taylor and Susan Pintzuk (Chapter 3), is an attempt to specify the factors that determine the position of objects in embedded clauses with finite verbs in OE. The authors investigated three texts from different periods of the OE language—*Martyrology*, *Heptateuch*, and *Apollo-nius of Tyre*—and have concluded that OV/VO variation and the information status of the objects have a significant correlation; i.e., given objects prefer the pre-verbal position while new objects tend to follow finite verbs. (At the same time, though, the authors demonstrate that word order variation is also influenced by the length or heaviness of the objects.) Interestingly enough, the effect of information structure is less pronounced in *Heptateuch*, a text of the late tenth century, than in *Martyrology*, a text of the late ninth century (making it characteristic of earlier texts in the OE context). The authors argue that this is because OV and VO were still in competition in the language of *Martyrology*, while surface VO order was well established

by the time of *Heptateuch*.

“Latin Absolute Constructions and Their Old English Equivalents: Interfaces between Form and Information Structure,” by Olga Timofeeva (Chapter 10), examines the impact of information structure on OE translations of Latin absolute participial constructions (APCs). Timofeeva first classifies APCs into two subclasses: adverbial APCs proper, which “tend to behave as topics and are responsible for the general cohesion of a discourse” (p. 233), and adverbial-adjectival APCs, which “are likely to be discourse-new and hence to appear in postposition to the main clause” (p. 233). The former subclass expresses time, cause, condition, and concession, while the latter represents manner, apposition, and attendant circumstances. Next, the author investigates how examples of each subclass are translated into OE, making it clear that in addition to literal translation by means of OE dative absolutes, Latin APCs are rendered by a variety of forms, including prepositional phrases, finite clauses, and adverbs. Despite this formal diversity, however, the information statuses of the original Latin APCs are maintained in all cases of OE translation. This strongly indicates that a single information structure can be mapped into different grammatical systems, supporting the view that syntax and information structure are independent of each other.

“Why a Determiner? The Possessive + Determiner + Adjective Construction in Old English,” by Cynthia L. Allen (Chapter 11), sheds light on the role of determiners in noun phrases with possessors in OE. As the title indicates, OE allowed sequences where a determiner intervened between a possessor and an adjective in a noun phrase (Poss Det Adj). By quantitatively comparing nominals of this pattern with their counterparts lacking determiners (Poss Adj) in *Blickling Homilies* and *Vercelli Homilies*, Allen attempts to tease out the factors determining the presence or absence of determiners in these constructions. Her main findings are as follows: (i) it is irrelevant whether the grammatical features of determiners, i.e. gender, number, and case, add information about the features of entire noun phrases indeterminable only from adjectives; (ii) in both texts, the Poss Det Adj pattern tends to be preferred over Poss Adj when adjectives are nonrestrictive; and (iii) in both texts, positive adjectives such as *halig* ‘holy’ favor the Poss Det Adj pattern whereas negative adjectives such as *yfel* ‘evil’ favor Poss Adj.

On the basis of the results given above, it is evident that information structure strongly influences the choice of particular options among the word order variations permitted by a given grammar.

4. Information Structure and Syntactic Change

While information structure serves as a useful tool in accounting for synchronic word order variation, it seems difficult to explain diachronic syntactic changes solely in terms of information structure because these changes are commonly and reasonably supposed to be triggered by subtle interactions between language-internal factors such as morphological attrition and external factors such as language contact. Thus, a reader may feel somewhat frustrated if he or she expects from the title of this volume (*Information Structure and Syntactic Change in the History of English*) that truly novel explanations of syntactic changes from the perspective of information structure will be presented. Below, we shall consider (the limits of) the role played by information structure in syntactic change, taking the structural change of noun phrases in English for example.

“Functional Shifts and the Development of English Determiners,” by Tine Breban (Chapter 12), investigates how the functions of English determiners have developed and shifted historically. First, it is shown that the OE determiners *an* and *se* had a far greater number of functions than do their respective descendants *a(n)* and *the*, which are employed as genuine articles in Present-day English (PE). For instance, OE *an* could function as a kind of presentative marker, introducing specific referents representing information that was new both in the discourse and to the addressee. Unlike PE *a(n)*, this presentative marker was optionally attached to a noun phrase when that phrase received focal interpretation or referred to an important referent in the enfolding discourse. Afterwards, in ME, as *a(n)* and *the* specialized into articles serving identification functions, the lost functions were carried over to semantically complex determiners such as *this*, *some*, *one*, *another*, or *the other*. Breban maintains that this series of changes emerged because the syntactic position optionally occupied by *an* and *se* in OE came in ME to be generalized as an obligatory slot responsible for expressing the definiteness of noun phrases.

“The Proximal and Distal Perspectives in Relation to the Position of Directional Modifiers in the English Noun Phrase,” by Turo Vartiainen (Chapter 13), focuses on the interpretive difference between prenominal and postnominal modification by the directional modifiers *coming*, *past*, *above*, *below*, and *following*. The gist of Vartiainen’s claim is that prenominal modification is closely connected to the proximal perspective, leading to the clear identification of discourse referents, whereas postnominal modification is related to the distal perspective, resulting in a poor identification of dis-

course referents (p. 308). Having demonstrated that this hypothesis holds true in PE for the directional modifiers mentioned above, the author next investigates the historical development of *following*. According to him, *following* was employed exclusively as a postnominal modifier in ME, but came in ModE to be used also as a prenominal modifier, first, in the 17th century, in its “textual function” as in *the following example*, and subsequently, in the 18th century, in its “temporal function” as in *the following day*.

The findings presented in these chapters are intriguing in their own right, but they also reveal the primacy of formal considerations over communicative convenience in the process of syntactic change. If Breban’s analysis is on the right track, it follows that determiners shifted their functions to satisfy interpretive requirements in a way consistent with the structural changes being undergone by noun phrases. That is, the functional changes of the lexical items under consideration were a consequence, and not a cause, of syntactic change. With respect to the development of the prenominal use of *following*, Vartiainen attributes the time lag of about a century between its textual and temporal functions to the tendency of textual *following* to point to a referent that comes immediately after the relevant noun phrase, arguing that “the prenominal position would have been the more natural position to express this proximity” (p. 323). However, it remains unclear why *following* was used as a postnominal modifier in the first place. If the interpretive requirement could alter the word order between a head noun and its modifier, it might as well be expected that the distribution of *following* observed in PE, wherein the proximal (i.e. textual) usage prefers a prenominal position and the distal (i.e. temporal) usage favors a postnominal position, would have been established as early as ME. To resolve this paradox, we may be advised to take into consideration the effect of the relative frequencies of these usages (cf. Bybee (2003)). In any event, further investigation is clearly necessary to unravel the interaction between information structure and syntactic structure, and especially the role of the former, in the process of language change.

5. Information Structure and Syntactic Structure

As mentioned at the outset, generative grammar holds from its inception the autonomy of syntax as a tenet, and thus practitioners have long refrained from incorporating concepts related to information structure, such as topic and focus, into syntactic categories. One aspect of the recent reaction to

this tradition is research in the realm of “syntactic cartography.” Since the seminal work of Rizzi (1997), numerous studies have proposed that syntactic structures include categories such as Top(ic) and Foc(us) that are devoted to the discourse-related interpretation of constituents. This approach seems to have achieved a certain degree of success, at least at the descriptive level. However, the authors in this volume who conduct their research under the generative framework are conservative in this respect and do not show any commitment to the practice of cartography. This attitude is observed in a comment by the editors in Chapter 1: “[s]uch an integrated view of syntax and information structure does not have many insights to offer for the loss of, say, scrambling in English, because without any corroboration, “the feature for scrambling was lost” is little more than a restatement of “scrambling was lost” (p. 8).

With this in mind, I shall evaluate Ans van Kemenade and Marit Westergaard’s paper “Syntax and Information Structure: Verb-Second Variation in Middle English” (Chapter 5). The main topic of this chapter is the relevance of information structure to the variation of V2 order in ME. On the basis of a survey of the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, the authors have concluded that V2 order in ME is a function of the following factors: the information status of the clause-initial constituent, the type of finite verb, and the information status of the subject. Particularly interesting for our purposes is the claim that there are two subject positions available in the basic clause structure of ME (see also Hulk and van Kemenade (1997) and van Kemenade (1997)). More specifically, van Kemenade and Westergaard argue that in clauses with an initial adverb, a nominal subject occupies the higher subject position, termed Spec-F, if it has specific reference to an antecedent, whereas if it receives a nonspecific or focal interpretation it is located in the lower subject position, Spec-T. The relevant structures can be represented as follows:

- (3) a. [_{CP} **Adv** C [_{FP} **Subj** V [_{TP} T]]] (Adverb-Subject-V)
 b. [_{CP} **Adv** C [_{FP} V [_{TP} **Subj** T]]] (Adverb-V-Subject)

If we further assume that the finite verb raises to F in this structure, we can obtain the adverb-subject-V and adverb-V-subject orders.

A point to note is that the essence of van Kemenade and Westergaard’s findings can be naturally captured by the fine-grained CP structure of Rizzi (1997), although they do not explicitly mention this possibility. If we replace their functional category F with Top(ic) and add Force and Fin(iteness), the structures in (3) can be replaced with those in (4) (see also Nawata (2009)).

- (4) a. [_{ForceP} **Adv** Force [_{TopP} **Subj** Top [_{FinP} **V** [_{TP} T]]]]
 (Adverb-Subject-V)
 b. [_{ForceP} **Adv** Force [_{TopP} Top [_{FinP} **V** [_{TP} **Subj** T]]]]
 (Adverb-V-Subject)

In these structures, a subject representing given information occupies Spec-Top and is interpreted as a kind of topic, whereas a subject representing new information stays in Spec-T, satisfying the general rule of information ordering in which new information comes after given information. If we assume that the finite verb raises to Fin in clauses with an initial adverb, we can correctly derive the relevant ME word orders. Thus, van Kemenade and Westergaard's insight concerning the variation of subject position may as well be taken as supporting evidence for a cartographic approach making use of the category Top.

One might argue that the structures in (3) and (4) are merely notational variants, but this ignores the fact that they make different predictions with respect to the diachronic reanalysis of subject positions. It is generally assumed that in PE, subjects occupy a single designated position in the surface structure. Drawing on the structure in (3), van Kemenade and Westergaard hint that the ME preverbal (higher) subject position was generalized as this default subject position alongside the loss of V2 (p. 110). However, this analysis cannot be straightforwardly translated into one that makes use of the cartographic structure employed in (4), since Spec-Top cannot serve as the canonical subject position in subject-prominent languages like English. Under the cartographic approach, the subjects would be expected to shift downward so that the lower subject position, Spec-T, would become the default subject position in tandem with the loss of V-to-Fin movement (Nawata (2013)).

It awaits further investigation to determine decisively whether or not we can conclude that it is appropriate to resort to discourse-related notions such as topic and focus to delineate syntactic structures, and, if we ever can, how and to what extent they can be incorporated as independent functional categories.

6. Summary

To sum up, this volume as a whole provides us with a clear picture of the syntactic effects of information structure in the history of English, illustrating how information structure, broadly construed to include discourse relations, arranges constituents within the limits imposed by syntax.

Finally, I would like to close this review by pointing out another characteristic shared by the studies in this volume: almost all these papers present plentiful empirical data collected from electric corpora. The full use of electric corpora has become a hallmark of modern linguistics, alongside close attention to information structure and the reevaluation of the diachronic aspect of language, as mentioned in the introduction. This is another reason why the volume under discussion offers a handy perspective on the latest development in linguistic studies. Thus, I would recommend this volume to all scholars who are interested in linguistic theories, language change, and corpus linguistics, not to mention those who are devoted to the history of English, from philological and/or theoretical viewpoints.

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