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Grammar – discourse – context

Grammatical variation and change and the usage-based perspective

1 Some thoughts about the relationship between grammar, discourse, and context

[... G]rammar is predominantly about the coherence relations between the proposition (clause) and the wider communicative context, be it the current text, face-to-face speech situation and, within the latter, the speaker-hearer interaction. Our traditional structuralist methodology of examining – or experimenting with – isolated clauses has tended to obscure what grammar actually does. [... G]rammar has little to do with atomic verbal clauses (proposition), but rather with their discourse context – i.e. the communicative function. (Givón 2018 [1979]: 35)

The present volume is concerned with the relationship between grammar and discourse and the issue how grammar is shaped by language use in context, in a synchronic as well as in a diachronic perspective. Our focus is on the English language, but in describing grammatical phenomena of English, several of the contributions to this volume discuss methodological or theoretical issues that have a wider implication for linguistics in general. The topic of this volume is the outcome of two conference workshops convened by us at ISLE4 in Poznan in 2016, and at ICAME 38 in Prague in 2017.¹

Grammar in linguistics is commonly understood with reference to morphological and syntactic patterns, which are (a) perceivable and linguistically describable as regularly recurring sequences of specific types of morphosyntactically marked content and function words in linguistic performance, and which (b)

¹ The workshops had the titles “Grammar – discourse – context: Widening the horizon for a theory of grammatical change” (ISLE 4, 18 September 2016), and “Back to text – Contextualizing corpus data in historical and variationist English linguistics” (ICAME 38, 24 May 2017).

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reflect more abstract cognitive structures – schemata, rules, or principles – that are stored in speakers’ memories as part of their linguistic competence, and govern the formation of complex words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in speech production. Disregarding for the moment the, in parts vast, discrepancies between different theories of grammar,² a commonality between all of them is the assumption that the concrete grammatical patterns visible in linguistic performance reflect some kind of abstract knowledge about the “well-formedness” of utterances on the part of speakers.

From a functionalist perspective, such as is voiced by Givón (2018 [1979]: 35) in the introductory quote, grammar is, however, more than just a set of abstract patterns or rules determining “well-formedness”: grammatical structures are meaningful, or functional, in and of themselves. Following this view, grammar may be described as a structural code that is used as an instrument for coding communicative function (Givón 2018 [1979]: 33; see also Strauss et al. 2018), involving the four major coding devices of morphology, intonation (on word-level and clause-level), rhythm (e.g. pace, lengths, pauses), and sequential order of words or morphemes (Givón 2018 [1979]: 34).

This view of grammar is also inherent in cognitive and usage-based linguistics (e.g. Langacker 2000; Taylor 2002; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Croft and Cruse 2004; Bybee 2010), which have come to play an increasingly important role in current linguistic thinking, including the study of variational and diachronic linguistics. Cognitive linguistics goes even further than defining grammar as a structural code for communicative function by claiming that “grammar is conceptualization” (Langacker, quoted in Croft and Cruse 2004: 3; see also Langacker 2008: 3–4). Grammar is seen as symbolic and recognized to play a crucial role in the way human beings conceptualize, or make sense of, their experience

2 Such discrepancies concern, for instance, the question whether the very general structural principles that are universally found in the languages world-wide are domain-specific, belonging to an innate language component in human beings’ brains (e.g. Chomsky 1972, 1981, 1986; Radford 1988: 34–38; cf. Schlobinski 2003), or whether our knowledge of grammar emerges in interplay with other domain-general learning mechanisms in the process of language acquisition (e.g. Hopper 1988; Langacker 2000, 2008; Tomasello 2003; Bybee 2010; Edwards 2010; see also Piatelli-Palmarini 1980); further, the question whether grammatical knowledge is different from or the same in kind to lexical knowledge, i.e. likewise symbolic but with a different degree of abstractness (e.g. Langacker 2000, 2008; Taylor 2002; Croft and Cruse 2004); or whether sentences and utterances are construed with grammatical structures as templates into which the words are simply inserted following a “slot-and-filler principle”, or whether speakers make use of chunks of lexical and grammatical items that are memorized as such, following a so-called “idiom principle” (e.g. Gleason 1965; Sinclair 1991, 2004; Hoey 2005; Bybee and Beckner 2015; see also Green 2017).

with the world and how they organize this knowledge in their minds. The categories and structures shaping this knowledge of language and “the world” are “built up from our cognition of specific utterances on specific occasions of use” (Croft and Cruse 2004: 4), which reflects a usage-based view of language acquisition (e.g. Tomasello 2003; see also Taylor 2002: 27–28; Hopper 1987, 1988; Bybee 2006, 2010). Different languages may reflect different cultural conceptualizations of “the world” (e.g. Palmer 1996, Sharifian 2015) and thus synchronic variability and diachronic change are not only inherent in grammar but also meaningful with respect to both the mental organization of knowledge in speakers’ minds and the communicative and interactive functions which language serves in different societies.

In order to do justice to the functionalist, symbolic, and usage-based view of grammar and language, linguistic analyses need to interpret language data in their discourse context (see Givón 2018 [1979]: 35, quoted initially). In pragmatics, *discourse* is usually understood as language in the contexts of its use and above the level of the sentence, taking recourse to the systems of knowledge and beliefs, social practices and the socially recognizable identities involved in it (e.g. Blommaert 2005; van Dijk 2008, 2014; Flowerdew 2014). As Blommaert (2005) notes,

[d]iscourse is language in action [... It] comprises all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural, and historical patterns and developments of use. [...] What is traditionally understood by language is but one manifestation of it; all kinds of semiotic ‘flagging’ performed by means of objects, attributes, or activities can and should also be included for they usually constitute the ‘action’ part of language-in-action. (Blommaert 2005: 2–3)

Pragmatic discourse analysis is accordingly interested in “what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language, knowledge based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before, to do things in the world: exchange information, express feelings, make things happen, create beauty, entertain themselves and others, and so on.” (Johnstone 2008: 3). As Johnstone (2008) further points out, discourse is both the source of this knowledge about language and the result of it. Thus, the pragmatic linguistic concept of *discourse* is interconnected with Foucault’s (1972) social-philosophical concept of *discourses*, which are

[...] conventional ways of talking that both create and are created by conventional ways of thinking. These linked ways of talking and thinking constitute ideologies (sets of interrelated ideas) and serve to circulate power in society. In other words, “discourses” in this sense involve patterns of belief and habitual action as well as patterns of language. [...] Discourses, in their linguistic aspect, are conventionalized sets of choices for discourse, or talk. (Johnstone 2008: 3).

In the light of this, linguistics in general, but especially diachronic and historical linguistics, is faced with the challenge of finding ways of incorporating as much of the discourse context into their analyses as possible. The different facets of discourse *context* may be summarized as follows (based on Wodak 2014):

On the micro-level:

- 1) the immediate surrounding text of the communicative event in question, i.e. what has also been called *co-text* (see Halliday and Hasan 1985);
- 2) a) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres, and discourses;
b) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between spoken and/or written texts and other modes of communication (e.g. pictures, colours, fonts, scripts);
c) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between different varieties and languages that are part of the “world of discourse”;

and on the macro-level:

- 3) the extralinguistic social, environmental variables and institutional frames of a specific “context of situation”, including multilingual and multicultural settings; and
- 4) the broader sociopolitical and historical context that discursive practices are embedded in and related to.

Looking at the influence of context on processes of grammatical variation and change, context on the micro-level of analysis further includes:

- 5) the structural context provided by the language system, i.e. the system of interdependencies between lexemes (semantic fields, cognitive domains, collocations, etc.) and grammatical patterns and constructions (Fischer 2007: 116, Möhlig-Falke 2012: 24) which form the linguistic input and underlying cognitive structures (mental grammars) of speakers at any historical stage of the language.

Especially in historical linguistics, the issue of “context” and “contextualizing” becomes even more pressing because – naturally – native-speaker knowledge of historical stages of a language, such as of Old, Middle, Early Modern and Late Modern English up to the early 20th century, can only be accessed indirectly. Hence, what constitutes “normal” or “canonical” grammatical usage, for instance with respect to word order, and what is a deviation from it for stylistic reasons, carrying some special communicative function, often requires a very close look into the discourse context. The inclusion of this aspect of context follows

Halliday’s systemic view which states that “meaning is choice”, i.e. in construing their utterances, speakers choose linguistic patterns from a range of options, and they usually do so for a specific communicative purpose, which may be semantically, discourse-structurally, sociopragmatically, or stylistically motivated (Halliday 1977). Processes of grammatical change may be closely intertwined with lexical semantics and discourse structure, and several grammatical changes may interact (e.g. Bech and Eide 2014; Möhlig-Falke 2012, 2017; Petré 2014, 2015). There is a dynamic interaction between *discourse* and *discourses*, the interlocutors involved in them, and the grammatical context (see Flowerdew 2014: 4–5; Duranti and Goodwin 1992: 31).

Further, which level(s) of context are selected to be relevant in a given analysis depends on the researcher, on the goals of the analysis and the (theoretical and methodological) context of the study. Context is thus also *construed* by analysts in their work (Flowerdew 2014: 6). Researchers themselves are part of the context and may influence the outcome of their research by the way they form hypotheses on the basis of the theoretical frameworks they follow and by making “judicious decisions about what to include and how far to go” (Baker 2014, quoted from Flowerdew 2014: 6). Therefore, context also comprises

- 6) the construal of those aspects of context which the researcher considers to be relevant, accounting for his/her theoretical background and assumptions, hypotheses and goals of research.

The role of context for the interpretation of linguistic utterances and successful communication by means of language has long been acknowledged in linguistics, being a prime object of study in pragmatics, discourse analysis, anthropological and cultural linguistics, for instance. Interpretation on the basis of contextual clues has also been shown to play a central role in the process of language acquisition and language evolution, being vital for the human capacity of intention reading (Tomasello 1999, 2014). Sense-making with the help of context is furthermore the essence of analogical reasoning, i.e. the human capacity of forming links between categories on the basis of shared similarities while ignoring small differences (Fischer 2018; see also Paul 1909; Gentner and Namy 2006). Analogy is also an essential part of productively extending our expressive powers by metonymization and metaphorization (e.g. Traugott and Dasher 2005). Context,

contextual knowledge, and contextual clues are thus central to making sense of “the world” and to communicate about it by means of language.³

However, these general insights into the centrality of the discourse context for language usage and cognition have not yet been fully integrated into the investigation of processes of language variation and change, and particularly of grammatical change. Placing one’s focus on the investigation of discourse means that the clear distinctions between the different structuralist levels of linguistic description, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, become blurred – distinctions on which many of our methodological tools of variational and diachronic linguistic analysis still rest. Our structuralist heritage, useful as it is for tearing apart the complexity of language to break it down to its essentials, has for a long time favoured de-contextualized analytical perspectives on contemporary and historical language use as well as on the mechanisms and processes guiding variation and change over time (see also Givón 2018 [1979]: 35, quoted above). What happens if we take these theoretical notions seriously and try to implement them in our investigations, both with respect to the questions we ask, the data we use (e.g. concordances retrieved from large corpora vs. full texts or longer text passages, digitized texts vs. printed facsimiles vs. manuscripts), and the methodologies we apply in trying to answer these questions, and in explaining grammatical variation and change *in its discourse context*? The task of implementing such an approach is challenging, and we can only proceed to it step by step, especially if we include the objective to be able to model mechanisms and processes of language variation and change, such as, for instance, diffusion, analogy, reanalysis, and (inter)subjectification in processes of grammaticalization (e.g. De Smet 2009, 2013; López-Couso 2010; Traugott 2010, Los 2012; Bisang 2016; Fischer 2018).

One way to approach this task is to focus on the different aspects of *context*, as outlined above, and to investigate the influence of (selected levels of) context on processes of grammatical variation and change qualitatively to see what their inclusion adds to our knowledge and understanding of causes and mechanisms of grammatical variation and change.

³ See also the theory of frame knowledge, or semantic frames (e.g. Fillmore 1976, 1982; Goffman 1986 [1974]; Ziem 2014) and Konerding (2008) on the relation between discourse and knowledge frames.

2 About the contributions

The contributions to this volume treat the relationship between grammar, discourse, and context from various perspectives – theoretical, methodological, and with respect to diachronicity. **Kristin Bech**’s contribution (pp. 15–48) focuses on the structure of noun phrases in Old English and demonstrates that theoretical generalizations found in the literature on Old English syntax often do not hold when verified with empirical contextualized data, i.e. noun phrases within their immediate micro-level context (or co-text). By the example of noun phrases with present participle modifiers in pre- and postnominal position in the Old English translation of *Cura Pastoralis* compared with its Latin source text, she further reveals that postnominal position of a present participle modifier was used systematically “to convey meaning which would otherwise be obscured if prenominal position had been mandatory. In other words, although postnominal position was rare in Old English, it was used productively and for specific purposes” (Bech, this volume, p. 46). Thus, contextualizing syntactic data both on the micro- as well as on the macro-contextual level is necessary to understand the kind of synchronic syntactic variation found in historical data.

The contribution by **Bettelou Los** and **Thijs Lubbers** (pp. 49–92) also investigates Old English syntax in what they call a corpus-based, data-driven, and quantitative stylometric approach including n-grams on the basis of morphological tags. The major methodological challenge they face is what has been called the “Fish fork” by Stubbs (2005: 6), i.e. the fact that “working (by necessity) from a pre-determined set of assumptions about what constitute relevant linguistic features means that such investigations may well uncover high frequencies of these features, but that such findings can be unsatisfactory because they are unsurprising” (Los and Lubbers, this volume, p. 55). Developing an exploratory methodology including lexical trigramming, POS-tag n-gramming, and feeding the latter into correspondence analyses, as well as philologically informed interpretation of the data, they manage to visualize, or model, textual and stylistic differences that correspond with genre, register, text type, and authorial style.

Belén Méndez-Naya’s article (pp. 93–124) moves further into the Early Middle English period of English language history, which is still underrepresented in the research literature due to the scarcity of sources, although it has been found to be a crucial period for the development of the English language particularly with respect to its morphosyntactic system (e.g. Kroch and Taylor 1997; Trips 2002; Los 2009). Méndez-Naya investigates the configuration and grammaticalization development of the Early Middle English intensifier system by focusing on a single text, the late 12th-century *Ormulum*. She undertakes an in-depth

exploration of the effects of the micro-level linguistic context on the one hand, identifying bridging contexts for newly arising degree interpretations, and the macro-level context of language contact with Old Norse on the other, demonstrating that norsification both affects the inventory of intensifiers itself as well as frequency and distribution of individual items.

Lynn Anthonissen (pp. 125–156) investigates the passive nominative and infinitive (NCI) construction in Early Modern English with the aim of exploring whether constructional syntactic change is possible within the adult lifespan of individual speakers, for

[i]f we are serious about the cognitive commitment, research on language (change) as an abstract structure must be complemented by research on variation and change in the linguistic individual. As pointed out by Schmid and Mantlik (2015) and De Smet (2016), variation in language use reflects differences in how language is cognitively represented. Therefore, “any patterns or tendencies found in this variation may reveal something about the organization of mental representation” (De Smet 2016: 251), and, I would add, possibly also about the extent to which the adult mind can adapt to ongoing linguistic change. (Anthonissen, this volume, p. 127f.).

The study analyzes language data by four authors included in the EMMA corpus (*Early Modern Multiloquent Authors*, Petré et al. 2019) with respect to the micro-level semantic and pragmatic contexts of use. It reveals not only considerable variation in the use of NCIs by these authors throughout their lifetime, but also finds non-random patterns in that individual authors exhibit linear trends of semasiological change in the NCI construction that persist into old age. She thus demonstrates how functionally determined variation in the language usage of individuals is connected with more general processes of diachronic change.

Ruth Möhlig-Falke’s article (pp. 157–190) investigates dual-form adverbs in the 18th and 19th century by using data from the *Old Bailey Corpus* 2.0. The study explores variable adverb marking in order to explain why these adverbs may appear with and without the adverbial suffix *-ly* in similar syntactic environments at a time when *-ly*-marking for adverbs becomes the preferred choice in standardized contexts. By close contextual analysis on the micro-level as well as by taking the systemic context of the categories of adjective as against adverb into account, she demonstrates how variable adverb marking is mainly due to the general fuzziness of the category boundary between adjective and adverb in English, the adverbs’ highly context-sensitive interpretation, and their differences in semantic-pragmatic orientation – i.e. variation in *-ly*-marking is largely functionally determined rather than in free variation.

The contribution by **Dagmar Haumann** and **Kristin Killie** (pp. 191–220) focuses on the concept of “bridging context” in the syntactic reanalysis of the

sentence adverb *naturally* between the late 16th to late 19th century, bridging contexts being micro-level co(n)texts in which both an old and a new analysis are possible (e.g. Heine 2002). The authors find that the reanalysis of narrow scope *naturally* as an evidential adverb depends on a variety of interacting factors, with syntax playing the central role by determining the contexts in which a reanalysis is possible, i.e. in clauses that project a ForceP specified for assertive illocutionary force. By micro-level co(n)textual analysis they further show that reanalysis may be lexically, pragmatically, and contextually constrained even if it is licensed by the syntax, thus emphasizing the importance of multifactorial analysis for phenomena representing bridging contexts.

Reijirou Shibasaki (pp. 221–247) investigates the grammaticalization process of the sentence-final *is all*-construction from independent clause to an amalgamated discourse marker with summarizing function in 19th- and 20th-century American English. Based on a large number of different corpora, he shows how this amalgamation process proceeds over different genres and registers and depends on the specifiable linear sequence of clauses in particular pragmatic conditions, i.e. on co-text. His study thus supports the assumption of Systemic Functional Grammar that “a lexical or grammatical item can be properly construed only in a given stretch of discourse” (Shibasaki, this volume, p. 224). Shibasaki also discusses how the construction has begun to spread to other varieties of English, and can be expected to spread further, since new pragmatic markers travel quickly (Mair 2009; Aijmer 2013). Hence language-external factors also play a role in the diffusion of linguistic structures.

Elena Seoane's contribution (pp. 249–276) is concerned with the role of contextual features in the consolidation of the adverbs *just*, *(n)ever* and *yet* as perfect markers in World Englishes. Based on a meticulous qualitative and quantitative analysis of data from the *International Corpus of English* (ICE), the author shows the complex interplay of structural and contextual factors interacting to shape grammatical variation, only partially confirming Miller's (2000) and Brown and Miller's (2017) hypothesis on the entrenchment of the investigated adverbials as perfect markers. Findings concern the alleged spread to L2-varieties of English, the semantically and pragmatically differing functions of *just*, *(n)ever*, and *yet*, as well as the relative insignificance of spoken as against written mode in their distribution. She thus demonstrates the importance of combining quantitative analyses with contextually informed qualitative assessment of the data.

Martin Konvička (pp. 277–304) presents a theoretical assessment of three different functionalist approaches to the issue of grammatical status, i.e. to the question which factors and properties give a linguistic element its grammatical rather than lexical status, which is crucial within a theory of grammaticalization.

The author works out the similarities and differences between the three existing models proposed by Himmelmann (1992), Diewald (2011), and Boye and Harder (2012), focusing on the principles employed as well as on how the three models approach the question of grammatical gradability. In mapping both the advantages and disadvantages of the extant models he further works out the points of convergence that may be profitable for future research.

Hendrik De Smet (pp. 305–331) also focuses on a theoretical topic by approaching the issue of motivation in linguistic variation and how this is interpreted in the two large strands of variationist linguistics on the one hand, and functional linguistics on the other. While variation is seen as “natural and common” in variationist linguistics, Functionalists “assume that [it] is anomalous” (De Smet, this volume, p. 305), this having different implications for the respective understanding of language change. In a case study of hypervariation in the prepositional complements of emotion adjectives, he demonstrates, by analyzing them in their broader grammatical context, that both views may be reconciled: Variation “arises because grammars offer multiple near-equivalent solutions to the same coding problem” (De Smet, this volume, p. 327), since having an abundance of solutions may offer an advantage in efficiently coding and communicating experience. Furthermore, “many linguistic subsystems are parasitic on their elements’ core functions” (De Smet, this volume, p. 328) and available form-function mappings originally developed for spatial relations may be less than optimal for coding the causes of emotional states. Hence, synchronic variation and even hypervariation may be communicatively and functionally motivated, this in turn opening a better understanding for the motivations underlying diachronic language change.

The final contribution by **María José López-Couso** (pp. 333–364) also treats a theoretical topic by focusing on hypercharacterization in language variation and change, i.e. the fact that languages accumulate apparently redundant linguistic material in category marking. In three in-depth case studies of syntactic hypercharacterization in the history of English (strengthened adverbial subordinators, pronoun resumption in extraction contexts, and “double-locative overlap constructions” with *there*), the author demonstrates that hypercharacterized forms and constructions resulting from accretion are more than superfluous and functionless material but may in fact be seen to realize important functions in the respective linguistic systems at the communicative level as well as at the level of grammatical structure and “can be plausibly explained as the result of predictable language change – as well as language variation – phenomena” (López-Couso, this volume, p. 360).

3 Final remarks

Although working against a wide range of different theoretical and methodological backgrounds, as well as having different research aims and foci, all of the contributions to this volume subscribe to a usage-based view of language variation and change, taking up the challenge of contextualization. The contributions show how important it is to integrate contextual information to various degrees in the investigation of processes of grammatical variation and change at any stage of language history, depending on the availability of sources on whose basis contextualization is possible. In the long run, it may be useful to combine such investigations, which take grammatical patterns in their context of use as their starting point, with approaches that consider historical discourses in their own right and identify interacting patterns of language variability and change emerging from the discourse itself, i.e. combine the historical, variationist, and diachronic linguistic perspective with modern discourse analysis, and take texts and discourses as a starting point (e.g. Johnstone 2008; Landwehr 2008). However challenging, such a task might be a logical next step in usage-based diachronic linguistics. With this volume, we would like to open the floor for an exploration of (more) contextualized approaches to grammatical variation and change, with the perspective to expand on this both theoretically and methodologically.

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