

Debating the proposition “Nothing in linguistics makes full sense except in a diachronic light”

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One can disagree with the proposition in a number of ways:

1. things in linguistics do make sense without diachronic light (synchrony without diachrony)
2. nothing in linguistics makes sense when only in a diachronic light (synchrony supports diachrony)
3. things in linguistics make full sense when treated from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives (synchrony and diachrony work in tandem)

What falls from the above is that synchrony is always involved and diachrony cannot be done alone whereas synchrony can. So, there is a logical priority of synchronic over diachronic study of language. Arguments can be provided for each of the above counter propositions in order to support the case of synchrony.

1. Language universals (which are universal preferences in preference theories) govern the origin, acquisition, structure and change of languages. The only comprehensive approach to Any study of language performance of our contemporaries is exclusively synchronic and does not require any recourse to history. I reject here the understanding of diachrony in a micro-perspective (i.e. each point in time becomes past the moment it happens) and adopt a classic long-term macroperspective of change taking place over generations or millennia. In order to account for a given linguistic system as performed NOW by our contemporaries we do not need to refer to any forms which are no longer in use since they are not stored in the speakers minds/brains (competence: cf. an old orthodox generative fallacy). All we need is present, attestable variation. All the experimental methods we have at our disposal apply to the present spoken language. (Btw, interestingly, diachronic studies in the near future will have recorded speech at their disposal!).
2. Diachronically orthodox colleagues have fallen into a “diachronic only” trap. This has made them produce vast DESCRIPTIONS of the historical data (in a philological-neogrammarian fashion) without being able to provide EXPLANATIONS for it, since an explanation in order to be one cannot be restricted to historical forms only. Explanations stem from general linguistic and extralinguistic principles which in their nature are HOLISTIC and refer to language system, acquisition and change. Arguing even further, for the study of performance the best access to the past is via the present. This indeed is the idea underlying the uniformitarianist principle: to generalize from the present to the past. Explanations of external linguistic phenomena (in the domains of phonetics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, neurolinguistics, pragmatics), i.e. the ones concerning language use, need to be anchored in the present in order to apply to the past.
3. The study of language will therefore necessarily involve both a synchronic and diachronic perspective.

In conclusion: a synchronic approach is always necessary and may be sufficient; a diachronic approach may not be necessary and is never sufficient; a tandem approach is most comprehensive and thus commendable.