

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

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Questions, positions, arguments

1. Is the computational system that drives diachronic and synchronic processes the same?

Yes. Of course there is no diachronic computation (the mind/brain operates only in real time). The question is there could be any stable and rule-governed diachronic variation. The answer is Darwinistic: "phonetics propose, phonology disposes". That is, phonetics generate random variation, pieces of which are ennobled through grammaticalization. Once a process is a grammatical rule, it is detached from (and ungoverned by) phonetic marshalling. It obeys the laws of the rule system in which it evolves, and nothing else. The system of grammatical rules is not natural (in the sense of Anderson 1981). What it is governed by, however, is Universal Grammar.

Two steps in the life of a process need to be carefully distinguished: 1) the transition from phonetic variation to a grammatical rule (phonological cherry-picking) and 2) the evolution of the process as a grammatical rule within the grammatical system. 1) is governed by extra-linguistic parameters such as (social) group-dynamics (group recognition) (Labov, Moteton), maybe phonetic salience in acquisition (Blevins, Hale & Reiss etc.). 2) is governed only by grammar-internal law. However, grammar also intervenes in 1) as a filter: not all phonetic variation qualifies as a grammatical (phonological) rule (e.g. "stress every prime number syllable"). Hence only the subset of phonetic variation that is grammatically interpretable is eligible for phonological cherry-picking.

The related empirical question is whether it is true that all phonological processes that we know of are attested both synchronically and diachronically. The classical answer is no, diachronic processes are a superset of synchronic processes: a lot of very familiar things that diachronicians manipulate every day are unheard of in synchronic alternation: metathesis, Grimm's Law ingredient $p > f$, rhotacism etc. Although there is much to be proven, my take is that the two sets do coincide: there is only one set of phonological processes, which may have a synchronic or a diachronic incarnation.

2. If diachronic and synchronic rules are different in kind, why do we not have random processes in diachronics?

Defenders of the opposition position of 1. typically say that synchronic alternations are under the spell of grammar, but diachronic evolution is not. Why, then, are diachronic processes not random? Why isn't there any more closed syllable lengthening, or open syllable shortening, in diachronics than in synchronics?

A consequence – quite radical – of the position that synchronics and diachronics are two distinct waterproof worlds that obey different laws is that diachronic and synchronic argumentation is non-interoperable: nobody can bring diachronic data to bear on a synchronic problem, or in order to find out about how synchronic grammar works. This is about the state of affairs in early generative times where diachronic data were largely despised.

3. Dualism

All attempts at reducing phonology either to synchronic grammar (early generativism) or to diachronic grammar (very popular in the past decade: Blevins, Hale & Reiss) are doomed to failure. In order to discover how phonology works – and there is only one phonology –, we need to interpret all data available, synchronic and diachronic alike. There is no principled difference among both sets; the only thing that makes diachronic data different is the difficulty to get hold of them: there are texts, centuries, hardly investigatable registers and all kinds of secondary problems that have to be overcome (and sometime actually can't) before the linguistic analysis proper can begin.

4. Diachronic evolution reduces to change in the lexicon (Longobardi about syntax)

That may be correct, but it concerns only a subset of diachronic activity, i.e. the one that describes the "aging" of grammatical rules (which for phonology was described, correctly I think, by Vennemann's early work in *Natural Phonology*). But even here I am not sure whether lexical changes alone can take us from initial phonetic variation over phonological rule-incarnation up to lexical-item-idiosyncrasy in extreme cases such as Celtic word boundary-spanning lenition (spirantisation). At some point a red line must be drawn between an active grammatical rule and suppletion. Where that line runs is an everlasting question, as much as the issue regarding lexicalism (and modern anti-lexicalism).