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(Received 10 January 1994)


David Denison’s (DD henceforth) English historical syntax is a most welcome addition to the historical linguistics library in that it fills a didactic gap and also provides a useful tool to any researcher interested in this field. For those interested in the history of English syntax there was no textbook available apart from Traugott’s (1972) History, which is by now somewhat outdated, written as it is within an early form of generative grammar. Denison’s new book reflects the (amount of) research that has been done since the seventies in more than one way. First, in its sheer length. Second, it gives a very useful review of many of the articles/books that have been written on English historical syntax since that time (and before!). Third, it is itself a product of the fertile interchange that has been taking place since the seventies between the modern scientific study of language and the older philological tradition. The latter also helps to explain the interest the author has in explanation, something that is often missing from earlier (syntactic) histories of English.

The book is divided into five parts. Part I, the ‘groundwork’, forms the basis for the whole book. It discusses methodology (very briefly, see also below), gives a short sketch of the main developments that have taken place in the various periods of English, and it deals with changes in nominal morphology, which, together with those in the verbal paradigm, are largely responsible for the changes that occur in the syntactic history of English. Part II, word order, further builds up the ‘groundwork’, since word order is not only of great interest as an area of change, but it also leads directly or indirectly to many of the innovations discussed in parts III to V. Part III is concerned with the development of the structural notion ‘subject’ in English. It deals with constructions (imPERSONALs, indirect and prepositional passives) which involve oblique NPs that syntactically become subjects. Part IV deals with complementation patterns; it looks at the increase in infinitival constructions, changes in the form of the infinitive, and the occurrence of
Subject-raising. Part V, finally, covers changes in verbal constructions; it is especially concerned with the rise of the category Aux and the numerous periphrastic constructions that appear after the Old English period. Thus, the changes in the modals are discussed, the origin and spread of periphrastic do, the (auxiliaries of the) perfect, progressive and passive, and especially the relation between all these auxiliaries (what combinations, and in what order, are first encountered and why).

Each chapter is set up in more or less the same way, its structure catering for the uses to which the book may be put. Thus, in each case, DD begins with a short description of the problem (this usually includes a discussion of the relevant terminology). This is especially valuable for classroom usage because it enables the student to see what has changed and why the change is of (theoretical) interest. Then follows a very extensive description of the data (this usually accounts for about half the chapter, often even more), and after that a section called ‘Explanation’. The chapter finishes with ‘questions for discussion or further research’; these are original and extremely useful, and frequently, I feel, give a clearer indication of the problems present in some of the analyses/explanations, and of the writer’s own stance in this, than the discussions in the preceding sections.

The data-coverage is one of the very strong points of this book. Every example is very conveniently provided with a full gloss, a translation, the date of occurrence, and the edition. In many writings on historical syntax (especially the more recent generative ones), the reader is presented with only a very small selection of data and often gets the impression that this data is skewed towards the analysis/explanation/state of the theory at hand. The present author tries very hard to come with ‘a neutral presentation of the data’ but realizes that in many (all?) cases this is ‘impossible’ (p. 63). What we are given here is a long list of examples of all the types of constructions under discussion. Sometimes, I must admit, I wondered whether some of it was relevant, as for instance in the chapter on impersonals, where constructions such as the following were – with some hesitation, it is true – included from Visser (1963–73: §§10–11, 50) (p. 67): as i [= in] þe godspel is written, alle crieden... heng þat traitur. It seems to me that, semantically, verbs like write (say, etc.) are rather different from the rest of the impersonals in that they do not convey some kind of experience invoked by the physical or mental environment that the person described is in. Syntactically, they are also different; the above example, for instance, can still be used without a subject in Modern English, which is not true for the ‘regular’ impersonals. Similarly, one might wonder how relevant the constructions on p. 73 are, which show (untypical of impersonals) more than two arguments. It is not at all clear whether the arguments shown are direct arguments (i.e. not circumstantial, see also below), or whether the ‘excess’ argument is not simply an extension of another. In other words, a clearer theory about argument structure, might well show that these examples are irrelevant.
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It is quite clear why DD casts his net so wide concerning his presentation of the data. It has everything to do with his ‘neutral’ position, referred to above. However, this position may also lead to a lack of clarity. There is a real danger that the systematic (and therefore the most interesting) aspect of language change is lost sight of. It seems to me a pity that there is not more methodology in this book: a discussion for instance of the relation between the theory of grammar and linguistic change, and, perhaps more importantly between the theory of language acquisition and change, which has been subject of discussion more recently (see Lightfoot 1991, Clark & Roberts 1993). There are remarks of a theoretical nature which indicate the author’s stance. He is a strong believer in the effects that surface structures have on change. For instance on p. 141, he writes that leten of acted as a ‘bridgehead’ in the actuation of the prepositional passive, arguing further ‘in favour of lexical diffusion of the prepositional passive as against across-the-board adoption of a purely syntactic rule’; similarly, for the impersonals (pp. 95–96), he argues that variation – shown in serial relationships – may explain why they changed. It is true that these variations and surface phenomena may shed light on the diffusion but they do not show the direction of the change (where, to my mind, deeper syntactic factors played a crucial role). Therefore, when reading through the long lists of data, this reader felt a need for more signposting: ‘Why is this construction relevant for the development at hand?’ Sometimes this is made explicit, as e.g. on p. 184, where it is stated that the ‘significance of V + NP + Pred is as a possible forerunner of VOSI’ (Visser’s term for infinitival constructions involving a lexical object/subject). But quite often too, the relevance becomes only collaterally clear from a later discussion, for example, we only hear on p. 281 why the do + past part construction given on p. 259 may be of importance for the rise of d. Since it crucially depends on one’s theory what data are considered relevant and what not, it is likely that a more theoretically inclined reader will baulk at these lists, which the more ‘descriptive’ reader will respond to favourably. It is difficult to know what is the best strategy for a book such as this. After all we all know that the present state of the/a theory is often short-lived, and that therefore a more ‘neutral’ book like this may have a longer life and serve a larger audience. But it is done at a cost.

Another aspect in which the data sections are strong is in the care that is given to each individual example. I, for one, have complete faith in the judgement of the author (not in the least because he gives voice to each small hesitation). This is, as those of us know who are familiar with e.g. Visser’s lists, an exception to the rule rather than the rule. For instance, with reference to an example quoted in Visser from the Old English Boethius (p. 261), where DD discusses the occurrence of anticipative d in Old English, he does not only check Mitchell’s discussion of it, but also the relevant Latin prose passage, and all other possible readings (as proposed by others) of this particular sentence. In many instances too, DD clears up debris by pointing
at a faulty interpretation/analysis that has been given by an author to an example.

The set-up of the ‘explanation’ sections varies. Usually, but not always, they begin with an overview of the various types of explanations offered. When this overview is present, it is useful because it ties together the different strands put forward and enables the reader to see which elements crop up in most explanations, and how each different author combines them. In each case the rest of this section is strictly tied up with DD’s reading of the available literature. In other words, subdivisions in this section are headed by the name of the author who has written on it. This does not mean that we get an (alphabetical) list of these authors. Usually they are placed according to the school they ‘belong’ to (generative, non-generative, semantics-based syntax, text-based/structural, etc.). In connection with these sections I often got the same uneasy feeling that I had with respect to the presentation of the data. In some cases (either because a clear line already runs through most of the literature as in the case of the modals or the have-perfect, or because DD himself has taken a special interest in the construction through his own research, as in the case of do), there is a clear story line so that the data and the author-coverage fall into place, i.e. the available literature is consistently related to it. In other cases, however, notably in the chapters on subject raising and VOSI and control verbs, this is much less evident. There are so many different authors discussed, with often so much detail (DD finds it hard to resist the inclination to explain everything), that the reader often feels that he got stuck in the dense undergrowth and cannot find his way out of the wood. DD has an inkling of this himself, I think, since he writes about one of his own articles that it is ‘a densely written reaction to the preceding items and others...’ (p. 140, emphasis mine). The separate sections on data, explanations and earlier literature also lead to quite a lot of doubling. This does not matter when the book is used as a reference work, but as a textbook for students one would prefer a tighter presentation.

The number of authors discussed is large. The most relevant discussions are included. I have not found any important books/articles missing, except perhaps Zimmermann (1968) on tense/auxiliaries. (A little surprising too is the omission of an article by Koopman in Rissanen (1992), which would have provided useful clarification/discussion of van Kemenade’s article in the same volume, which is discussed (on pp. 333-334), and which would also have been relevant in the discussion on p. 32 on the order of finite verb and non-finite verb in subordinate clauses in Old English.) The synopsis given of each article is usually good, to the point and clear. Once or twice a remark is left rather hanging in the air as in the reference to Rynell on p. 260; or the discussion is so succinct that it may become difficult to understand (as with Warner’s article on auxiliaries on p. 287). Sometimes precious space has been devoted to a work that is not really worthwhile, as DD himself admits by numerous derogatory remarks in the case of Ard (1977) (pp. 197-199, 248-249). Only in a few cases, have I found (an) author(s) to be
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misrepresented. On p. 65, for instance, DD writes that Fischer & van der Leek (1983) ‘argue for the objecthood of all clausal Causes from their consistent final position within the higher clause’. That this is not true must be clear from their diagram [21] (1983: 356) where the causal clause is clearly subject. Sometimes, through too much detail, the essence of an article gets lost, as for instance in the discussion of van Kemenade (forthcoming [1992, OF]) on pp. 333–334. The important point she makes is not highlighted, namely that it is possible to distinguish between deontic and epistemic modals in Old English on the basis of their word order (I do not think that this observation is correct (see Fischer in press), but that is a different matter).

The author has taken great care to use accessible terminology. He explains the more technical terms or refers the reader to the glossary at the back. In only a few cases did I have a problem with terminology, as in the use of the term ‘non-argument’, which stands (confusingly, I think, and it is not in the glossary) for a circumstantial constituent (i.e. an argument not present in the lexical entry) (p. 53) and also for a dummy argument (pp. 66, 97), the more usual interpretation. Also DD’s use of PRO_{arb} (p. 171) is not altogether clear to me. He writes that ‘PRO_{arb} is not appropriate in GB theory for reference which is not truly arbitrary, and little pro must be used.’ He gives no references for this assertion, but it seems to me that little pro is not usual in constructions like Bob said to bring the car. But these things are of minor importance. My overall opinion of this book is unquestionably positive. It will provide an invaluable handbook and work of reference for years to come, and we must be grateful to the author for having accomplished the difficult task of bringing all this material together in such readable form.

REFERENCES


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(Received 25 April 1994)