Part I Origins and Theoretical Assumptions

1 Diachrony vs Synchrony: the Complementary Evolution of Two (Ir)reconcilable Dimensions

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"Since languages […] are transmitted from one age to another […] the relation of the *past* to the *present* enters into the utmost depth of their formation" (Humboldt 1836/1988:40). This statement by the linguistic pioneer Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century shows that the relationship between diachrony and synchrony has long been of concern to linguists – even though Humboldt himself did little more than state the need to deal with both sides of the question. This chapter will explore changing attitudes to this relationship, showing that in the early days of linguistics, diachrony and synchrony were indeed regarded as irreconcilable, though in recent years they have become increasingly integrated.

"The opposition between the two viewpoints – synchronic and diachronic – is absolute and allows no compromise" (Saussure 1915/1959: 125). This dogmatic statement about the need to separate diachrony from synchrony was made by the venerated Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1837–1913), in his posthumously published text, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1915), which was assembled by his students from their lecture notes. The book is now better known to British and American readers in its translated version *Course in General Linguistics* (1959).

Saussure illustrated his uncompromising statement about the opposition between diachrony and synchrony by his well-known comparison to cuts made through the trunk of a tree. The linguist could make either a horizontal cut, and examine a language at a single point in time, or he could make a vertical cut, and chart the development of selected items over a number of years.

For a long time, this rigid division was largely unquestioned, and still remains a methodological distinction put forward in some textbooks: "[l]anguage can be

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viewed either as historically developing, or as a more or less static, synchronic object of investigation" (Hock 1991:30).

Yet the relationship between diachrony and synchrony has varied as linguistic concerns have shifted. In the nineteenth century, attention was focused primarily on diachronic linguistics, largely due to the excitement of finding that changes were not random, but 'regular' in nature. The so-called 'neogrammarians,' a group of scholars centered on Leipzig around 1870, promoted the view that "[a]ll sound changes, as mechanical processes, take place according to laws with no exceptions" (Osthoff and Brugmann 1878, my translation; full text and slightly different translation in Lehmann 1967).

In contrast to the historical fervor of the nineteenth century, for over half of the twentieth century the majority of linguists concentrated on synchronic studies. This was partly in reaction to the earlier historical fixation, and partly because of the urgent need to capture for posterity descriptions of languages that might be likely to die out. Diachronic linguistics continued, but was considered by many to be an optional extra, an inessential subsidiary study.

But in spite of the widespread early twentieth century attention to synchrony, most of the synchronic descriptions were inadequate. They were lacking in coverage in ways that impoverished both synchronic and diachronic studies. The omissions were of two main kinds. First, many synchronic linguists tried to ignore stylistic variation, even though it must have been obvious that any normal speaker could vary the speed and formality of their pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary, depending on whether s/he was addressing an employer or stranger on the one hand, or friends and family members on the other. Second, the majority of linguists preferred to concentrate on clear-cut cases, ignoring any variation or fuzziness they encountered. In so doing, many of them unwittingly omitted the evidence needed to study changes in progress.

Of course, not all linguists could be accused of these shortcomings. The insightful linguist Edward Sapir famously said: "[a]ll grammars leak" (1921: 38). And the renowned Russian (later American) linguist Roman Jakobson both spoke and wrote realistically about the impossibility of separating diachrony from synchrony. In his memorable lectures at Harvard (1960–61), he impressed his students by standing on one leg and waving the other in the air: "[m]y friends" (this in his inimitable middle-European accent), "[z]is is what a change is like. It is like a step being taken. We do not jump suddenly from one leg to ze other. In a change, you need to look at ze half-way stage, when you are standing on one foot, and ze other is in ze air, like zis" (more leg-waving). In spite of his unforgettable lectures on the topic, his most important published statement on the need to integrate synchrony and diachrony was for a long time accessible only in French, and was not made available in an English translation until 1972 (Jakobson 1949/1972). The paper ended with some key comments on the topic (Jakobson 1949/1972: 138):

> The joining together of the static and the dynamic is one of the most fundamental dialectic paradoxes that determine the spirit of the language. One cannot conceive of the dialectic of linguistic development without referring to this antinomy. Attempts

> to identify *synchrony, static* […] on the one hand, and, on the other *diachrony, dynamic* […] make of historical linguistics a conglomerate of disparate facts, and create the superficial and harmful illusion of an abyss between the problems of synchrony and diachrony.

Or as another scholar succinctly expressed it more recently: "[t]he linguistic processes that yield change are diachronic extensions of variable processes that are extant in synchronic usage and synchronic grammar" (Guy 2003: 370). As Guy points out, it is now widely accepted that all change involves variation, even though variation does not inevitably lead to change: "[w]e must allow the possibility that some variables persist in active alternation in the speech community, and indeed in the speech of each individual, for generations, without resulting in one variant supplanting all others" (2003: 372).

But perhaps the general lack of knowledge about ongoing changes in the early days was due to the fact that sociolinguistics was a fledgling branch of linguistics, which did not come of age until over halfway through the twentieth century. The person who brought about a revolution in thinking among linguists on this topic was the sociolinguist William Labov. In the 1960s, he addressed the diachrony/synchrony problem in a (then) novel way and moved historical linguistics in a new direction. He pointed out the need to look not only at completed changes, but also at ongoing alterations:

> One approach to linguistic evolution is to study changes completed in the past […] On the other hand, the questions of the mechanism of change, the inciting causes of change, and the adaptive functions of change, are best analyzed by studying in detail linguistic changes in progress […] An essential presupposition of this line of research is uniformitarian doctrine: that is, the claim that the same mechanisms which operated to produce the large scale changes of the past may be observed operating in the current changes taking place around us.
>
> (Labov 1965/1972: 268–69) (see Chapter 5 in this *Handbook*)

In a landmark paper (1965/1972), he outlined twelve sound changes, three on rural Martha's Vineyard (an island lying three miles off the east coast of mainland America, and technically part of the state of Massachusetts), and nine in urban New York City. The sound changes were documented across two successive generations: earlier reports in the literature were supplemented by later data obtained by Labov himself. Sound change, he observed, is characterized by the rapid development of some units of a phonetic sub-system, while other units remain relatively constant. Word classes as a whole are affected, rather than individual words. The change is regular, though more in the eventual outcome than in its inception or development.

The changes originated with a restricted subgroup of the speech community, at a time when the separate identity of this group had been weakened. The linguistic form which began to shift was often a marker of regional status with an irregular distribution within the community (Labov 1965/1972: 285). The change then moved throughout the subgroup. He referred to this stage as change from

below, that is, change below the level of social awareness[1]. The linguistic variable involved in the change is labeled an 'indicator' which he regarded as a function of group membership.

Succeeding generations of speakers within the same subgroup carried the change further. The variable is now defined as a function of group membership and age level. In cases where the values of the original subgroup were adopted by other groups, the sound change with its associated value of group membership spread to the adopting groups. As the sound change reached the limits of its expansion, the linguistic variable became one of the norms which defined that speech community. The variable was now a 'marker', and began to show stylistic variation.

The movement of the linguistic variable led to readjustments in the distribution of other elements within the system. Later changes, not inevitable, involved 'change from above,' correction towards the prestige model, the linguistic usage of the highest status group.

Labov did not just document changes in progress, he also suggested how to carry out this research. He showed the need to obtain speech samples from a range of different people, in different speech styles. In New York City, he began by selecting a balanced population sample, looking at geographical area, age, ethnic group, and social position, and he obtained different speech styles from each group. Samples of formal speech were relatively easy to document. He and his students found that as interviewers, they were treated as well-educated strangers, and those being interviewed spoke fairly carefully. Even more careful speech was obtained by asking people to read a prose passage, and also word lists. But casual speech was more difficult to capture, and he used several methods. One was a 'danger of death' situation. He asked an informant if s/he had ever seriously thought s/he might be likely to die. As the informants relived a terrifying episode in their lives, they often, without realizing it, moved into a casual style of speech. For example, a woman described a car accident rapidly, using an informal style: "[a]ll I remember is – I thought I fell asleep and I was in a dream […] I actually saw stars, you know, stars in the sky – y'know, when you look up there […] and I was seein' stars" (Labov 1972: 94). Labov was also able to hear casual speech when the informant answered the phone, or talked to her children: "[g]et out of the refrigerator, Darlene! . . . Close the refrigerator, Darlene!" (Labov 1972: 89). He found a street-rhyme useful for the pronunciation of the words *more* and *door*:

> *I won't go to Macy's any more, more, more,*
> *There's a big fat policeman at the door, door, door.*
>
> (Labov 1972: 92)

He also allowed speakers to digress. He found that some speakers, particularly older ones, had favorite topics they wanted to talk about, and these digressions often elicited casual speech.

The early, careful work by Labov on Martha's Vineyard and in New York stimulated a generation of younger linguists to study change, and he is rightly applauded for his inspiration: "[t]he 'synchronic approach' to the study of language change, the study of change in progress, forms one of the cornerstones of

research in language variation and change. This approach has had an enormous impact both on our knowledge of the mechanisms of change and on our understanding of its motivations" (Bailey 2002: 312). Another sociolinguist has argued that the study of language change in progress might be "the most striking single accomplishment of contemporary linguistics" (Chambers 1995: 147). Labov's influence is acknowledged in *A Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, a thick volume of over 800 pages, which is dedicated to him: "[f]or William Labov whose work is referred to in every chapter and whose ideas imbue every page" (Chambers, Trudgill and Schilling-Estes 2002: *v*).

Labov's work had an immediate appeal to students and researchers. A key innovation was his emphasis on the need to quantify linguistic variation with reliable statistics, and he established methods for doing this (see Chapter 4 in this *Handbook*). This inspired a whole post-Labovian generation to explore changes which were independent of his original Martha's Vineyard and New York ones. For example, in Britain, Peter Trudgill (1974, 1986) explored English in Norwich, Jenny Cheshire (1982) looked at English verb-endings in Reading, and James and Lesley Milroy examined English in Belfast (e.g. J. Milroy 1992, L. Milroy 1980/1987). Each of these moved the field along in different ways. For example, Trudgill explored over- and under-reporting of changes by people in Norwich, which provided useful insights into attitudes towards change; Cheshire specifically looked at teenagers' use of morphology; James and Lesley Milroy gained the confidence of their informants by saying that the researcher was a 'friend of a friend,' which enabled him/her to be treated as an insider, a trusted participant-observer, who was sometimes prepared to sit quietly for more than an hour, waiting for conversation to begin.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that all diachronic/synchronic problems had been solved. Labov had looked mainly at how changes moved from person to person, within a community. But now, the progress of change through a language needed further attention. The difficulty was that the spread was never fully complete. In the words of Matthew Chen and William Wang, in any change, there was "the nettlesome problem created by a few recalcitrant forms" (1975: 256). The neogrammarians mostly blamed exceptions on dialect mixture and analogy, though, as Chen and Wang (1975: 256) point out, "more often than not, linguists have used dialect mixture as an excuse for not producing evidence of a substantial nature." And the inadequacy of analogy as an explanation became clear when there was a plethora of exceptions in Chinese, which has virtually no paradigms. The difficulty, as Chen and Wang (1975: 256) explain, is that:

> A phonological innovation may turn out to be ultimately regular, i.e. to affect all relevant lexical items, given the time to complete its course. But more often than linguists have thought, a phonological rule peters out toward the end of its life span, or is thwarted by another change competing for the same lexemes.

They explain this difficulty by hypothesizing a process of lexical diffusion, in which "a phonological innovation extends its scope of operation to a larger and larger portion of the lexicon" (1975: 256) (see Chapter 22 in this *Handbook*). They

pointed out that this may have been understood by Sapir, when he had spoken of how a 'drift' gradually "worms its way through a gamut of phonetically analogous forms" (1921: 180). They supported their claim by highlighting changes in Chinese, Welsh, and the altering stress accent in English two-syllable words, where a stress shift has been gradually occurring in words such as *rebel, record.* At first, both nouns and verbs were stressed on the second syllable, though from the sixteenth century onwards, the stress on nouns has increasingly moved to the first syllable, though that on verbs has remained on the second. In short, Chen and Wang emphasized the need to examine the word-by-word behavior of any change, in a process they labeled lexical diffusion (Chen and Wang 1975, summarized in Aitchison 2013) – though Labov has argued that not all changes behave in this fashion (Labov 1994).

Grammaticalization is a further topic that has important implications for the diachrony/synchrony relationship. The older term grammaticization was originally coined by the French linguist Antoine Meillet, and was defined by him as "the attribution of a grammatical character to a previously autonomous word" (Meillet 1912/1948: 131). Yet Meillet's description was too narrow: more than single words tend to be involved, as one of his original examples showed: the change of the Greek words *thelo ina* 'I want/wish that' to the sequence *tha* which is now the future tense marker. Similarly, the English negative *not* was compacted from an earlier *ná wiht* 'not a thing.'

Yet from the diachrony/synchrony angle, the most important point is not the size of the units involved, but the observation that the various stages of the grammaticalization process typically overlap: "[a]lthough it is true that, given enough time, one structure may completely replace another, it is also true that one commonly finds the old and the new structure coexisting, often for a considerable period of time" (Lichtenberk, 1991: 38). There are numerous similar examples, and similar statements in Heine, Claudi, and Hünnemeyer (1991), Heine and Kuteva (2002), Hopper and Traugott (1993/2003), Ramat and Hopper (1998), Traugott and Heine (1991).

As the examples above show, grammaticalization envelops both the form and meaning of words, though there is no need for these two aspects to work simultaneously: they tend to be interleaved and loosely in touch, rather than strict partners (Fischer, 1997). The syntactic sequences found in grammaticalization inevitably vary from language to language. But the semantic concepts involved show surprisingly similar developments across different languages, so much so that a book has been published, with the title *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization* (Heine and Kuteva 2002). For example, ability frequently becomes permission, as in English 'John can come,' spatial concepts become temporal: in English the spatial 'from tree to tree' is paralleled by the temporal 'from year to year,' locative notions may denote existence as in 'there is beer, if you want some,' and similar examples can be found in numerous languages.

A crucial aspect of this type of development is that quite often it is impossible to know whether we are dealing with a synchronic state, or a diachronic happening: one merges into the other. In the example in the paragraph above, it is impossible to tell whether 'John *can* come' is a case of ability or permission. In some

cases, the ambiguity may be intentional, as in some samples from Tok Pisin (a pidgin-creole spoken in Papua New Guinea). A toothpaste advertisement possibly exploits the fact that the word *save*, originally 'know' can also mean 'know how to,' 'be skilled at,' 'be accustomed to.' *Colgate i save strongim tit bilong yu* might mean "Colgate [toothpaste] knows how to/ is skilled at/ is accustomed to strengthen your teeth" (Aitchison 2000: 141–42).

Recently, more attention has possibly been paid to the semantic aspects of grammaticalization, and the terms *layering* and *polysemy* have been used for the semantic overlaps which occur, since multiple meanings tend to remain in use synchronically. It has been well explained in papers by Paul Hopper and Elizabeth Traugott: "[w]ithin a broad functional domain, new layers are continually emerging. As this happens, the older layers are not necessarily discarded, but may remain to coexist with and interact with the newer layers" (Hopper 1991). "Meanings expand their range through the development of various polysemies […] these polysemies may be […] quite fine-grained. It is only collectively that they may seem like weakening of meaning" (Hopper and Traugott 1993/2003: 103). This polysemy viewpoint has now replaced the older, outmoded view, that words 'weakened' or 'bleached' as they grew old (Gabelentz 1891).

Polysemy has been defined as "a term used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings" (Crystal 2003: 359), though it raises a number of questions, such as how a linguist might distinguish polysemy (one form with several meanings) from homonymy (two lexical items which happen to have the same phonological form). Several proposals have been put forward, but so far, no agreement has been reached. As Nehrlich and Clarke (2003:4) point out: "[t]he precise relationship between polysemy, homonymity, ambiguity and vagueness is still an unresolved issue in lexical semantics." In spite of difficulties of definition, however, examples of polysemy provide excellent evidence for the impossibility of ever separating synchrony from diachrony.

James Pustejovsky may be the linguist who has become best known for his work on polysemy in recent years (Pustejovsky 1995; Pustejovsky and Boguraev 1996). A large amount of attention has been paid to verbs, he claims, but relatively little to other word classes: "[w]e have little insight into the semantic nature of adjectival predication, and even less into the semantics of nominals. Not until all major categories have been studied can we hope to arrive at a balanced understanding of the lexicon" (Pustejovsky 1995: 7).

Pustejovsky is largely right, even though some useful work on nominals has been published (e.g. Wierzbicka 1997). Following on from the observation that nominals have been under-studied, this paper now turns to a case study, exploring how speakers/hearers distinguish nominal polysemy, in a situation where different meanings overlap. This will (hopefully) elucidate how a superficially puzzling situation, the existence of a word with multiple meanings, which seems at first sight to be a synchronic/diachronic mire can be handled by a language's speakers (Aitchison 2003; Aitchison and Lewis 2003).

Aitchison and Lewis (2003) investigated the various usages of the word *disaster* in British English. They used the British National Corpus (BNC) as their main data base: this was supplemented by evidence culled mainly from newspapers (on

corpora, see Chapter 6 in this *Handbook*). The initial question was how speakers (and learners) manage to understand which meaning of a polysemous word is intended, and how to use it acceptably. For example, a sequence describing a serious event might be found not far from one which related to social trivia, as in:

> . . . the Hillsborough football disaster which killed 95 people. (serious)
> To get a panama hat wet is to court disaster. The hat becomes limp and shapeless. (trivial)

Two main types of clue elucidated the seriousness or triviality of a disaster: topic and collocation. A serious disaster with multiple deaths was above all indicated by a geographical location, as in the Hillsborough football disaster, the Clapham disaster (a rail crash), the Lockerbie disaster (a plane crash), the Zeebrugge ferry disaster (a capsized ferry). The location was sometimes accompanied by an indication of the type of disaster, but not necessarily.

For trivial disasters, the 'disaster' was sometimes fully explained, as in the panama hat problem mentioned above. Others were typically flagged in two ways: first, by the topic of the 'disaster;' second, by the collocating words. Two trivial topics recurred: sporting disappointments, and cookery mishaps:

> The last wicket fell, so it was another *disaster* for England. (cricket, sport)
> The gravy's a *disaster*. It's got too much fat in it. (cookery)

Nobody was ever poisoned in a cookery 'disaster,' the cooks merely produced food that sounded less than delicious.

Collocating words *absolute* or *total* usually indicated that the disaster was a trivial one:

> England must pull itself together if a bitterly disappointing tour is not to become a *total disaster.*

Similarly, the phrases *disaster strikes* or *disaster struck* usually indicated a trivial event:

> *Disaster struck* again for the home side after 57 minutes.

So the attempt to dramatize sporting events, and routine household incidents, partly accounted for the escalation in use and polysemy of the word *disaster*.

But a further factor may have helped to increase its usage. This is the observation that many of the disasters discussed were potential, rather than actual, as shown by the words used with *disaster*, such as *avert*, *avoid*, *near*, *potential*, *could be*. Again, this seemed to be an attempt to dramatize a non-event:

> A second jet disaster was narrowly averted in Bogota on Thursday.
> When you rescue the old Christmas tree lights from the loft for the umpteenth time, remember that they could be the cause of an electrical disaster.

The findings outlined above relate only to the word *disaster:* other disaster words behave differently. A brief overview of the word *tragedy* suggested that there were no cooking tragedies at dinner parties. Maybe a tragedy would have indicated a 'tragic' outcome, perhaps food-poisoning. Second, our informal discussions (at which we asked speakers of English as a second language to describe some of our 'disasters'), suggest that different types of English use different words for unfortunate events: an Indian informant indicated that the word *calamity* might be appropriate for an over-cooked dinner which disappointed the guests. But at the very least, these 'disasters' show that polysemy can provide a fertile field for future researchers attempting to explore the diachrony/synchrony dimensions.

Conclusion

A once-respected methodological distinction between diachrony and synchrony has become progressively more blurred. Early work which tried to link the two, such as that of Roman Jakobson, was largely unread by the majority of linguists, yet William Labov initiated a key movement in linguistics with his pioneering work on changes in progress, which made sociolinguistics into possibly the most popular branch of modern linguistics. Other linguists, such as Matthew Chen and William Wang, hastened to sweep up some of the few topics unexplored by Labov. They pioneered the approach to the lexicon known as lexical diffusion, which showed how a change spreads over the lexicon, though again with synchronic/diachronic overlap. The interaction of synchrony and diachrony has been further explored by those working on grammaticalization and meaning change, which show how the various historical stages typically overlap. This has led on to further work, in which the overlapping usages of polysemous words are being explored, with increasing understanding of how speakers and hearers use and understand words with similar form, but different meanings.

This paper has tried to show that diachrony and synchrony are not irreconcilable. They are essentially overlapping processes, and one cannot be understood without the other. This paper started with a quote from the pioneering linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, so it is relevant to end with another of his memorable comments, which reveals again his farsightedness in setting linguists along the path to understanding the strong links between synchrony and diachrony: "[t]here can no more be a moment of true *stasis* in language, than in the ceaseless effulgence of human thinking itself" (Humboldt 1836/1988: 143).

NOTE

1 The phrase 'change from below' is an unfortunate one, as it has led to a certain amount of misunderstanding about change, an assumption among some that change is led by lower class usage, which is by no means always the case.

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