

INTRODUCTION: 30 YEARS OF DiGS

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The 20th edition of the Diachronic Generative Syntax (DiGS) conference, whose proceedings we present here, was held in York in June 2018. It was not by chance that York was chosen to host the 20th edition: the series of DiGS conferences was indeed inaugurated in York in the Spring of 1990 through the initiative of our colleague Adrian Battye as the local host, with the cooperation of Ian Roberts, then a professor at Bangor University. One of the present issue's editors, Giuseppe Longobardi, was there, together with a relatively small but enthusiastic group of linguists sharing the feeling that there was something missing in generative syntax, and there was a niche to fill. Paola Crisma's first attendance was the third edition, held in Amsterdam in 1994, and, as happened to many others, DiGS became for her a valued intellectual habit.

Here we want to sketch, in a very partial and inevitably personal reconstruction, some important events and trends which have occurred around the DiGS conferences and community and have shaped the field of formal historical syntax over the past three decades. A full list of DiGS conferences, with various details, is available at <http://walkden.space/digs/>.

Generative syntax had started to formally investigate historical language transmission only a few years before, especially with David Lightfoot's groundbreaking book *Diachronic Syntax* in 1979. At that time, many syntacticians were experiencing great enthusiasm for the development of such a novel approach to grammatical diversity as the theory of parameters, but a few among them felt it dissatisfying that their interest in historical linguistics could not directly interact with those new exciting trends of modern formal linguistics. A field of diachronic studies in generative syntax was far from established, thus the first meeting of DiGS in York was justly perceived as

a novel enterprise, but it was unclear whether it would become a regular appointment for the few practitioners.

In the 1980s the ‘synchronic’ bias of early generative syntax was still very strong and perceived as a ‘progressive’ innovation in the field: therefore the study of intergenerational transmission of I-languages, and of persistence or change in the grammar of the corresponding E-language through time, was largely ignored. This was perhaps understandable in light of the central role played by the notion of the native speaker’s intuition in the cognitivist revolution in which generative linguistics had played a crucial part at least since Chomsky (1959): obviously, relevant native speakers are unavailable in the case of diachronic studies. Yet, this gap in the field was in sharp epistemological contrast with the declared ‘Galilean’ research style of generative inquiry (Chomsky 1980): as often stressed by Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini (see e.g. Piattelli-Palmarini 2010), this would have suggested, among other things, to look for evidence from any possible source, without *a priori* delimitations of relevant domains, as is normally the case in many fields of the natural sciences. At the same time, the traditional though unwarranted assumption that syntax cannot provide insights about language relatedness was unchallenged and contributed to neglect of historical issues in formal syntactic frameworks.

The success of the original York meeting in 1990 was, however, very encouraging for this group of pioneers. Further outstanding impulse was then provided by Tony Kroch’s intellectual initiative, with a second DiGS conference organized two years later at the University of Pennsylvania. Then, for almost two decades, the DiGS conference was held every second year, attracting greater participation than could originally be expected, and taking place in an alternating fashion at European and North American institutions.

The year 2009 saw two developments, which both bear witness to the growing role of diachronic concerns in syntactic theory: the DiGS conference became an annual one, to accommodate an increasing number of good contributions, and began to be hosted by institutions outside Europe and North America, thus reaching out to the Southern Hemisphere: this has been the case in 2009, in Campinas (Brazil), and in 2017, in Stellenbosch (S. Africa). One would not be able to describe the DiGS community as a small group of enthusiasts now, but it is remarkable that the original spirit has remained the same: that of a vivacious and interactive community, without an official ‘board’ but with a genuine common interest.

The growth of DiGS over the years has been also paralleled by a progressive extension of the scientific topics addressed at the conferences. An important development is the study of the historical transmission of syntax

through the quantitative approach made possible by syntactically annotated *corpora*, a line of inquiry in which the University of Pennsylvania and the University of York have played a key role. The original annotation devised for various stages of English in the Penn-Helsinki Corpora is now being extended to other languages, with the creation of other syntactically-annotated corpora: see <https://www.ling.upenn.edu/hist-corpora/other-corpora.html>.

This kind of work, fostered by the DiGS community, has led to the familiarization of the field of formal linguistics with the notion of several 'grammars in competition' (Kroch 1989, Pintzuk 1999). This concept has major theoretical relevance, since it begins to relax the original generative focus and idealization according to which "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community [...]" (Chomsky 1965: 3). In the model of grammars in competition, different grammars may co-exist in a community (within an E-language, Chomsky 1986), but also in the linguistic competence of a single speaker (I-language). In this perspective, formal generative syntax and the quantitative approach to variation of the type inaugurated by Labov (1994 and previous work) are not at odds: on the contrary, their interaction proves to be extremely fruitful in advancing our understanding of the relation between language diachrony and synchronic variation. We dare to speculate that, had Uriel Weinreich lived long enough to see such developments, he would have viewed this research as a fulfilment of his vision.

Another remarkable outcome of much DiGS-centered work is the development of attempts at theoretically constraining and justifying syntactic change, as a phenomenon intrinsically calling for an explanation; this was envisaged in Clark & Roberts' (1993) formulation of a 'logical problem of language change', supposedly parallel to the 'logical problem of language acquisition'. One of the best examples of this kind of concern is Keenan's (2009) notion of 'inertia', but also the adaptations and extensions of Jespersen's concept of diachronic 'cycles'.

Also, the refinement of restrictive hypotheses on what is a possible syntactic change has led to the first hypotheses challenging the long-standing biases against a role of syntax for historical reconstruction proper (e.g. with attempts to recover proto-Germanic clausal structures or an African substrate in some Brazilian Portuguese patterns), including the reconstruction of phylogenetic relations, a line now actively pursued at York and Reggio Emilia.

On the whole, the notion of historical relations between I-languages has come to stand alongside the simple concept of I-language as a topic worthy of theoretical investigation and, in turn, able to make suggestions on language

learnability and speakers' cognitive structures.

Thus, it has become increasingly clear that formal syntax can provide insights in the history of languages and their speakers, and that syntactic history elucidates the structure of the mind no less than classical ways of pursuing Chomsky's (1964) descriptive and explanatory adequacy.

In sum, the longest-lasting contribution of these first 20 editions of DiGS conferences has been that of practically working out "die Aufhebung der methodologischen Trennung zwischen Syn- und Diachronie" ('the suspension of the methodological separation between synchrony and diachrony') insightfully advocated by Obenauer (1977) well before DiGS was ever conceived.

It is within this framework, crucially created by the community of scholars regularly meeting for these first 20 DiGS conferences, that the scientific sub-paradigms outlined above have had a chance to arise: we trust that the works published in this issue and originally presented in York on the occasion of the 20th edition may witness how such a broad research program is now well established and well represented in the practice of ever growing new generations of formal historical syntacticians.

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