

A0040

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Drift and Long-Term Morphosyntactic Change

Frequently a language undergoes a set of changes that seem to be related to one another. These may occur together quickly, but, frequently, such changes span hundreds of years. The phenomenon was identified as ‘drift’ as long ago as 1921 by Edward Sapir, who famously noted that ‘language moves down time in a current of its own making. It has drift.’ (Sapir 1949 [1921]) The notion of drift is paradoxical since it seems to fly in the face of elementary facts: native speakers have no inbuilt knowledge of the history of their language, and cannot possibly know how to change their language in the direction ‘determined’ by history.

Explanations for drift, or the more neutral concepts of ‘long-term change’ or ‘long-term development’, have a long history in typological approaches focused on limiting the possible pathways between typologically consistent language states (Hawkins 1979, 1990). There has been a resurgence of interest also among formally oriented linguists, with the idea of ‘cascading parametric change’, embedded within a theory of markedness (Biberauer and Roberts 2008). Other factors that have been suggested as causes of long-term change include markedness, economy and the need to reestablish a synchronically motivated stable system (cf. also markedness, Andersen 1990).

This workshop explores the following questions:

- (a) Is drift different from other processes of change, such as analogy, grammaticalisation and/or parametric change? If yes, how?
- (b) Is drift the system’s reaction to asymmetry?
- (c) Can there be short-term drift? Or should drift be viewed as the opposite of “catastrophic” (parametric) change?
- (d) Is the notion of drift compatible only with a deterministic approach to language change?
- (e) Is drift unidirectional?
- (f) How can drift be reconciled with random variability? Can random factors cause drift?