Language Change and Variation from Old English to Late Modern English

A Festschrift for Minoji Akimoto
Introduction

In making idiomaticity a major concern of his earlier publications, Minoji Akimoto took up a topic that involves lexicography, syntax, semantics and diachronic change, and this integration of various approaches has continued to be a feature of his research. The arrangement of the papers in this volume into the sections ‘Syntax and Style’, ‘Words and Semantics’ and ‘Discourse and Pragmatics’ highlights the way that, taken together, they reflect the breadth of the dedicatee’s own work. This introduction responds to the other kind of diversity in Professor Akimoto’s research, its range over the entire history of English, by considering the contributions chronologically. Underlying this range is the importance of empirical evidence to language theory, a shared concern of many of the contributors.

Three of the papers are principally concerned with Old English. HIRONORI SUZUKI looks at aspects of element-order that belong to the precise metrical grammar of Old English poetry, and seem not to have reflexes even in the verse of the Middle English alliterative revival. Nevertheless, the tendencies he finds in the ordering of main and modal verbs are relevant to that regularisation of element order which marks the entire history of English.

DIETER KASTOVSKY also takes up data specific to the Old English period, Ælfric’s rendering of Latin grammatical terms, and while it is Ælfric’s enterprising making of equivalents from native elements that stands out in comparison with later periods, the extent to which he is prepared to use borrowings that even now look startlingly Latinate counteracts over-simple contrasts between periods.

MICHIO HOSAKA offers an account of the rise of complementiser *that* which is based on a close analysis of routes by which the pronoun *that* could have become a complementiser in Old English. He differentiates noun, relative and adverb clauses, proposing
precise mechanisms for the development of *that* in each, with noun and adverb clauses leading the way, and a shared appositional structure. Hosaka argues that the sequence from parataxis to hypotaxis to subordination should be seen as a cline, with transitional periods.

Middle English is conventionally seen as the period of fundamental change in English, and several papers take a close look at some of the transitions. Syntactically, a cluster of changes in the expression of negation is a well-known feature of later Middle English, but in a fine-grained study, YOKO IYEIRI uncovers the contrasts that exist between the sections of the translation of a single literary text, and casts light on the connection of these sections with each other and with Chaucer.

OHKADO MASAYUKI’s paper, in contrast, takes up a phenomenon that has received little attention in studies of English, stylistic fronting. His is one of several papers in this volume to make extensive use of data from outside English, but he shows that while the Scandinavian patterns allow interesting comparisons with the Middle English phenomena, the geographical distribution makes it unlikely that language contact is the sole cause, and long-running developments in word order must also be considered.

Another feature of Middle English is the remarkable multifariousness of its orthographies; JOHN SCAHILL seeks to distinguish the descriptive tallying of assumed underlying phonemes with their spellings from systems presumed to exist in scribes’ minds, arguing that it is precisely the absence of a settled system for writing English that leads some earlier Middle English scribes to produce nonce outcomes from the interaction of habits derived from Latin, French, and the forms in their exemplars with their own phonological systems.

While the contrast between Middle English and Modern English is generally seen as one of phonology and morphology, several papers in this volume trace developments, both lexical and pragmatic, that continue across the dividing-line. MEIKO MATSUMOTO considers a range of colour-terms, and finds, underneath some stability in their denotation, clear shifts (along with some continuities) in their connotations. Historical linguists in recent times have rejected the tendency of earlier researchers to draw their evidence from literature, in favour of the supposedly less marked usage to be found
in non-literary material, but Matsumoto shows the value of literary texts for the study of semantic nuance.

HARUMI TANABE’s subject is also a series of changes that began early in Middle English and continue into Late Modern English. Histories of English often cite give up as a prototypical phrasal verb, already attested in Early Middle English. But close attention to the attestations of this item and others in the same semantic field – including other phrasal verbs – show complex interactions and fluctuations that continue until the present, as well as a general expansion, reflected in the range of collocates.

The three remaining papers that draw their evidence from both Middle and Modern English all concern the expression of discourse functions through grammaticalisation. TOMOHIRO KAWABATA takes a variety of expressions of concession in English, of various grammatical origins – propositional, adjectival, adverbial, verbal, participial – and traces a process of subjectification by which they come to be used in concessive utterances. He finds that these concessives are frequently used in combination with each other, though the elements in such combinations often appear in syntactically separate sentences that nevertheless belong in some sense to single constructions.

LAUREL J. BRINTON focuses on one set of concessives, admit and admittedly, and shows that their history is best understood if they are taken together, despite their different syntactic origins (here echoing a point made by Kawabata). This case-study in grammaticalisation uncovers patterns in the position of the epistemic elements, and for verbs, the person of the subject and the presence or absence of modals. Notably, Brinton argues that for admittedly the data completely fail to follow the expected historical sequence adjunct > disjunct > subjunct, and that its history is better understood by reference to its clausal cousins using admit.

Expressions of negative condition form a set partly comparable to expressions of concession. MATTI RISSANEN traces a history somewhat similar to that found by Kawabata, with a variety of expressions, of various grammatical origins, appearing in Middle English, regularisation in Late Middle and Early Modern English, and less conspicuous developments continuing to the present. The genre of texts is found to affect the choice of concessives, and Rissanen argues
that *unless* tended to spread from official language to other registers.

A feature of Minoji Akimoto’s research career has been the implicit insistence that linguistic change does not stop with Early Modern English. Two papers in this volume consider the period of transition between Early and Late Modern English, the eighteenth century, both of them drawing their evidence from journalism. UDO FRIES, using the Zurich English Newspaper Corpus, considers stylistic changes that arise from changing rates of choice from among different syntactic options. Specifically, he finds for his period a marked decrease in average sentence-length in tandem with a drop in the number of clauses per sentence, but with variation according to the genre of news item.

SHIHOKO YAMAMOTO’s principal source is the *Spectator*, widely accorded a central role in the development of polite culture in eighteenth-century England, one dependent on the creation of a specific relationship between its writers and its educated bourgeois readership. She shows the place of comment clauses, finite and non-finite, in establishing this relationship, differentiates such clauses into more and less subjective types, and uncovers clear, motivated differences in the use of the various types between Addison and Steele.

Though his chronological ambit is wider, FUJIO NAKAMURA also draws much of his evidence from eighteenth-century non-literary sources. The research presented in this volume is part of a scrutiny of texts such as diaries and letters for hitherto unrecognised syntactic and lexical phenomena. Here he argues that the sense of ‘pretend’ for *seem* is clearly attested through much of the Modern English period, bringing this into relation with other senses of *seem* and other verbs in the same semantic field. The limitations of existing dictionary treatments of this word are set out.

MANFRED MARKUS’s research is also concerned with non-literary sources. As part of the *Spoken English in Early Dialects* project, he considers Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* as a source for linguistic study. Although Wright’s work predates the existence of a standard phonetic alphabet, his spellings and transcriptions allow extensive inferences about phonetic processes in connected speech and the sound-systems of the various dialects, while
his indications of stress are of particular interest. The use of his
dictionary as evidence for lexical items has long been recognised, but
further investigation also reveals patterns of word-formation typical of
colloquial registers.

The three remaining papers trace their topic through the entire
history of English, and it is perhaps not coincidental that syntax is a
major concern of all of them. Over the history of English, REIJIROU
SHIBASAKI finds a gradual decrease in transitivity, treated as a scalar
property. Arguing for a reduction in intrinsic transitivity from nouns
to pronouns to zero, he proposes that this decrease in transitivity over
time should be linked to a clear increase in the appearance in pronouns
in O. Shibasaki sees such a tendency as specific to Nomi-
native-Accusative, as opposed to Ergative-Absolutive, languages.

ELLY VAN GELDEREN considers the negative cycle, whereby
Negative Concord is absent in the earliest English, present in
subsequent periods, and again absent in the (standard) modern
language. Looking at the development of negative polarity items, she
offers an account of this cycle in terms of feature economy and
grammaticalisation. With the use of data from corpora, van Gelderen
makes proposals about the actuation of the cycle, identifying syntactic
and pragmatic contexts that appear to initiate the inception of new
stages in it.

FUYO OSAWA argues that Old English had no syntactic passive,
and traces the changes that led to its subsequent development. She
sees English in its earliest stages as a lexical-functional language with
no functional categories, in which inconsistency between case and
thematic role was impossible. Raising could not occur in such a
language for the same reason that prepositional and indirect passives
could not occur. Middle English developed structural case, with
non-thematic subject positions. Thus, the generative analyses of the
passive that are valid for Present-Day English cannot be applied to
Old English; there has been reallocation between morphology and
syntax. Osawa presents this history as an example of how diachronic
language changes involve functional category emergence.

Although they range over various periods of English and
aspects of language, the papers in this collection are linked by their
use of substantial bodies of data to test theoretical ideas, and in this
way exemplify the contribution that historically-based studies can make to linguistic knowledge.