Li11 Historical linguistics
Supervision 3: Formal and typological approaches to syntactic change
http://ling.cam.ac.uk/li11/

Essay Titles
Write an essay on ONE of the following topics:

1. Assess the usefulness of the concept of ‘parametric change’ as an explanation for syntactic change.
2. ‘In generative approaches, the essence of syntactic change is to be found in the process of child language acquisition.’ Discuss.
3. ‘A fully adequate theory of syntactic change cannot afford to neglect either the innate (with attention to child language acquisition) or the functional (with attention on discourse functions) motivations for language change’ (Harris & Campbell). Do you agree? [You’ll need to go back and look at work on grammaticalisation for comparison here.]
4. ‘Formal approaches to syntactic change predict that change should be random and directionless.’ Discuss.
5. Discuss how the observed gradualness of syntactic change can be modelled within a generative parametric theory of change. [For this essay, you’ll need to look in particular at the work of generative variationists like Kroch and Santorini.]
6. Is grammaticalisation theory compatible with a formal approach to syntactic change?
7. ‘The notion of typological consistency is not an explanation for word order change; it is a statistical property which is itself in need of explanation.’ Discuss.
8. If languages don’t have memories, how can there be long-term ‘drifts’ in the development of languages?
9. To what extent are typological arguments valid in reconstruction of the phonology and/or syntax of earlier stages of a language?
10. ‘The desire to achieve a typologically regular or symmetrical system is a weak explanation for any given linguistic innovation.’ Discuss with reference to any two instances of linguistic innovation from different languages.
11. ‘At each stage in their historical evolution, languages remain consistent with synchronic universal implications.’ Discuss.
12. ‘As an explanation for change, long-term typological drift raises as many questions as it answers.’ Discuss.

Reading
Parametric change
* Fischer, Olga; Ans van Kemenade; Willem Koopman; & Wim van der Wurff. 2000. The syntax of early English. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 1 ‘Language change and grammar change’. [MML L11B.62; online via UL.]


Formal approaches to grammaticalisation


Generative variationists


Kroch, Anthony S. 1989. Reflexes of grammar in patterns of language change. Language Variation and Change 1, 199-244.


**Typological approaches**


Harris, Martin B. 1984. On the causes of word order change. *Lingua* 63, 175–204.


**Typological approaches to phonology**


**Drift**

Sapir, Edward. 1949 [1921]. Language: An introduction to the study of speech. London: Harvest. [Read pages 147–70, the section entitled 'Language as a historical product: Drift'.]
