Historical (Morpho)Syntax from a Psycholinguistic Perspective

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Psycholinguistic concepts have long been given a central role in explanatory accounts of language change across different theoretical frameworks. Whilst the obvious impossibility of experimental research previously posed a challenge, developments in large corpora, artificial language research and computational methods in recent years have significantly increased the possibilities for investigating language change, historical language data and the variation therein through the lens of psycholinguistics (Hundt et al. 2017, 2025). This research addresses questions like:

1. How can psycholinguistic models of production and/or comprehension account for patterns of historical variation?
2. To what extent can psycholinguistic concepts explain the emergence, diffusion, and loss of (morpho)syntactic constructions?
3. How can psycholinguistic approaches complement or challenge traditional functional, formal, and usage-based explanations of historical syntax?
4. What methodological problems arise when psycholinguistic hypotheses are tested against historical data, and how can they be addressed?

To shed more light on these questions, the workshop aims to bring together linguists working on historical (morpho)syntax from all theoretical backgrounds who use psycholinguistic approaches on their data. Its broader goals are, thus, to discuss the methodological challenges in *psycho-historical linguistics* (term used by Winters 2017) and explore how the concepts and methods from psycholinguistics can contribute to the understanding of historical syntactic variation and diachronic change.

As already noted, psycho-historical linguistic research has been growing in recent years. Among others, *priming* (Bock 1986) has been invoked to account for "the development from spatial to temporal expressions" (Jäger and Rosenbach 2008, 91) and the emergence of *-ing*-complements in English (Meisezahl and Walkden 2026). Furthermore, *frequency effects* (e.g. Jescheniak and Levelt 1994; Ellis 2002) have been used to investigate morphosyntactic language change such as word class changes (De Smet 2016). The preceding concepts also provide a link to theories of *language acquisition*. The Tolerance and the Sufficiency Principle (Yang 2016), a mathematical model of language acquisition, has, for example, modelled valency changes in Middle English psych verbs (Trips and Rainsford 2022; Trips et al. 2026).

Furthermore, Hundt et al. (2025) emphasise the importance of, among others, *salience* (Ariel 2001), *analogy* (Gentner 2003), *prediction* (also Pickering and Gambi 2018) and *ambiguity* (Tuggy 1993) for research in language history. There is also a growing research interest in how the overarching concept of processing influences historical variation and diachronic change of, for example, word order change in German infinitival constructions (De Cesare et al. 2024).

Finally, the advent of large language models creates new possibilities for the application *information theory* (Shannon 1948) and *surprisal* (Hale 2001; Levy 2008), which calculate the information content of a unit in a given context and have been strongly linked to processing (e.g. Demberg and Keller 2008). These notions were, for instance, applied to the change of OV to VO in English and Icelandic (Wallenberg et al. 2021) and the variation of word order in the

German middle field (Voigtmann and Wall 2026), although their application to historical data still presents challenges.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the potential of psycholinguistic approaches to historical syntax, an area that will certainly grow in the future.

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