

**COMPARATIVE AND DIACHRONIC SYNTAX:
MINIMAL ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE COMPARISON OF
SYNTACTIC SYSTEMS**

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The paper presented by Roberts contained a sketch of an approach to comparative and diachronic syntax in terms of parametric variation in the spirit of Chomsky's (1995) minimalist programme, but differing from its standard implementation in some major respects. It assumes that functional categories are associated with autonomous syntactic positions, which have regular phrasal projections as determined by X-bar theory. This assumption implies that variations in inflectional morphology across languages correlate with variations in syntactic position, i.e. word-order variation.

Since Roberts is striving for an integrated theory of comparative and historical linguistics, he uses the same descriptive means for synchronic inter-linguistic and for diachronic intra-linguistic comparison. The basic distinctions are four-fold: A given functional feature can either (a) be left without (segmental) phonological expression (intonation may come into play), or (b) be marked by an overt element without a dependency between positions, or (c) be marked by only a dependency between positions, or (d) be marked by an overt element together with a dependency between positions.

This is the basic apparatus. In order to account for diachronic change, it is furthermore assumed (cf. Clark & Roberts 1993, in progress) that in language acquisition, each generation tends to minimize markedness in deriving a parameter value from the trigger experience and that the four options presented above are correlated with a three-fold distinction of markedness with (a) being the least marked option, (b) and (c) having an intermediate and (d) the highest degree of markedness.

Roberts remarked that to the extent that his approach espouses a methodological minimalism as well, it should reveal something about what all adequate approaches have in common. It should be clear from the preceding section that not everybody agrees that this extent is sufficient for a really fruitful relation between descriptive and explanatory endeavour