Audiences that are newly acquainted with this work should be warned to take the book with a grain of salt, sometimes a handful, and to refer to seminal studies that describe the models criticized in this volume before drawing their own conclusions.

REFERENCES


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*Nuria Sagarra*

*Pennsylvania State University*

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In this fascinating book, Givon considers the question of how complexity arose in human language (syntactic complexity refers to hierarchy, embedding, or recursion). Givon takes issue with the claim of Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002) that recursion is the key feature that separates human language from prehuman communication and that it arose suddenly (gapped evolution). Givon adduces data from a number of subfields of linguistics to argue against Hauser et al.’s claims. Givon concludes that syntactic complexity must have evolved gradually and he develops a fairly plausible set of steps for such a gradual evolution.

Following the work of Heine and Kuteva (2007), the genesis of complexity in human language can be probed in three domains—diachrony (historical linguistics), ontogeny (language acquisition by children), and phylogeny (evolution)—which Givon proceeds to do in the subsequent chapters. Studying the third domain is not directly possible, given that there is basically no information on it. However, Givon attempts to derive information about evolution indirectly by considering other aspects of language.

According to Givon, the general developmental trend both in language acquisition and in historical change is primarily compositional, from words to clauses to clause chains to embedded clauses. This view is thoroughly and convincingly developed for diachronic syntax in chapters 3–5, in which Givon details historical data from various languages on different types of passive structures, verb complements (clause union), and relative clauses. Although the acquisition data (chapters 6–8) are somewhat more controversial, Givon
provides a strong argument that complex syntax is also acquired in compositional fashion, from parataxis to syntax (i.e., from coordination to subordination).

To the extent that diachrony and ontogeny reflect the evolution of language, Givon provides solid arguments from these fields for his view of gradual evolution. The data from the other areas that Givon considers are much less clear. The discussion on pidgins, creoles, and aphasia (chapter 9) is too brief to have much impact. Similarly, there is only a cursory discussion of prehuman communication (chapters 1 and 12), although this would seem to warrant more consideration, given Givon’s claims. Although interesting, the recent neurological and neurolinguistic research reviewed (chapter 11) does not address many of the most relevant questions, which remain unanswered.

The crux of chapter 12 on evolution is “the multi-step, gradual evolutionary scenario for the rise of human language, grammar, and syntactic complexity” (p. 318). Prior to such evolution, certain social and cultural changes must have taken place—in particular, an expanded foraging or hunting range, an increase in the size of the social-communicative group, and accelerated rate of cultural change.

The hypothesis about the six major evolutionary steps is provided toward the end of the book. The first four—the rise of the lexicon, the one-word clause, the two-word or multiword clause, and the rise of pregrammar—are well argued for throughout the book. However, the discussion of the last two steps (grammatical morphology and embedded constructions) is less than satisfactory. Givon does not discuss functional projections (such as tense phrase or agreement phrase). If, as Vainikka and Young-Scholten (2007, 2010) have argued, the syntactic tree develops from the bottom up, one projection at a time, in both naturalistic SLA and in child language acquisition, each functional projection might correspond to a separate step in the evolutionary scenario, which would give rise to several more steps than Givon posits. Although this book provides an excellent starting point, much more elaboration is needed to account for the connections between grammatical morphology and syntactic structure, whether in language acquisition, historical change, or, potentially, language evolution.

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