

History Comes Full Circle

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Abstract—In the sense that it deals with issues appertaining to the crucial function served by the history of language in its developmental processes, the argument advanced in this paper is a projection from the author's older theory of synchro-diachronic concomitance (Ohashi, 2013) and securely grafted onto it. At the same time, it is designed as a ground work of the enterprise to be embarked on in an attempt to bring into light the hitherto undefined growth pattern of language, that is to say, the tendency for human language to revert to a historically antecedent model for the purpose of remaking itself in its older image. First, the reader is introduced to 'atavistic development' as the key term denoting such a tendency, and then is given a clearer picture of the delimitation and specificity of that key concept by dint of the literature review where the proposed thesis is compared to similar theories of many years' standing. Now the stage is set for example studies, the paper will proceed to look into a selected number of hard facts that are likely to manifestly endorse and clearly articulate our idea of linguistic atavism, albeit that the range of such examples will be confined to syntactic and morphological ones mustered from the history of English. It is the paper's ambition that the ray of light shed by this research will penetrate revealingly into part of the darkness in which language change has been shrouded.

Index Terms—atavistic development, uniformitarian principle, drift, exaptation, language change

I. INTRODUCTION

Just as the earth's crusts lying in sight are creations of successively layered geological periods, so a language as it now exists is a work authored by its long-lived history. To see that this is so, it suffices to reflect on any syntagma you construct for purposes of communication, say, "I recently googled my 7th grade teacher and found his current e-mail address" (New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. 'google'). A moment's examination will bring to your notice how much that Modern English sentence owes to legacies inherited from past history beneath its completely modernized pronunciation and spelling: Apart from the finite verb 'googled', the nominal form of which came into being as a trademark in the 1990s, and the adjectival noun 'e-mail' which was clipped from 'electronic mail' in the 1980s, all the words comprising that syntagmatic concatenation are identifiable as carryovers from Old English, Middle English or Early Modern English, while grammatically the paratactic construction of the sentence goes right back to Old English and the SV order of the two coordinate clauses stretches back to the early part of the Middle English period. So inextricably are *history* and *now* interwoven in what your mouth utters that you may well feel disposed to liken your utterance to pre-modern English beads pierced together with a modern string. Whoever wishes to grasp language in any true historical linguistic sense of the term needs to recognize what is illustrated here as a measure of the extent to which the fabric of a living language (e.g. Modern English) is superposed on that of its forebears (e.g. Old English, Middle English) in order thereby to elucidate a fundamental truth about language, which is that the current state of linguistic affairs is built up out of an interplay of two forces in alliance, viz. *history* and *now*.

Such in brief is the thinking behind the contention expounded in Ohashi (2013) within the conceptual framework of the synchro-diachronic concomitance theory. To be sure, all this is little more than a truism outfitted in technical disguise. Nonetheless, renewing such an understanding of language leads us to find a semblance of life longer than a lifetime as it awakens us to the realization that language-users, without exception, are living a history by revivifying the heritage passed down from the previous generations every single time they speak or write.

This investigation is another of the author's efforts to view language in light of the unbroken correspondence between *history* and *now*, redoubled with the intention of opening up a new approach to the study of language change by focusing attention on a certain hitherto overlooked kind of change, which we will call 'atavistic development', or 'linguistic atavism' as a terminological substitute, to denote the tendency for a language to revert to its historically antecedent model. Despite its far-reaching consequence on language change that is abundantly observable, the development so termed and defined has singularly escaped being done justice to. It is none other than the change of such a kind that is to be brought into discussion in what follows.

II. REVIEW OF PAST DISCUSSIONS

For atavistic development to be writ large as a truly new approach to describing language change, its shape must be sharply delineated, so it may be demarcated from its precursors that were ushered in at different points in the progress of modern linguistics and have illuminated the developments of a similar kind ever since. The uniformitarian principle, among others, merits special mention because its contention appears to be of a piece with the tenet of atavistic development.

William Whitney, who “first made it [the uniformitarian principle] the cornerstone of linguistic methodology and theory” (Christy, 1983, p. 110), states:

There is no way of investigating the first hidden steps of any continuous historical process, except by carefully studying the later recorded steps, and cautiously applying the analogies thence deduced. (Whitney, 1884, p. 253)

The more thorough we are in our study of the living and recent forms of human language, the more rigorous in applying the deductions thence drawn to the forms current in ante-historic periods, (...) so much the more sound and trustworthy will be the conclusions at which we shall arrive. (Ibid., p. 287)

While Whitney’s preoccupation with “any continuous historical process” capable of surviving through time comes as no surprise because the study of linguistic change was the mainstay of nineteenth-century linguistics, one point to note here is his reiteration of the importance of “the later recorded” languages as holding the key to our understanding of the “ante-historic” languages. This correspondence between history as the explicans and prehistory as the explicandum is so crucial to Whitney’s interpretation of uniformitarianism that it is not inapposite to render his insistence into a short metaphorical saying “[T]he present is the key to the past” (Deutscher, 2005, p. 9), or better *The known is the key to the unknown*. Supposedly, the crux of uniformitarian linguistics as defined by Whitney resides in the positivist use of the attested to approach the unattested.

In the nineteenth century in which the uniformitarian principle was borrowed from geology to linguistics, a host of contemporary linguists were involved in the process of its introduction into their own science. Among them all, the neogrammarians were second only to William Whitney in being vociferous and influential as advocates of the principle. (See Christy, 1983, p. 83; Labov, 1994, p. 22) In the following quote where Karl Brugmann as a neogrammarian and uniformitarian stresses the significance of “the historical period of language development” for the purpose of explaining “prehistoric phenomena of language”, we can see how Whitney’s (1884) point finds an echo:

In explaining prehistoric phenomena of language we must assume no other factors than those which we are able to observe and estimate in the historical period of language development. The factors that produced changes in human speech five thousand or ten thousand years ago cannot have been essentially different from those which are now operating to transform living languages. (Brugmann, 1897, pp. 1-2, quoted in Christy, 1983, p. 82)

Over the following sixty years or so during which synchronic linguistics was in the vanguard of modern linguistics, the uniformitarianism remained as good as a dormant name. It is soon after sociolinguistics came to the fore and breathed life into classical historical linguistics in the 1960s that interest in the principle was rekindled by William Labov, who “declared the uniformitarian principle the basis of the study of sound change in progress.” (Christy, 1983, p. 111) But when he made that declaration, Labov proclaimed a departure from the previously existing path of the principle.

In his oft-quoted definition of uniformitarianism, Labov depicts it as “the claim that the same mechanisms which operated to produce the large-scale changes of the past may be observed operating in the current changes taking place around us”. (1972, p. 161) The first thing that catches the reader’s eye is the substitution by “the past” for Whitney’s “ante-historic periods” and Brugmann’s “prehistoric [periods]”. Twenty-two years later, the first chapter of Labov’s *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors* (1994) is still headed ‘The use of the present to explain the past’ without any intimation that his studies may be rocked to and fro between prehistoric and historic ages. In all probability, Labov deliberately reduced the correspondence between prehistory and history to the narrower correspondence between past and present within the history of a language, with a view to making the old principle serviceable to the needs of the newly revived academic interest in language change. When Deutscher writes “[T]he present is the key to the past” (2005, p. 9), “the past”, referring to prehistory (see the context in which the sentence finds itself), is part of the metaphorical expedient. But when Labov rewords prehistory in favour of “the past”, referring to former stages of the history of a language, he does so precisely because he feels the need to. In consequence, Labov’s version of uniformitarianism has radically shrunk in the breadth of time with which it is purported to deal.

There is more to it than that. Not just did Labov narrow the time span covered by the principle, but he shifted emphasis from ‘past’ pole to ‘present’ pole of the binarism. Despite the fact that *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors* begins with the pronouncement “The uniformitarian principle is the necessary working assumption for all the investigations to follow” (Labov, 1994, p. 23), the author is primarily concerned with the changes now in progress throughout the pages of the book, so much so indeed that much of the time he is describing current changes. So is it with *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Labov, 1972). It looks as if Labov is using the past to know better about the present instead of using the present to explain the past. This reversal of explicans and explicandum brings into sharp relief the fundamental difference lying between the first William’s uniformitarianism and the second William’s uniformitarianism.

If William Whitney is remembered as the founding father of uniformitarianism as a linguistic principle, William Labov may go down in posterity as a reformist who gave an extra lease of life to uniformitarianism by making it amenable to sociolinguistics, dialectology and historical linguistics of his day. True enough, the full savour of the prototypical principle of uniformity is lost; but that disservice is more than made up for by the service Labov has done modern linguistic studies by expanding the availability of the principle drastically. The only misgiving is about an unwelcome entanglement of the two co-existing interpretations and ensuing confusions because the historically older definition of the principle as “inferring the past by observation of the present while invoking no unknown causes” (Christy, 1983, p. 87) remains the authentic interpretation of uniformitarianism to this day. Is the uniformitarian principle about the present as the teacher to the past or about the past as the teacher to the present? Which holds the key to understanding which? Likely,

the fastest way out of this embarrassing tangle is to rename Labov's view of uniformitarianism 'atavistic development', that is to say, the tendency for history to come full circle linguistically.

A certain amount of account must be taken of 'drift' in the current context in view of its potential intermingling with atavistic development. Quoting from Edward Sapir (1921, p. 134), who introduced 'drift' as a linguistic term, P. H. Matthews (1997, s.v. 'drift') interprets the term as a collectivity of "symptoms of larger tendencies at work in the language", whereas R. L. Trask (2000, s.v. 'drift') synthesizes it as a reference to "the tendency of a language to keep changing in the same direction over many generations" by abridging Sapir's (1921, Chap. VII) own definition of drift which can be cobbled together as "larger tendencies" of a language or language family "to change of its own accord unceasingly and gradually in a certain direction over centuries, possibly millennia". As it appears, there is a world of difference between drift and atavistic development: (i) the former is postulated as a larger tendency of change, but the magnitude of a change is not a definitional requirement for the latter to meet, (ii) the former is presumed to be a steadily developing change, yet the latter is posited as an intermittent change, (iii) the former is assumed to continue operating for centuries or even millennia, which is no part of the assumption of the latter concept, and (iv) most crucially, the drift, as the name suggests, is a deviation from the starting point of a given language or language family whereas atavistic development is conceptualized as the revival of the older history of a language or language family as the impetus for its later development. After such cross-examinations, we are left with the general impression that no two concepts could be more sharply contrastive than drift and atavistic development. But is it really so?

Appropriating Sapir's (1921, pp. 134-136) own inventory of examples, let us pause at this juncture to consider the loss of case endings as an instance of drift. Sapir's wide-angle lens captures the spread of more than five millennia from the proto-Indo-European period down to the Middle English period and identifies the reduction of pronominal case system from the seven Indo-European cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, locative, instrumental)¹ to the four old Germanic cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative) and then to the three Middle English cases (nominative, genitive, objective) as a striking example of drift. Certainly, nothing prevents us from agreeing with his observation, but what if we switch to a zoom lens and restrict attention to the progress of Indo-European languages from Graeco-Roman antiquity to old Germanic times? What comes into sight is the repetition of case syncretism as testified by the waning of the vocative case in classical Greek and Latin due to its absorption into the nominative, the merger of dative and ablative in the plural in Latin, the integration of nominative and accusative in neuters in old Germanic languages, to cite but a few examples. Coming much nearer to our time and glancing over the progress of the English language from Middle English to Modern English at close range, we can see a similar process of case syncretism being repeated: The dative and accusative cases of pronouns get syncretized as the objective case (e.g. dative 'him' + accusative 'hine' >objective 'him') in Middle English, and then the nominative 'ye' and the objective 'you' are syncretized as 'you' in Early Modern English (e.g. How do ye? >How do you do?), while the syncretism of the nominative interrogative 'who' and the objective interrogative 'whom' is currently taking place in Modern English (e.g. Whom did you talk to? >Who did you talk to?).

The above-instanced example tempts us to gather that the recurrences of linguistic atavism (i.e. case syncretism) have added up to the drift of case forms (i.e. the loss of case endings) and that the atavistic developments seen as such from one angle are found to be built into what can be viewed as the drift from another angle. Who knows if comparable repetitions of an atavistically-motivated linguistic renewal are not encapsulated within other examples of drift, but then, as noted by Sapir (1991, p. 127) himself, "for a long time it [the drift] may exist as a mere tendency"? Herein lies the reason why we should not give short shrift to Sapir's idea when gazing into issues pertaining to linguistic atavism.

Before closing the current section, a brief mention could be made of 'exaptation', a term coined by biologists S. J. Gould and E. Vrba in 1982 (see Lass, 1997, p. 316) to denote the adaptation of a certain structure for a different purpose from its original one that fortuitously obtains during evolutionary stages. (See Martin and Hine eds., 1985, s.v. 'exaptation'; Allaby, 1994, s.v. 'exaptation') Celebrated biological examples include the adaptation for flight of feathers that used to be thermoregulatory devices for protobirds (Allaby, 1994, s.v. 'exaptation'; Lass, 1997, p. 316; Toyota, 2009, p. 89) and the reuse by vertebrates of their respiratory and digestive organs for voice production (Lass, 1997, p. 316). Applying this biological concept to historical linguistics (for its experiments, see Lass, 1997; Toyota, 2009) on the premise that linguistic exaptation is a modified recycling of a historically older linguistic form or structure is expected to further explicate the concept of what atavistic development is.

In keeping with the intent of this diachronic study, its emphasis will be laid on the proposition, exposition, and development of the thesis termed atavistic development. To that end, a selected number of examples of linguistic atavism as attested in some syntactic and morphological changes of English will be looked into in what follows.

III. ATAVISTIC DEVELOPMENT

A. *Plural Inflection of Adjectives*

The comeback that the long-lost plural inflection of adjectives appears to be staging arouses interest as it can be interpreted as a throwback to the good old days. It is part of our linguistic common sense that a Modern English noun phrase should be composed of a singular adjectival followed by either a singular noun or a plural noun. Due to this grammatical straitjacket, Modern English speakers feel obligated to say 'two dark rooms' (not *two darks rooms), 'a

¹ Sapir (1921) does not count the vocative as a fully-fledged case.

three-volume novel' (not *a three-volumes novel), 'a five-year-old boy' (not *a five-years-old boy), and so forth. While this rule remains in full force and still governs the construction of a noun phrase, a keen observer of Present-day English cannot fail to notice a growing trend towards the kind of phrasal construction consisting of a plural adjectival followed by a noun. Examples could be supplied endlessly: 'a goods lorry' (1911 as cited in the Oxford English Dictionary [OED]), 'a customs-official' (1923 as cited in the OED), 'the Contagious Diseases Act' (as cited in Jespersen, 1924, p. 208), 'the savings bank' (1929 as cited in the OED), 'Australian Rules football' (1933 as cited in the OED), 'communications technology' (1941 as cited in the OED), 'sales representatives' (1949 as cited in the OED), 'materials control' (1980 as cited in the OED), 'a Humanities subject' (as cited in COLLINS COBUILD English Language Dictionary, 1987), and whatnot. This combinatorial acrobatics that pairs a plural adjectival noun with a noun has been gaining a foothold as an innovative grammatical process of late years to the potential detriment of the canonized construction of a noun phrase of which the adjectival modifier should stay singular.

Arguably it is nothing like an interpretative absurdity to impute this deviation from the mainstream of English grammar to an atavistic development and hazard a guess that this particular area of Modern English grammar is reverting to the bygone days when the occurrence of a plural adjective wherever the call for it was felt was a full part of the grammatical system of English. Just as in Latin the modifying part of the noun phrase inflects in sync with its modified accompaniment in such a way that a singular noun agrees with a singular adjective and a plural noun with a plural adjective (e.g. *puella pulchra* 'girl beautiful' > *puellae pulchrae* 'girls beautifuls', *vir bonus* 'man good' > *virī boni* 'men goods'), so too in Old English the adjectival part of the noun phrase inflected according as its nominal companion was pluralized (e.g. *se gōda mann* 'the good man' > *þā gōdan menn* 'the goods men', *sēo ealde bōc* 'the old book' > *þa ealdan bēc* 'the olds books'). Centuries after the dismantling of adjective inflection from the system of English, demonstrative adjectives (e.g. this tree > these trees, that person > those people) and *man* and *woman* as adjectival nouns (e.g. a manservant [*also*, man-servant, man servant] > two menservants [*also*, men-servants, men servants], a woman teacher > three women teachers) still retain plural inflection.

Of particular significance for our current purposes is the inflection of *man* and *woman* as adjectival nouns that has sustained productivity tenaciously to this day, contributing such pairs of singularized and pluralized noun phrases to English as 'a man-dancer > men-dancers', 'a man-child > men-children', 'a man-midwife > men-midwives', 'a man-cook > men-cook', 'a woman doctor > women doctors', 'a woman-angler > women-anglers', 'a woman-driver > women-drivers', 'a woman priest > women priests', 'a woman officer > women officers'. From the way the afore-cited new generation of phrasal construction with a plural adjectival such as 'communications technologies' and 'materials development' is remarkably reminiscent of this older generation, it is irresistibly tempting to undertake a view that the atavistic recycling of the historical grammar is spurring the revitalization of plural adjectivals in Present-day English. But then, the new generation ('communications technologies') can be traced back to the older generation ('women teachers'), and the older generation in its turn harks back to the Old English grammar (*þa ealdan bēc* 'the olds books'). To say the least, linguistic atavism is nothing like an overinterpretation of what is taking place in Present-day English inasmuch as the noun phrase with a pluralized adjectival noun ('communications technologies') can be observed to stay wedded to the morphology of *þa ealdan bēc* 'the olds books' and suchlike noun phrases of Old English.

B. Do-periphrasis

Turning from morphology to syntax, it hardly needs to be reassured that SV (e.g. 'Ar ður igrap his sweord riht and he smat ænne Sexise cniht.' -*Brut*) entered into currency as a canonical word order of an English declarative in the twelfth century but that an interrogative sentence with a full verb continued to take VS order (e.g., 'Hatz þou, gome, no governour ne god on to call...?' -*Patience*) till the interrogative with expletive *do* (e.g. 'Fader, why do ye wepe?'² -*The Canterbury Tales*) began to take over from the VS interrogative in the last part of the Middle English period (Fischer, 1992, p. 278; Fischer and Wurff, 2008, p. 186). As for the cause for the sharp rise of *do*-periphrasis in interrogatives in late Middle English, Cr ĕpin (1972, p. 78) ascribes it to the fact that the availability of expletive *do* spared English speakers the trouble of inverting "the normal SV order", and Fischer and Wurff (2008, pp. 155-6) concur that "the increasing fixity of word order as SVO" is accountable for the percolation of *do*-periphrasis from declaratives to interrogatives.

What is interesting to note here is not so much the late Middle English development of *do*-periphrasis in interrogatives *per se* as what to Cr ĕpin's eye appears the recurrence of a similar development upwards of three centuries later. Accounting for the spread of 'Have you got + O?' question (e.g. "Have you got a match?") in Modern British English as an informal substitute for 'Have you + O?' question (e.g. "Have you a match?"), Cr ĕpin (1972, p. 78) opines that where late Middle English speakers used *do* as a grammatical device in order to retain the normal SV order Modern English speakers followed suit by using *have* as a grammatical device for the same purpose, thereby suggesting the 'Have (expletive) you (S) got (V)...?' question is a modern reincarnation of the late Middle English 'Do (expletive) + SV?' interrogative and a recycled bit of history. Is this not an arresting case in point of the atavistic development in the sense in which the term is used in this writing?

C. Classical Sense of *ĕnoma/nōmen*

² Quoted from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* VII. According to Fischer (1992, p. 278), this is the first attested example of a question containing expletive *do*.

One thing that comes to a typical learner of Classical Greek or Latin as something of a surprise is the fact that neither of these languages draws an explicit distinction between the two word classes now called nouns and adjectives in English. A *prima facie* account of its reason is this: As demonstrated by the similarity of the inflections of their ‘adjectives’ to those of their ‘nouns’, the two classes of words were perceived to be much the same by people in antiquity, whence the Greek term *ónoma* (‘name’) and the Latin term *nōmen* (‘name’) covering the noun and the adjective as one integrated class. If you asked what justified their unification of the two word classes, Graeco-Roman grammarians might well reason: “What is called the noun in your terminology is the name of a thing, and what you call the adjective is the name of a quality. What’s the difference?”

It is said to be the Latin grammarians in medieval Europe³ who referred to what is now termed the noun as the ‘noun substantive’ (*nōmen substantivum*) and what is now the adjective as the ‘noun adjective’ (*nōmen adjectivum*), thereby dissociating one from the other yet still categorizing them as subdivisions of the superordinate *nōmen*. Speakers being lazy across time and space, what happened then is that ‘noun substantive’ was first shortened to ‘substantive’ and then to ‘noun’, while ‘noun adjective’ was shorthanded as ‘adjective’. We have reason on our side in surmising that just as Europeans began to think of ‘minute’ and ‘second’ as two recognizably separate time concepts only after the original ‘first minute’ (Latin, *minuta prima*) and ‘second minute’ (Latin, *minuta secunda*) were reduced respectively to ‘minute’ and ‘second’, likewise it is not until they formed the habit of saying the ‘substantive’ (later, ‘noun’) and the ‘adjective’ in their vernaculars that Europeans developed a full sense of distinction between nouns and adjectives.

The noun is the name of a thing, and the adjective is the name of a quality. What’s the difference? Far from being an endemic Graeco-Roman logic, this abnegation of the post-medieval differentiation between nouns and adjectives has been passed down to speakers of later generations of European languages in effect. Otherwise, French speakers would not have substantivized such adjectives as *anglais* (‘English >the English language’), *mignon* (‘pretty >cutie’), *sublime* (‘sublime >sublimity’), *ronde* (‘round >a dance in which the dancers move in a circle’), *intellectuel* (‘possessing a highly developed intellect >a person possessing a highly developed intellect’), *singulier* (‘singular >a singular number’), etc., and German speakers would doubtless not have nominalized such adjectives as *gut* (‘good’) >*Güte* (‘goodness’), *arm* (‘poor’) >*Arme* (‘a poor person’), *jung* (‘young’) >*Junge* (‘a boy’), *krank* (‘sick’) >*Kranke* (‘a patient’), *bekannt* (‘well-known’) >*Bekannte* (‘an acquaintance’), *deutsch* (‘German’) >*Deutsch* (‘the German language’), etc. By the same token, without the same hereditary conception sedimented in the inner recesses of their collective mind, speakers of English might not have nominalized such adjectives as ‘black’, ‘Christian’, ‘savage’, ‘relative’, ‘individual’, ‘august’ (venerable >the eighth month of the year), and the like, nor might such adjectival nouns as ‘surprise’ (as in ‘a surprise ending’), ‘fun’ (as in ‘a fun game’), ‘mystery’ (as in ‘a mystery pianoman’), etc. have gained currency in contemporary English so exponentially. It takes no more than a moment for these hard facts to bring us to realize that subserving behind those conversions is a vestige of classical sense of *ónoma/nōmen* as genetically inherited by Europeans in later ages and be convinced that not only does that traditional sense still subsist as a communally shared perception but it has been and still is profitably exploited as a linguistic device for the purpose of remaking their languages.

In that it has contributed a good many newly lexicalized, idiomaticized and grammaticalized forms as illustrated above, this legacy inherited from classical antiquity has been diachronically productive vigorously as a linguistic device and still does not desist from serving a procreative function. What we have here is a truly striking example in which a synchronically lost taxonomy of word classes (i.e. *ónoma, nōmen*) is still found impacting on modern languages as a cause for the proliferation of atavistically-generated words and phrases. Instead of being bewildered by this long-lasting recycling of linguistic classicism, we have to be pleasantly astounded by language’s tenacious reluctance to break with the past and be open-eyed at the same time to the profound significance of atavistically-ignited productivity and its wide implications for studies of language change.

D. Restoration of Inflection

That the traditional edifice of inflections that Sanskrit, Greek or Latin had boasted was attenuated over time is one of the most often told stories about the general development of Indo-European languages, while how periphrasis took over from inflection as an alternative grammatical process is an umbilical part of the same story. Taken together, the two parts complete the full account of this drift of Indo-European languages of major importance.

In the history of English, the watershed was from the late Old English to early Middle English periods. Old English was powerfully equipped with inflection as a means of marking different grammatical functions of the same lexical unit: the present and past tense forms of verbs were distinguished inflectionally (‘binde >band’), the comparisons of an adjective were achieved by inflections (‘eald >ięldra >ięld(e)st’), a singular noun was pluralized inflectionally (‘stān >stānas’), the case distinctions of a pronoun were drawn by inflections (‘hwā >hwone >hwæs >hwæm >hwȳ’). Being a maximally inflectional and minimally periphrastic language, Old English was incapable of creating such periphrastic tense forms as ‘shall go’, ‘have come’, ‘be reading’, such periphrastic comparisons of adjectives as ‘more curious’, ‘most intelligent’, or such analytic substitutes for inflectional genitives as ‘the name of the river’, ‘the maid of the chamber’. After the cataclysmic erosion of the inflection system that the history of English witnessed as it was transitioning from the Old English to Middle English periods, English could no longer turn to inflections for marking different grammatical

³ Robins (1990, p. 95) names Peter Helias and Thomas of Erfurt as the first medieval grammarians to divide *nōmen* into *nōmen substantivum* and *nōmen adjectivum*.

categories. Thenceforward, it was inevitably led to take a new course of development as a periphrastic language, and that way the road was paved for the advent of *do*-periphrasis, auxiliary periphrasis, prepositional periphrasis, and other resources to be tapped to form analytic expressions with assistive words, all of which fortuitously proved equal to the demands of the new ages and societies. Consequent on all this, however, English as it is spoken today is no longer typologized as an inflectional language *par excellence*. When Barber (1993, p. 274) makes a reference to the growing recent trend towards periphrastic comparisons (e.g. ‘more keen, most simple’) by observing “*More* and *most* are spreading at the expense of the endings *-er* and *-est*”, his remark sounds emblematic of the degree to which periphrasis is a defining feature of the English of our time.

While Barber’s (1993, p. 274) pronounced reaffirmation that the long-term historical trend in English, that is, the ‘drift’ in Sapir’s terminology, is from a synthetic system to an analytic system leaves little room for doubt, it must be borne in mind that Modern English is not entirely destitute of expressions showing a countervailing tendency. One of such countercurrents is the development of ‘boundary loss’ (Brinton and Traugott, 2005, p. 7 et passim) as exemplified by such coalesced exponents as (be going to >) *be gonna*, (ought to >) *oughta* or *oughter*, (have to >) *hafta*, (‘ve got to >) *‘ve gotta*’ and (have got to >) *gotta*. To press home the significance of what is occurring specifically to these five, it must be noted that as distinct from plain phonetic spellings like *sorta*, *kinda*, *whodunnit*, *dunno*, *gimme*, *hussy* and the like functors are spelled phonetically as regards these five exponents.

The way ‘be going to’ has lost a boundary and formed a new auxiliary phrase for futurity reminds us of the process through which the future tense form of Spanish evolved (e.g. infinitive *hablar* ‘speak’ + *hás* [finite of *haber* ‘have’] > *Tú hablarás* ‘You will speak’) or the process in which the simple future tense form of French was obtained (e.g. infinitive *chanter* ‘sing’ + *ai* [finite of *avoir* ‘have’] > *Je chanterai* ‘I will sing’), and from there, it is but a step to the supposed origin of the weak past tense inflection of English verbs (e.g. walk + did > walked). If the theory advocated by Whitney (1884, p. 61), Izui (1979, p. 22) and Lehmann (1989, p. 3) among others to the effect that the English past tense morpheme *-d* derives from the Germanic equivalent to ‘did’ is in accord with the truth at all, what we have here are illustrations profoundly typical of the kind of grammaticalization that synchronized with the formation of a new inflection, viz. the future tense inflection in Spanish, the simple future tense inflection in French, or the weak past tense inflection in English. To such a theoretical context we can put down the grammaticalization of *be gonna* and conceive of it as an atavistic relapse into the pre-Middle English golden age of inflection. For from a theoretical point of view, what has taken place when Modern English speakers began to say *be gonna* by virtue of boundary loss⁴ is not far removed from that which happened in the remote past when *walk* + *did*, for instance, coalesced into *walked* due to boundary loss, thus introducing weak verbs to English.

Analogous to this is the currency of *oughta* (or *oughter*), *hafta*, *‘ve gotta* and *gotta* in present-day colloquial English. Unlike the *-a* of *be gonna* which serves as a tense-marking inflectional morpheme, the phoneme /ə/ appended to each of these grammaticalized coalescences is fulfilling a role as a modality-marker. All the same, they are joining forces with *be gonna* to change the face of Modern English grammar by resuscitating the grammatical process long since defunct called inflection, such that every time Present-day English speakers say /hæftə/, if not write *hafta*, to denote a sense of obligation, unawares they are using English procreatively enough to atavistically restore the dim past when ‘walk + did’ were getting coalesced into ‘walked’, ‘trēow (‘true’) + liċe (‘body, shape’) were getting desegmented as ‘truly’, ‘frēond (‘friend’) + scipe (‘shape’) were getting fused into ‘friendship’, etc. Let us contend insistently therefore that the scarcity of examples does not detract from the seriousness of what is happening to this part of the grammar of contemporary English.

Such is the force of atavism as a hidden cause inciting language change that it has gone a long way quite without our knowledge of it towards providing unbroken links between the past and the present of the English language. This nugget of realization suffices to deepen our conviction that Modern English is not an island any more than Old English or Middle English is, but that all developmental stages of English are intimately interconnected with later progeny constantly feeding off their foregoing progenitors.

E. Exaptation

The reuse for affective purposes of the historical singular/plural opposition in the second-person pronouns of English (*þū* and *gē* in Old English, *thou* and *ye* in Middle English in the nominative) widely prevalent from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries and the grammaticalization of the ‘be + present participle’ structure⁵ as progressive aspect in Modern English are given as examples of exaptation by Lass (1997, pp. 317-319), while Toyota (2009, pp. 90-91) argues that the development of periphrastic passive from the perfective aspectual construction in Indo-European languages is an example in point of exaptation.

As is usual with a newly coined or borrowed term, *exaptation* is yet to make its way into dictionaries of linguistics. To all intents and purposes, though, it should be defined as the reuse for a different function of the older form or structure that leads to the invention of a new grammatical category. (See Lass, 1997, p. 320; Toyota, 2009, p. 90) Otherwise, we would be hard put to tell exaptation from similar developments such as functional shift (e.g. Middle English, ‘He is a very fole’ > Modern English, ‘She is very kind’), grammaticalization (e.g. Middle English, ‘How do ye?’ > Modern English,

⁴ The earliest *gonna* cited by the OED is dated 1913. But Guy Deutscher (2005, p. 151) reports that the poet Alexander Douglas wrote: “Now Willie lad, I’m ganna gie You twa or three directions” as early as 1806.

⁵ According to Lass (1997, p. 319), this structure existed as early as Old English days, yet it “was used sometimes with a clearly progressive sense, most often not”.

‘How do you do?’), lexicalization (e.g. Early Modern English, ‘H’as broke my head’ >Modern English, ‘I am flat broke’), etc.

Even after defining exaptation as strictly as above, its examples are expected to be gathered plentifully: to name but three quick illustrations, the functional shift of the demonstrative *that* to the relative *that* in late Old English is one of the most readily available examples because that specific conversion cleared the way for the emergence of a new grammatical category called relatives, the development of the absolute genitive case (e.g. ‘a friend of mine’, ‘It is thine’) from the genitive case (e.g. ‘mine eyes’, ‘thine uncle’) of personal pronouns in late Middle English qualifies for inclusion likewise, and the derivation of *his*-genitive⁶ (e.g. ‘since Christ his birth’ [=since Christ’s birth], ‘King Edward the Fourth his death’ [=the death of King Edward the Fourth]) from the genitive *his* in the fourteenth century can also pass muster for the same reason.

The three additional examples to follow are likely to give us a better idea how exaptation can be looked upon as an ironical twist of the atavistically-driven repetition of history and how it is a creative force operating behind language change. The first example takes us back to the early part of the Middle English period when bare infinitive was increasingly superseded by *to*-infinitive due largely to the decay of the inflectional endings of the infinitive. To fill the gap created by the loss of inflectional endings, the directional preposition *to* began to serve as a new infinitive marker. This is already an exaptation of prepositional *to* as periphrastic infinitive marker *to*. What is more, the same process of exaptation was repeated in the same period as another preposition of direction *for* was invoked as an additional infinitive marker for disambiguation’s sake (e.g. ‘It grieves me for to go’. -1400, ‘This is a fouler theft than for to breke a chirche’.-1534)⁷. Within the Middle English period, therefore, two prepositions were exapted in rapid succession as periphrastic infinitive markers, which had been a largely unknown grammatical category in Old English. (See Jespersen, 1954, pp. 150-157; Fischer, 1992, p. 317)

Not to change the subject, the preposition *for* was further exapted in the next stages of the history of English. Taking “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (The Authorised Version of the Bible, Cor. 7.1) as a representative example, Jespersen (1954, pp. 308-309) writes: “A good many sentences of this type are doubled-barrelled and present the possibility of ‘metanalysis’ by which ‘It is good for a man | not to touch a woman’ may come to be apprehended ‘It is good | for a man not to touch a woman’. (...) What at first was a prepositional complement of the adjective thus becomes virtually the subject of the infinitive”. As if not to be content with just pointing out one occurrence of what we call a linguistic exaptation, for what occurs here is the adaptation of prepositional *for* as a sense-subject marker, the Danish linguist goes so far as to suggest that this double-barrelledness of the construction is the very reason for “the enormous extension of the use of *for* before the subject of an infinitive” (Jespersen, 1954, p. 308) in modern age. If Jespersen’s is a plausible analysis of the rise of the sense-subject marker *for* at all, we can review that without the model ‘preposition *for* followed by NP’ the target ‘marker *for* followed by sense-subject’ might not have woven into the system of Modern English, and likewise, without the model ‘preposition *to* followed by infinitive’ the target ‘marker *to* followed by infinitive’ would not have crept into English to be stored in its syntactic repository. All this is something worth spelling out as it admirably suits the thematized concern of this writing.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is eminently clear that the examples of language change probed in the preceding sections are not a magpie collection of disconnected one-off occurrences but different manifestations of the same regular growth pattern. It is prudent enough to draw a conclusion from there that instead of being at the mercy of history’s vagaries those changes have been set in motion by something programmed within the developmental history of language. The name we give to this “something programmed” is atavism. The way the above-scrutinized examples compel attention to heredity as a motive for language change is so revealing that it is hard not to entertain the idea of atavistic development, while at the same time we are struck afresh by the remarkable infrequency with which the idea *atavism* has found its way into the literature of linguistics despite the fact that gravitation towards the atavistic rejuvenation of history as a driving force for the remaking, readjustment, enrichment and empowerment of language seems an inescapable observation for any right-minded linguistic historian to make.

Before bringing the argument to a close, a few words may be in order about our next task as inseparable from the one with which we are through. The term ‘productivity’ is defined from a synchronic point of view as the degree to which a linguistic process can be freely called in to create new instances of the same type, and is conceived of as a gradient idea dividing up into ‘full productivity’ (e.g. ‘-s’ for pluralizing a singular noun), ‘limited productivity’ (e.g. ‘-ician’ as in beautician, mortician, esthetician), and ‘lost productivity’ (e.g. ‘-th’ as in filth, mirth, sloth). (See Crystal, 1994; Bussmann, 1996; Matthews, 1997; Dubois et al., 2007) If this is all that being productive amounts to, we will have to either dismiss out of hand most of the examples of atavistically recovered linguistic processes explored above as no longer productive in full vigor (i.e. ‘limited productivity’) or reject them outright as unproductive (i.e. ‘lost productivity’) and hence our enterprise will lose its bite. And what a loss it is that the kind of productivity so inherent in the life of any language and so central to understanding how language grows should miss recognition!

⁶ The heyday of *his*-genitive is the Early Modern English period. In the nineteenth century, it began to decline. (See Nakao, 1979, pp. 155-156)

⁷ Both these sentences are quoted second-hand from Lightfoot (1979, p. 187).

To keep our grand design from foundering, perhaps we need to make bold to unlearn and disconfirm the synchronic definition of productivity and redefine it from a diachronic perspective, or else invent a new term capable of embracing the kind of productivity that was once revived to press a given language to move forward but has known better days, for the very reason that evidence of the extent to which the restoration of lost productivity and the loss of restored productivity alternate in the course of the progress of language is exactly what the current enquiry into the long-lived vitality of history has brought into light.

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