EDITORIAL

Diachrony and Diachronica

40@40

Claire Bowern Yale University

In this second set of contributions on the 40th anniversary of *Diachronica*, seven historical linguists provide perspectives on the current state of the field and aims for the future. While the authors in issue 40.4 focused on the ideas that have structured the field – the actuation problem, the relationship between synchrony and diachrony, and how we do our work – this current set of contributions focus on method: what we do, how and why we do it, and how our methods make historical linguistics more visible to other ways to study the past.

Diachronica at 40

David Goldstein UCLA

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of *Diachronica*, it is an opportune moment to reflect on the trajectory of historical linguistics. Given that I was six years old when *Diachronica* was launched, my remarks primarily concern the last two decades. This period marked a transformative phase in historical linguistics with the introduction of Bayesian phylogenetic methods.

Despite the transformative nature of these methods, I still encounter linguists who harbor skepticism towards them. So I would like to offer a few words as to why these methods are so revolutionary. First and foremost, they have substantially enhanced linguistic phylogenetics. Whereas traditional subgrouping struggles with estimating rates of change and divergence times, the Bayesian approach provides a rigorous and transparent framework for both endeavors. Furthermore, Bayesian methods provide us with tools to gauge the uncertainty of our inferences – a crucial feature, since any assertion about the past is bound to involve uncertainty.

Bayesian methods offer more than just a solid backbone for phylogenetic estimation. They also furnish linguists with robust tools to infer the probability of

https://doi.org/10.1075/dia.24014.bow | Published online: 7 March 2024 *Diachronica* 40:5 (2023), pp. 666–682. ISSN 0176-4225 | E-ISSN 1569-9714 © John Benjamins Publishing Company unobservable linguistic states. Linguistic reconstruction has of course long been a central endeavor of historical linguistics, but the credibility of ancestral forms inferred with traditional methods varies considerably. In the absence of tools to gauge their probability, assessing their accuracy remains a challenge. Moreover, traditional methods of reconstruction often fail to take phylogenetic uncertainty into account.

The influence of Bayesian phylogenetic methods now extends well beyond historical linguistics. They have, for instance, catalyzed a methodological transformation in linguistic typology, steering attention from synchronic states to diachronic processes. This transition has advanced the study of correlated changes and implicational universals – phenomena of paramount interest not only to historical linguists and typologists, but also to theoreticians. As a result, Bayesian approaches have fostered new dialogues among these sub-disciplines.

Looking to the future, I nurture three aspirations:

- 1. Quantitative and computational methods become the norm in the investigation of linguistic history.
- 2. Historical linguists continue to adopt insights and techniques from other fields, be it bioinformatics, social sciences, population genetics, machine learning, complexity science, or other possibilities that the future may unveil.
- 3. Deeper engagement ensues with other sub-disciplines of linguistics ranging from phonology and sociolinguistics to syntax and psycholinguistics.

These aspirations stem from a core conviction: an interdisciplinary perspective paves the way for broader understanding and new discoveries. We have nothing to gain from intellectual insularity.

Forty years of diachronic generative syntax

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In 1983, the seeds were being planted for a community of scholars working on diachronic syntax from a generative perspective. The publication of Lightfoot's provocative *Principles of Diachronic Syntax* (1979) had fed into a broader conversation about the nature of explanation in historical linguistics. At the same time, the Principles and Parameters framework was fueling renewed interest in cross-linguistic variation among generative syntacticians. Thus the first few years of *Diachronica*'s existence were fertile ground for the emergence of diachronic generative syntax as a shared endeavor. Fast forward forty years, to 2023, and