RESEÑAS

Bas Aarts, Joanne Close, Geoffrey Leech y Sean Wallis (Eds.)
The English Verb Phrase: Investigating Recent Language Change with Corpora
Cambridge: CUP, 2013, 474 páginas
ISBN: 9781107016354

Corpora of written and spoken texts have been broadly used as a method to study real-world language in samples. Nonetheless, it wasn't until the early nineties that it became an asset for the study of current language change. Current change, on the other hand, has emerged as one of the most interesting areas of research in the domains of diachronic English linguistics. This is due mainly to the impact short-term changes have in language variation from a grammatical point of view. The present work provides an all-inclusive description of ongoing change in the grammatical system of English –with a focus on the verb phrase– by means of the use of corpora. Aarts, the Director of the Survey of English Usage and Professor of English Linguistics at UCL; Close, Lecturer in English Language at the University of Chester; Leech, Emeritus Professor of English Linguistics at Lancaster University; and Wallis, Senior Research Fellow in the Survey of English Usage at UCL, make a significant contribution in the area of diachronic linguistics by producing this book as an outcome of their research on The Changing Verb Phrase in present-day British English funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

At a glance, it is clear that a central aim of this work is to validate the importance of changes in the grammar of English over short periods of time, in order to prove that major changes can occur in the space of a decade or two. It is for this reason that they include the analysis of the verb phrase, a central element in grammar, in the search for substantial variation in recent past. Leaving aside the findings relating to the ongoing change in the English verb phrase, there is one singularity about this book that makes it particularly appealing to its readers, namely that it highlights as a key feature the methodological aspects of the investigations carried out in this matter.

The book is organized in 15 chapters which are subdivided in two different categories. From chapters 2 to 6, it is possible to find all the papers concerned with innovative methodologies used to elucidate current change in the verb phrase of English. The rest of the chapters, from 7 to 15, are descriptive research papers which have their focus on several aspects of the verb phrase construction. Regarding paper selection criteria, we can say they all belong to leading young researchers from around the world whose work on current language change have made a relevant contribution to the field of historical linguistics. Each of them share the following features: they tackle current change in the recent past, they all focus on the verb phrase (patterns, progressive and perfective aspects, passive voice, intention-marking constructions, semi-modal verbs, structures of negation, various complementation patterns, and negative contractions), they use methodologies for investigating short-term patterns of change in English, and they also have the goal of accomplishing comparability in corpus design and sampling of corpora from different periods to track linguistic history in terms of usage.

Unlike other works on the field of language change tracking by means of diachronic corpora, *The Verb Phrase in English: Investigating Recent Language Change with Corpora*, identifies

and foresees possible drawbacks that researchers may face when dealing with linguistic variation and relatively small corpora that could not possibly allow generalization of findings. In Chapter 2, for instance, Aarts, Close and Wallis, discuss issues related to methodological tasks to be carried out and methodological aspects to be considered at the moment of researching for hard evidence in language change. The former delineates the importance of having a focus on linguistic variation where there is a choice, whereas the latter outlines the essential features the structure being looked at needs to have so as to obtain accurate evidence about what is changing. Thus, in the case of an extensive investigation into whether *will* is replacing *shall*, there has to be a close look at first person alternation and the modal semantics implied. In chapter 3, on the other hand, Davies comments on the limitations of using corpora from the Brown family in research on language change, due to their restricted size and discontinuity of language samples available. Therefore, in order to carry out his study on recent shifts with 3 non-finite verbal complements in English, he resorts to the Time Corpus of American English claiming that, as it comprises continuous data and contains more than 100 million words spanning the 20th century, it fulfills the needs a research on language change must have. Davies concludes, that even though the corpus is restricted to the variety of American English, it does not have the same limitations corpora from the Brown family have.

Regarding the chapters devoted to descriptive research on linguistic changes (7-15), it is possible to observe that the results are described both qualitatively and quantitatively, in order to achieve substantial accuracy in language change description and also to empower researchers to create new hypotheses about language change. In Pfaff, Bergs and Hoffman's work on the expression of recentness and the English past progressive, they investigate the frequency this "hot news" perfect structure has in modern American and British English. With the results obtained from COCA[1], BNC[2] and the creation of a small corpus for the purposes of this research, they found that there is a rise of the past progressive due to the spread of progressive constructions into the functional area of simple forms. These results enable them to hypothesize theories related to not only the rising of the structure, but also the topicalization of it since it has been mainly used to introduce a new topic.

Another interesting research to discuss in terms of the explanatory factors behind frequency changes is Callies's. His study on Bare infinitival complements in present-day English takes samples from COCA and BNC to look at whether speakers use the marked infinitival complement or unmarked (bare) infinitival complement. Callies's findings state that the bare infinitive construction is used more often in transitive verbs by English speakers in spoken language. Accordingly, he suggests that one possible explanation for this phenomenon is the "erosion" process, in which there is a tendency to elide function words whithin the speech

---

[1]   COCA: The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is the largest freely-available corpus of English, and the only large and balanced corpus of American English. The corpus was created by Mark Davies ofBrigham Young University, and it is used by tens of thousands of users every month (linguists, teachers, translators, and other researchers). The corpus contains more than 450 million words of text and is equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. It includes 20 million words each year from 1990-2012 and the corpus is also updated regularly (the most recent texts are from Summer 2012). Because of its design, it is perhaps the only corpus of English that is suitable for looking at current, ongoing changes in the language. Davies, Mark. (2008-) The Corpus of Contemporary American English: 450 million words, 1990-present. Retrieved from http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/.

[2]   BNC: This linguistic database allows you to quickly and easily search the 100 million word British National Corpus(1970s-1993). The BNC was originally created by Oxford University Press in the 1980s - early 1990s, and now exists in various versions on the web. Davies, Mark. (2004-) BYU-BNC. (Based on the British National Corpus from Oxford University Press). Retrieved from http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/.

chain. Similarly, research carried out by Aarts, Bowie and Wallis on *The Perfect in spoken British English*, offers a theoretical explanation on the decline of infinitival perfect and past perfect after performing an extensive search in DCPSE[3]. They conclude that one of the plausible hypotheses explaining this phenomenon is the increasing trend to simplify the verb phrase, especially in certain contexts in which the choice makes no difference to meaning. A second aspect to consider is the American influence on British English, seeing as it has been noted that perfective forms have fallen in American English dramatically since the 1800s (Elsness, 1997).

Overall *The Verb Phrase in English* provides an excellent account on methodological issues scholars and students interested in language change may encounter when carrying out their own investigations in this matter. Likewise, it offers an outlook on current ongoing linguistic changes in the English verb phrase with the aim of promoting the use of corpora in language change studies, and also encouraging researchers to develop more investigations with methodologies used in diachronic linguistics so as to hypothesize new theories on the rapid language change process English is undergoing nowadays.

MARITZA ORTEGA
Universidad de Chile
maritza.ortega.perez@gmail.com

[3]   DCPSE: The Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English is a new parsed corpus of spoken English available on CD-ROM. It contains more than 400,000 words from ICE-GB (collected in the early 1990s) and 400,000 words from the London-Lund Corpus (late 1960s-early 1980s). The orthographic transcriptions have been normalised and annotated according to the same criteria. ICE-GB was used as a gold standard for the parsing of DCPSE. The parsing has been corrected by a variety of methods to provide as high a quality of result as possible. Retrieved from http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/projects/dcpse/.