

Hengzhi Hu, National University of Malaysia

Luying Zheng, National University of Malaysia, p119571@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Language Change: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

Reviewed Publication: Elitzur A Bar-Asher Siegal, Nora Boneh, Eitan Grossman & Aynat Rubinstein (eds.). 2025. *Language change: Theoretical and empirical perspectives*. Cham: Springer.

Research on language change sits at a durable crossroads between description and explanation. We can now document change with increasingly fine-grained corpora and typology, yet persistent debates remain about what counts as evidence (especially for meaning change), how to separate semantic change from pragmatic enrichment, and which mechanisms (e.g., reanalysis, inference, acquisition, diffusion, communicative pressures) are actually doing the explanatory work (Millar 2024). These questions matter directly for journals whose scope includes language change, because such venues serve a cross-subfield readership that expects both empirical credibility and theoretical cumulativeness. *Language Change: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*, edited by Bar-Asher Siegal et al. (2025a), responds to this landscape with a clear intervention: progress on language change, particularly meaning-related change, requires explicit theorizing about what the phenomenon is, how it can be detected in historical data, and what predictions a proposed mechanism makes. The volume concludes an interdisciplinary research program on diachrony and formal semantics, which sought to foster sustained collaboration between historical linguistics and formal semantics rather than parallel lines of inquiry.

The book's fifteen chapters span negation, cyclicity, aspect, modality, information structure, and related interface problems. Chapter 1 sets the conceptual agenda for "formal diachronic semantics." Chapter 2 offers a diachronic account of why newly grammaticalized future markers often pattern asymmetrically under negation; it argues that these asymmetries follow from

Cite as: Hu, Hengzhi & Luying Zheng. 2026. Language Change: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives: Reviewed Publication: Elitzur A Bar-Asher Siegal, Nora Boneh, Eitan Grossman & Aynat Rubinstein (eds.). 2025. *Language change: Theoretical and empirical perspectives*. Cham: Springer. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 45(1). <https://doi.org/10.18148/zs/2026-2002>

Received: 07 January 2026; **accepted:** 02 February 2026; **published:** 08 June 2026

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how emergent futurity interacts with modality and scope during grammaticalization. Chapter 3 develops a typology/history of “two types of negation”; it treats the two types as semantically distinct classes whose differing distributions help explain recurrent trajectories in negative systems. Chapter 4 argues for cyclicity between anaphors and intensifiers; it shows that recurrent reanalyses between these functions can be modeled without abandoning constraints on binding and emphasis-related meaning. Chapter 5 traces the auxiliiation of Hebrew *come*. Chapter 6 treats Latin *quidem* in contrast/negation environments; it uses these environments as diagnostics to sharpen *quidem*'s discourse–semantic contribution at the focus/contrast–negation interface.

The remaining chapters extend this program across domains and methods. Chapter 7 explains preterit loss in Southern German via interacting intra- and extra-linguistic factors. Chapter 8 theorizes “innovation” in grammatical morphology. Chapter 9 develops cyclicity effects in presupposition development (including a diachronic adaptation of “Maximize Presupposition”); it argues that competition among alternatives can drive historical shifts in presuppositional strength and distribution. Chapter 10 discusses a stative-to-perfective pathway in Semitic in typological perspective. Chapter 11 reconstructs the diachronic semantics of two Hungarian “almost” items; it shows how near-synonyms can split into stable semantic niches as scalar and counterfactual components become differently conventionalized. Chapter 12 links subjectivity with shifts in subordination/coordination at the semantics–syntax interface in Hebrew; it argues that changes in speaker-oriented meaning are coupled with changes in clause-linkage strategies, locating subjectification at a concrete interface locus. Chapter 13 analyzes Biblical Hebrew cardinal constructions with ordinal meaning using synchronic variation to infer diachronic developments. Chapter 14 uses modality pathways as a test case for mechanisms of meaning change. Chapter 15 reports an artificial-language learning experiment on the emergence of differential object marking from atypical information structure; it provides experimental support that givenness-driven discourse pressures can motivate the conventionalization of a new morphosyntactic contrast over time.

For language-change scholarship, the volume's core strength is that it consistently treats explanation as more than narrative plausibility. The editors foreground problems that historical linguists often acknowledge but do not always operationalize: identifying semantic change when older and newer uses overlap; distinguishing semantic change from pragmatic enrichment; and deciding whether a recurring “pathway” reflects a mechanism or merely a descriptive generalization (Bar-Asher Siegal et al. 2025b). Many chapters respond by stating diagnostics and predictions rather than relying on umbrella labels, most notably Chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 11, 12, and 15. That style matters for a language-change readership because it makes disagreement productive: when a mechanism is formulated as a prediction about distribution, competition between forms, or compositional contribution, debate can advance with sharper evidence rather than terminological substitution.

A second strength is its coherence around recurring concerns—negation/polarity asymmetries, cyclicity, and interface-driven pathways (Millar 2024)—without enforcing methodological uniformity. The negation-focused contributions, for instance, treat asymmetries as constraints on how innovations diffuse and stabilize, not as language-particular curiosities. The “cycle” motif likewise appears in different domains (anaphor–intensifier relations; presupposition marking), inviting a broader question: are cycles best understood as properties of specific subsystems, or as outcomes of tensions between inference, economy, and form–meaning alignment? The collection’s breadth prevents formal diachronic semantics from collapsing into a single favored mechanism; instead, it argues that explanation benefits from explicitness, regardless of domain.

Methodologically, Chapter 15 by Tal et al. (2025) signals an especially consequential expansion of what can count as evidence in language-change argumentation. It tests a specific hypothesis about the emergence of differential object marking: that differential object marking may originate as a response to atypical information structure (givenness) and only later be re-analyzed as semantically conditioned (e.g., animacy). The reported outcome is important for language-change theory precisely because it is not simply confirmatory: while the experiment supports the emergence of differential object marking under atypical information structure, this effect did not generalize to animate objects as such, despite the input correlation between animacy and givenness. In production, participants did not increase marking for animate objects overall (and on some testing days the trend even went in the opposite direction), and the statistical model reports no reliable main effect of animacy on object marking. This is a methodological service to the field. It shows how experiments can test the plausibility of proposed micro-mechanisms without recreating historical ecologies, and it pressures pathway narratives to specify which steps are expected under learnability and which require additional conditions (contact, register stratification, sociolinguistic diffusion, acquisition setting). For readers invested in language change as an explanatory science (Shalini & Perono Cacciafoco 2023), this chapter reframes experimentation as a constraint on mechanism claims rather than as an alternative to historical data.

Despite its broad title, the volume’s center of gravity is semantic and morphosyntactic, consistent with its origin in a program on diachrony and formal semantics; readers seeking sustained engagement with phonological change, contact-induced change as the primary driver, or variationist quantitative modeling will therefore find those dimensions largely peripheral. In addition, the language coverage is uneven, with Hebrew/Semitic data anchoring multiple chapters (auxiliarization, subordination/subjectivity, numerals, modality pathways, stative-to-perfective), which is a major asset for Semitic diachrony but may feel narrower than the title implies for readers who expect typological balance across unrelated families. Finally, accessibility varies: some chapters are readily usable by historical linguists without extensive formal-semantics training, while others presuppose familiarity with formal semantic argumentation, and the absence of

a brief concluding synthesis means that cross-chapter generalizations (e.g., when semantic vs pragmatic explanations diverge most sharply) are left for the reader to assemble.

The book's audience is best described in language-change terms. It will be most valuable to advanced graduate students and researchers working on meaning change, grammaticalization pathways, and interface phenomena, especially those who want to connect diachronic evidence to explicit semantic hypotheses and debates about mechanisms and recurrence. Formal semanticists interested in diachrony will find historically grounded problems that can discipline synchronic theory-building, while semiticists and scholars of Hebrew diachrony will find a rich cluster of theory-forward studies. For language-change scholars outside semantics, the book is best approached less as a survey and more as a methodological demonstration: it shows how to raise the evidential bar for claims about pathways and mechanisms by making analyses explicit, testable, and easier to contest.

Overall, the book is a strong contribution to language-change scholarship because it insists that meaning-related change can be analyzed with the same explanatory ambition and the same demand for constraints that historical linguistics brings to other domains. Its most persuasive claim is methodological: language-change research becomes more cumulative when “theoretical” and “empirical” are treated as mutual checks implemented through diagnostics, typological comparison, corpus reasoning, and (where appropriate) experimental constraints.

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