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## **FUNCTIONAL SYNTAX**

### **AN INTERVIEW WITH T. GIVÓN**

Thomas Givón<sup>1</sup>

**REVEL – In your book *Syntax* (vol. I, John Benjamins, 2001), you say that “the best point of departure for functionalism is to be found in biology, the mother-discipline that has been profoundly functionalist for over two thousand years” (p. 2). What lessons can linguists take from Biology to understand linguistic functionalism?**

**GIVÓN –** Ever since Aristotle (though most people credit Darwin), Biology has pursued an adaptive intellectual and empirical agenda. That is, taking it for granted that structures are motivated by their functions (Aristotle's analogy was the structure vs. use of tools). And that structures evolve gradually, under adaptive pressure. And that cross-species variation is, fundamentally, the evolution of alternative solutions to the same adaptive-functional problems. This necessary association of three core elements--function, change and variation--is just as fundamental to linguistics as it has been to biology.

**REVEL – What contrasts can we highlight when comparing a functionalist and a formalist approach to the study of the syntax of natural languages?**

**GIVÓN –** The contrast between the formal and functional approaches to language involves all three elements mentioned above. So that not only function, but also change of three types--evolution, acquisition and diachrony--as well as variation,

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which is both the beginning and the end-product of change, are involved in the contrast between the two major approaches to language. The three types of language change closely correspond to three types of change in biology--evolution, development/maturation and individual life-long learning, respectively.

**REVEL – You are a pioneer in the functionalist studies in North America. What were the first difficulties and challenges to “establish” functional syntax in an environment traditionally dominated by structuralist and generative linguistics?**

**GIVÓN** – I don't consider myself a pioneer, but rather a successor of the great pioneers who came before us. To mention but a few: Franz Bopp, Hermann Paul, Otto Jespersen, Edward Sapir, George Zipf, Joseph Greenberg and Dwight Bolinger, among many others. The difficulty in reestablishing an adaptive approach to language involved the presence of two successive, well entrenched schools of American structuralist (Saussurean) linguistics—Bloomfield's and Chomsky's. These are not only intellectual traditions, they are also academic power structures, with positions, grants, graduate programs etc. I got into linguistics right after Chomsky overthrew the Bloomfieldians, so I witnessed the change from one structuralist power structure to another.

**REVEL – In your opinion, what were some of the major contributions of functional syntax to the understanding of human language?**

**GIVÓN** – I think I have already answered this above.

**REVEL – Could you please suggest a list of influential works (seminal and recent ones) on Functional Syntax for our readers?**

**GIVÓN** – I am not much of a reader, and am at the moment away from libraries, including my own. Still, if pressed, I would recommend the works of Hermann Paul, Antoine Meillet, Otto Jespersen, George Zipf and Joseph Greenberg as the most

fundamental ones for the functional adaptive approach to language. These are the intellectual giants on whose shoulders we all stand, and their works are well known and easily accessible.