As long ago as 1979, David Sankoff and William Labov, in their defense of the “variable rule,” noted that external (i.e., social) factors affecting the probability of a binominal linguistic choice tended to be statistically independent of linguistic factors in logistic regression (VARBRUL analysis). While they did not pursue this observation, it has turned out to be of importance in subsequent work, especially in quantitative diachronic syntax. Indeed, statistical independence among factors influencing linguistic variation has proved more general in the diachronic realm than might have been expected. In the first place, linguistic factors affecting binominal morphosyntactic choices in historical corpora have turned out generally, if not universally, to be statistically independent of text date, an external factor. This is the so-called “Constant Rate Effect” proposed by Kroch in 1989. Secondly, and equally significantly, choices between syntactic options undergoing change have repeatedly turned out to be independent of other, purely grammatical, options. In this talk, I will present some of these independence results from the history of English and other languages and discuss their implications for the relationship between grammar and usage. I will focus particularly on recent results obtained by Augustin Speyer on the quantitative evolution of topicalization and verb-second word order in the history of English.

References
