The present paper provides an answer to the following questions: (a) Can syntactic change be induced by language contact? (b) How can this be accounted for within the generative framework? (c) What type of evidence – given the limitations of diachronic studies, e.g. no native speakers to offer grammaticality judgements – is available to prove or disprove the causal relation between language contact and language change?

Traditionally, language contact is understood as a possible trigger of diachronic change whereby two or more languages/dialects are in a contact situation and influence each other (cf. Thomason 2001, although it is obscure what the syntactic mechanism of influence is). However, from a generative perspective, it is not clear at all how language contact may trigger syntactic change. As a matter of fact, at least a priori, it is impossible since under such a view ‘language’ is considered to be a social product and not the ‘mental object’ of the individual (cf. Lightfoot 1999). In order to bridge the empirical observation, namely that language contact is triggering language change in some cases and the theoretical restrictions, namely that the locus of change is the individual, we propose to collapse language contact to ‘competing grammars’ (in the sense of Kroch & Taylor 1997). More explicitly, for us, language contact and ‘grammars in competition’ is the same. To put differently, when we have contact between: (a) two languages, (b) a language and a dialect, (c) two dialects or (d) two varieties of the same dialect/language, the result, from an acquisitional point of view, is identical: the child has to deal with two grammatical systems.

In the literature, it has been argued that language contact might take place during bilingual acquisition, when the acquisition of one system might affect the acquisition of the other, thus resulting in language contact-induced change (cf. Weerman 1993). However, this is not a sustainable claim: bilingual acquisition studies show that children cope very well with this task (Meisel 2001). They acquire two or more distinct systems and the outcome is the same as for monolingual native speakers. So, if bilingual acquisition per se cannot lead to language contact-induced change, what is the alternative? We would like to argue that contact-induced change can only take place if the E-language of an adult has somewhat changed and this adult will provide input to the next generation of speakers. Another possibility would be that the first language of a near-native L2 learner suffers attrition (cf. Tsimpli, Sorace, Heycock, Filiaci 2003) and this very attrited first language serves as input to a child. On both counts, it can then be claimed that the child will acquire an I-language whose differences can be ultimately attributed to contact. Crucially though, the vehicle and locus for change remain the first language acquisition and the ‘individual’ and language contact can only affect the E-language and not the I-language.

Following this argumentation, from the perspective of diachronic generative syntax, we postulate that for a language contact-induced change to be plausible, the following conditions should be met (cf. Sitaridou forth.): (i) there is a sociolinguistic background of contact; (ii) parametric change has taken place; (iii) change might be located within the ‘vulnerable domains’ of the acquisitional process (such as null subjects, focus, modality, etc. also cf. Müller 2003); (iv) dialectal/register syntactic variation is philologically detectable (however, this a meta-theoretical condition).

Next, in order to test the limitations of our model we present two case studies from Romance: (a) the change of subjects in the history of French and (b) the word order change in the history of Portuguese. These two case studies are good candidates to be considered for language contact-induced change because they fulfill the conditions set out above: (i) they involve contact (between dialects and languages in the case of French and varieties in the case of Portuguese); (ii) they show change in the vulnerable domains (null subjects in the
case of French, information structure in the case of Old Portuguese); (iii) parametric change has taken place (French has evolved from a null subject language to a non-null subject language (cf. Roberts 1993; Vance 1997) and Portuguese has suffered parametric change with respect to the availability of structural positions (cf. Martins 2002)).

For Old French, we argue that the change in the realisation of null subjects was not due to language contact. It is well-known that 13th century Old French is a mere cover term for the different dialects that existed (e.g. Picard, Wallon, Francien, etc.). Additionally, apart from the dialects being in contact with each other, they were also in contact with Old Occitan—a prototypical null-subject language—in the south and Old Allemnic/Germanic dialects—prototypically non-null-subject languages—in the north east. It is shown, by means of a corpus-analysis, that the distribution of null-subjects is almost identical across the board (cf. Sitaridou forth.). Therefore, in a sociolinguistic context where undeniably there was contact, no contact-induced change occurred.

For Old Portuguese, we investigate whether the word order variation is an instance of: (a) competing grammars; (b) dialectal variation; or (c) optionality. Although Modern Portuguese has a free word order (cf. Costa 1998), Old Portuguese is even more flexible with respect to the placement of phrasal constituents: it allows OV orders in contrast to Modern Portuguese. This ‘high’ flexibility has been explained in terms of a richer clausal architecture which provides the possibility of optionally selecting a scrambling feature (more specifically an ‘Attract-all F EPP-feature’, cf. Martins 2002). Since the selection of this feature is supposed to be optional (and therefore the OV-VO orders as well), Old Portuguese provides good testing ground for (the nature of) competing grammars. However, if the different word order patterns can be related to different interpretations, then optionality would only be apparent. A third possibility is that the different word order patterns belong to different dialectal areas. To test for the last option, we investigate data from three different medieval dialects of Galego-Portuguese.