Frank Parker (1976) has proposed a basic paradigm for syntactic change as follows: (a) change can come about when a speaker forms hypothesis in constructing a grammar; (b) since more than one hypothesis can be formed to account for a single piece of data, ‘mis-assignment of constituent structure’ (MCS) can take place; and (c) a deviant hypothesis may be formed by a speaker and a corresponding rule retained in his grammar if (1) it doesn’t violate a linguistic universal, and (2) it doesn’t change meaning.

Parker’s paradigm was based on his analysis of the phenomenon that many Indo-European verbs inflected in the middle voice have taken on passive meaning. In this paper various attested changes from archaic Chinese into ancient Chinese and from ancient Chinese into Mandarin and Southern Min dialects are carefully examined in the light of Parker’s paradigm.

Parker’s chief mechanism, namely, ‘mis-assignment of constituent structure’ is found to be too restrictive and should be expanded to include ‘re-alignment of thematic roles’ in some cases. It is proposed that the general form of the mechanism be called ‘mis-analysis of structure’. The two constraints, which Parker posited without much explanation, are also examined and discussed in all these cases of syntactic change and their implications for linguistic theory in general and theory of linguistic change in particular are finally drawn.