Diachronic and functional explanations in linguistic typology

Convenors

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Workshop description

One of the goals of linguistic research is to identify generalizations that have cross-linguistic validity. In typology and general linguistics, it has been common to interpret such generalizations (known as universals) from a cognitive and functional point of view. For example, the cross-linguistic correspondences between argument marking in coding splits and the position of an argument on animacy, definiteness or topicality hierarchies have been regarded as a result of an interaction between the principles of iconicity and economy (Aissen 2003). Similarly, the Greenbergian word order correlations have been explained by universal cognitive constraints, e.g. Hawkins' (1994) Early Immediate Constituents principle.

These and other universals, which have been assumed largely on the basis of synchronic distributions, have triggered many proposals about the psychological mechanisms at play and a speaker's mental representation of their language. However, it has been emphasized recently that establishing such universals and proposing their explanations is only possible when synchronic data are backed up with diachronic evidence. For example, Cristofaro (2012) argues that synchronic alignment systems found in a number of languages in fact result from very heterogeneous language-specific diachronic changes rather than from overarching cognitive and functional principles that link them all. Another example is Dispersion Theory in phonology, which seeks to explain cross-linguistic variation in vowel inventories in terms of conflicting functional constraints operating at the synchronic level. As shown by Vaux & Samuels (2015), this theory fails to explain a range of idiosyncratic phonological patterns and should be superseded by an evolutionary account (e.g. Blevins 2004).

Moreover, Bickel *et al.*, who argue that "all synchronic observations about language are the result of history, and therefore, any evaluation needs to target trends in diachrony rather than current distributions" (2014: 24), find no statistically significant association between various referential scales, on the one hand, and development or preservation of case alignment in diachrony, on the other hand, when areal and genealogical relationships are controlled for. This finding questions the validity of the corresponding synchronic generalizations and thus of any cognitive assumptions that have been used to explain them.

The aim of this workshop is to bring together historical linguists, typologists, cognitive and functional linguists and other specialists to explore the role of diachronic evidence in testing language universals and establishing cognitive and functional explanations.

The proposed contributions to this theme session address different aspects related to the topic of the workshop, including the following questions:

1. Can synchronic universals be interpreted from a historical perspective, i.e. as a product of diachronic biases within language families?
2. What are the pitfalls of inferring cognitive explanations solely from synchronic evidence?
3. Bybee (2006) claims that the diachronic sources and processes of change are "the true universals of language". Does this mean that diachronic explanations should always be regarded as higher-ranked than functional ones?
4. How can one explain the numerous instances of diverse sources and paths, but uniform results of language change? This seeming paradox may be resolved if one regards human language as an adaptive system and considers universal cognitive and social factors that operate in grammaticalization and other processes of language change. Some of these factors are the following:
   - iconicity and analogy,
   - economy based on 'pragmatic commonness',
   - universals of event conceptualization,
   - functional pressures on speech-act distinctions,
   - universal distributional asymmetries of reference and topicality.

5. What can linguistics gain from the triangulation of diachronic evidence, synchronic (multivariate) corpus-based studies and typological evidence?
6. In many cases, diachronic data are not available. Is it possible to infer the causal structure behind the synchronic distributions without diachronic evidence? Possible suggestions are statistical causal analysis of synchronic correlations and use of dialectal data.

All these questions are illustrated by case studies based on a broad range of typologically diverse languages and language varieties, including pidgins and creoles. The linguistic phenomena under investigation are equally diverse, from palatalization and labialization to valency-changing derivations and verbal paradigms, and from question words and possessive pronouns to word order and verbal complementation.

References

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