

The languages of Mainland Southeast Asia and their typological characteristics between hidden and overt complexity

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The present paper will look at MSEA languages and their typological properties from the perspective of three hypotheses:

- (i) The pragmatic inference of grammatical categories is developed to a high degree in MSEA languages, cf. “hidden complexity” in Bisang (2009).
- (ii) Hidden complexity is the result of maturation brought about by at least three factors: language contact, the initial properties of the languages involved at the time of contact, certain phonological properties.
- (iii) Hidden complexity leads to area-specific interactions across different grammatical categories.

I will start out from the idea that the grammatical properties of languages are determined to a considerable extent by the two independent and competing motivations of explicitness vs. economy (Haiman 1983, among others). While explicitness is based on articulation and has the advantage of reducing the number of potential interpretations of an utterance, economy activates pragmatic inferences that can produce and assess much more information in a much shorter time than is possible with articulation. From such a perspective “inference is cheap, articulation expensive” (cf. Levinson 2000: 29 on the “articulatory bottleneck”).

Explicitness-based articulation leads to what I call “overt complexity” and basically corresponds to grammatical complexity as discussed by McWhorter (2001, 2005) and Dahl (2004). Economy-based hidden complexity allows minimal, simple-looking surface structures whose interpretation in terms of grammatical categories needs pragmatic inference or pragmatic enrichment. MSEA languages have developed hidden complexity to a particularly high degree. The examples that will be briefly addressed are (i) radical pro-drop, (ii) multiple coreference options in relative clauses, (iii) lack of relation marking in clause combining and (iv) bare nouns with their wide range of interpretations (on (i) to (iii), cf. Bisang forth).

Both types of complexity are the result of maturation. Explicitness-oriented maturation is discussed by Dahl (2004) and is based on overt morphosyntactic structures. Economy-oriented maturation extends the potential of grammars to express only that part of grammar which is minimally necessary for the interpretation of an utterance with a limited number of grammatical markers. As is to be expected from explicitness-oriented maturation, MSEA languages have developed markers of sometimes very fine-grained grammatical distinctions (e.g. tense-aspect, directional markers, coverbs/prepositions, numeral classifiers, etc.). The effects of economy-oriented maturation operate against what is expected from the comparative observation of other languages in (i) preventing even highly grammaticalized markers from becoming obligatory and in allowing one and the same marker to be multifunctional (e.g. ‘give’-verbs or ‘come to have’-verbs; for the latter, cf. Enfield 2003). The factors that enhance and stabilize such a high degree of economy are (i) language contact and (ii) the properties of the languages at the initial stage and (iii) phonological properties.

The high relevance of hidden complexity favours interactions across grammatical categories. This will be illustrated by the (in)definiteness interpretation of the classifier (CL) in [CL+noun] constructions (Li & Bisang 2012). In Sinitic, the interpretation of CL in

[CL+noun] interacts with information structure as it is associated with the preverbal and the postverbal positions. For that reason, the CL marks definiteness in the preverbal position and indefiniteness in the postverbal position. In MSEA languages, information structure works differently. For that reason, the CL can develop into a marker that comes close to a definiteness marker in some of these languages (but with specific differences from articles in English or German). It goes without saying that this type of area-specific properties is hard to detect with large-scale typological statistics. What is needed are detailed analyses of individual grammatical systems.

References

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