

Social and Grammatical Complexity: Language Spread and TAM Marking (oral presentation)

A naive layman's view would have it that more complex societies have more complex languages. Professional linguists have rejected this view, initially by adopting the dogma that all languages are of equal grammatical complexity, and more recently with proposals by McWhorter, Trudgill and others to the effect that languages of large nation states actually tend to be simpler than their counterparts associated with smaller speech communities. This paper, however, argues that in one domain at least, the original naive layman's view is factually correct.

This paper presents empirical evidence for a correlation between language spread and Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM) marking. A typological study of 868 languages distinguishes between two grammatical types:

- (1) *TAM marking*
 - (a) *obligatory*: if all basic declarative affirmative main clauses contain an overt grammatical expression of at least one TAM category
 - (b) *optional*: if basic declarative affirmative main clauses may occur without any overt grammatical expression of any TAM categories

Worldwide, both types enjoy widespread distribution, though with striking areal patterns: a large contiguous area of obligatory TAM marking encompasses East and North Africa plus West, North and South Eurasia, while another large area of optional TAM marking includes Mainland and Insular Southeast Asia plus parts of Western New Guinea.

The occurrence of obligatory TAM marking correlates positively with languages that belong to large genealogical families that have, at some time in the past, undergone spread over extensive land masses. Quantitatively, this correlation can be demonstrated by assigning to each language various indices representing the size of its genus and/or family in accordance with various databases such as *WALS* or *Ethnologue*. Qualitatively, this correlation can be observed in specific families or regions characterized by a mix of spread and other languages. For example, within the Niger Congo family, Bantu languages, a prime example of language spread, are overwhelmingly obligatory TAM marking, while non-Bantu languages are majority optional TAM marking. Similarly, in the greater New Guinea area, amongst the Non-Austronesian languages, the one large spread family, namely Trans-New-Guinea, is almost exclusively obligatory TAM marking, while families belonging to other smaller families are majority optional TAM marking.

The correlation between language spread and TAM marking may thus be viewed as an instance in which social and grammatical complexity correlate positively. Although seeming to contradict the abovementioned proposals by McWhorter and Trudgill, there is in fact no conflict, since the correlations apply at different historical stages. For example, complexification and the development of obligatory TAM marking would have occurred at the earliest stages of Indo-European if not before, while simplification takes place much later as English becomes a "Non-Hybrid Conventionalized Second-Language" and its descendant creole varieties then move from obligatory to optional TAM marking. In conclusion, it is suggested that the correlation between social and grammatical complexity demonstrated here may provide a model for similar developments in the realms of early child language acquisition and in the evolution of human language itself.