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Functional Explanations for Referential Hierarchy Effects on Grammar

oral/poster

The growing documentation and analysis of American indigenous and other understudied languages has revealed several unique grammatical systems based on referential hierarchies, some of which overtly express event direction, triggering a recent surge in typological work on the topic (Bickel 2008a, Richards and Malchukov (eds) 2008, Zavala 2007, Zúñiga 2006, 2008). However, it is still unclear whether hierarchical systems should be treated as an alignment type in its own right (Nichols 1992, Siewierska 2005, Zúñiga 2006), viewed in terms of voice (Givón 1994, Shibatani 2006), or analyzed based on the properties of individual systems (Bickel 2008a). In this paper I examine referential hierarchy effects on grammatical marking in 40 languages. My aim is to show that all hierarchical systems can be explained in terms of subjectivity, politeness, and topicality, and that in different languages these functions are fulfilled in structurally distinct ways conditioned by genetic inheritance and contact-induced change, as proposed by Bickel (2008a), consequently supporting the idiosyncratic approach.

Previous studies have focused either on a specific subcategory of hierarchical systems, i.e. inversion (Klaiman 1992, Zavala 2007, Zúñiga 2006, 2008) or obviation (Aissen 1997, Dryer 1992), on a particular structural correlate (Bickel 2008b), on the origin of hierarchy effects (Mithun 2010, in press), or on individual systems. This work attempts to consolidate and expand these studies by examining a large number of languages. The following parameters are analyzed for each language: (a) domain (i.e. involving speech-act participants or not), (b) locus of marking, (c) type and presence of person marking, (d) presence of event direction marking, (e) alignment type, (f) presence of obviation and specific obviation triggers, and (g) rankings in individual hierarchies.

The results reveal vast formal variability among the languages studied and, therefore, a difficulty for categorizing. Nevertheless, strong similarities are apparent within language families (e.g. Algonquian, Mixe-Zoquean, Sahaptian) and in linguistic areas (e.g. California), thus corroborating Bickel's (2008a) claim that genetic and areal reasons rather than universals account for structural patterns in referential hierarchies. Most languages exhibit ergative or mixed alignment, although hierarchy effects are irrelevant in intransitive clauses. Inverse languages often use different markers for A and O, in addition to marking event direction, but not in all scenarios. Languages labeled as hierarchical (but not inverse), generally leave third persons unmarked and do not show obviation, but they present mechanisms similar to inverse marking (i.e. passives) where inverse would be expected (e.g. Yana, Yurok), hence equally marking event direction. Whereas rankings generally follow the animacy hierarchy (Silverstein 1976), the ranking of speech-act participants exhibits variability. Systems where first persons always surface can be related to subjectivity (Scheibman 2002), while higher ranking second persons can be associated with politeness (Mithun 2008). All other rankings are based on topicality with higher ranked participants being more topical.

Overall, the analysis of referential hierarchy effects in 40 languages provides evidence of great structural variability linked to genetic and areal sources therefore favoring an idiosyncratic structural and a functional approach and arguing against hierarchical systems as a separate alignment type.