

The decay of direct/inverse systems

- Oral / Poster
- Theme session 2: Typological hierarchies in synchrony and diachrony

Two general diachronic causes can be proposed to explain the relative rarity of prototypical direct/inverse systems in the world's languages.

First, the pathways of grammaticalization leading to the creation of direct/inverse systems might be complex and unusual, in which case few such systems would be created to begin with.

Second, these systems could be unstable, and hence subject to decay, optionally giving rise to a new type of agreement. Since most languages with direct/inverse systems are either isolates (Mapudungu, Movima, Kutenai) or very small families (Sahaptian, Shastan, Kiowa-Tanoan), the diachronic stability of these systems is difficult to assess. Among larger families, in which diachronic hypotheses are easier to evaluate, only two have direct/inverse systems: Algonquian and Sino-Tibetan.

In the first one, direct/inverse systems appear to be very stable, as even very innovative languages, such as Arapaho, preserve them fully.

In Sino-Tibetan, on the other hand, there is no consensus as to whether the direct/inverse systems observed in some branches are ancient (as proposed by DeLancey (1981)) or innovative. Even in the subgroups where prototypical direct/inverse systems are attested, as in Rgyalrongic, not all languages share this feature. Sino-Tibetan seems thus to be the ideal testground for studying both the development and the dissolution of direct/inverse systems. The presentation will accordingly focus on the issue of decay of direct/inverse systems in two subgroups of Sino-Tibetan: Rgyalrongic and Kiranti.

First, based on first-hand data on two Rgyalrongic languages (Japhug and Resnyeske), we show how a formerly pristine direct/inverse system, attested in the central Rgyalrong languages (see Sun and Shidanluo (2002), Jacques (2010), Gong (to appear)) has changed into opaque and partly hierarchical systems in the neighbouring Lavrung and Rtau languages. The most unexpected outcome of this research is the discovery that when the direct/inverse contrast is lost in 3>3 forms, it is always the inverse form that is preserved and the direct one that is lost (Jacques (2012)).

Second, we show that some Kiranti languages have apparently undergone a similar pathway of evolution as Rtau and Lavrung, and propose some elements of reconstruction of proto-Kiranti morphology.

By presenting some possible pathways of decay for direct/inverse systems this study shows that opaque hierarchical systems may in some cases have

evolved from prototypical direct/inverse systems which have lost their synchronic motivation due to a combination of phonetic change and analogy.

References

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