abstract 033

How widespread is transitive encoding?

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It is often taken for granted that languages have a large number of transitive verbs, or even that the typical two-argument verb is transitive. But we know that languages differ in the extent to which they make use of transitive encoding (e.g. Hawkins 1986 on English/German contrasts: in German, verbs like 'help' and 'follow' are not encoded transitively). Typological studies such as Tsunoda (1985) and Malchukov (2005) have tried to formulate generalizations concerning the kinds of verb meanings that tend to be coded non-transitively in different languages. But so far there has been no serious published attempt to quantify transitive encoding: How strongly do languages differ? Is English atypical in the prominence it accords to transitive encoding? There seem to be three major obstacles to such quantification: how to define transitivity cross-linguistically, how to sample verbs, and how to get systematic cross-linguistic data.

In this presentation, we report on a major study of valency patterns in 35 languages from around the world, which allows us to overcome the data obstacle: We brought together a consortium of 35 author teams (experts in their respective languages) to provide a dataset of about 80 verbs with detailed valency information. The individual datasets are comparable because they consist of counterparts to the same set of 80 basic verb meanings. (The aggregated database, called ValPaL [="Valency Patterns Leipzig"] will be published online, so that our results can be easily verified.)

As for the two first obstacles, we basically follow the path of Greenberg (1963): We define our comparative concepts in a rigorous way, but we do not make an attempt to justify them, being content with some intuition-based decisions. This concerns, in particular, the choice of 80 verb meanings: We tried to include verb meanings of diverse kinds, which seem to us reasonably representative. As argued by Lazard (2005), intuition-based decisions are unavoidable in typology and do not detract from the methodological rigour of the enterprise. Our definition of transitivity follows Lazard (2002) and Haspelmath (2011) in spirit: We start out from the typical transitive verb 'break' and define "transitive encoding" as the encoding that is used by this verb. A verb is considered transitive if it contains an A and a P argument, and A and P are defined as the arguments that are coded like the 'breaker' and the 'broken thing' roles of the 'break' verb. We have found that this definition appears to give the same result as the criterion of "major two-argument verb class" (Witzlack-Makarevich 2011), but it is easier to apply.

Our findings are not particularly surprising: Languages differ in the extent to which they use transitive encoding in their ca. 80 sample verbs, but not dramatically: All our 35 languages have the transitive class as their major verb class, so the prominence of transitivity seems to be a robust language universal. What is perhaps most surprising is that English is not extreme in its degree of transitivity prominence.