The referential hierarchy: reviewing the evidence in diachronic perspective

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The referential hierarchy, 1st person pronouns > 2nd person pronouns > 3rd person pronouns > kin > human > animate > inanimate, has been accounted for in terms of a variety of factors, such as animacy, topicality, definiteness and natural attention flow (Dixon 1979 and 1994, Comrie 1989, DeLancey 1981, Corbett 2000, Song 2001, Croft 2003, among others). These explanations have been proposed based on the synchronic association between individual factors and the presence of particular constructions, independently of the diachronic processes that give rise to these constructions in individual languages.

The paper discusses extensive cross-linguistic evidence about the possible diachronic origins of three major phenomena that have been described in terms of the referential hierarchy, namely alignment splits in case marking, hierarchical alignment, and the presence of singular vs. plural distinctions for different NP types. This evidence poses several challenges both for the explanations that have been proposed for the referential hierarchy on synchronic grounds, and for the very idea of a referential hierarchy, in the sense of a scalar alignment of particular NP types that is relevant for speakers and leads them to use different constructions for these NPs. In particular:

(i) The various constructions involved in alignment splits, hierarchical alignment, and the encoding of singular vs. plural distinctions arise as a result of processes of context-induced reinterpretation of particular source constructions (for example, the reinterpretation of various types of source elements as markers of particular argument roles or plural markers, and the reinterpretation of cislocatives and third person markers as inverse markers). These processes are based on highly specific contextual relationships between the meaning of the source construction and that of the resulting construction, rather than general factors pertaining to different NP types on the hierarchy such as animacy, topicality, definiteness, or natural attention flow.

(ii) The distributional patterns attested for individual constructions also do not appear to originate from these factors. Rather, they reflect the distribution of specific source constructions. When a construction is restricted to particular portions of the referential hierarchy (as is the case with some case or plural markers, and inverse markers), it originates from a construction that is restricted in a similar way. When the distribution of the source construction is unconstrained (as is the case with the constructions that give rise to other case or plural markers), so is the distribution of the resulting construction.

(iii) Different patterns pertaining to the same grammatical domain (for example, different alignment patterns or different types of restrictions in the distribution of singular vs. plural distinctions) originate from different diachronic processes, and the same holds for the various instances of individual patterns in different languages, for example the various instances of hierarchical aligment, or the various cases where a singular vs. plural distinction is limited to human or animate nouns. This suggests that, contrary to the traditional view, the patterns described by the referential hierarchy are not amenable to a unified explanation, and the hierarchy is best regarded as a schema that is general enough to capture the outputs of several independent diachronic processes.