

Mapping the semantics of pronominal clitics in Iranian

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Semantic maps have proved highly applicable for representing the functions typically associated with dative-type grams. They also have considerable explanatory power as a model for understanding diachronic developments (Haspelmath, 2003). In this contribution I will combine these two aspects by mapping the functional shifts in the clitic pronouns of Iranian, which have undergone various radial extensions from a benefactive/external possessor core over a two-and-a-half thousand year time frame (Haig, Forthcoming). Functional expansion occurred through massive syncretism, as the erstwhile distinct Old Iranian Dative and Accusative clitics disappeared and their functions were absorbed by what was, etymologically, the old Iranian Genitive. The result was a single set of ‘oblique’ clitic pronouns, found in an extremely wide range of Iranian languages past and present. But unlike the dative clitics familiar from Romance and other languages, these pronouns also extended functionally to express transitive subjects in the past tenses.

Although the resulting systems exhibit rich cross-language variation, the distribution of functions can be shown to be tightly constrained, hence allowing the formulation of a number of hypotheses regarding possible paths of historical development. It will be argued that the two-dimensional approach to case functions advocated by Lehmann et al. (2004), distinguishing direct (control/affectedness) from indirect involvement, provides the most apt framework for capturing the essence of the Iranian system, and for tracing its development in a comparative perspective. The broader issues to be raised in the paper concern the efficacy of semantic maps for modelling patterns of syncretism, and the relative amount of construction-specific meaning which needs to be included in the functional categories adopted for a particular semantic map.

References

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