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Competing motivation models and diachrony: what evidence for what motivations?

Competing motivation models are usually established on synchronic grounds. If different constructions can plausibly be associated with different functional motivations, then it is assumed that the interaction between these motivations determines the distribution of the constructions. This holds both for classical competing motivations models, as used in the functional-typological approach, and Optimality Theory models.

In the functional-typological approach, however, cross-linguistic patterns are the result of diachronic processes leading to the creation of the relevant constructions in individual languages (Bybee 1988, Newmeyer 2002, Dryer 2006). This paper argues that, in many cases, these processes pose a number of challenges for existing competing motivation models. Attention will be focused on various processes pertaining to alignment patterns and zero vs. overt marking. In particular:

(i) The motivations postulated in a particular model may turn out to play no direct role in the diachronic development of the relevant constructions. In this case, the constructions provide no evidence of a competition between these particular motivations. For example, a number of processes of form-function reanalysis have been described whereby accusative, ergative, and patient markers originate, respectively, from serial verb constructions, oblique or possessive markers, and object markers (Anderson 1977, Lord 1993, Malchukov 2008, Mithun 2008, among several others). These processes can be accounted for in terms of mechanisms of contextual inference which are independent of the motivations that have been invoked to account for the existence of different alignment patterns on synchronic grounds, e.g. principles that lead speakers to associate different argument types (Du Bois 1985), or the need to mark some particular argument as opposed to others (Comrie 1989, Dixon 1994, Aissen 2003). Likewise, overt expression of plural may originate from contextual inferences that lead speakers to grammaticalize distributives, collectives, duals, or paucals, or constructions involving nouns of multitude (Lynch 1977, Mithun 1999, Corbett 2000). Overt marking for singular/plural (as found in gender-number portmanteau morphemes) and person may arise through the grammaticalization of demonstratives and personal pronouns (Greenberg 1978, Heine and Reh 1984, Mithun 1991, Siewierska 2004), and thus is related to what categorial distinctions are originally available for these elements in the language. These processes are arguably distinct from the competing motivations postulated to account for the distribution of zero vs. overt marking on synchronic grounds, such as e.g. iconicity and economy (Haiman 1985, Croft 2003).

(ii) The very notion of competing motivations may not provide an adequate account for particular distributional patterns. If different constructions originate from processes of form-function reanalysis, then their distribution is related to what source constructions are originally available in the language and how these can be reanalyzed (e.g. through mechanisms of contextual inference), rather than being the result of a competition between alternative functional principles that lead speakers to create different constructions. There may still be a competition between different motivations in this case, but only in the relatively general sense of a competition between the tendency to maintain the conventions of the language (Newmeyer 2002) and the principles leading to reanalysis.

While these facts do not invalidate the idea that cross-linguistic patterns may be the result of different functional principles, they suggest that any model of the interaction of these principles in a speaker's mind should take into consideration, on a case-by-case basis, the diachronic processes that may possibly contribute to the shaping of the relevant patterns.

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