

Title: “Schematizing cross-linguistic variation: the case of reciprocal constructions”

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The reliance on in-depth analyses of grammatical categories in individual languages becomes challenging once integrated into a cross-linguistic (typological) perspective. The detailed and carefully selected data sets from individual languages must form the empirical basis of cross-linguistic comparison and resulting generalizations. Yet, by its very nature, the typological perspective forces the linguist to abstract away from many idiosyncrasies and differences that subsist between languages, and to adopt a terminology that is capable of capturing the similarities in form and meaning.

I here present a method of schematization of concrete data sets (see below) taken from different languages, which allows one to conduct cross-linguistic comparisons, however without losing the language-specific perspective out of sight. The merit of this method, besides resulting in rather concrete, easily interpretable visualizations (schematic diagrams), lies in the fact that comprehensive data sets on grammatical features from different languages can be concisely summarized and juxtaposed to one another, and moreover exploited in quite different ways, depending on the specific formal/semantic parameters chosen for cross-linguistic comparison.

For illustration, I turn to a well-studied grammatical phenomenon, the reciprocal construction, which has been comprehensively studied over past decades in both the descriptive and typological literature (e.g., Nedjalkov 2007; König & Gast 2008; Evans et al. 2011; Maslova & Nedjalkov 2005; König & Kokutani 2006; Evans 2008). In part, I will draw on data sets sampled from primary sources (e.g., descriptive grammars, dictionaries) on a selected number of Australian and Papuan languages. In addition, I will include data presented elsewhere in the literature on reciprocals (cf. the above-mentioned references) to demonstrate that the method presented is applicable and amenable to quite different data resources.

In presenting the data on reciprocals, I will assume both a cross-regional and regional perspective. The cross-regional comparison focuses on the fact that languages tend to rely on quite different structural means for the expression of reciprocal ‘each other’ meanings (e.g., verb-marking vs. argument-marking strategies, cf. König & Kokutani 2006), but that such different types of structural encoding and their contexts of occurrence (e.g., preferably with non-symmetrical word forms) are yet recurrent across languages. The regional comparison in turn illustrates that both cognate and analogous instances of grammaticalization need consideration, but that cognate marking patterns often require rather different synchronic assessments from one another. For example, variants of the verbal suffix *-nyji are widely distributed among non-Pama-Nyungan languages of Northern Australia (cf. Alpher, Evans & Harvey 2003), yet their productivity and functional status as dedicated markers of reciprocity differs quite strikingly from one language to another.

I propose that the method of schematization presented here can contribute to cross-linguistic generalizations, because it allows one to visualize in single diagrams comprehensive data sets from individual languages, while at the same time enabling linguists to integrate these into the broader perspective of cross-linguistic comparison. In this context, the term ‘family resemblance’ in reference to analogous or cognate instances of grammaticalization (e.g., Evans & Levinson 2009) also receives a very concrete visual interpretation.