

Evolution of person bound indexes: the dynamic-typology approach

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There are three hypotheses that have been made w.r.t. verb bound person indexes: **(the strong hypothesis)** the third person is frequently zero-coded and an overt exponent is rather exceptional (Benveniste 1971; Koch 1995); **(the moderate hypothesis)** the third person tends to be zero-marked (Bybee 1985: 53; Cysouw 2003: 61-2; Siewierska 2010); **(the weak hypothesis)** zeros – if any – tend to occur in the third person (Bickel et al. 2015).

I will test these hypotheses on 137 languages from 5 families (Dravidian, Turkic, Indo-European, Mayan and Finno-Ugric) in such a way that I contrast the values reconstructed for the respective proto-languages on the basis of the traditional Historical-Comparative Method for each person/number index with the respective values of ca. 30 modern languages per family in order to establish diachronic trends which would hold across time and genetic/areal affiliations. I will compare the lengths of the reconstructed form for the A/(S) person indexes with the length of the same form in the modern language in order to establish whether the index has increased or decreased in length and to what extent.

I will claim that there is a universal pressure for the third person to be shorter than the other persons of the same number set (moderate asymmetry; the weak hypothesis) that constraints the length of person/number indexes in the long run. Analogically, the method will reveal that there is a diachronic adaptive pressure for the plural set to be longer than the singular set. Moreover, I will argue that these results cannot be accounted for in terms of source-motivated tendency because the indexes undergo not only simple phonetic reduction in the course of time but also addition of morphological material (due to analogy) or replacement by new markers from very versatile sources.

Finally, I will argue for a functional motivation behind this. Haspelmath (2008: 5) drawing on Horn (1921) and Zipf (1935) argues that the more frequent a sign is the more predictable it is and, hence, needs less coding. Indeed, the third person indexes are more frequent than the ones of other persons. However, it seems that frequency in itself may be determined by functional and semantic motivations. I will argue on the basis of the trends obtained from some limited corpus data (Lithuanian (Indo-European), Tojolabal (Mayan)) and categorical bans (Finnish (Finno-Ugric), Hebrew (Semitic)) that in addition to the coding asymmetry there is also a semantic asymmetry: there is a tendency for the third person to desemantize (i.e. to become a non-referring expression) faster than this is the case with other persons. For example, the so-called “*pro-drop*” is often more restricted in the third person than it is in the first or second: contexts requiring more referential information – such as topic shifts – become incompatible with the third-person “*pro-drop*” more often than with “*pro-drop*” in other persons.

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