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Areal Typology of Agreement Systems

This paper will build upon recent research (Matasović 2014) which has shown that languages with adnominal agreement (i.e. agreement in the domain of the NP) almost always have verbal agreement (where the clause is the domain of agreement) as well. Languages with the former agreement pattern, but without the latter (henceforth languages of the [+NA & -VA] type), are very rare cross-linguistically. However, the sample used in our earlier work was rather limited (only 100 languages), and the definition of verbal agreement was somewhat narrow, as only languages with unambiguous person/number/gender affixes on verbs were counted as having verb agreement. In this paper, we shall use Haspelmath's notion of argument indexes (Haspelmath 2013) as representing verbal agreement, and show that the typological correlations observed in our earlier work still hold, i.e. that the [+NA & -VA] type is indeed unexpectedly rare cross-linguistically (with $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, by using a sample of 300 languages, we will look at different types of agreement (in terms of syntactic domains and agreeing categories) and show that the areal distribution of particular types is non-random. Moreover, some combinations of agreement features and domains are rare in all areas (e.g. languages with person, but not number agreement in the verb, or languages with gender, but not number agreement in the NP), while other combinations are “genetically” constrained, in that they are limited to a handful of language families (e.g. gender, but not person agreement in the verb, which is virtually limited to Nakh-Dagestanian languages).

In our earlier work it has been hypothesized that the cross-linguistic rareness of the [+NA & -VA] type has diachronic explanations, because agreement first arises on verbs, as person/gender/number argument indexes lose their referential status and become pure agreement markers, while adnominal agreement arises only if a language already has verbal agreement, by extension of an already present syntactic rule. This means that languages with adnominal agreement, but without verbal agreement, must have had verbal agreement at an earlier stage, but lost it (without also losing adnominal agreement). We will look at the attested instances of the [+NA & -VA] type and show that this indeed appears to be the case.

REFERENCES

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