Motivations III: Iconicity

1. Basic idea

Theories on iconicity assume a certain similarity of the sign with the concept it denotes. There is an isomorphism between a concept and the way in which it is expressed. Language structure reflects structures of experience. Haiman (1978, 1980, 1983, 1985) has published extensively on iconicity. I shall only present some examples in this handout.

Iconicity and conceptual distance:

The linguistic (morphosyntactic) distance between two linguistic items parallels their conceptual distance. If a language has two near-synonymous constructions which differ structurally in linguistic distance, they will differ semantically in (among other things) conceptual distance in a parallel fashion.

2. Alienable vs. inalienable possession

In languages which express alienable and inalienable possession by means of different constructions, the possessor and the possessed are morphosyntactically closer in the inalienable construction than in the alienable construction or they have the same distance in both constructions. What is excluded is the case in which inalienable possession is expressed with more morphosyntactic distance than alienable possession. The following example from Yabem (Jabêm: Austronesian; Papua-New Guinea; Dempwolff 1939: 20 - 23) is to illustrate this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inalienable possession (suffix)</th>
<th>Alienable possession (word)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>Body parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1s</td>
<td>-c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2s</td>
<td>-m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3s</td>
<td>-ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1pi</td>
<td>-ngi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1pe</td>
<td>-ngi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2p</td>
<td>-mi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3p</td>
<td>-ngi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(1) Inalienable possession: relatives:
gwadê-c 'my uncle', gwadê-m 'your uncle', gwadê 'his uncle', etc.

(2) Inalienable possession: body parts:
ôli-c 'my body', ôli-m 'your body', ôli 'his body', etc.

(3) Alienable possession:
ngoc àndu 'my house', nêm i 'your fish', ma wang 'our canoe',
nêm bu 'your water', etc.

3. Root serialization, verb serialization and switch-reference
in Alamblak (Papua New Guinea)

Verb serialization:
Verb serialization is (roughly defined) the juxtaposition of two (or more) finite verbal forms.

(4) Alamblak (Bruce 1988:24):
Yënt mi-ak-r-t, tita-r-t.
girl DOWN-get/take-3sm-3sf carry.on.shoulders-3sm-3sf
'He got the girl down (there); he carried her on his shoulders.'

Switch-Reference:
Switch-reference occurs in sequences of predicates in which the last verb of the last predicate is finite and the preceding predicates/verbs depend on it with regard to a certain operator (e.g. person, tense, illocutionary force). Switch-reference is marked on the non finite forms and indicates whether the subject or the actor of the next predicate will be identical to (SS = same subject/SA = same agent) or different from (DS = different subject, DA = different agent) from the predicate which it marks.

(5) Alamblak (Bruce 1988: 24):
Yënt mi-ak-hatê tita-r-t.
girl DOWN-get/take-SA carry.on.shoulders-3sm-3sf
'Having gotten the girl down (there), he carried her on his shoulders.'

Root serialization:
Two or more roots are integrated within one and the same verbal paradigm.

(6) Alamblak (Bruce 1988: 26):
Yënt mi-ak-tita-r-t.
girl DOWN-get/take-carry.on.shoulders -3sm-3sf
'He got (a/the) girl down there, carried (her) on (his) shoulders.'
Examples (4) to (6) basically are conceptually identical. The different types of their morphosyntactic expression has to do with different degrees of conceptual distance:

This comparison of Alamblak serial verbs with other syntactic and morphological forms suggests that the **degrees of morphological compactness** of two or more verb roots reflects the degree of conventionalization of the ideas as a single unit. (Bruce 1988:22)

Data ... will reveal that Alamblak serial constructions are more restricted than concatenated predicates but not as restricted as lexical words. It seems that verbs in serial constructions are governed by the same type of pragmatic constraint as is discourse as a whole, but more than being merely demonstrably associated, **they must be either commonly associated or in an association which is culturally significant in some pragmatic sense**, for them to be morphologized as a single word. Since the notion of 'common association’ is a semantico-pragmatic one a specific serial cannot be described or generated by a set of semantic selection rules ... . The notion can only be demonstrated by native speaker judgements and statistics which could serve as an index of the degree of conventionalization which has taken place. (Bruce 1988:23) (The bold print is mine, W.B.)

Some more examples of root serialization in Alamblak (Foley 1986: 117; Bruce 1984):

(7) **muh-hambrë-më-r-m.**
climb-look.for-REMPAST -3sm-3p
'He climbed [up there] and looked for them.‘

(8) **tat-noh-më-an-r.**
hit-die-REMPAST -1s-3sm
'I killed him by hitting him.‘

(9) **tandhi-ak-ni-më-t-m.**
cook-get-go-REMPAST-3sf-3p
'She cooked, got them and went.‘


4. On the coevolution of meaning and form: Bybee (1985)

In Bybee’s (1985) approach, semantic items can be combined according to five different morphosyntactic strategies:

Lexical strategy:
Two or more semantic elements are expressed in one single lexical unit: *kill* (*die* plus *cause*), *drop* (*fall* plus *cause*).

**Inflectional strategy:**
Each semantic element is expressed by a separate morphological unit combined into a word (affixation, ablaut). Inflection is characterised by obligatoriness:

A morphological category is inflectional if some member of the category obligatorily accompanies the radical element when it occurs in a finite clause. Thus, an inflectional category must be combinable with any stem with the proper syntactic and semantic features, yielding a predictable meaning. (Bybee 1985:11)

**Syntactic / periphrastic strategy:**
The semantic elements are expressed by independent units or words: *come to know* (*know* plus inchoative).

**Free grammatical strategy:**
The morphosyntactic elements which belong to this strategy are part of a closed set and occur in a fixed position, but they are not bound to a lexical element: Object nouns in French or Spanish: *Je le vois* (*I see him*); modal auxiliaries in English such *may, can, will* etc. According to Bybee, free grammatical items are also called *clitics, particles* or *auxiliaries*.

**Derivational strategy:**
On the one hand, derivational expressions are similar to lexical expressions inasmuch as they are not productive and sometimes idiosyncratic. On the other hand, derivational expressions are similar to inflection inasmuch as they consist of two morphemes which are combined within the boundaries of one word. The difference between inflection and derivation cannot be defined rigidly. There is a continuum between lexical and inflectional strategies. The most clear-cut definitional criterion is that of obligatoriness. Moreover, Bybee (1985) makes a distinction between derivational morphemes which change the word class of a lexeme and derivational morphemes which don’t.

The above five strategies are characterised by different degrees of fusion (morphosyntactic cohesion) within the following continuum:

\[
\text{lexical} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{derivational} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{inflectional} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{free grammatical} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{syntactic}
\]

\[\text{greater degree of fusion}\]

Table 1 (from: Bybee 1985: 12)

The lexical strategy is characterised by the highest degree of fusion. Both semantic elements are expressed within one single unanalysable and undistinguishable morpheme. The lowest degree of fusion is found in the syntactic strategy (juxtaposition of two independent words). The other three strategies are situated between these two poles.

The degree of morphosyntactic fusion is determined by two semantic concepts, i.e. *relevance* and *generality*, which are defined as follows:

Relevance: a meaning element is relevant to another meaning element, if the semantic
content of the first directly affects or modifies the semantic content of the second. (Bybee 1985: 13)

Generality: By definition, an inflectional category must be applicable to all stems of the appropriate semantic and syntactic category and must obligatorily occur in the appropriate syntactic context. In order for a morphological process to be so general, it must have only minimal semantic content. (Bybee 1985: 16)

Relevance/Generality: Relevance applies to categories of all kinds—lexical, derivational, inflectional, and periphrastic. However, generality distinguishes inflectional from all the rest. Inflectional categories are more general—have a wider range of applicability with predictable meaning—than lexical, derivational, or periphrastic categories. Thus generality is a necessary defining feature of inflection. (Bybee et al. 1994: 22)

The cooperation of these two concepts or principles can be seen from the following statistics based on Bybee’s 50 language-sample. Table 2 shows the percentage of languages which express each of the five grammatical categories such as valency etc. by means of inflection or derivation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Inflection</th>
<th>Derivation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valency</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number agreement</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person agreement (subject)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person agreement (object)</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender agreement</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 (from: Bybee 1985: 30 - 31)

Definitions:

*Valence* refers to differences in the number or role of argument that the verb stem can take.

*Voice* indicates the perspective from which the situation described by the verb stem is viewed.

*Aspect* refers to the way the internal temporal constituency of the situation is viewed.

*Tense* places the situation in time with respect to an established point in time, either the moment of speech, or some other point in time.

*Mood* refers to the way the speaker presents the truth of the proposition in the discourse and real-world context. Included here are expressions of probability, possibility and certainty. *Evidentials* indicate the source of the information expressed by the proposition and were included under mood.

*Number agreement* is concord with one or more of the arguments of the verb. Subject, object and indirect object agreement are distinguished.

*Person agreement* is concord by person with one or more of the arguments of the verb. Subject, object and indirect object agreement are distinguished.

*Gender agreement* is concord with one or more arguments of the verb according to their assignment to lexical classes either arbitrarily or based on inherent qualities of the entity referred to.
The above eight grammatical categories are arranged according to their degree of relevance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inflectional</th>
<th>Lexical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number agreement</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person agreement</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender agreement</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 (from Bybee 1985: 24)

The categories which present the highest degree of relevance according to Table 3 can not only be expressed inflectionally but also derivationally (cf. table 2). This behaviour depends on the degree of generality. The semantic content of a sign must be relatively general for that sign to be combined to a sufficiently large number of verbal roots. This high degree of generality is often not reached by the categories of valency, voice, and aspect. The semantics of the signs representing one of these categories is often not specific enough and thus such a sign cannot be expressed inflectionally.

References:


