

Grammatical maturity as form-meaning asymmetry

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Maturity in grammars is a feature that is correlated to complexity (Dahl 2004). However, it is difficult to provide exact measures of maturity (Dahl 2004, 106). I argue that maturity often manifests itself as form-meaning asymmetry, which is in its turn an indicator of linguistic complexity. As a consequence, languages that lack mature phenomena should also be less complex, and this conclusion is corroborated by many studies on creole languages (most notably McWhorter 2001).

Mature phenomena presuppose a non-trivial prehistory (Dahl 2004, 106). When a word starts becoming grammaticalized, it usually has a clearly definable meaning and is long enough not to coincide with other words. Thus, at the beginning of the grammaticalization process, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the form of the grammaticalized item and its meaning. Later, this correspondence can evolve into an asymmetrical relation (“one form — many meanings” or “many forms — one meaning”)

One can distinguish between syntagmatic and paradigmatic form-meaning asymmetry. The syntagmatic asymmetry can be observed within a sentence. If a meaning is expressed by more than one element, it is **redundancy (agreement)**, cf. Latin *mēns-a magn-a* ‘table-NOM.SG big-NOM.SG.FEM’. If a form conveys more than one meaning, it is **cumulative expression (fusion)**, cf. Latin *mēns-a* ‘table-NOM.SG’. The paradigmatic asymmetry can be observed when comparing paradigms with each other. If a grammatical morpheme expresses different meanings in different paradigms, it is **homonymy** (cf. English *boy-s* ‘boy-PL’, *play-s* ‘play-3SG’), and if many meanings are expressed by the same morpheme, it is **synonymy** (cf. English *boy-s* ‘boy-PL’, *ox-en* ‘ox-PL’). Redundancy, cumulative expression, homonymy and synonymy are difficult to quantify, but they clearly contribute to the complexity of languages.

These four phenomena are virtually absent from the grammars of most creole languages which are also considered to be generally simpler than non-creole languages. This is easy to explain because creole languages have a shorter history and did not have enough time to develop redundancy, cumulative expression, homonymy and synonymy of grammatical markers. Sure enough, the absence of these features alone is not enough to distinguish creoles from non-creole languages, but they can be used for quantifying linguistic complexity. However, a metric which would encapsulate all these four features is still to be developed.

References

- Dahl, Östen. 2004. *The Growth and Maintenance of Linguistic Complexity*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- McWhorter, John H. 2001. “The World’s Simplest Grammars Are Creole Grammars.” *Linguistic Typology* 5:125–166.