

The Evolution of Spatial Orientation Systems in Mayan and Nuristani

The diversity of spatial orientation systems in the world's languages has fascinated linguists, anthropologists and cognitive scientists alike (cf. Levinson 1998) and it has been taken as one of the few compelling arguments in favor of linguistic relativity (cf. Levinson 1996: 195-196).

Nevertheless, we still know little about how complex geomorphic orientation systems evolve diachronically or about the lexical sources that end up as elements of their paradigms. Palmer's (2015: 210) hypothesis that "a correlation will exist between a language's system of absolute spatial reference and the topography of the language locus" would suggest that certain environments favor the development of certain kinds of spatial systems. If this is the case, then it should be possible to compare the development of spatial orientation systems within language families that, e.g., have members both in mountainous and in flat environments.

In two case studies, we trace the evolution of spatial orientation paradigms from a variety of constructions involving motion verbs in Mayan languages and from adverbial formations in Nuristani languages. The fact that diverse sources lead to similar outcomes in unrelated languages spoken in similar environments, whereas related languages spoken in different environments do not develop the same amount of semantic distinctions, lends credence to the idea that the physical environment can under certain circumstances have a direct impact on linguistic structures and that linguistic coordinate systems "are constructed in response to the environment" (Palmer 2015: 210).

References

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