The areality of the consecutive pattern in Mesoamerican languages

It is clear that clause-linkage strategies can be transferred across family lines with or without substance. The theoretical importance of exploring this domain has been highlighted by various typological studies (e.g. Schmidtke-Bode 2009: 202–203; Martowicz 2011: 327; Hetterle 2015: 269). However, we are just beginning to learn about the myriad ways this can happen. The present paper analyzes the areality of the consecutive construction, a clause-linkage pattern that has received little attention cross-linguistically.

The term consecutive refers to constructions in which only the first clause shows the formal characteristics of an independent clause, and the following clause or clauses are characterized by a reduction or lack of verbal inflection, and/or by the use of a verbal form called the CONSECUTIVE (Creissels et al. 2008:140; Vydrin 2020: 85). In (1), the temporal frame of the discourse is initially anchored with the past tense marker -a-, and the second clause appears with the consecutive marker ka-.

Manda (Atlantic-Congo/Bantu)
(1)   *va-**a**-l-ili*,   *va-**ka**-wʋk-a…*
         3PL.SBJ-PST-eat-PST   3PL.SBJ-CONS-depart-FV
         'They ate, and then they went from there…' (Bernander 2017: 196)

While the consecutive is common in many African languages, this construction is also attested in other areas of the world, such as Australia (Jones 2011: 270), and Oceanic (Lynch 1978: 50). This suggests that the consecutive is not a unique African phenomenon. Intriguingly, the consecutive pattern appears in various parts of the world in areal clusters. If neighboring languages have similar rare patterns for expressing temporal subsequence, it is statistically unlikely that these languages have undergone such a developmental process independently of one another. Accordingly, the parallelisms are not easily explained by chance. They cannot be explained as a common inherence, because the languages are not all genetically related. The most likely explanation is language contact, because the languages are spoken in the same geographical region, but it is difficult to see how such fundamental but abstract patterns could be transferred from one language to another.

The question is: How could such deeply-integrated grammatical systems be transferred, usually without substance? Here this question is explored in four genealogically Mesoamerican unrelated languages: Huasteca Nahuatl, Papantla Totonac, San Gabriel Huastec, and Uxpanapa Chinantec.

Based on a number of intra-genetic variance analyses, systematically informed by what is known from social/cultural history, it is proposed that Huasteca Nahuatl served as the source. The consecutive pattern in Huasteca Nahuatl has different functions. It is used for indicating temporal subsequence, motion-cum-purpose, tail-head linkage, afterthoughts, and commands. Intriguingly, while some neighboring languages have copied some of these functions from Huasteca Nahuatl, others have also copied some of these functions, and developed others.

Although some details must remain an object of speculation, close comparison of the systems for marking the consecutive in Huasteca Nahuatl, Papantla Totonac, San Gabriel Huastec, and Uxpanapa Chinantec provides a glimpse of some ways in which areal concentrations might develop.

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