

Ambiguity avoidance vs. expectation sensitivity as functional factors in language change and language structures: Beyond argument marking

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There is a long tradition of invoking ambiguity avoidance as a functional factor in explaining the rise of differential argument marking (e.g. Caldwell (1856: 271), who suggested that special accusative marking in Dravidian is employed “in order to avoid misapprehension”). But more recently, some authors have contrasted anti-ambiguity as a motivating factor with “predictability-based marking” or “expectation sensitivity” (e.g. Haspelmath 2019: §8; Tal et al. 2022: §1.2; see also Zehentner 2022 for discussion).

In this presentation, I will revisit the debate, also making reference to Grice’s “Avoid ambiguity” maxim and recent psycholinguistic perspectives such as Wasow (2015), as well as the recent typological perspective of Seržant (2019). My critique of the anti-ambiguity explanation will start out from a discussion of the concepts of ambiguity, polysemy, and indeterminacy (= vagueness), which are not often kept apart clearly. Especially in (lexical) semantic-map research (e.g. Georgakopoulos & Polis 2021), “polysemy” (which should be the same as ambiguity) is often conflated with indeterminacy. But indeterminacy is of course rampant in language structures, and it could not be otherwise because there is no way to specify every aspect of meaning that might conceivably be interesting.

On the empirical side, I will extend the discussion of diachronic motivations and pathways from argument marking to other kinds of differential coding, such as alienable vs. inalienable contrasts (e.g. Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1996), independent vs. dependent possessor forms (e.g. Michaelis 2019), causative vs. anticausative marking (e.g. Haspelmath 2016; Inglese 2022), and plurative vs. singulative marking (e.g. Grimm 2018). I will argue that in all these systematic differential-coding situations, expectation-sensitivity provides a good explanation of the typological patterns and their diachronic motivations, while ambiguity avoidance is often irrelevant. This is a very indirect argument in favour of anti-ambiguity explanations, but since the understanding of diachronic change typically relies on indirect inferences, these considerations seem highly relevant to the broader picture.

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