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Levels of explicitness

The case of markers of encoding states of affairs relations

It has been claimed repetitively that a number of speakers as well as the presence of written form are the factors which correlate with the level of explicitness of a language. There is, however, a serious problem we encounter when trying to verify this hypothesis. The common sense definition of “explicitness” (*distinctly expressing all that is meant; leaving nothing merely implied or suggested; expressed*) widely used in linguistics (c.f. discussion on explicit case, tense, gender marking, explicit subject, object, verb, empty categories) is of little use. The reason for that is it usually refers to a simple binary distinction *expressed* vs *non-expressed* while a number of phenomena (especially from a crosslinguistic point of view) allow for various surface realizations and hence display degrees of explicitness. The existence of levels of explicitness with respect to some phenomena has been confirmed by a number of proposals such as continuum of explicitness of linking clauses, hierarchy of explicitness of relativization, explicitness hierarchy of homophones, hierarchy of explicitness of reference forms in sign and oral language, hierarchy of explicitness in the paradigm etc.

Trying to verify the hypothesis of socio-cultural correlates of explicitness I have focused on detailed comparison of strategies used to encode four states of affairs relations: anteriority, causality, purpose and conditionality in a sample of 100 languages. The (on-going) research has revealed that also in this case a simple binary distinction explicit vs implicit is not sufficient. In this paper I argue that the markers of the four adverbial relations mentioned reveal the following downgrading order of explicitness:

1. connectives distributed obligatory over main and subordinate clause,
2. connectives distributed optionally (i.e. where it is acceptable to omit one element of the pair),
3. one-word subordinators, complex (multi-word) subordinators, adverbial suffixes on final verb forms and clitics serving the function of connectives,
4. converbs,
5. relative clauses,
6. special verb forms (eg. subjunctives),
7. serial verb constructions,
8. coordination,
9. juxtaposition of clauses.

I distinguish between monofunctional and macrofunctional forms of connectives and between monofunctional and macrofunctional forms of converbs ascribing different levels of explicitness to them.

The relevant recent findings and discussions (e.g. definition of word; problem of universality of linguistic categories; problem of symmetric vs asymmetric verb forms; the phenomenon of converbs) are also taken into consideration.