Morphological exceptionality and pathways of change
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Abstract

Linguistic theory is often confronted with and shaped by typologically rare phenomena that challenge previously held assumptions and theories. At issue is how to accommodate these typological rarities; should they be interpreted as a fluke, exceptions to an otherwise robust tendency, or should they be considered a constraining factor on the way our theories are built? Within the field of morphology, data presenting such uncommon structures are often dismissed as improbable and unlearnable, if not impossible.

A case in point is the phenomenon of multiple exponence, the realization of the same grammatical information in multiple places within an inflected word, an example of which comes from Chintang (Kiranti):

(1) Kina hun-ce cind-ų-ŋ-yuŋ-ų-ŋ-cu-h-ē
dist-NSG teach-3o-1SG.A-CONT-3o-PRF-3o-1SG.A-3NSG.O-1SG.A-IND.PST
‘I have been teaching them.’

Typologically speaking, we do see that there is a strong tendency cross-linguistically towards encoding any given grammatical information once within an inflected word, yet multiple exponence, though uncommon typologically, is attested in a number of languages.

The current study explores the diachronic development of this uncommon pattern, the phenomenon of multiple exponence in the Kiranti languages. Comparative evidence suggests that the interaction of an uncommon typological feature, simultaneous inflection in periphrastic and/or verb-chain constructions, with well-attested diachronic processes of coalescence resulted in synthetic verb forms that retain the redundant agreement morphology of their periphrastic progenitors. Multiple exponence additionally provides a vehicle for discussion of an important point of contrast between theories of morphology that rely on a one-to-one correspondence between a segmentable piece of a word and the information it encodes – along the lines of the traditional ‘morpheme’ – and those that take morphology to be a many-to-many association between properties and their exponents – as in traditional ‘word-and-paradigm’ descriptions.