Functional adaptedness in creole languages

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In this talk, I will investigate three coding asymmetries in creoles languages:

1. motion-to vs. motion-from: *to* vs. *from*
2. dependent vs. independent possessive person-forms: *my* vs. *mine*
3. zero-marked stative verbs vs. zero-marked dynamic verbs: *Jan ø sick* 'John is sick' vs. *Jan ø daans* 'John danced'

These coding asymmetries are universally detectable in the languages of the world (Haspelmath 2019a, b). They reflect functional adaptedness in that speakers strive to be most efficient in expressing a given grammatical meaning while spending as least energy as necessary. As more frequent meanings (motion-to, dependent possessive person-forms etc.) are more predictable, speakers can afford to code them with less segments. Vice-versa: less predictable meanings (motion-from, independent possessive person-forms etc.) have to be marked with more segments so that the chances are high for the hearer/interlocutor to retrieve the intended meaning.

Such functional-adaptive explanations have a diachronic component (Bybee 1988): Since the current system is often rigidly conventional, the adaptive forces must have been active in earlier diachronic change.

The universal coding asymmetries are the outcome of hundreds, sometimes thousands of years of language change processes. These processes reflect countless speech acts between interlocutors adding up incrementally and resulting in the crystallization of functionally adapted grammatical structures over time. As grammatical change progresses at an extremely slow pace compared to other cultural evolutionary processes, the step-by-step changes which bring about functionally adapted grammatical structures are often opaque or difficult to trace, even in languages with a well-documented written history. To circumnavigate this difficulty, I will focus on creole languages, which are born out of extremely accelerated change processes in the context of the European colonial expansion, roughly during the 16th to 20th centuries. These high-contact languages have evolved their complex grammatical structures within only a few hundred years. In this way they are a good test case for functional-adaptive change processes because creoles demonstrate in a kind of fast motion what happens to grammatical structures under functional pressures.

References

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