

On the placement of agreement markers

Balthasar Bickel
University of Zurich

Languages differ greatly in how they place agreement markers: some languages place them into uniformly defined positions (e.g. all subject agreement markers appear in the same position, and this position only contains subject agreement markers), while others distribute them over several positions; some languages impose a fixed linear order (e.g. subject agreement markers precede object agreement markers) while others do not constrain the order of markers. However, in joint research with John Mansfield and Sabine Stoll we recently showed that these possibilities greatly differ in their global probabilities and that learnability and processing conditions bias languages and speakers towards uniform and linearly consistent placements. In my presentation I will review these findings and discuss exceptional patterns. In our data, the exceptions are chiefly concentrated in two families, Algonquian and Kiranti. Capitalizing on previous work on the typology of argument alignment with Alena Witzlack-Makarevich, I will show that the exceptions in these languages stem from two patterns of long-distance dependency: co-argument sensitivity and distributive exponence. While these dependencies might be accidental developments, I will discuss the possibility that they provide alternative solutions to the demands of learnability and processing.