Centre Language – Variation – Multilingualism

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Andreas Hölzl:
The architecture of interrogative systems

Abstract:

This study is a cross-linguistic exploration of interrogatives (e.g., *which*, *where*, *how many*). These are traditionally referred to as interrogative *pronouns*, but in fact belong to a variety of different word classes (e.g., adjectives, adverbs, numerals). Despite this internal heterogeneity, the interrogatives in any given language will be shown to form a more or less coherent *system* (e.g., Muysken & Smith 1990). Following ideas from Ecological Psychology (Turvey 2009), such an *interrogative system* will be shown to exhibit an internal structure and interactions with its linguistic environment, i.e. the language it is part of (Hölzl preprint). Cross-linguistically, interrogative systems differ along several lines, including the delineation or bondedness of the system (e.g., unique phonemes), the number of individual interrogatives, the form-meaning relationship (e.g., polysemy), the analyzability and coherence (e.g., resonance phenomena), the diachrony (e.g., grammaticalization to and from interrogatives), or the internal organization (e.g., paradigms, derivational relationships). Based on a wide variety of languages from around the world (e.g., Manchu, Mandarin, Nepali, Oromo, Quechua, among others), this study sketches these dimensions of variation (e.g., Mackenzie 2009; Hölzl 2018), but also points out several common cross-linguistic properties. For instance, interrogative systems usually exhibit forms of self-similarity, mirroring word class distinctions as well as broad semantic categories found in the language at large. The study concludes with general remarks on the applicability of this systemic approach to other areas of language (e.g., demonstratives, e.g. Diessel 2003).

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