Why languages are best understood as inherently historical systems

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We defend the argument that taking diachrony into account is both unavoidable and logically necessary as soon as one deals with anything linguistic that is at all empirically interpretable. Taking diachrony into account is unavoidable because empirical observation itself has a temporal dimension, and it is logically necessary for the following reasons:

Premise 1: For anything to be empirically interpretable it must have identifiable referents in the material world that are observable at least in principle. This is not only true of utterances and texts, but also of linguistic competences and their constituents, as well as of all other (meta-)linguistic constructs that create and represent institutional facts (cf. Searle 1995) such as languages and varieties in the socio-cultural sense, discourse conventions, text(type)s, genres, etc. They are empirically interpretable because they are realized as concrete patterns in the mind-brains of actual human speakers, and exist not only in space but also in time.

Premise 2: At the same time, the very existence of any cognitively linguistic constituent depends on its being conventionalized, i.e. it needs to be shared, and nothing can be shared among speakers without being transmitted among them first.

Conclusion: It follows that all constituents of linguistic competence are inherently historical objects and exist essentially because they have been successfully transmitted. (Note that this view is inherent even in radically synchronic research programs. Even Chomsky (e.g. 1988: 16), for example, maintains that adult grammars derive both from genetically specified properties of the language faculty and from "the linguistic experience of a child growing up in a speech community", which amounts to being exposed to the output of adult grammars, of course.)

The question is whether this view has explanatory potential.

Arguments that it does not usually work like this: first generalizations are couched in ahistorical terms that vary among linguistic schools. Simply put, formalists look for systematic constraints on possible grammars and relations among them, while functionalists search for preferences derived from speakers' communicative and social needs, and external (e.g. cognitive, articulatory or perceptual) constraints on linguistic solutions. Once observable facts are related to these factors, anything that remains inaccessible to such explanatory strategies is (often implicitly) attributed to historical contingency (Dressler 1985: 278 speaks of the "Devils's case", for instance). Thereby, history is very narrowly constructed as a wastebasket into which anything that is unexplainable is thrown. On that definition, it is clear that no historical explanations can emerge.

However, that definition is implausible and merely reflects the popular view that history cannot be lawful because it involves a strong component of arbitrariness and human whim, and flies in the face of tons of evidence that (a) most of the time language is transmitted fairly faithfully and that (b) changes are often systematic. We therefore suggest that all factors usually adduced in synchronic accounts, such as genetic constraints on possible languages and their acquisition, biologically specified needs of speakers (e.g. social integration, communication, sense-making, aesthetic needs, etc.), as well any physiological limits on articulation and perception are more adequately interpreted as constraints on the transmittability and memorizability of linguistic constituents, within which the fundamentally historical character of language unfolds itself.

We shall substantiate our argument for a fundamentally historical approach to anything linguistic with examples from various levels of linguistic description.

Bibliography
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