

The University of Pittsburgh ~ Department of Linguistics

Colloquium Series *Presents:*

“Optimal-Constructional Morphology: Or how, when your lexicon gives you *lemon*, you make *lemonade*”

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In this talk, I will present an outline and partial implementation of an emerging theoretical framework for modeling linguistic morphology. This framework is called Optimal-Constructional Morphology and revolves around two fundamental insights (neither of them with precedent): First, morphological structures are, semantically, more than the sum of their parts. Word-forms have the semantic content that they do because of the constructions that they instantiate, not simply because of the “morphemes” that they contain. Second, languages deviate in their morphologies from universal ideals of transparency, expressiveness, economy, and structural well-formedness because their histories have not given them the resources, in their inventory of available constructions (lexicon or “constructicon”), to satisfy all of these desiderata simultaneously. Word structure is a product of the tension between a rich inventory of properties demanding expression and a limited inventory of constructions through which to express them. The implementation of these insights is illustrated through a brief look at types of compounding and reduplication in Mong Leng, A-Hmao and Jingpho and then a more detailed look at the inflectional morphology of the Dumi verb.

The idea of a construction introduced to account for the semantic differences that exist between the semantics of attributive and coordinative compounds in Mong Leng, A-Hmao, and Jingpho, and the similarities that exist between the semantics of coordinative compounds and reduplication in A-Hmao and Jingpho (following the insights of Inkelas and Zoll 2005). An analysis of mismatches in the agreement inflection of the verb in Dumi (a Tibeto-Burman language belonging to the Kiranti group) is used to motivate the other major aspects of the framework.

In Dumi, a transitive verb usually only agrees with one of its arguments, the argument that is highest on the animacy hierarchy or, barring a difference in animacy, highest on the number hierarchy. For example, agreement is expressed by the suffix *-imi* in all cases when a verb has a second person plural argument and a third person argument, or a third person plural argument and a third person dual or singular argument. However, there are two cases where there is subject-specific agreement morphology (the first and second person singulars). In these cases, once the subject agreement has been expressed, if the subject is higher than the object on the animacy/number hierarchies, agreement with the object can then be expressed with the same markers that would otherwise be used to agree with the more prominent argument. In other words, the non-specific agreement matches the less prominent argument just in case subject-specific agreement has already appeared closer to the root.

In terms of the model advanced here, this is understood as the result of the step-wise evaluation of a word-form, at each point in its structure in order to ensure that the construction chosen is the one that best advances the word-form towards a fixed target property-set, relative to the priorities of the language (as encoded in a constraint ranking). In the normal case, agreement with the less prominent argument is usually not expressed because it is possible to show agreement with only one argument and the constraint ranking favors the selection of constructions that will express agreement with the more animate and more numerous argument. However, if agreement with this argument has already been exhaustively expressed and well-formedness considerations do not rule out the application of non-specific agreement to the base, a non-specific agreement construction will apply to express agreement with the less prominent argument as well in order to advance the expressed property-set closer to the target property-set.

I argue that this approach provides some significant insights into morphological patterns that have been missed or obscured by most earlier proposals.

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Room 144 ~ Cathedral of Learning