Counterfactual conditionals through the lens of type and antitype-based comparison

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Linguistic typology has traditionally been characterized by strong data reduction, stemming from the use of binary or categorical classifications (Cysouw 2005: 562). Put another way, in traditional typological paradigms, languages have usually been treated as single data points with a binary or categorical value. However, as typological findings become finer-grained, it is now well known that there are many examples where a binary or categorical classification does not work (e.g., languages are not simply nominative/accusative, ergative/absolutive, or agent/ patient; Mithun 2016: 2). This has given rise to methodological approaches to typology that are based on non-categorical measures and that have led us to uncover deeper factors behind the shapes languages take (e.g., Token-Based Typology; Levshina 2019; Typology of Templates; Good 2016; Multivariate and Distributional Typology; Bickel 2010, 2015).

In this presentation, I introduce a new methodological approach to linguistic typology and corpus-based analysis that provides a higher degree of descriptive accuracy than previous attempts: TYPE AND ANTITYPE-BASED COMPARISON (e.g., Olguín Martínez & Rogers 2024; Olguín Martínez & Gries 2024; Olguín Martínez & Gries, in press). In this approach, special attention is paid to how syntax, lexicon, discourse, and semantics fit together in a unified model, i.e., how syntactic factors interact with lexical, discourse, and semantic factors in language use and which configurations of features are preferred (i.e. occur more often than expected by chance, which in the literature are referred to as TYPES) or dispreferred (i.e. occur less often than expected by chance, which in the literature are referred to as ANTITYPES). In type and antitype-based comparison, there is no conceptual directionality, i.e., there are no dependent or independent variables, as in popular regression models. Instead, linguistic variables show different degrees of association strength giving rise to cross-clausal associations. Accordingly, type and antitypes can lead us to a better understanding of the ranges of factors involved in the entrenchment of constructions and a deeper theoretical understanding of how speakers organize their grammatical knowledge.

In this presentation, I discuss the implementation of type and antitype-based comparison from a typological and corpus-based perspective in two case studies: (1) standard counterfactual conditionals in typological perspective (e.g., *if he had not already arrived, we would have postponed the meeting*) and (2) proxy counterfactual conditional constructions in English (e.g., *I wouldn't do that if I were you*).

The analysis of types and antitypes affords a uniquely informative window into the workings of grammar and processes of linguistic diversity. It provides an integrative, non-modular approach that looks at how the dynamic emergence of complex configurations serve the communicative, cognitive, and collaborative goals of its users. Moreover, it provides us with new criteria for classification and a testing ground for universal functional constraints. Analyzing interfaces (e.g., syntax-prosody interface; syntax-discourse interface) provides an important point of departure. However, the investigation of types and antitypes may provide a more holistic framework for grammatical analysis and can lead us to uncover links between language, social organization, and cognition that have been traditionally neglected.

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