

The Morphosyntax of Discontinuous Agreement in Amharic: The Case of the Missing Morphemes

Ruth Kramer, Georgetown University

In Amharic, a Semitic language spoken in Ethiopia, subject agreement is expressed by both a prefix and a suffix in certain verb paradigms. For example, the simple imperfective verb *yi-säbr-u* ‘they break, they will break,’ has a prefix *yi-* and a suffix *-u*, and both of these affixes express subject agreement (roughly, *yi-* expresses third person and *-u* expresses plural). This kind of prefixal/suffixal agreement is often referred to as discontinuous agreement, and it has been the focus of considerable morphosyntactic research cross-linguistically (e.g., Noyer 1992, Halle 1997, Trommer 2002, Harbour 2007, 2008ab, Campbell 2012). However, most of this work has focused on either individual verbs in isolation or large cross-linguistic surveys. In this paper, I take an in-depth yet systemic view of discontinuous agreement in Amharic. I identify two mysterious instances where parts of the discontinuous agreement “disappear,” and explore the implications of these disappearances for the syntax-morphology interface and for the analysis of discontinuous morphology across languages.

Specifically, imperative verbs lack the prefixes associated with discontinuous agreement (but have the suffixes), and compound imperfective verbs lack some of the suffixes (but have the prefixes). I develop novel analyses of both of these effects, showing, for example, that the “disappearing” suffixes in compound imperfective verbs simply undergo the Distributed Morphology operation Local Dislocation (Embick and Noyer 2001) and “re-appear” in their expected position if this operation is blocked. I argue that both instances of “disappearing” morphemes support morphological approaches to discontinuous agreement (e.g., Noyer 1997, Harbour 2008a) and not syntactic approaches (see e.g., Girma 1994, Tourabi 2002). I conclude by considering when syntactic approaches to discontinuous agreement might be warranted, and propose some initial diagnostics for distinguishing between syntactic and morphological explanations for the complex yet well-attested patterns of discontinuous agreement across languages.

Modeling emergence in phonological space
Rebecca L. Morley, Ohio State University

For over fifty years, the null hypothesis has been that a set of innately specified substantive universal properties are the basis of the human language faculty. A frequent corollary of this view is that strong constraints on the acquisition module are necessary to explain the high level of regularity observed in linguistic systems (e.g., Kiparsky, 2006, 2008). Challenges to the nativist hypothesis argue that many recurrent properties of linguistic systems may be emergent (e.g. Blevins 2004); that these properties arise, in language after language, through the same interaction of internal and external pressures. In recent years there has been success in modeling simplified systems as existence proofs: demonstrations that it is possible to derive complex, apparently purposefully ordered behavior, from a simple mechanism that applies in a non-goal oriented way (e.g. de Boer, 2000, Pierrehumbert, 2001, Wedel, 2007, Sós-kuthy, 2015).

In this talk I will present two models of this general kind. In both, the basis for emergent structure is an acoustic speech signal that is inherently ambiguous with respect to the abstract units from which it is composed. It will also be assumed that each individual speech event must be independently parsed. The key innovation is that the traditionally assumed abstract phonological representations are taken to be only one of multiple possible parses of a speech event. The result is a population of variants (within an individual speaker/listener) that persists even when no apparent change is taking place. In the first model, a coarticulation-based change ($V + N > \sim V$) is emergent from a frequency-conditioned increase in the proportion of word variants with highly overlapped articulatory gestures. In the second model, a change in underlying feature specification ($/b,p/ > /p,ph/$) is emergent from an external change to the degree to which each acoustic cue successfully predicts the underlying phoneme category. The successful implementation of these models shows that without discarding ambiguous tokens (e.g., Wedel 2004, Garrett and Johnson 2013), enforcing proximity to a specified point in acoustic space (e.g., Wedel, 2012, Sós-kuthy, 2013), or explicitly encoding an assumed sub-category structure (e.g., Sós-kuthy 2015), it is possible to derive both global change, and (critically) global stability.

Variation is ½ the Spice of Language

Robert Berwick, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Chomsky has noted that “among the many puzzling questions about language, two are salient: First, why are there any languages at all, evidently unique to the human lineage? Second, why are there *so many* languages?” – apparently clumped into groups or “species.” These linguistic questions are in fact just the same as the questions regarding biological species that so preoccupied Darwin, and comprise modern biology’s explanatory bedrock: why do we observe *this* particular array of living forms in the world and not another? Consequently, investigations in biology and linguistic science ought to share Darwinian explanatory tools such as phylogenetics—subject to the similarities and differences between languages and biological individuals. Here we examine one such application of Darwinian linguistics in light of such similarities and differences –Dunn’s (2011) phylogenetic analysis of human language—uncovering several deficiencies.

Comparative Historical Linguistics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Model for a Scientific Convergence

Stephen Alter, Gordon College

The late nineteenth century saw an array of language-oriented disciplines begin to engage in the conjectural reconstruction of past phenomena, the results in each case manifesting a genealogical or “family tree” pattern. These reconstructions involved original (proto-) languages, phonological forms, manuscript texts, and source documents; participating disciplines included, among others, comparative-historical linguistics, stemmatics, and comparative mythology. The result has been a mode of “scientific” inquiry spanning a variety of linguistic and humanistic fields, especially so in its late-nineteenth-century heyday. Even if unacknowledged, this proliferation of comparative-historical inquiry (it will be argued) has had a mutually reinforcing effect on the participating disciplines, buttressing the scientific legitimacy of each—an effect due in part to the parallel pattern that emerged in bio-evolutionary science in this period.

Phylogeny estimation under a model of linguistic character evolution
Tandy Warnow, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Phylogeny estimation addresses the challenge of estimating how a group of objects (whether biological species, languages, or manuscripts) evolved from a common ancestor. In this talk I will describe my efforts made to model character evolution in languages, the performance of different methods for phylogeny estimation under these models, and open problems. This talk will include my work with collaborators Don Ringe (Penn Linguistics), Steve Evans (UC Berkeley Statistics), Luay Nakhleh (Rice Computer Science), and Francois Barbancon (self-employed). See <http://tandy.cs.illinois.edu/histling.html> for additional information.