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From reported discourse to causality: Charting the forking path

Many languages of the world exhibit causal adverbial clauses that have their origins in the domain of reported discourse. One well-known strategy involves a causal connector grammaticalized from a converb of a speech act verb (lit. ‘P, saying/having said Q’; henceforth Type I).

Yet another type, which is widely attested in reference grammars but has so far been relatively neglected in theoretical or typological literature, introduces causal clauses with a combination of a wh-pronoun of reason and a verb of speech in the conditional (lit. ‘P, if (you) say why, Q’; Type II) [Gerasimov 2022].

At present, my database contains 179 relevant constructions from 108 languages of Eurasia, including 65 and 98 constructions of Types I and II respectively. While the distribution of both strategies throughout Eurasia is clearly affected by areal and genetic factors, in this talk I am going to focus on functional motivations behind both developments.

The two types above are defined on the basis of their formal makeup, but they differ clearly with respect to their positional and semantic properties as well. Causal clauses introduced by converbal markers display word order expected for the language in question (typically, preposition with clause-final connector for OV languages of Eurasia). They are polyfunctional, but in the domain of causality are restricted to contexts of subjective reason/motive. Type II constructions are exclusively found in OV languages, yet show atypical word order (postposition with clause-initial connector), which led many grammarians to treat them as recent pattern borrowings from e.g., Russian. They are specialized for expression of causality, but able to cover the whole range of causal relations.

These differences between the two types are directly linked to their diachronic origins. Type I constructions develop from reported discourse embedded into temporal subordination, with the quoted speech act belonging to the participant. Type II constructions involve monologization of a hypothetical verbal exchange between speaker and addressee (‘P. If you ask why [P, I say] Q). They introduce clauses that corroborate or explain the preceding statement in case of interactional trouble; their emergence thus fills an important functional gap in OV languages that otherwise use preposed adverbial clauses.

In order to better understand the diachronic developments involved, more data are needed on syntactic and semantic properties of particular constructions in specific languages, I will sketch prospective avenues for further research by presenting a tentative questionnaire tailored to the two types of constructions outlined above and aimed at identifying the proportion of properties characteristic of reported discourse vs. subordination. The parameters to be checked include indexical shift, interpretation of perspectival elements, main clause phenomena, binding restrictions, etc.

References:

Gerasimov D. V. O dvux tipax dicendial’nyx pokazatelej prichiny (preimuschestvenno na materiale jazykov Evrazii) [On two types of dicendial causal markers (with a special focus on the languages of Eurasia)] // *Voprosy jazykoznanija*, 2022, No. 2. Pp. 7–29.