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Positive and negative rarities in the cross-linguistic encoding of motion events

Based on a typological investigation of the verbal (verbs, locative auxiliaries), adverbal (verb affixes, verb particles), and adnominal (adpositions, case) encoding of motion events in the clause in 150 languages from all continents, this paper discusses a number of salient rare phenomena in the cross-linguistic encoding of motion events.

In the first part, some positive rarities are discussed. Possitive rarities are such rare features which are lacking in the vast majorities of languages while negative rarities are rare missing features which are lacking only in a small minority of the languages of the world. Positive rare features in the domain of motion events include the following: the encoding of figure in the verb stem (e.g., Navajo), the encoding of ground in verb stems (e.g., Car Nicobarese), honorific motion verb stems (Samoan, Thai, Tibetan), a distinction of telic and atelic verb stems for 'go down(ward)' and 'go up(ward)' (e.g., Basque), deictic motion verbs derived from demonstrative adverbs (Austronesian), two equally unmarked verbs for 'come', 'come home' vs. 'come to other place', (Hmong), the distinction between 'in (empty space)' and 'in (full space)' in cases or adpositions (e.g., Avar), prepositions inflecting for person (e.g., Atoni), source marking by a sequence of two deictic verbs (Hmong), the domain of ENTER being expressed by either 'descend' or 'ascend' (Kâte).

While a large number of positive rare features in a certain functional domain are essential especially in testifying to the diversity of coding strategies of that domain—contrary to a widely hold belief a small number of large consistent types in a typology is no proof for a lack of cross-linguistic diversity—negative rare features are intriguing by themselves: why should the lack of a certain feature be rare? Positive features make languages more complex. Missing features, however, make languages simpler, at least at first glance.

In the second part of the paper, the following negative rare features will be discussed:

- Lack of a distinction between deictic or pseudo-deictic verb stems, such as Spanish *ir* vs. *venir* or English *go* vs. *come*. By far most languages make such a distinction in verb stems.
- Lack of a distinction between *go* and *walk* in verb stems.
- A complete lack of basic path verb stems, such as French *entrer* 'enter', *sortir* 'exit', *monter* 'ascend', and *descendre* 'descend'. Even if many Indo-European languages lack path verbs, this is rare cross-linguistically.
- Lack of motion events in motion event clauses. Even if clauses like *Out!* (instead of *Go out!*) are quite common cross-linguistically, there are only few languages which systematically lack motion verbs in clauses such as *He went to the town* and *They went after him*. Why should this be the case? From a functional point of view motion verbs are largely redundant in such contexts and *He to the town* and *They after him* would do as well. Equivalent structures occur in fact systematically, e.g., in Hopi, but are cross-linguistically rare.

The paper discusses possible reasons why the presence of a feature in these four cases is the winning strategy and by far outnumbers the lack of that feature cross-linguistically which seems to represent a less complex structure, at least at first glance. It is considered to what extent the four negative features require compensation in other parts of language structure and thus turn out to be positive rare features in a broader perspective. Put differently, it will be considered to what extent functional explanations can account for negative rarities in the domain of motion events.