Expressing ideologies through linguistic examples
The case of polysynthesis and recursion

Kilu von Prince¹, Marcin Kilarski²
¹Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, ²Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

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Background

• We have different backgrounds:
  • Kilu: documentary linguistics, semantics, typology;
  • Marcin: history of linguistics, typology, language change.

• Common project: debates on linguistic complexity and their ideological implications.
Introduction

- Linguistic complexity has recently been at the forefront of several controversial debates.
- Here we illustrate their ideological implications based on two examples, i.e., polysynthesis and recursion.
- We show that the vague concept of complexity is often used as a cover for more specific ideological positions.
- Descriptions of both phenomena have been shaped by exoticism and a lack of access to primary data.
Complexity

- The complexity of a system can be understood in several ways, e.g. in terms of the number of items it contains, or the number of rules needed to describe it.

- Complexity is straightforward to measure when applied to individual components of language, e.g. by counting phonemes in phoneme inventories.

- But when applied to entire structural levels such as morphology or syntax, obtaining an objective measure of complexity is much harder.
Debates on complexity

- Describing languages and language components as “simple” or “complex” has always been a convenient way of characterizing cross-linguistic differences.
- The specific implications of such characterizations depend on the historical contexts (e.g. racist and colonialist interpretations vs. relativist ones).
- In recent debates, the notion has regained popularity in a range of debates relating to, e.g., Universal Grammar and social correlates of language structure.
Polysynthesis in Native American languages

Figure: Map of linguistic stocks of American Indians (Powell 1894)
Polysynthesis in Native American languages

- Pervasive commonalities despite considerable genetic and typological diversity (Boas 1911; Mithun 1999).
- Complex word structure as the hallmark of most American Indian languages (Du Ponceau 1819).
Verbs in Iroquoian languages

• Complexity is accumulated in verbs (and not nouns and particles).
• Verbs may consist of several roots and affixes which convey a range of meanings relating to the event and its participants.
• Polysynthesis as an option: choice between analytic and synthetic constructions provides stylistic alternatives.
Template verb structure in Iroquoian languages (Scancarelli 2005)

- prepronominal prefix
- pronominal prefix
- stem
- base
- root (+other roots/affixes)
- tense suffix
- modal suffix
Verbs in Mohawk (Iroquoian) (Mithun, 2012, 567)

(1) Aonsakonwaia’tisákhd’.

a onsa konwa ia’t isak ha ’
OPT REP 3PL/FEM.SG body seek AND PRF

“They should go back to look for her.”

Images of polysynthesis

- Little interest in the internal structure of words and the meanings they convey among most commentators.
- Interpretation of grammar as lexicon: grammatical distinctions are treated as lexical and redundant differentiation (‘different words’).
- Redundant complexity: “enormous and useless excess of words” (Brinton 1885), “Much cry and little sense” (Jespersen, 1894), “a crippling burden on our memory” (Ullmann, 1951, 1964).
‘Words’ as an index of civilizational development

• Incapacity for abstract and rational thought, deductive reasoning, counting and categorization:
  • “almost imbecile ... deficiency of abstraction” (Farrar, 1870, 183),
  • lack of “deductive analytic faculty” (Oppert, 1884, 37),
  • “absence of general ideas” (Lefèvre, 1894, 188).

• Moral decadence, absence of social values and work ethics, minimal creative and artistic potential:
  • “... the work of minds which have nothing else to occupy their energies, and therefore follow in one single direction an erroneous and partial line of development.” (Farrar, 1870, 184) (Farrar 1870: 184).
  • Evolutionary dead-end due to alcohol abuse and intermarriage (Lefèvre, 1894).
Cherokee as a window on human prehistory

Herbert Spencer’s (1820–1903) *The Principles of Sociology* (1884, 1st ed. 1876)

“If now we remember that in the languages of inferior races the advances in generalization and abstraction are so slight that while [in Tasmanian] there are words for particular kinds of trees there is no word for tree; and that, as among the Damaras, while each reach of a river has its special title, there is none for the river as a whole, much less a word for river; or if, still better, we consider the fact that the Cherokees have thirteen different verbs for washing different parts of the body, and different things, but no word for washing, dissociated from the part or thing washed; we shall see that social life must have passed through sundry stages, with their accompanying steps in linguistic progress, before the conception of a name became possible.” (p. 382)
Interim conclusions

- A small selection of empirical observations has been taken to support a specific view of human nature and culture.
- The primary data on which these conclusions are based are not accessible to a wider (scientific or lay) audience.
- The complexity of polysynthesis has further obscured the relation between empirical observations and their interpretation.
Recursion: Definition

- Among many different notions of recursion, the most salient one in today’s debates is **syntactic self-embedding**.
- This implies, for example, that clauses can contain clauses, noun phrases can contain noun phrases.
- There should be no strict grammatical limit on the number of embedded levels.

The dog chased the cat that ate the rat that stole the hat.
Recursion: Significance in linguistics

- Syntactic recursion is thought by some to be the only feature that is both unique and universal to human languages (Hauser et al., 2002).
- This view has been challenged on the basis of data from several languages, most prominently Pirahã.
- Everett (2005) takes the alleged lack of recursive structures as proof that culture determines language.
- Other researchers have tried to show that Pirahã does have recursive structures to prove that this feature is a linguistic universal (Sauerland, 2018; Sandalo et al., 2018).
Recursion in Pirahã: Language as a cultural tool?

Everett (2005) argues that contexts such as reported speech do not require embedded sentences in Pirahã:

(2) \( ti \ gái-sai \quad kó’óí \ hi \ kaháp-ií \)

I say-nominative name he leave-intention

“I said that Kó’óí intends to leave.” (lit. “My saying Kó’óí intend-leaves.”)

Everett (2005, 622)

“[…] some of the components of so-called core grammar are subject to cultural constraints, something that is predicted not to occur by the universal-grammar model.”
Problems with Everett (2005)

- Everett (2005) is based on years of fieldwork in the Pirahã community.
- However, this fieldwork has to this date produced only a very small set of accessible primary data (Futrell et al., 2016).
- It has also been criticized for his failure to...
  - ...take into account plausible alternative interpretations (Levinson’s and Pawley’s comments, Nevins et al. 2009);
  - ...contextualize his findings within the region/adjacent cultures (Gonçalves’ comment);
  - ...consider a broader range of cross-linguistic data (Pawley’s and Wierzbicka’s comments).
Recursion in Pirahã: Evidence for Universal Grammar?

Sandalo et al. (2018, 295)

“ [...] support for UG has emerged from fieldwork with isolated indigenous languages. With such compelling support, we maintain that the same type of complex grammatical phenomena and formal constraints upon them are found in all known languages in the world.”
Problems

- Sandalo et al. (2018) report on two experiments, one with two speakers, the other with one speaker.
- Instead of reporting precise statistics, they use generalizations such as *The speaker consistently paired the target sentences with the recursive pictures*.
- The speakers’ behaviours are easily compatible with a wide range of interpretations that are neutral with respect to whether Pirahã has recursion.
Ideologies

- Both Everett and Sandalo et al. make very strong claims based on scarce empirical and theoretical motivations.
- Everett aligns himself with the view that linguistics should be a subdiscipline of anthropology.
- Sandalo et al. align themselves with the Chomskyan view on Universal Grammar.
Conclusions

• In the debates we have reviewed here, authors align themselves with specific ideas, ideologies and schools of thought:
  • Polysynthesis: reinforcement of the racist and colonialist stereotypes.
  • Recursion: support for an anthropological perspective on language vs. support for Chomskyan ideas on Universal Grammar.

• In both debates, exoticism and a lack of primary data contribute to the opacity of the debates.

• Moreover, the complex nature of the phenomena in question further obscures their implications.
References


References II


