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The Stability of Interrogatives: A Case of Indo-European Exceptionalism?

The content interrogatives of Indo-European are straightforwardly reconstructible for Proto-IE, and this has led to a widespread belief that question words are diachronically stable words. We will argue that the apparent stability of content interrogatives is a fortuitous characteristic of Indo-European, which cannot be generalized to human language in general. Our contribution tackles this topic by a twofold approach combining typological data and the data provided by attested linguistic long-term developments in the corpus of ancient Indo-European.

The major process of change in interrogatives is some kind of renewal of old forms, i.e. new interrogatives are made on the basis of old interrogatives. In general, interrogatives show a diachronic propensity for the accretion of additional morphemes (typically pronouns and deictic particles, but also involving lexical items) with subsequent grammaticalisation. One perspective of our contribution is to look for mechanisms to explain such morphophonemic extension of interrogatives, involving e.g. reinforcement and syntactic fusion. Another perspective is to explore semantic shifts in interrogatives and their repercussions on the semantics and syntactic functions of other interrogatives in the same language.

It happened to be the case that in the history of Indo-European this renewal of interrogatives has consistently happened by suffixation and/or right branching over a period of a few thousand years, probably involving many cycles of renewal in this timeframe. Because of this stable structural regularity, the first few sounds of the interrogatives have remained similar throughout this long period. Although such consistent branching of interrogative structure is found in other human languages, it is far from universal. From a typological survey we will show that most languages do not have a completely regular 'wh'-like structure, arguably because the syntactic structures of renewal are more variable, removing over time any remaining evidence that might be used for reconstruction.

Workshop title

Stability and Borrowability of Interrogative Pronominals

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