

Socio-cultural factors and clause-combining devices: a cross-linguistic study

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The potential correlation between cultural complexity and language has been a very controversial and, at the same time, underresearched topic. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion by looking at two socio-cultural factors that are said to be potential correlates of language explicitness and complexity: presence of literary tradition and population size. The domain in which the analysis is performed is the domain of clause-combining.

Linguists seem to agree that widespread literacy alters the structure of language. It has been said (cf. Ong 1982, Chafe 1984, Miller and Weinert 1998) that one of the most significant differences between the spoken and written languages/language varieties lies in clausal subordination which is especially common in writing. The research in this domain has been, however, limited to only a few, mainly Indo-European languages.

Similarly, there are no cross-linguistic studies verifying the hypothesis (Wray and Grace 2007) that population size is related to language structure in the way that the higher the number of speakers of a given language the more explicit the language tends to be.

In this paper I present results of a cross-linguistic study on encoding two circumstantial relations – purpose and conditionality – in 50 languages from around the world (the sample is statistically balanced). In the discussion I refer to various strategies of linking clauses observed in world's languages, distinction between monofunctional and macrofunctional markers of circumstantial relations as well as issues of language contact and linguistic borrowing.

The results of my study show that the presence of markers of both relations cannot be viewed as correlated in a straightforward way with either the level of written form development or population size. Many languages of small groups, very often not written at all, have to their disposal explicit clause-linking devices while some languages spoken by millions of speakers lack direct strategies of expressing circumstantial relations of purpose and conditionality.

The number of markers of conditionality and purpose, on the other hand, is correlated on a statistically significant or close-to-significant level with both the level of written form development and the number of speakers. It needs to be noted, however, that it seems more plausible that variation in the domain of clause-linking markers would increase with the introduction of writing rather than with a mere increase in population size.

In the light of these findings I argue that, at least for the domain of explicitness of clause-combining, a correlation with population size is only a side-effect of presence of written form. I also stress that we should be careful to not overestimate significance of written form and literacy in discussions on structures of languages.

References:

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