

THE EVOLUTION OF MORPHOLOGICAL AGREEMENT

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Morphological agreement either arose late in the evolution of language (Heine & Kuteva, 2007) or, as an essential part of semantic neural mapping, was present in the earliest stages of protolanguage (Hurford, 2002, Casey and Kleunder, 1995). The main proposed reasons for its evolutionary origins stem from the functions of agreement: pro-drop, redundancy, as an aid in parsing, and syntactic marking, among others. Here, I seek to encourage discussion and examine the evidence surrounding the possibility that morphological agreement is more than detritus by bringing together the diverse uses for it that have not previously been considered simultaneously. I suggest that the ability to evolve agreement (as not all languages exhibit morphological agreement) occurred simultaneously with proto-syntax in protolanguage (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2010) basing my arguments on the functions mentioned above, as well as on the presence of varying complexity in morphological agreement, and the nature of modern pidgins and child language acquisition. I use the canonical agreement hierarchy, developed by Corbett (2006), to support this further by asserting that many of the principles suggested may reflect the first morphological functions, just as typological universals have traditionally been used to make implications about protolanguage. An example of a hierarchical feature that may be used to shed light on protolanguage might be, for instance, that verb and subject agreement is more common cross-linguistically than verb object agreement, especially in languages with free word order. Additionally, early language communities may have had different pressures on linguistic evolution and morphological complexity than modern languages, including differences in the amount of shared information (such as morpho-phonological phenomena) between small and larger ones. I argue that morphological agreement is an integral part of language evolution, and that the origin of agreement in protolanguage may not have followed the same paths (particularly language internally and as a process of grammaticalization) as modern agreement formation processes. By doing this I hope to call attention to the lack of study in this particular area, and to emphasize the possible importance of agreement in evolutionary theories of language, and to recommend further experimental and empirical avenues for research.

References

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