

# Diversity in Systemic Expansion and Contraction

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## Description of the Workshop

The grammatical systems of languages – such as case, gender or TAM systems – can vary considerably in terms of the core distinctions they make (and the exponents thereof) even in closely related languages. In the most striking cases, some family members have systems that encode a handful of cross-linguistically familiar categories, whereas the same systems in related varieties expand to typologically unusual proportions. For instance, six auxiliaries encoding TAM distinctions are observed in the 7th century Old Turkic records; this increased to 19 auxiliaries in Kazakh and 28 in Uzbek, yet Modern Standard Turkish has only five (Erdal 2004; Bodrogligeti 2002; Tulum 1997; Györfi 2022; Göksel and Kerslake 2005; Gabain 1953). Conversely, while we see a stable system of 7-8 nominal cases in many Slavic languages, the Bulgarian case system gradually contracted to only two (Wahlström 2015). **What motivates the mass expansion or contraction of grammatical systems?**

Existing explanations for the expansion of grammatical systems typically examine the development of new categories/feature values at the level of the grammaticalisation of individual constructions (Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994; Hopper and Traugott 2003; Narrog and Heine 2011; Kuteva et al. 2019) or the analogical expansion of a grammatical strategy (De Smet and Fischer 2017; Fischer 2011; Fischer 2008) but say much less about dependencies between existing and emergent categories. While studies on grammatical niches have examined some of the effects of competition within grammatical systems (Aronoff 2019; Aronoff 2016; Dale and Lupyan 2012), little is known about how this plays out in the most expansive systems, what types of categories emerge as systems grow beyond what is normally encountered, or what motivations exist for their mass expansion. Available diachronic evidence suggests that in some expansive systems, growth is characterized by a period of rapid expansion following an S-curve (Ghanbarnejad et al. 2014; Blythe and Croft 2012) in which new categories emerge, and are sometimes quickly lost, as the system grows and reshapes (Györfi and Bond, forthcoming). In Old Turkic, the limited number of attested TAM expressions conveyed familiar grammatical distinctions such as ‘perfective,’ ‘imperfective,’ and ‘habitual.’ In subsequent varieties, the newly introduced constructions compete with existing ones, but instead of replacing them, they develop into highly specific categories, such as ‘perfective: short duration’ or ‘imperfective: unidirectional change’

(Győrfi and Bond, forthcoming). The question remains open as to whether these reflect language-specific developments or if the most expansive grammatical systems reflect universal tendencies in terms of their organization.

Similarly, a growing body of work has investigated the loss of inflection over time (Sims-Williams and Enger 2020; Sims-Williams and Baerman 2021), and attrition of grammatical distinctions through language contact (Montrul and Yoon 2019; Schmitt 2019; Schmitt and Sorokina 2024). With respect to the contraction of expansive systems, Verkerk and Di Garbo (2022) investigated the erosion of the gender system in northwestern Bantu languages. They propose that the gender systems that have undergone the most significant erosion from the extensive Proto-Bantu gender system have been restructured around semantically transparent animacy contrasts. This suggests that the contraction of expansive systems may, in part, be motivated by a reduction in the opacity of the system. These observations prompt us to consider whether the complexity of expansive systems diminishes according to the same principles observed in smaller systems. Or is the contraction of expansive systems driven by specific factors related to the semantic organization or complexity inherent in larger systems?

Exploring the ways in which expansive grammatical systems emerge and contract provides a unique opportunity to understand patterns of linguistic organization that are less well evidenced in more typical systems.

## **Questions and research topics**

We are particularly interested in case studies of variation within a single family, or cross-linguistic studies, where synchronic or diachronic variation provides clues to the context in which expansion is favoured, or where structured contraction or loss of large systems can be observed.

We invite scholarly contributions, focusing on any linguistic phenomenon, that address the following questions:

1. Can cross-linguistic patterns be established to describe large-scale systemic expansion and contraction?
2. What types of categories appear in the most expansive systems?
3. Do these patterns of expansion or contraction correlate with different typological profiles?
4. Are there specific conditions that can predict systemic expansion or contraction?
5. Although some examples appear to have developed through analogy, is this the sole mechanism driving such systemic expansion?
6. Expansion is sometimes described in terms of an S-curve, characterized by a period of relatively rapid growth. However, is this universally applicable?
7. What is the role of language contract in large-scale systemic expansion and contraction?

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