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Reconstructed and constructed morphology: Can language planning turn back the wheel of time?

The comparative method is based on the interaction of historical phonology – the axiom of the regularity of sound change – and historical lexicology (etymology): the former makes the rules, the latter delivers the material for testing, modifying and enhancing them. This works well with the reconstruction of lexical stems. The reconstruction of grammatical or bound morphs, however, is much more problematic. Affixes play by different rules: they are often affected by system-driven changes ("analogy"), and their structure can be phonotactically more strictly constrained than that of lexical stems. Furthermore, the comparative method in itself has a typologically distorting effect: it is possible to reconstruct invariant proto-forms behind today's variation, but once variation is completely levelled, it becomes irretrievable.

This effect is the cause of the well-known fact (see e.g. Chafe 1959, Korhonen 1974) that reconstructed proto-languages tend to be more regular as concerns morphophonology than the languages used as a starting point for the reconstruction. In other words, reconstructions tend to be closer to what was traditionally called the agglutinative type (for a detailed critique of the term, see Arkadiev forthcoming) – possibly also because reconstructing the substance of affixes is less controversial than reconstructing syntactic structures or patterns. Accordingly, the developments from the reconstructed proto-form to today's language would correspond to the classical typological cycle, or at least part of it: from the agglutinative type towards increasing fusion and/or isolation. However, examples of the opposite, i.e. recreation of clearly segmentable affixal morphology, are not difficult to find.

In morphologically rich languages, language planning and standardization typically involves the regulation of morphology, i.e. taking a stance to variation and morphophonological alternations, or even introducing new affixes or inflection types. Modern Standard Estonian is an example of a highly planned and standardized language, into which some new derivational or inflectional affixes have been implemented by language planning (Raag 1998). The strong tradition of language planning has also provoked criticism. Already Kaplinski (1984) accused Estonian language planners not only of "confusing" the language with "unnatural and artificial" constructs but also of "trying to turn back the wheel of time" by (re)introducing obsolete inflectional or derivational elements or patterns which would have already been replaced by analytic expressions.

In my talk, I will use examples mainly from Estonian and other Finnic languages to demonstrate in what respects and how planned change in morphology can mimic reconstruction and possibly even reverse typological change. The examples will shed light on how different factors – variation, language contact, cultural and political circumstances – conspire in archaizing language planning.

References

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