

Östen Dahl, *The Growth and Maintenance of Linguistic Complexity*. (Studies in Language Companion Series, 71.) Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 333+x pp.

The remarkable fact that some languages appear to be more complex than others has long been a matter of interest to linguists and has repeatedly motivated efforts to define linguistic complexity and to explain how and why complexity develops and why it is sometimes “maintained” (as Dahl puts it) and sometimes not.

In this monograph Dahl presents a theory of linguistic complexity and tries to tackle the mysteries of its growth and occasional longevity.

While the typological tradition from Schlegel (1808) to Finck (1910) and Sapir (1921) to Greenberg (1978) endeavored to define linguistic complexity in synchronic terms, Dahl views it in diachronic terms as the outcome of what he calls “maturation processes”, that is, developments through which language categories reach “maturity”.

The book comprises twelve chapters entitled 1. Introduction (1–4), 2. Information and redundancy (5–18), 3. Complexity, order, and structure (19–56), 4. Languages as non-genetically inherited systems (57–74), 5. Aspects of linguistic knowledge (75–102), 6. Maturation processes (103–118), 7. Grammatical maturation (119–156), 8. Pattern adaptation (157–181), 9. Featurization (181–208), 10. Incorporating patterns (209–260), Stability and change (261–288), 12. Final discussion (289–296). These twelve chapters are preceded by a brief Preface (ix–x) and followed by an Appendix (297–302), References (303–314), a List of abbreviations, and indexes of languages, authors, and subjects (315–333).

The key notions in Dahl’s theory, maturity and maturation, are mentioned already in chapter 1, but thematicized only after the first five chapters of the book have laid out the conceptual underpinnings of the theory. These chapters cover such general concepts as information, redundancy, prominence, and rhetorical inflation (chapter 2); the notion of order (structure), kinds of complexity, adaptation (“attunement”), emergence and “emergentism”, patterns, and linearity (chapter 3); system types, organisms, genotypes and phenotypes, replication, and life cycles (chapter 4); functions and intentions, ritualization, conventions, and entrenchment (chapter 5). All these matters are important in and of themselves, and Dahl’s views of them are generally not without interest, sometimes thought-provoking, occasionally provocative. But the one hundred pages of preliminary exposition in these first five chapters of the monograph seem an overly lengthy introduction to its central topic.

The key concept of Dahl’s theory is introduced in chapter 6. If we assume that linguistic patterns in general have life cycles, that is, pass

through a number of different stages, then it may be possible to identify, in many if not all linguistic patterns, grammatical phenomena that imply a historical development. Dahl calls such phenomena mature and offers this definition: “*x* is a mature phenomenon iff there is some identifiable and non-universal phenomenon or a restricted set of such phenomena *y*, such that for any language *L*, if *x* exists in *L* there is some ancestor *L'* of *L* such that *L'* has *y* but not *x*.” The most obvious candidates for ‘maturity’ Dahl sees in complex word structure such as inflectional and derivational morphology and incorporating constructions; lexical idiosyncrasy such as gender, inflectional classes, and idiosyncratic case marking; syntactic phenomena such as agreement and case marking; word order rules, other than the ordering of sister constituents, such as clitic ordering; specific marking of subordinate clauses; and certain morpheme-level and word-level features in phonology. The presentation of the theory is followed by remarks on how ‘mature’ phenomena would be viewed from a Naturalness or Markedness point of view.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the relation between grammaticalization and ‘maturation’ and discusses the basic steps in grammaticalizations, the initial extension (here called “pattern spread”), the paradigmization (called “pattern regulation”), which is the crux in grammaticalization, and the subsequent morphosyntactic integration and reduction of the grammatical forms or expressions (called “pattern adaptation”). In the account of extension, Dahl discusses “rhetorical devaluation” and “problem solving” as well as the possibility of contact-motivated change, which he recognizes as essentially the result of interference or transference (which are kinds of bilingual extension, here called “pattern borrowing”). Other sections of the chapter deal with complementary distribution and variation (“pattern competition and pattern regulation”), grammaticalization cycles, the issue of (uni)directionality, and the rise and fall of redundancy in grammatical change. The last-mentioned issue is illustrated with examples of obligatory possessor marking and obligatory use of posture verbs in locative constructions.

Chapter 8 spans a number of topics related to grammaticalization, from the reductive change in expressions (called “adaptive sound change”) to the morphosyntactic integration of grammatical expressions, the changes from free form through clisis and affixation to fusion (“tightness and condensation”). The core portions of the chapter deal with the relation between changes in grammatical content and the reduction and integration of grammatical expressions and with the allegedly problematic status of reanalysis in grammaticalization.

Under the heading “Featurization” chapter 9 surveys the kinds of deviation from a purely linear concatenation of meaningful elements which are so characteristic of inflectional morphology, that is, of mature patterns.

These are the standard trouble spots in morphological analysis, cumulations of grammatical features in single morphs, fusion, distributed and portmanteau expressions, suppletion, syncretism, and zero marking, and along with them the distributed expression in syntax called agreement. Like many scholars before him Dahl questions the utility of such deviations from linearity and suggests they may have a function similar to that of checksum digits, in other words, that they are essentially an error-checking mechanism.

The long chapter 10 on incorporation (“incorporating patterns”) discusses ‘classic noun incorporation’, quasi-incorporation (with discontinuous or merely juxtaposed constituents), and lexical affixes and then goes on to illustrate several characteristic grammatical kinds of incorporation, compound nouns, possessive NP constructions, *dvandva* compounds, titles and other propriial classifiers, locational and directional adverbs. The chapter ends with a detailed discussion of the genesis of incorporation and the conditions that define the properties of incorporations. In conclusion it offers a plausible information-packaging account of these properties.

While chapters 7–10 are dedicated to the growth of complexity, chapter 11 focuses on the maintenance of complexity, the other issue in the title of the monograph. Here Dahl speculates on such questions as how to measure stability, whether languages predominantly accumulate complexity or gain and lose complexity cyclically, the role of language contact in inducing or reducing complexity, and the possibly different roles of children and adults in advancing maturational changes.

The final discussion in chapter 12 restates some central points in Dahl’s theory and some of their implications. Here are the chief ones: (i) Linguistic maturity is not directly related to naturalness or preferences; there are dispreferred language states, but these are states with an imbalance between content and excessively verbose expressions. (ii) Contrary to the terminal zero in the widely accepted ‘grammaticalization cline’, maturation processes “do not contain an element of ‘programmed death’ ... a mature pattern can in principle exist forever.” (iii) Maturation is not so much cyclical as it is dialectic: in extension, grammatical expression becomes more redundant (“verbose”), in morphologization, expression redundancies are reduced. (iv) Maturation processes typically spread from foregrounded to backgrounded environments; when a process is arrested, older forms are typically found in the latter environments; but these are also most exposed to expression reduction and integration; hence the same kinds of environments may present both archaisms and innovations. (v) In the ‘state space’ inhabited by all possible languages, there are states that languages tend to move towards, and where they tend to stay once they have got there; this contradicts Naturalness Theory and “simplificationism

generally”; actual examples of such states typically have long histories of stability (e.g. the Semitic verb system). (vi) The ease with which mature systems are acquired by children demonstrates our genetic capacity for the acquisition of complexity. In addition to this capacity, complex systems presuppose a specific cultural chain of development. (vii) The genetic capacity for complexity can only have come about through a co-evolution of genes and language in culture. Indeed linguistic complexity has a counterpart in the accumulation of information in cultural patterns. (viii) The similarity with the accumulation of genetic complexity in the evolution of species is important: whereas languages do not evolve — they merely change — “linguistic patterns do evolve in the sense of going through sequences of stages characterized by increasing complexity”.

This monograph is an important contribution to general, to typological, and to historical linguistics. A work that is as abundant in examples and ideas as this one is cannot avoid criticism, indeed it is likely to appeal to readers who have their own ideas and therefore cannot agree with everything they find here. Rather than criticizing it I would like to emphasize that the project undertaken in this book is exceedingly ambitious and undoubtedly premature. And so it is not surprising that it falls short in a number of regards. I will mention two aspects of the work that readers may find disappointing.

The first one concerns Dahl’s account of the growth of linguistic complexity. There is no doubt that grammaticalization (the change from lexical to grammatical meaning or from grammatical to more grammatical meaning, in Kurylowicz’s (1965) well-known formulation) plays an important role in the growth of linguistic complexity. But it is primarily the changes towards increased morphosyntactic bonding and reduced expressions that are responsible for the complex mappings between content and expression that define complexity (in Dahl’s sense, ch. 3), and which are the topic of this book. These matters are discussed in detail and amply illustrated in chapters 6–10.

However, an account of the development of complexity in individual categories is not an account of the growth of linguistic complexity as it has been understood in the typological tradition since Schlegel (1808). What is characteristic of languages of the inflectional type — Sapir’s (1921) fusional-symbolic synthetic type — is a predominance of categories with complex expression or, if you will, a preference for complex expressions of grammatical categories. Dahl acknowledges that the historical transmission of complex patterns must presuppose a genetic capacity for the acquisition of complex expression patterns. But he barely touches on the developmental tendencies by which patterns of complex grammatical expression accumulate and come to predominate in a language. Sapir (1921:122) spoke of typological developments “affirming that back of the

face of history are powerful drifts that move language, like other social products, to balanced patterns” — such as the relatively stable states Dahl mentions in chapter 12 (see above). Dahl’s final word on this issue is that the growth of linguistic complexity is a kind of evolution. But such metaphors shed no light on the issue at all. They merely beg the questions of how typological drifts arise, and what propells them.

The second aspect of the book that may cause disappointment is its treatment of the maintenance of linguistic complexity. Despite the prominence of this issue in the title of the book, Dahl in fact has nothing to say about it. In chapter 11 (“Stability and change”) there are several pages of discussion on the topic, but to no conclusive effect. It is shown that some lexical meanings have more stable expressions than others, that some inflectional categories arise or are renewed every 300–600 generations, and that ablaut patterns can be very tenacious (as they are in Semitic). It is suggested that language contact is inimical to the maintenance of complexity, which is hardly news. And Dahl speculates that children and adults have different roles to play in the transmission of complexity. But no coherent account of the conditions that favor the maintenance of complex morphology is offered, or even attempted, here.

But we must not demand the moon. In *The Growth and Maintenance of Linguistic Complexity* Dahl addresses questions to which we have so far only partial or only speculative answers or none whatever. This is a courageous book. There is no doubt it will stimulate discussion and in this way move our understanding of typological change forward.

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