

The Agglutination Hypothesis: A belated empirical investigation

Martin Haspelmath, Max-Planck-Institut für evolutionäre Anthropologie, Leipzig

In the 19th century, morphology was the most prestigious subfield of linguistics, and morphological typology dominated the thinking about patterns in cross-linguistic diversity. The well-known classification into fusional, agglutinating, isolating and incorporating languages, as established by Humboldt and Schleicher, has become a classical model that no introductory textbook fails to mention. Although few linguists in the 20th century have systematically studied the typology of morphological techniques and many have criticized the classical taxonomy, it is used routinely for characterizing languages or explaining specific features.

My paper will be mostly concerned with the agglutinating/fusional distinction (taking for granted the validity of the parameter of degree of synthesis/isolation). Although some critics have claimed that this is a purely taxonomic distinction that makes no prediction about other aspects of the grammar (i.e. does not embody a typological correlation), the old idea that there are (predominantly) agglutinating and (predominantly) fusional languages in fact makes two implicit predictions. First, agglutination/fusion is characteristic of whole languages rather than individual constructions; second, the various parameters of agglutination/fusion correlate. The (unstated, but widely assumed) Agglutination Hypothesis can thus be formulated as follows:

The Agglutination Hypothesis

- (i) First prediction: If a language is agglutinating/fusional in one area of its morphology (e.g. in nouns, or in the future tense), it shows the same type elsewhere.
- (ii) Second prediction: If a language is agglutinating/fusional with respect to one of the three agglutination parameters (a-c) (and perhaps others), it shows the same type with respect to the other two parameters:
 - (a) separation/cumulation
 - (b) morpheme invariance/morpheme variability
 - (c) affix uniformity/affix suppletion

While from the start linguists have been careful to point out that individual languages may (and often do) represent mixed rather than pure types, everybody seems to be committed to the Agglutination Hypothesis as a statistically valid correlation. Without the first prediction, it would hardly make sense to speak of “agglutinating languages” (rather than, e.g., “agglutinating tenses”). Without the second prediction, we would have to single out “separating”, “morpheme-invariant” and “affix-uniform” languages rather than “agglutinating languages”.

Amazingly, the Agglutination Hypothesis has never been subjected to empirical verification. In this paper, I will report on a study of the nominal and verbal inflectional morphology of a reasonably balanced world-wide sample of 30 languages. I will apply a variety of measures for the agglutination parameters and determine whether they are cross-linguistically significant. The results, while not as clear-cut as one would wish, suggest that the validity of the Agglutination Hypothesis is by no means a foregone conclusion – it may well be that it will turn out that “agglutination” is just one way of trying to capture the strangeness of non-Indo-European languages, which all look alike to Eurocentric eyes.