

Grammatical description and communities of practice

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The question of whether grammatical categories can be compared across languages has been the subject of debate amongst typologists (e.g. Haspelmath 2010; Lazard 2012). One aspect of this question that is not always considered is the extent to which different grammar writers may deploy different vocabularies as a result of belonging to different communities of practice (Wenger 1998). This paper suggests a method by which such questions might be investigated and presents some preliminary results of a pilot study. A stratification matrix was constructed to investigate three dimensions of possible variation: language family studied (Indo-Aryan v. Oceanic), linguistic training (PhD awarded in the US v. PhD awarded in Europe), and time (grammars published before 2000 v. grammars published after 2000). Each cell was populated with two sources giving a sample size of 16 items. The lists of abbreviations provided in these sources are the data on which the analysis is based. Across the sample, there are one-to-many mappings between abbreviations and concepts (one abbreviation is used for more than one concept) and also in the other direction (one concept is represented by more than one abbreviation). The initial tabulation of abbreviations consisted of 523 items; when concepts judged to be equivalent were unified, this reduced to 406 items. Of these, 138 items appeared in more than one source and it is this list which forms the basis of a network analysis resulting in the visualisations presented as Figure 1 (Variation by language family described), Figure 2 (Variation by training) and Figure 3 (Variation across time).

Not surprisingly, Figure 3 shows the least differentiation across the salient dimension. The time span represented here (1972 to 2017) is not very large, indeed the use of interlinear text as a major part of language description and the concomitant reliance on grammatical glossing is a relatively recent development. One initial hypothesis in regard to this dimension was that some trend towards standardisation might be evident in the 21st century, with the Leipzig Glossing Rules (Comrie, Haspelmath & Bickel 2003, first version) possibly having an effect. There is little evidence supporting this hypothesis; three abbreviations only used in 21st century sources (OBJ, PROH, QUOT) are included in the Leipzig rules; however another nine items only occur in sources after 2000 and are not included in the Leipzig list.

In contrast, the networks for languages described and linguist training do show a degree of differentiation along those dimensions. Descriptions of Oceanic languages use 27 concepts not used in descriptions of Indo-Aryan languages, while there are 17 concepts used only by Indo-Aryanists. Looking at variation by training, there are 19 concepts used only by US-trained linguists, and 21 used only by European-trained scholars. In some cases, the variation is hard to explain: for example, the concept OBJECT is used by Oceanists but not (or not in exactly the same way) by Indo-Aryanists. But in other cases, the variation seems more obviously motivated: for example, linguists trained in Europe use the concepts represented by S, A and O (after Dixon 1979) but US-trained linguists do not and this can plausibly be attributed to more general differences in theoretical orientation.

The results presented in this paper suggest that the methodology adopted has value and that the questions are worth further investigation.

References:

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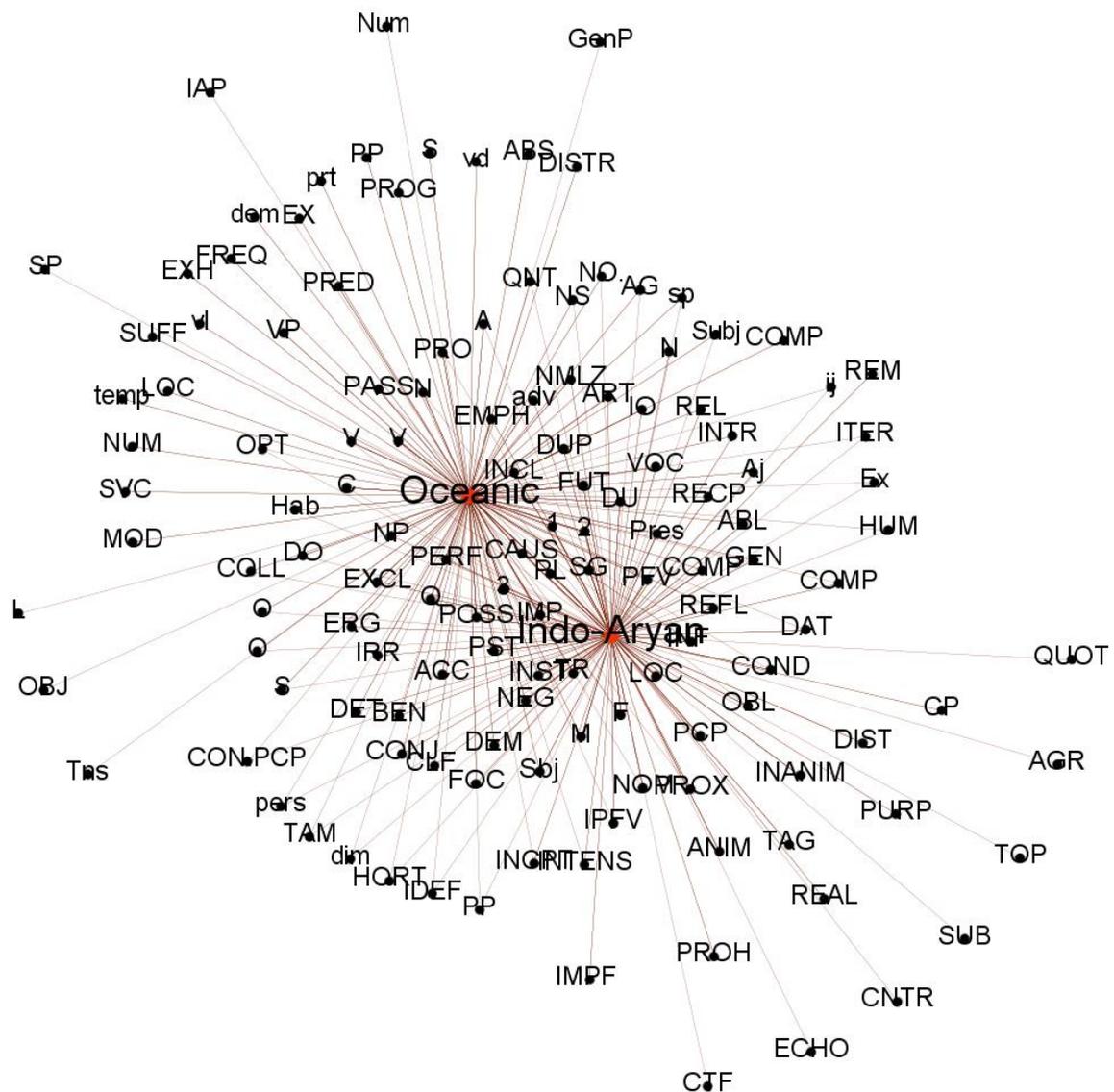


Figure 1 – Network showing variation in grammatical concepts by language family described

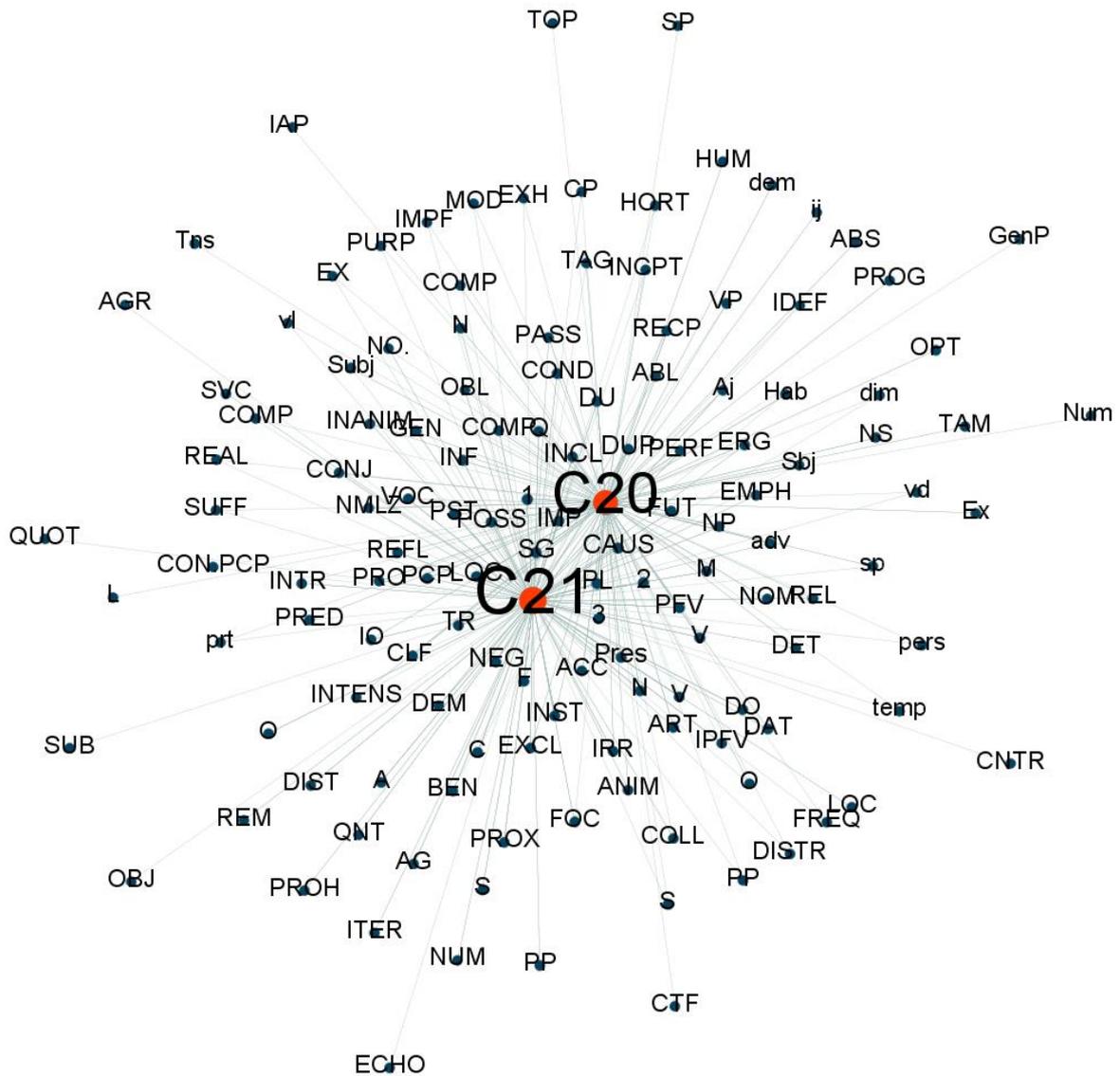


Figure 3 – Network showing variation in grammatical concepts by date of publication