

## **Sociotypology: linking language variation to sociological diversity**

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### **1. Description of the topic and research questions**

The goal of this workshop is to shed light on the causal role of sociological factors on the typological diversity of the world's languages. A common view in linguistics has been that typological diversity mostly results from random, internally-motivated changes in language structure, with no intervention of external issues, like the physical or social environments. Underlying this view is the hypothesis that the core features of human grammars are imposed by our brain, which is assumed to be configured similarly in all human beings (pathological instances aside), and to have remained unmodified since our emergence as a species. In other words, grammar universals are claimed to be biologically determined, with the effects of the natural environment or cultural practices circumscribed to quite peripheral components of language (particularly, the lexicon). Accordingly, factors external to language could explain the exact words Athabaskan languages have, or the places where they are spoken, or the fact that they are very similar, but they cannot explain why Athabaskan languages exhibit such a complex morphology... beyond the plain reason that they derive from a language with a complex morphology.

Increasing evidence suggests instead that factors external to language can explain many aspects of language structure and complexity cross-linguistically. Recent research using extensive language databases has shown that phonological features are impacted by the physical environment in which languages are spoken (Maddieson and Coupé, 2015; Everett et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, the strongest and more widespread effects are caused by our social environment. Classical sociolinguistics has extensively studied the effect of sociological factors on language structure within a language. However, this new research supports the view that these effects can be also expected across languages. Accordingly, the number of speakers, the degree of bilingualism, the tightness or the looseness of the social networks, the degree of literacy, the number of adult learners of a language, or the forms of political organization... are all factors that can account for the grammatical features a language has. A familiar example is the negative correlation found between the index of agglutination and population size (Lupyan and Dale 2010).

When one considers the social factors with an impact on language structure together with the language features subject to variation, an interesting pattern emerges (see Bolender 2007; Wray and Grace 2007; Trudgill, 2011; or Nettle, 2012, Gil, 2021, among many others). On the one side, the languages spoken by isolated human groups living in small,

close-knit communities with high proportions of native speakers (the so-called “esoteric languages”) usually exhibit larger sound inventories and complex phonotactics, opaque morphologies (with more irregularities and morpho-phonological constraints), limited semantic transparency (with abundance of idioms and idiosyncratic speech), and reduced compositional structure, and fewer syntactic devices. Conversely, large and complex social networks, involving greater rates of inter-group contacts and cultural exchanges, seemingly favour languages with expanded vocabularies and increased syntactic complexity (including greater reliance on recursion). These “exoteric languages” also exhibit greater compositionality and enhanced semantic transparency, as well as simpler sound combinations and more regular morphologies. Overall, the difference between “esoteric” and “exoteric” languages seems to stem from their differential context-dependency. Thus, esoteric communication takes place between people sharing considerable amounts of knowledge, whereas in exoteric communication language use is usually decontextualized.

The main objective of this workshop is to explore the potential causative role of sociological factors on typological diversity. As a consequence, our focus is not only on microvariation within languages but also on macrovariation across languages. Specific research questions to be addressed include (but are not limited to):

- Patterns of global linguistic diversity
- Socio-cultural factors accounting for language diversity
- Adaptive value of language diversity
- Feedback effects between sociologically-driven diversity and cognitive diversity
- Emergent properties of languages in response to sociological factors

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## **2. Keywords**

Typological diversity; sociological factors; cultural evolution; adaptive value of language diversity