

Rethinking argument structure interactionally: Deviations from Who Does What to Whom across the languages

Convenors:

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Presentation

The goal of this workshop is to lay the groundwork for an utterance/TCU-oriented typology. Departing from the traditional clause-based model of cross-linguistic variation, we aim to uncover the fundamental syntactic patterns of spoken discourse and the typological variation in this domain.

Traditionally, linguistics has emphasized clausal structures and sentences, commonly defined as structures with a predicate and its arguments. Such structures typically express a proposition, a description of an event that addresses the question of *Who does what to whom*. Although a definition of the basic notions of clause and sentence is known to be problematic under close scrutiny (e.g. de Beaugrande 1999), clause-based argument structure is the traditional domain of theoretical and typological inquiry of syntax. Such a view is reflected throughout linguistic literature, as is illustrated in (1):

(1) *I wrote a long letter* (Croft 2022: 32)

Despite the massive shift to usage-based models in current linguistic thinking, the clause/sentence-based view of grammar persists nearly unchallenged. Distributional typology, which has gained popularity in recent years, significantly reformulates the discipline's goals as asking and answering the questions *what's where why*. However, it remains rather traditional in its focus on *Who does what to whom* structures. This stance is evident, for example, in recent discussions on the forces that shape case-marking systems cross-linguistically: "In utterances with an agent (A) and a patient (P)—for example, *Henry kissed Mark*—languages need to signal which argument maps onto which role." (Shcherbakova et al. 2024: 7259). Similarly, cognitive experimental approaches operate within the sentence-planning and comprehension paradigm, with the requirement to produce a full clause as a response to a stimulus (e.g. Nordlinger, Rodriguez and Kidd 2022:195).

By contrast, conversation analysis and its daughter approach, interactional linguistics, have focused on the structures of spoken language in face-to-face interactions. In this tradition, it has long been known that units of spoken interaction, such as (the lexical content of) intonation units (IUs) and turn construction units (TCUs), can constitute locally sufficient contributions, without forming a clause in the traditional sense. The panoply of such structures and the phenomena they represent is broad. This includes, for example, incremental planning and delivery. While the incremental view is in line with current clause-based approaches to planning (cf. again Nordlinger, Rodriguez and Kidd 2022 above), in the interactional view chunks that do not evolve into a clausal structure form nonetheless part of the overall larger structure. A different type of a phenomenon are structures that conventionally convey information without having a clausal structure. This, for instance, includes detached NPs used for such tasks as shifting attention to a referent, assessments,

exclamations, requests or narration (Sorjonen and Raevaara 2014, Helasvuo 2019, Izre’el 2018). Some additional well-known cases of non-clausal constructions with heavy interactional load and designated functions are vocatives (Sonnenhauser and Noel Aziz Hanna 2013) and interjections (Dingemanse 2024). Taking a non-clausal analysis of such structures seriously leads to further theoretical questions, such as the clausal nature of stand-alone verbs and the notion of “omittable arguments” in “radical pro-drop” languages. Is reconstructing a clause in such cases justifiable, or is it parallel to reconstructing, for instance, “an omitted temporal adverbial” where the temporal reference is established from the context (as potentially is the case in (1)). Finally, there is an also widespread family of mirror-image phenomena where syntactic structures conventionally go beyond expressing aspects of the reported event and involve aspects of the speech act and its sociopragmatic settings (such as allocutivity (Antonov 2015)).

Unfortunately, interactional linguistics and typologically informed usage-based linguistics continue to exist in parallel universes. There are very few studies that seriously ask how “clausal” spoken languages actually are. Notable attempts to bridge the gap originating in interactionally informed approaches, are yet to make an impact on theoretical linguistics and typology. For example, Laury, Ono & Suzuki (2019) show that Finnish and Japanese differ significantly with respect to argument expression and, consequently, the proximity to the *who-does-what-to-whom* prototype. While Finnish speakers most often express at least one “argument” overtly (and the predicate is obligatory marked for subject), Japanese speakers seem to orient to predicate-only TCUs (cf. also the contributions to special issues of *Studies in Language* 2019 and *Languages* 2025 edited by Laury and Ono on this topic). Yet, to this day, the dialogue between interactional approaches, general linguistics, usage-based theories, and typology is minimal. Moreover, the coverage of this research has been rather narrow, with much of the work concentrating on the same language choice. Building upon the seminal work of Ono, Laury and others, we aim to collect new cross-linguistic evidence and develop further the attempt to situate the problem of adequacy of clause- and argument structure-based thinking at the core of the general linguistic discussion.

The aim of the workshop is thus an attempt to discuss and determine what components basic units of natural spoken discourse consist of, and how languages differ in this respect. We are particularly interested in deviations from prototypical clausal structures (predicate + arguments). These deviations can be classified into two main types: (1) “omission” or non-marking of typical arguments (A, S, P, R, etc.) and (2) addition (more or less obligatory) of non-canonical referential phrases: topics, other detached noun phrases, address forms, etc. Some of these deviations have been discussed in the literature., e.g.:

- Prevalence of predicate-only structures, e.g. Japanese (Laury, Ono & Suzuki 2019),
- Prevalence of structures based on referential structures with no overt syntactic relations to the rest of the utterance (“topic-prominent languages” Li & Thompson 1976, Left Dislocations (Ozerov 2024) and more)
- Non-specification or underspecification of thematic roles of the referents, e.g. Riau Indonesian (Gil 2004; Gil & Shen 2019),
- Addressee prominence: allocutivity, e.g. Basque and Korean (Antonov 2013, 2015) and familiarizers (Kleinknecht & Souza 2017),
- Obligatory indexation of the speech situation, such as avoidance speech, e.g., the mother-in-law speech style in Dyirbal (Dixon 2015).
- Other quasi-obligatory pragmatic marking, e.g., through final particles in East Asia (Panov 2020)

- The “online syntax” approach (Hopper 1987; Auer 2015) arguing that typical clauses emerge in the incremental production of utterances.

Research questions

This workshop invites contributions that ask and answer the following questions using concrete, language-specific and cross-linguistic data:

- How do naturally occurring units of interaction in individual languages differ from the clausal prototype “predicate + arguments” (*who does what to whom*)?
- What types of frequent or obligatory, free or bound referential phrases do occur beyond the standard semantic types of arguments (S, A, P, T, R)?
- How much non-specification of thematic roles can be found cross-linguistically?
- Are there any areal or genealogical clines in utterance types that do not fit the clausal prototype?
- Is propositional content and indexing of the speech event features a binary opposition or a continuum?
- Which alternative models of syntax can account for utterances that are not prototypical clauses? What can we benefit from applying these models to clausal patterns?

Please send provisional abstracts of no more than 300 words (excluding references) in PDF format by November 10, 2025 to any of the convenors:

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