

Case studies in areal morphology: the Indo-European languages of Central Asia

SVENJA BONMANN

*Department of Comparative Language Science,
Indo-European Studies Group / Distributional Linguistics Lab*

A central research question in historical-comparative linguistics relates to the diachronic stability of morphosyntactic categories (in a more abstract way) and concrete devices (i.e. morphemes). The most obvious way to tackle this question lies in a detailed investigation of genetically related languages whose prehistory is known either directly (via textual remains) or indirectly (reconstruction of morphological aspects via the comparative method), and which happen to be spoken over a vast territory. In such a case, areal influence due to intensive language contact with speakers of other language families suggests itself as the source of potential changes or remodelings of typological traits among the members of the language family in question.

Scholarly consensus holds it that, in a very general sense, morphological structures are comparatively resistant to borrowing (e.g., Gardani et al. 2015, Dediu & Cysouw 2013, Matras & Sakel 2007, Myers-Scotton 2002, Moravcsik 1978, Thomason & Kaufman 1988, McMahon & McMahon 2005), at least in comparison to phonological properties or lexical material. However, this verdict is not apodictic; morphological borrowing, even though not as likely as phonological or lexical borrowing, does occur, and several case studies have highlighted different aspects of contact-induced morphological change (see, among others, Aikhenvald 2003, Grant 2008, Law 2013, 2014, Kossmann 2010 or Gardani 2008, 2012, Gardani et al. 2015). This research has also shown that although it is not possible to predict the general outline of grammatical borrowing (see Thomason 2000), there are indeed some aspects of morphological categories which are more often and more easily borrowed than others. In Gardani's words (2012, 72), it is

“widely accepted that, whereas contact-induced morphological change is not rare in word-formation, it represents a rather exceptional phenomenon in inflection. Morphemes that realize inflection are believed to be among the most change-proof elements in any language and highly resistant to borrowing (cf. Thomason 2001, 70-71). Indeed, at the current state of knowledge, the borrowing of inflectional morphemes is very rare (...).”

Furthermore, following Gardani (2012, 77),

“morphemes that realize morphosyntactic features (and values) proper of inherent inflection, such as number and gender on nouns, are borrowed more easily, hence more frequently, than features pertinent to contextual inflection such as structural case. This is predictable from the consideration, on the one hand, that inherent inflection is more similar to derivation than contextual information (...), and, on the other hand, that derivation is more easily borrowable than inflection (...). Therefore, as prototypical representatives of inherent inflection, plural morphemes are predicted to be borrowed at a higher-than-average rate.”

This is an interesting notion and one which can be tested against empirical evidence. Gardani (2012: 80-90) himself gives several examples of borrowed plural morphemes around the globe. What is missing in his pioneering article, however, is both a diachronic and an areal perspective, i.e. the question whether certain plural morphemes are, perhaps, borrowed again and again (or simply never lost, once obtained) over the millennia in certain linguistic areas. With other words: are there diachronically stable ‘areal morphemes’?

In the paper underlying this talk, I want to shed some light on this question by means of an in-depth investigation of plural marking in a comparatively large region, viz. the territory stretching from the Eurasian steppe in the north to the ancient civilizations of the Near and Middle East. This huge area was populated and dominated for at least 2.500 years by (Indo-)Iranian tribes; in principle, it encompasses the Bronze Age Andronovo horizon and the Iron Age Scythian cultural complex as well as the Median, Persian and Parthian empires in the Near and Middle East as secondary south-western extensions of the steppe-based Iranian civilization. It is only natural to assume that language contact with highly diverse language families must have been a major factor within this territory.

Modern Iranian languages indeed show a great variety in terms of plural suffixes. In the South-West we can mainly observe the morphemes *-hā*, *-ān* or *-gal*, whereas other Iranian languages (mostly spoken in the East) have plural endings in a high vowel (*-i*, *-e*, *-əy* etc., like in Yidgha-Munji or Pashto), and endings in a labial (*-ef*, *-əv*, *-əf* etc., oblique plural endings found in Waxi, Sarikoli or Yidgha-Munji). Furthermore, a group of North-Eastern Iranian languages shows plurals with *-t-* as a distinct feature (cf. Ossetic *-tä*, Yazghulami *-aθ*, Waxi *-iš-t*, Sogdian *-t'*, or Scythian *-τα* in names of tribes).

I hypothesize that at least some of these plural morphemes may have come into being as a direct (matter borrowing) or indirect (pattern borrowing) result of language contact with non-Iranian languages having similar plural morphemes. I will present evidence which indicates that some of the plural markers of modern Iranian languages are in origin non-Indo-European, and I will try to narrow down the most likely point in time for the actual borrowing. The results of my study may be useful in updating and calibrating current computational models of trait evolution.

References

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2003. Mechanisms of change in areal diffusion: new morphology and language contact, *Journal of Linguistics* 39 (1), 1-29. DOI: 10.1017/S0022226702001937
- Aikhenvald Alexandra Y. 2006. Grammars in contact: a cross-linguistic perspective. In Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and Robert M. W. Dixon (eds.) *Grammars in contact: a cross-linguistic typology*, 1–66. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell Lyle. 2006. Areal linguistics: a closer scrutiny. In Yaron Matras McMahon April and Nigel Vincent (eds.) *Linguistic areas: convergence in historical and typological perspective*, 1–31. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dediu, Dan & Michael Cysouw. 2013. Some structural aspects of language are more stable than others: a comparison of seven methods. *PLoS ONE* 8(1): e55009. DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0055009
- Gardani, Francesco. 2008. *Borrowing of inflectional morphemes in language contact*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Gardani, Francesco. 2012. Plural across inflection and derivation, fusion and agglutination. In Lars Johanson & Martine I. Robbeets (eds.), *Copies versus cognates in bound morphology*, 71–97. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Gardani, Francesco, Peter Arkadiev & Nino Amiridze. 2015. Borrowed morphology: An overview. In Francesco Gardani, Peter Arkadiev & Nino Amiridze (eds.), *Borrowed morphology* (Language Contact and Bilingualism 8), 1–23. Berlin, Boston & Munich: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Grant, Anthony P. 2008. Contact-induced change and the openness of ‘closed’ morphological systems: some cases from Native America, *Journal of Language Contact - THEMA* 2: 165-186.
- Kossmann, Maarten. 2010. Parallel system borrowing. Parallel morphological systems due to the borrowing of paradigms, *Diachronica* 27 (3): 459-487.
- Law, Danny. 2013. Inherited similarity and contact-induced change in Mayan Languages. *Journal of Language Contact* 6(2). 271–299.
- Law, Danny. 2014. *Language contact, inherited similarity and social difference: The story of linguistic interaction in the Maya lowlands*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

- Matras, Yaron & Jeanette Sakel. 2007. Introduction. In Yaron Matras & Jeanette Sakel (eds.), *Grammatical borrowing in cross-linguistic perspective*, 1–13. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- McMahon, April & Robert McMahon. 2005. *Language classification by numbers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moravcsik, Edith A. 1978. Language contact. In Joseph H. Greenberg, Charles A. Ferguson & Edith A. Moravcsik (eds.), *Universals of human language: Method & theory*, 93–122. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Myers-Scotton, Carol. 2002. Contact Linguistics. *Bilingual encounters and grammatical outcomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sakel, Jeanette. 2007. Types of loan: Matter and pattern. In Yaron Matras & Jeanette Sakel (eds.), *Grammatical borrowing in cross-linguistic perspective*, 15–29. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Seifart, Frank. 2015. Direct and indirect affix borrowing. *Language* 91(3). 511–532.
- Storch Anne. 2006. How long do Linguistic Areas Last? Western Nilotic Grammars in Contact. In Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. and Dixon, Robert M.W. (eds.) *Grammars in contact: a cross-linguistic typology*, 94–113. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomason, Sarah G. 2000. On the unpredictability of contact effects, *Estudios de Sociolingüística* 1: 173-182.
- Thomason, Sarah G. & Terrence D. Kaufman. 1988. *Language Contact, Creolization, and Genetic Inheritance*. Berkeley: University of California Press.