1. Introduction

In this chapter we consider eight grammatical systems—Polarity, Tense, Aspect, Evidentiality, Person, Reference classification, Number and Case—and examine their co-occurrence within grammars. In many instances there is no dependency between systems. For instance, a language may have a two-term number system, singular and plural, and a three-term case system, nominative, accusative and dative, with all combinations of these choices being attested (nominative singular, accusative singular, dative singular, nominative plural, accusative plural, dative plural). In another language we may find a distinction between three cases in singular number, but only a two-way contrast in plural number—a nominative plural (corresponding in function to nominative singular) and a single accusative-dative plural (functionally corresponding to both accusative singular and dative singular). We can then say that there is a dependency between the Number and Case systems in this language, specifically that Case depends on Number since the Case choices that are available depend on the choice that is made from the Number system.

We have gathered all the examples we could find of dependencies between the eight systems and examined the direction of dependencies. For some pairs of systems there is a one-way dependency; for instance, if there is a dependency between Polarity (positive versus negative) and Case it is always Case that depends on Polarity, never the other way around. For other pairs the dependency can operate in one direction in one language and in the reverse direction in another; for instance, we have examples of Case depending on Number, and also Number depending on Case (but never in the same language, only in distinct languages). Putting together the full set of dependencies, from our data, reveals a hierarchy of dependencies between the systems. This helps to explain the way in which human language is intrinsically organised.
We have not restricted ourselves to a particular selection of languages. Rather, we have looked for dependencies between systems in all the languages on which we (or the colleagues we consulted) have available data, more than five hundred in all. We give, in this chapter, examples of all the dependencies that we have found. Our methodology was basically inductive (see §6).

§2 presents the eight systems that we consider, and then §3 briefly mentions formal and functional markedness within systems. §4 begins by explaining the idea of dependency, as we use the term, before getting down to the main business of the chapter, statement of the dependencies we have found. §5 gives a hierarchy that summarises the dependencies and then §6 suggests a rationale that underlies the hierarchy. §7 is a brief conclusion, with suggestions for further work. The appendix extends the discussion to also include the system of Definiteness.

2. Systems Considered

All languages have a number of grammatical systems—closed sets of choices one of which must be selected for a construction of a certain type. Some systems are found in all languages (e.g. Polarity, Person) while others occur in many but not all languages (e.g. Tense, Case).

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1 Dependencies of the type investigated here are typically found in agglutinative and especially in fusional languages. They are rarer in isolating languages. The fact that we quote few examples from isolating languages should not be taken as an indication that we have ignored this typological class; on the contrary, we have assiduously searched the grammars of isolating languages.

2 We give an example of every type of dependency found. We do not, of course, mention every example of each type; for some dependencies we found scores of examples but have just quoted a couple of typical ones here.

3 This chapter is concerned with paradigmatic dependencies between grammatical systems. A related question concerns the syntagmatic co-occurrence of different grammatical systems, either as portmanteau morphemes, or as separate but contiguous morphemes. In some instances this can be entirely fortuitous and does not imply a semantic connection between the systems involved, e.g. the surface realisation through one portmanteau verb suffix in Latin of person and number of subject, tense, voice and mood. In other instances syntagmatic connection does indicate a semantic link between systems, e.g. in most languages pronouns combine person and number in one form (which is not analysable into separate person and number morphemes); this correlates with the fact that non-singular number is interpreted differently in different persons. We plan, in a later study, to examine the varied semantic bases of syntagmatic co-occurrences of grammatical systems.