Review Essay

Affixes in Language Change

Copying, Inheritance and Accommodation

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Lars Johanson and Martine Robbeets (eds.)

1 Introduction

Summarizing part of the editors’ introduction to this book, Éva Csató (p. 371) writes in her contribution, ‘The main concern of this volume is the copiability of bound morphemes and the evidence of shared morphology for establishing genealogical relationship.’ The book is divided into three parts: Part 1, Theoretical and typological issues (introduction and 6 papers), Part 2, Case studies: America (4 papers), and Part 3, Eurasia (10 papers). However, the papers are described here not in the order in which they appear, but by assigning them to three broad categories: those that tackle the book’s title topic more or less directly, those that suggest there is a third alternative besides copies and cognates, and those that are off topic. This makes it easier to bring out themes that unify papers in the first two categories. I hasten to note that some of the off-topic papers are valuable contributions to the study of contact-induced change, but they could perhaps have been more appropriately published elsewhere.

The introduction also indicates a secondary goal: to apply Johanson’s ‘code-copying’ framework more widely. Part of the introduction interprets the book’s
papers within this framework, but only five out of 20 papers—Backus and Verschik, Robbeets, van de Pol, Csató, Hayasi—actually employ it, and only the first two discuss the copying of affixes (for brevity’s sake I use ‘affixes’ rather than ‘bound morphemes’). Indeed, a number of authors continue to talk of ‘borrowing,’ despite Johanson’s insistence that ‘copying’ is a more appropriate metaphor because a copy is never identical with its model. I follow Johanson in this, but not in some of his less transparent terminological choices.

2 Papers on Copied and Cognate Affixes

Ironically, perhaps, cognates scarcely figure in most of the papers that are dedicated to the book’s title topic. The underlying logic of most authors seems to be that if we want to use cognate affixes as evidence of genealogical relationship, we must be able to recognize and set aside copies, and we achieve this by describing cases where affixes are known to have been copied and by inferring what these cases have in common, i.e., what leads to copying and what constrains it. The steps in this process are thus:

(1) a. identification and description of copied affixes;
   b. generalization based on (a);
   c. application, where (b) is applied in order to recognize and set aside copied affixes so that genealogical relationship can be established on the basis of cognate affixes.

Cognate affixes come into their own at step (1c), but the only paper in the volume to provide an application of this kind is Robbeets’.

Victor Friedman’s “Copying and cognates in the Balkan Sprachbund” serves as an introduction to the pitfalls of identifying and describing copied affixes. It consists of four cautionary tales, each with its own moral. In the first Friedman reexamines the oft-cited alleged copying of verbal subject agreement suffixes from Bulgarian into Meglenite Romanian (Weinreich 1953)—more accurately, as Friedman points out, from Macedonian into Meglenoromanian—and shows that these are not copies at all, but internal developments in Meglenoromanian brought about by morphological analogy; such developments have not occurred in the most Slavicized dialect of Meglenoromanian. His second tale

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1 In so doing I leave clitics in limbo. In their one occurrence in the volume, in Aikhenvald’s paper, they are not treated as bound.