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Cross-linguistic variability of valency class systems

Valency classes are classes of verbs that employ identical patterns for encoding their core arguments. Cross-linguistic study of valency classes is an intriguing and complex matter. It is intriguing because it provides wealth of data on universal tendencies, scenarios of historical development and mechanisms of areal diffusion of syntactic patterns. It is complex for a number of reasons, including the lack of any evident basis for cross-linguistic comparison.

In my talk, I am going to discuss possible approaches to solving these problems. I will focus on cross-linguistic variability in the syntactic behaviour of bivalent verbs (such as ‘drink’, ‘see’, ‘be afraid’, ‘have’, ‘resemble’, etc.) and will advocate the wordlist-based approach as implemented in the BivalTyp database (www.bivaltyp.info). This database currently contains information on coding behaviour of 130 predicates in 90 languages (spoken mainly in Northern Eurasia). Based on these data, I will argue that that valency patterns of individual verbs change relatively fast and are easily transferable in language contact, while the semantic basis of transitivity is more stable, although not entirely uniform across language families. Besides, I will explore the ways in which valency patterns of individual verbs can be measured in terms of higher or lower typological predictability and will claim that experiential verbs display idiosyncratic behaviour more often than verbs that denote concrete physical actions.