

Valence Orientation in Contact: a Cross-Linguistic Perspective
Workshop for SLE 51, Tallinn, 2018
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Nichols, Peterson & Barnes (2004) have proposed that a general typological parameter of languages is their VALENCE ORIENTATION – that is, the overall tendency of a language to treat members of causal-noncausal verb alternations in a particular way. In some languages, verbs with meanings like *seat* and *scare* tend to be formally derived from verbs meaning *sit* and *fear* (e.g., Nanai, Lakhota), while in other languages, the direction of derivation is the converse (e.g., Russian, Maasai). Yet other languages tend to treat both members as derived (e.g., Ingush, Hausa), or neither member as derived (e.g., Ewe, Ossetic). This work intersects with Haspelmath (1993, 2017) and Haspelmath et al. (2014), which show that lexical meaning influences propensity to causativize or decausativize. All of the above studies are interested in form-meaning and/or form-frequency correspondences, as are studies conducted in generative frameworks (e.g., Levin & Rappoport Hovav 1995 and subsequent literature).

However, meaning- or usage-based explanations (called ‘functional theories’ in Bickel 2015), which appeal to cognitive or communicative biases, may be only one part of an account of cross-linguistic diversity in basic valence orientation or, more broadly, in the coding of causal:noncausal verb pairs. Another possible set of factors is ‘event-based’ (Bickel 2015), i.e., historical contingencies that have brought speakers of different languages into contact, potentially leading to convergence, on the one hand, or divergence, on the other. Therefore it is important to directly target the possibility that the distribution of valence orientation across languages is influenced by language contact. Preliminary support for this possibility is found in Haspelmath (1993), which points to a European preference for anticausatives, or Nichols et al.’s (2004) finding that basic valence orientation tends to pattern areally. For example, transitivity languages, which prefer the formal derivation of a causal verb from a noncausal verb, are especially prominent in Northern Asia and in North America, while they are strongly dispreferred in Africa, Australia, and Europe.

Such broad areal distributions are the point of departure for the proposed workshop on Valence Orientation as a Contact-Influenced Parameter: A Crosslinguistic Perspective. The hypothesis to be investigated in this workshop is that valence orientation, while generally genealogically conservative, is prone to contact-induced change. This hypothesis still remains to be evaluated on the basis of detailed case studies that specifically target valence orientation in actual contact situations. Indeed, several studies point to the possibility of convergence in valence orientation in certain contact situations. Kulikov & Lavidas (2015) point to an areal split within Indo-European, such that verb labiality increased in the western languages (e.g., Romance and Germanic) and decreased in the eastern languages (e.g., Indo-Aryan and Armenian). Coptic and Koine Greek, which were in intensive contact in Late Antique Egypt, both developed an increased tendency to labile verbs (Grossman 2017, Lavidas 2009). Russian Yiddish has moved away from the Germanic profile towards a strong detransitivizing preference as in Russian, while United States Yiddish has shifted towards a preference for labile verbs as in English (Luchina-Sadan, in prep.), as has Pennsylvania German (Goldblatt, in prep.).

We invite abstracts for 20-minute talks that focus on one of the following (or similar) topics:

1. Case studies of individual contact situations that provide a detailed discussion of the valence orientation of the languages in contact, in order to evaluate the extent to which language contact played a role in shaping valence orientation
2. Areal studies of valence orientation
3. Global cross-linguistic studies of valence orientation

4. Valence orientation in pidgins, creoles, or mixed languages
5. Other aspects of valence orientation in the context of language contact
6. Family biases (Bickel 2011 and subsequent literature)
7. Relevant methodological issues and questions.

Wordlist approaches have been shown to give sensitive and rigorous measures of cross-linguistic similarity and distance, and we especially welcome abstracts that base the study of languages in contact on existing standard wordlists, such as the list of 18 verb-pair meanings provided by Nichols et al. (2004) (revised in Nichols (2017)), for which roughly 200 languages have already been coded; the 31 verb-pair meanings in Haspelmath (1993) or the 20 verb-pair meanings in Haspelmath et al. (2014); or the 20-gloss list in Nau & Pakerys (2017/in press); or the 31-pair WATP list. We also welcome contributions that criticize existing wordlists or propose new ones.