

Reference production and grammatical relations across spoken languages.

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Usage-based linguistics has for a long time sought the evolutionary seedbed of grammatical relations from patterns of how we use language in real communication—especially in terms of how information is structured and processed (Givón 1992, DuBois 1987, Dixon 1979 among many others). For instance, subjects – in particular where represented as a grouping of sole and agentive argument in person indexing – have been regarded as the result of the grammaticalization of topics in discourse (Mithun 1991; Givón 1976, 1983). Ergative alignment - and the grouping of sole and patientive arguments in case marking - are thought to reflect structuring around focal information in discourse (DuBois 1987, 2003). The connections between grammar and discourse have, however, typically been cast in fairly opportunistic terms with little concern for systematic testing against patterns of language use (as represented in corpora) or processing (as detectable in relevant experiments) (cf. Haig & Schnell 2016, Schnell & Schiborr 2022). I here take on the first of these two aspects and present corpus-linguistic findings pertaining to reference production and its relation to grammatical relations and their development.

I will focus on findings from spoken-language corpora where – in contrast to written corpora – language users are much more clearly subjected to relevant pressures on speech planning and audience design that have been postulated to be relevant in shaping how languages develop according to usage-based principles. Essentially, my research (in collaboration with a number of colleagues) suggests an overall diminished role of audience design and aggregate pragmatic roles such as topic or focus in discourse production, and hence in the evolutionary origins of grammatical relations. Instead, it seems that attested commonalities of discourse production pertain primarily to the local context of utterance planning and their global concerns for overall informative and coherent communication of content relevant to human affairs.

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