

From a split second in the mind to millennia of persistence: How conjugation classes and declensions emerge and survive

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A striking property of inflectional systems is the existence of what Aronoff (1992) termed 'autonomous' morphological generalisations. These are organisational structures such as verb conjugations and nominal declensions which have no meaning for syntax, semantics or phonology, but which systematically pervade the morphology. A key challenge for any account of this is that autonomous morphology offers no obvious benefit relative to a system which lacks it, yet it must be learnt so presumably entails a cost. If we consider language as a complex dynamical system, then normally we would not expect costly structures with no benefit to persist, yet autonomous morphological structures can persist for millennia (Maiden 2018). In this talk I present recent research that attempts to offer insight into the mystery of autonomous morphology. I show how a simple mechanism of analogical change, iterated over and over during diachrony, could enable autonomous morphological organisation to emerge and persist. I then link this simple change mechanism to a notion of cognitive heuristics, which allow the mind to perform demanding tasks of probabilistic reasoning with reduced effort. I show how a simple rational heuristic, deployed in the context of reasoning about inflectional paradigms during language use, could give rise to exactly the analogical change mechanism which in turn would support autonomous morphology.