The Loss of Inflection
ICHl 2017

Organizers: Dr Matthew Baerman m.baerman@surrey.ac.uk
Dr Oliver Bond o.bond@surrey.ac.uk
Professor Greville Corbett g.corbett@surrey.ac.uk
Dr Helen Sims-Williams j.sims-williams@surrey.ac.uk

Workshop description

The loss of inflection has been observed in the history of a vast number of languages. It plays an important theoretical role in discussions of syntactic change (e.g. Allen 2006, Fischer 2010) and language contact and death (McWhorter 1998, Polinsky 1995, Campbell and Muntzel 1989), and is a crucial step in the ‘typological cycle’ (van Gelderen 2011, Igartua 2015). But while the development of inflection has been extensively discussed in theoretical work on language change, the mechanisms and pathways leading to inflectional loss have received little attention beyond histories of individual languages. This workshop will bring together scholars concerned with theoretical issues in historical linguistics to examine the loss of inflection in broad perspective. Our aim is to bring attention to neglected theoretical questions concerning the loss of inflection, and to begin to integrate it into general theories of language change.

Research questions

During its recorded history English has lost most of its inflection, including the morphological marking of mood, case and gender, and almost all of its person and number marking. English is far from unique in this regard: for example, the loss of case marking has occurred independently in languages throughout the Indo-European language family, from Celtic in the west to Iranian in the east, and has also occurred in Semitic languages (Hasselbach 2013). Loss of gender agreement has also been observed in Indo-European languages (e.g. Armenian), as well as in some Daghestanian (Nichols 2008), Niger-Congo (Good 2012), Iwaidjan (Australia; Evans 2007) and Dravidian languages (Andronov 2003). The loss of person agreement – for subject, object, or both – has been observed in Indo-Aryan, Finnic (Ziegelmann 2011), Manchu, Bantu, Ethiosemitic (Bulakh 2014), Dravidian, Australonesian, Papuan, Arawakan, Tupi-Guarani, Chibchan and Muskogean languages (see Siewierska 2004 for a number of references). The loss of verbal categories such as tense, aspect and mood marking on verbs is found in Indo-Aryan languages, Egyptian (Hodge 1970) and Chadic (Hellwig 2011).

At first glance this may appear to be just a matter of decay: words have got shorter, categories reduced and meaning simplified. But as the study of the history of English has shown (e.g. Lass 1992), this reduction and loss of inflection came about through the interaction of innovations at all levels of the grammar: sound change (e.g. word endings were rendered indistinct or disappeared altogether), morphological innovations (e.g. the consolidation and simplification of inflection classes) and syntactic innovations (e.g. affecting word order and the use of prepositional constructions). At one level the result is simplification, but the processes that led to it involved a complex series of systemic changes and the adoption of new organizing principles. Far from being just a matter of decay, the evidence so far shows that the loss of inflection follows along lines determined by paradigmatic structure, and so reveals properties of the organization of inflectional systems that might otherwise remain hidden. The overarching research question of the workshop will thus be what are the possible pathways of inflectional loss, and what do they reveal about the nature of inflectional systems?
We particularly encourage submissions approaching this question from the following five angles:

1. What role do the morphosyntactic features themselves play? That is, are certain types of function more likely to be lost than others? It is not infrequently the case that a word loses inflection for one feature but retains it for others. For example, Swedish verbs have lost subject marking but continue to inflect for tense, while Spanish nouns have lost all case marking, but continue to inflect for number. Is it that some features are more unstable than others?

2. What is the influence of the type of morphological form? For example, the loss of inflection in English is at least partly due to the fact that the markers typically occurred at the end of the word, a position particularly prone to phonological weakening. Does this mean that the form of inflectional markers plays a key role in determining their fate?

3. Could the complexity of the inflectional system itself bring about its demise? It has been suggested that having a large number of different forms leads to difficulties with memory and processing (Bever & Langendoen 1972), or that some languages have developed paradigm structures which are ‘conceptually too complicated’ (van Reenen and Schøsler 2000, cited by Kulikov 2006).

4. Since the loss of morphological marking often goes hand-in-hand with changes in syntax, it is natural to ask where the motivation comes from. Thus the loss of case marking to distinguish subject and object in English was accompanied by a codification of the word order which itself distinguished these grammatical roles, with subjects coming before the verb and objects after. Did the syntactic change enable the morphological change, or did the morphological change necessitate the syntactic change?

5. Is the ‘natural’ loss of inflection different from contact-induced change? Many, if not most, examples that have been reported have occurred under particular sociolinguistic conditions that involve the interaction of two or more languages. Much of the inflectional loss in English, for example, has been attributed to the influence of Scandinavian languages in the early period, while endangered languages in their last stages often lose substantial portions of their inflectional systems. This is usually seen as something fundamentally different from ‘natural’ evolution, and thus not subject to the sorts of regularities and constraints that normally govern linguistic change (Siewierska 2004; Heine & Kuteva 2005). But contact-induced change, though generally more rapid than internally-motivated change, is still not instantaneous, and so must proceed through stages. Is this a special kind of change with its own dynamic, or is it like a fast-forward version of ‘natural’ change?
References


