University of Zurich[UZH]

University Research Priority Program
Language and Space

Linguistic Morphology in Time and Space (LiMiTS)

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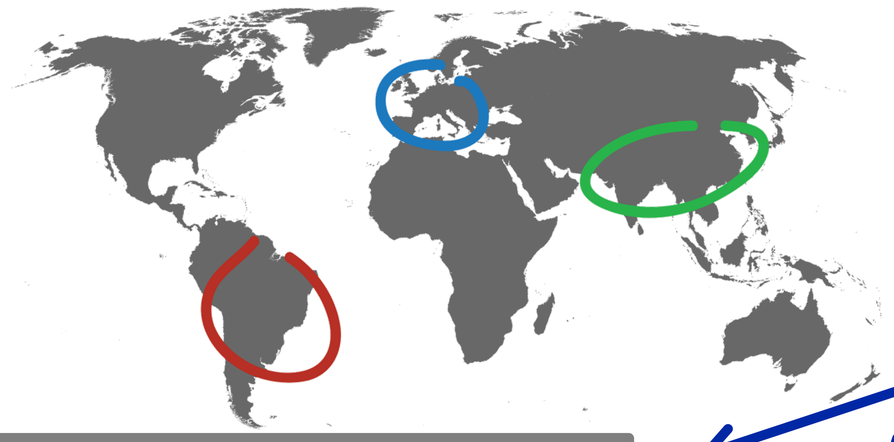
Goal: Understanding how morphology develops in different genealogical and geographical contexts and to what extent this development is affected by language contact



Focus: verbal morphology, particularly person marking, valency and voice markers, and TAM marking

Results

Methods

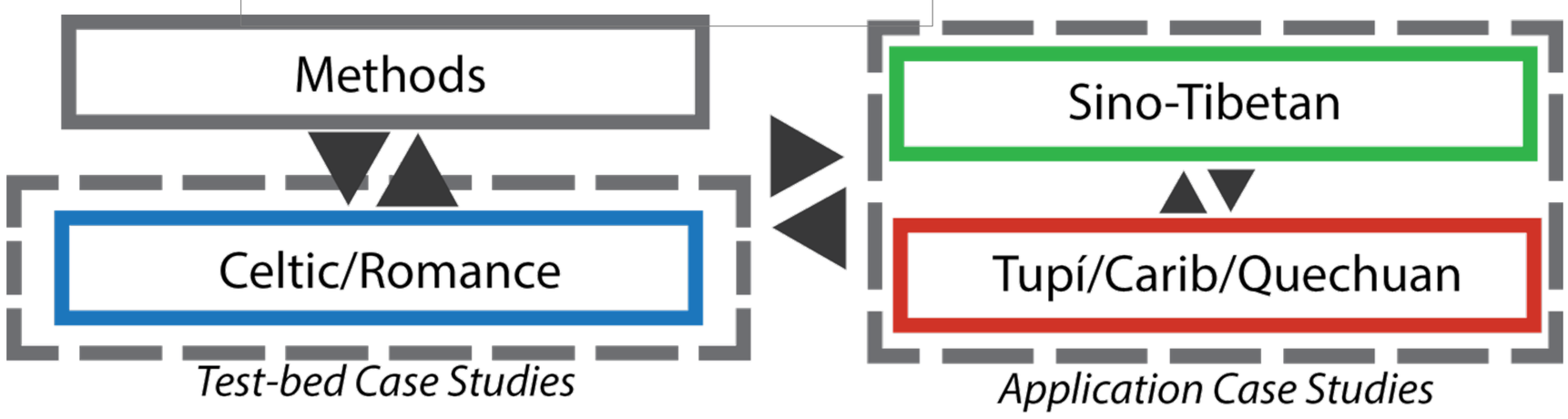
- collected geographical data relevant to modeling likely historical movement and expansion, such as river networks, elevation differences, etc.
- analyzed the performance of phylogeographical models in an extensive simulation study and showed that current phylogeographical methods have serious shortcomings when it comes to reconstructing past migrations
- developed a novel probabilistic approach to identify zones of shared evolution in space. In its present form, the developed algorithm is able to capture evidence for shared evolution in a spatial region at a fixed point in time (Dedio et al. 2019)

Morphological task force

- developed a bottom-up approach to systematically compare morphological structures between languages (van Gijn et al. forthc. a)
- designed a novel knowledge representation system (LiMiTSlang) to translate cross-linguistic morphological variation into computationally precise terms. This system consists of a data model and a formal representational language (van Gijn et al. forthc. a)

Sino-Tibetan

- collected data on 62 Sino-Tibetan languages to study the evolution of verbal synthesis under different geographical conditions and coded 125 languages for areal features of South / East / Southeast Asia
- performed in-depth analyses of word domains(phonological and syntactic cohesion domains) across four divergent branches of the family (represented by Bunan, Mandarin, Chintang and Burmese) and discovered remarkably more homogeneity than is commonly assumed
- provided first-time evidence for a diachronic process in the course of which object indexation markers are reanalyzed as markers of transitive verbs (Widmer 2018)



Celtic/Romance

- collected data on person marking morphology and collected new data through several fieldwork expeditions on Pantescu and Istro-Romanian
- Celtic: analyzed the temporal evolution of language similarity across branches in two geographical language groupings (in the British Isles, and in continental Europe and Scandinavia) and between these two groups and found quantitative evidence for contact-driven convergence that cross-cuts branches in the British Isles in the period from 1200–1900 CE (Dedio et al. 2019)
- Romance: analyzed 406 varieties and found a neat divide between varieties with third-person number syncretism and varieties without it; demonstrated that the spread of the new syncretic pattern is determined by a geographical barrier, the Apennine (Gardani & Romagnoli forthc.)

Workshops

Diachronic morphology: Theoretical, areal, and phylogenetic perspectives (2017/01)

Matter versus pattern borrowing in morphology (2017/09)

Niches in morphology (2017/09)

Rethinking evidentiality (2017/09)

Spatial patterns of language evolution (2018/01)

Romance languages and the others: The Balkan Sprachbund (2018/04)

Morphosyntactic misfits: Clitics, particles, and noncanonical affixes in the languages of the Americas (2018/06)

Tupí/Carib/Quechuan

- collected data on person marking in the largest branch of Tupian (Mawetí-Guaraní) and in non-Tupí-Guaraní languages, and on voice marking, the distributional behavior of particles and clitics, and morphophonological rules in 36 Tupian languages
- generated a new phylogenetic tree of the Tupian language family
- developed a computational model to explore explored the role of physical geography, specifically waterways, in the spread of morphological structures and identified probable pathways of language diffusion along the Amazon River network (van Gijn et al. forthc. b)

Core publications

Dedio, S., P. Ranacher & P. Widmer. 2019. Evidence for the British isles as a linguistic area. *Language*

Gardani, F. & S. Romagnoli (forthc.) The Apennine divide: Eastward third-person number syncretism

van Gijn, R., S. Dedio, F. Gardani, F. Sommer, M. Widmer, P. Widmer, T. Zakharko & B. Bickel (forthc. a) *Multivariate morphological typology*

van Gijn, R., P. Muysken & P. Ranacher (forthc.b) River thinking: River-based diffusion of linguistic features in the Upper Amazon

Widmer, M. 2018. Transitivity markers in West Himalayish: Synchronic and diachronic considerations. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 41(1), 75–105.