

Chasing the Essence of Polysynthesis

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Polysynthesis, a tendency toward many morphemes per word, is especially interesting for its potential correlations with syntactic structure. It appears that those morpheme types with the strongest interactions with syntax contribute to *holophrasis* in the narrow sense, the combination of the essential components of the clause into a single word: the predicate, all core arguments, and perhaps markers of argument structure. But holophrasis is not an either/or matter: the crucial morphological structures vary in detail and through time, developing via various possible pathways. Some languages contain full sets of pronominal affixes for all core arguments for example (Chumashan, Eskimo-Aleut), others for first and second persons but only some third (Iroquoian, Athabaskan), and still others for just first and second (Siouan, Muskogean). Some languages have elaborate, productive inventories of valency-changing affixes such as applicatives, while others have fewer or none. These constructions, too, can develop via various routes, from various their sources, through various sequences of processes of grammaticalization. Here it is shown that attention to differences among systems in detail and to the different processes by which polysynthetic structures develop can bring us closer to defining a useful polysynthetic type and understanding the reasons behind its syntactic correlates.