

Complexity/informativeness trade-off in the domain of indefinite pronouns

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Abstract

The vocabulary of human languages has been argued to support efficient communication by optimizing the trade-off between complexity and informativeness (Kemp and Regier, 2012). The argument has been based on cross-linguistic analyses of vocabulary in semantic domains of content words such as kinship, color, and number terms. The present work extends this analysis to a category of function words: indefinite pronouns (e.g. someone, anyone, no-one, cf. Haspelmath, 2001). We establish the meaning space and feature-based representations for indefinite pronouns, and show that indefinite pronoun systems across languages optimize the complexity/informativeness trade-off. This demonstrates that pressures for efficient communication shape both content and function word categories, thus tying in with the conclusions of recent work on quantifiers (Steinert-Threlkeld, 2019). Furthermore, we argue that the trade-off may explain some of the universal properties of indefinite pronouns, thus reducing the explanatory load for linguistic theories.