

The Development of Number Systems: Animacy and Optionality

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This paper explores the genesis and development of two-way Number systems with a focus on plural-marking. Haspelmath (2005: 142) points out that cross-linguistically, plural-marking varies along at least two dimensions: animacy and optionality. With respect to the animacy hierarchy (Comrie 1989, Corbett 2000, Croft 2003, Haspelmath 2005, among others), speakers make number distinctions for certain NP types, the most important of these being the contrast between animate noun (especially nouns with a human referent) and inanimate nouns. With respect to optionality, Haspelmath (2005) distinguishes between non-occurrence, optional occurrence, and obligatory occurrence of plural markers. These two dimensions, when combined, will give us six values. Table 1 shows a clear synchronic snapshot of variability in the marking of plurality on nouns, within languages that mark nominal plurality. The objective of the current study is to examine how this can be translated into a diachronic pathway.

Table 1: Summary of plural markers: animacy and optionality (from Haspelmath 2005: 142)

Feature	Occurrence
No nominal plural	28 languages
Plural only in human nouns, optional	20 languages
Plural only in human nouns, obligatory	39 languages
Plural in all nouns, always optional	55 languages
Plural in all nouns, optional in inanimates	15 languages
Plural in all nouns, always obligatory	133 languages (TOTAL: 290 languages)

Number-marking has developed in various ways. Given the variability in the development of number-marking, the first question that we address is the following: what are some of the common paths that languages which did not express nominal plurality took to develop plural-marking? One of the common ways is through the semantic extension of morphological or lexical elements originally expressing some notion of Number. For example, distributive expressions, as in Southern Paiute, imply the existence of more than one entity, and over time, may come to express plurality (Sapir, 1930-1: 258).

The second question that we investigate asks how plural-markers are integrated when they emerge in a language. Are they observed first on animate nouns, as implied by a diachronic translation of Table 1? If so, do they eventually extend to other semantic categories as well? Indeed, we find that in some languages which develop plural-marking, in particular when plural markers originated as distributives, as in Cayuga, it is limited to human/animate nouns (Mithun, 1988: 228-9). Similarly, in Korean, the new plural-marker started out being used exclusively on animate nouns as predicted, and, over time, extended its use to other nominal categories, including inanimate nouns, abstract nouns, and mass nouns (MacDonald 2014).

Corbett (2000: 57) proposes an implicational ranking of semantic classes for languages that do not mark Number on all count nouns. He claims that if a language marks Number on nouns referring to inanimates, then it must also mark it on animate nouns, further implying number marking on nouns referring to humans. We could expect that if Corbett's Animacy Hierarchy is mirrored in diachrony, such that if Number is introduced as a category, it will appear first with human nouns, then be extended to other animates, then to inanimates. We also return to the question of optionality raised above; we predict that when a noun system acquires plural-marking, it must go through a stage of optionality before becoming obligatory. Our presentation will focus on both animacy and optionality with respect to the diachronic development of two-way Number systems.

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