

Sociolinguistic typology: advances and challenges

It is now over a decade since the publication of 'Sociolinguistic Typology: Social Determinants of Linguistic Complexity' by Peter Trudgill (Trudgill, 2011). Trudgill was among the first sociolinguists to explore the claim that language structure may reflect aspects of the social structure of linguistic communities (Trudgill, 1992; 2002), a claim also investigated by those working in other areas of the language sciences (e.g., Wray & Grace, 2007; Lupyan & Dale, 2010). According to this hypothesis, the degree of linguistic 'complexification' in a language reflects aspects of its social structure. More specifically, Trudgill (2011) identified two major categories of social factors that he claimed are linked to cross-linguistic grammatical variation and change: the relative degree of contact versus isolation of linguistic communities, and their relative degree of social stability versus instability. Increased language contact and instability in terms of language transmission, Trudgill suggested, are associated with more rapid language change. In particular, he proposed that it leads to a process of grammatical 'simplification'. This consists of a number of processes, at least in relation to morphology, such as the regularisation of irregular marking, loss of morphological marking of categories such as gender and case, decreases in redundancy, and overall increases in the transparency of linguistic structures.

There has been a significant growth in interest in this topic in the last decade, with a number of challenges for this hypothesis. The most obvious contentious issue here is the notion of linguistic 'complexity' (Bisnath et al., 2022). Despite Trudgill (2011)'s proposal, there is a lack of consensus on how morphological complexity is defined and measured in both spoken and signed languages (e.g., Baerman et al., 2015; Arkadiev & Gardani, 2020; Aronoff et al., 2005; Gil, 2014; Schembri et al., 2018). This makes comparisons across languages difficult, and the variables that are sometimes compared run the risk of appearing 'cherry-picked' to suit particular theoretical assumptions. This comparative work has often focussed on inflectional morphology (e.g., Plag, 2006; DeGraff, 2001) but the complexity metrics used have been disputed (e.g., DeGraff, 2005), particularly when applied to creole and signed languages. The status of inflectional morphology in signed languages is a case in point: some have suggested that signed languages are inflection-less (e.g., Bergman & Dahl, 1994; Liddell, 2003), thus echoing claims about spoken language creole grammar (McWhorter, 2001), while others propose that sign languages have complex inflectional systems (e.g., Napoli, 2019). Typologically, not all studies have found evidence supporting the proposed link between morphological complexity and proportion of adult acquirers: Sinnemäki (2020) finds a correlation; Kopleinig (2019) does not; Sinnemäki and Di Garbo (2018) find a correlation for verbal complexity, but not for nominal complexity. As the latter authors put it, 'it matters what and how you count'. It is also unclear how, or indeed whether, Trudgill's notion of complexity extends beyond the domain of morphology: see Walkden and Breitbarth (2019) for a tentative feature-based definition of complexity in syntax.

This special session aims to take stock of these developments. We encourage submissions relating to one or more of the following questions:

- What is complexity in language? How can it be measured?
- How, if at all, does complexity change in different social and historical settings?
- How do the core ideas of sociolinguistic typology fare when confronted from data from languages and communities outside the spoken WEIRD canon?
- Can the core ideas of sociolinguistic typology be fruitfully applied beyond morphology and phoneme inventory size?

We explicitly encourage submissions from a broad range of theoretical backgrounds (e.g., functional, formal, cognitive, sociolinguistic) and methodological approaches (e.g., experimental, corpus-based, typological). Contact Adam Schembri (a.schembri@bham.ac.uk) and/or George Walkden (george.walkden@uni-konstanz.de) with any questions.