Cognitive schemas in nominal causal constructions: A quantitative typological assessment

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By nominal causal constructions we refer to causal constructions in which the causing event is syntactically represented by a noun phrase, as in *He is shivering **from** [the cold]* or *She was late for work **because of** [her husband]*. The causal meaning is abstract and complex. As a consequence, i) most languages have multiple nominal causal markers (henceforth, NCM) and ii) at least some of NCMs are polysemous and can also convey concrete, e.g. spatial, meanings. In our study, we take the patterns of syncretism displayed by NCMs as a proxy for the cognitive construal of the causal meaning. Language-specific studies on nominal causal constructions have identified several semantic parameters that can govern the choice between NCMs. However, most of these studies focus on a few European languages: as English (Radden 1985, Dirven 1995), Russian (Iordanskaia, Mel'chuk 1996, Levontina 2003), Czech (Klangová 2017), Lithuanian (Valiulytė 1998), etc. By contrast, large-scale typological inquiries into nominal causal constructions are largely missing. In our talk, we are going to partially fill this gap. Our goal is to find out i) whether languages rely on (dis)similar cognitive mechanisms in the use of NCMs and ii) whether there is any cross-linguistically robust co-variance between polysemy patterns displayed by a NCM and the semantic properties of specific nominal causal contexts.

In order to answer these questions, we used the data from NoCaCoDa (Say et al. 2022–), a typological database of nominal causal constructions. This database is based on a questionnaire containing 54 stimulus sentences that are annotated for five semantic parameters: direct vs. indirect causes, objective vs. subjective causes, internal vs. external causes, etc. Currently, NoCaCoDa displays first-hand data from 33 languages. The NCMs used in the elicited translations were grouped into five gross types based on their patterns of syncretism: Goal, Instrument, Location, Object, Source, while non-syncretic markers were tagged as Dedicated.

Based on the observed distributions we arrived at the following conclusions.

i) Syncretic NCMs viewed as a group are more prevalent than Dedicated markers. The most common patterns of syncretism are (in order of decreasing incidence) Source, Instrument, and Goal.

ii) Markers of specific syncretism-based types favour different causal contexts, e.g. Dedicated markers favour indirect external causes, while markers from the Source type favour direct internal causes.

iii) Arguably, the most important semantic parameter that manifests itself in the ways languages partition the semantic space of nominal causes is the contrast between direct and indirect causes.

iv) Although the overall incidence of specific patterns of syncretism varies greatly between languages (e.g. Source markers are more common in Eastern Europe than in adjacent areas), the types of associations discussed above are cross-linguistically stable.

v) Nominal causal constructions do not form a unified phenomenon. Dedicated causal markers (such as English *because of*), often considered prototypical, in fact constitute only a somewhat marginal type.

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