THE NON-UNIVERSALITY OF LINGUISTIC CATEGORIES:
EVIDENCE FROM PLURACTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

- PROJECT: PhD thesis on the typology of pluractional constructions in the languages of the world based on a 240-language sample.

- The aim of this presentation is to give a comprehensive account of pluractional constructions in the languages of the world in order to show that categories are language-specific and cannot be conceived as universal entities.

- Indeed, though the components of categories usually show some similarities from language to language, they remain very different each other and this makes hard a unique classification in cross-linguistic perspective.

INTRODUCTION

- In this sense, pluractional constructions are a good example of the non-universality of grammatical categories: the great heterogeneity that they reveal in the languages of the world makes them hardly classifiable under a single categorial label.

- In addition, the fact that they represent a phenomenon studied only in quite recent years and that basically does not correspond to any classical grammatical category makes them free from any kind of bias.

WHAT IS PLURACTIONALITY?

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- The term *pluractionality* was firstly coined by Newman (1980:13) to refer to what was previously known as *intensive* in Chadic tradition.

- The first definition was provided by Newman (1990):

> *the essential semantic characteristic of such verbs [pluractionals] is almost always plurality or multiplicity of the verb's action.*
> *(Newman 1990:53-54)*

WHAT IS PLURACTIONALITY?

- In my work, I have adopted a slightly different definition:

> *Pluractionality is a phenomenon that marks the plurality or multiplicity of the situations (i.e. states and events) encoded by the verb through any morphological mean that modifies the form of the verb itself*
> *(Mattiola 2017:120)*

WHAT IS PLURACTIONALITY?

(1) Konso (Afro-Asiatic, Cushitic)

a. *ʔiʃa-ʔ*   *ʔinanta-siʔ*   *ʔi=tuɠɠuur-ay*

3SGM.PRO-NOM   girl-DEF.F/M   3=push[SG]-PFV[3M]

‘He pushed the girl.’

b. *ʔiʃa-ʔ*   *ʔinanta-siʔ*   *ʔi=**tu**-tuɠɠuur-ay*

3SGM.PRO-NOM   girl-DEF.F/M   3=**PL**-push[SG]-PFV[3M]

‘He pushed the girl more than once.’ (Ongaye 2013:263)

• The only difference between (1a) and (1b) is the partial initial reduplication of the verb stem that gives a typical pluractional reading, that is, the action is performed several times.

THE FUNCTIONAL DOMAIN

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- Cross-linguistically, pluractional constructions show a high degree of multifunctionality, i.e., they can express several functions with a very different semantics.

- For this reason, I decided to classify such functions in two different groups:

  i. **CORE FUNCTIONS**: those functions that are necessary in order to call a particular construction a pluractional one;

  ii. **ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS:** those functions that a pluractional marker can encode additionally to the core ones and that are recurrent in the languages of the world.

CORE FUNCTIONS

- By definition, pluractional constructions express a plurality of situation, but there are different types depending on which element of the occasion is pluralized. They are:

  - ➤ **PLURACTIONALITY *STRICTO SENSU***:
    - ❖ *ITERATIVITY*
    - ❖ *FREQUENTATIVITY*
  - ➤ **SPATIAL DISTRIBUTIVITY**
  - ➤ **PARTICIPANT PLURALITY**

CORE FUNCTIONS

➢ **PLURACTIONALITY** *STRICTO SENSU*: it involves a plurality of situations through time. This type can be furtherly subdivided in two sub-types:

❖ *ITERATIVITY*: the plurality of situations is limited to a single occasion (cf. 2).

(2) Beng (Mande, Eastern Mande)

a.   Ǒ   *bè-ɛĺó*
         3SG:ST+   run-PROG
         'He is running'

b.   Ǒ   *bè~**bé**-ɛĺó.*
         3SG:ST+   run~**ITER**-PROG
         'He is running (repeatedly back and forth)' (Paperno 2014:41)

CORE FUNCTIONS

❖ *FREQUENTATIVITY*: the plurality of situations is extended to different occasions (cf. 3).

(3) Khwe (Khoe, West Kxoe)

*tí   à   bɛ̀-ɛ̀-xú-**t**-a-tè!*

1SG   OBJ   be.too.heavy-II-COMP-**FREQ**-I-PRS

'It is often too heavy for me!' (Kilian-Hatz 2008:146)

CORE FUNCTIONS

> **SPATIAL DISTRIBUTIVITY**: the plurality of situations is distributed over different locations (cf. 4).

(4) Apuriña (Arawakan, Southern Maipuran)

*Ø-umaka-**poko**-rewa-ta-na*

3M-sleep-**DISTR**-INTR-VBLZ-3PL

'They are sleeping around.' (Facundes 2000:311)

CORE FUNCTIONS

➤ **PARTICIPANT PLURALITY**: the plurality of situations involves several participants (the most affected argument: semantically, more often the patient, syntactically, the absolutive argument) (cf. 5).

(5) Huichol (Uto-Aztecan, Southern Uto-Aztecan)

a. *Nee* *waakana* *ne-mec-**umɨʔii**-ri* *eekɨ*

  1SG chicken.SG 1SG.SBJ-2SG.OBJ-**kill.SG**-BEN 2.SG

  'I killed the chicken for you.'

b. *Nee* *waakana-ari* *ne-mec-**uqɨʔii**-ri* *eekɨ*

  1SG chicken-PL 1SG.SBJ-3PL.OBJ-**kill.PL**-BEN 2.SG

  'I killed the chickens for you.' (Comrie 1982:113)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

- They can be grouped in different 'semantic clusters' depending on which relationship they have with the notion of plurality. These clusters are:

  - ➢ **NON-PROTOTYPICAL PLURALITY**: functions that encode a plurality which goes beyond the singular-plural distinction. They are: event-internal plurality (cf. 6), continuativity (cf. 7), habituality (cf. 6), and generic imperfectivity (cf. 9).

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

❖ EVENT-INTERNAL PLURALITY: a singular situation that is internally complex, i.e., it is composed of several repetitive phases.

(6) Sandawe (Khoisan, Hatsa-Sandawe)

a.   *gélé-áá*   *|-ìmé*

Gele-SFOC   (SV.)come:SG-**ITER**

'Gele came repeatedly' (Steeman 2012:143)

b.   *tsháá=sà*   *xàd-**ímé**-é*

pot=3F.SG   scrape_out-**ITER**-3OBJ

'She scraped out a pot.' (Steeman 2012:141)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

❖ CONTINUATIVITY: singular situations that are extended during time.

(7) Chechen (Nakh-Daghestanian, Nakh)

a.   *So*   *tykana*   *vedira*

          1SG.ABS store.DAT   V.run.WP

          'I ran to the store.'

b.   *Hoora*   *wyyrana so*   *tykana*   ***ydu***

          every   morning 1SG.ABS store.DAT   run.**PLAC**.PRS

          'Every morning I run to the store repeatedly (more than once per day)'

c.   *So*   *cwana*   *sahwtiahw*   ***idira***

          1SG.ABS one.OBL hour.LOC   run.**PLAC**.WP

          'I ran (went running) for one hour.' (Wood 2007:224-225)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

❖ HABITUALITY: situations repeated on different occasions, but the occasions occur in a time frame (which may or may not be directly specified), the situations are seen as typical of that time frame.

(8) Sandawe (Khoisan, Hatsa-Sandawe)

a.   *nì-ŋ*   *hík'-**wǎ**-ŋ*   *phàkhé-ŋ*   *|'èé-ì*

CNJ-CL   go:SG-**PL2**-L   inspect-L   look_at.3:NR

'And he will often go, inspect and have a look at it'

b.   *mindà-tà-nà=sɪ̰*   *hík'ɪ̰-**wà***

field-in-to=1SG   go:SG-**PL2**

'I go to the field.' (every day of my life) (Steeman 2012:242-188)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

❖ GENERIC IMPERFECTIVITY: it encodes a situation that occurs always; for example, it can be a property or a quality of an entity or a gnomic truth (that is, it is part of the encyclopedic knowledge).

(9) Meithei (Sino-Tibetan, Naga)

a.   *nók-**kən**-pə*

         laugh-**REPEAT**-NOM

         'someone who laughs all the time whether or not there is a joke, as a habit.'

b.   *əy-ti   yám-nə   pí-**kən**-pə   mí-ni*

         I-DLMT   lot-ADV   give-**REPEAT**-NOM   man-COP

         'I am a very generous man.' (lit. I am a man who always gives a lot) (Chelliah 1997:216)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

➢ **DEGREE**: functions that encode a modification of the 'usual degree' of the situation. They are: intensity (cf. 10), completeness (cf. 11), and emphasis (cf. 12).

➢ **RECIPROCITY**: a function that encodes an occasion in which at least two participants perform the same situation each other, i.e., reciprocally (cf. 13).

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

➢ **DEGREE**:

❖ INTENSITY: a degree modification of the normal development of the situation.

(10) Yimas (Lower Sepik-Ramu, Lower Sepik)

a. *ya-n-**arkark**-wampaki-pra-k*

V.PL.OBJ-3SG.A-**break(RED: *ark-*)**-throw-TOWARD-IRR

'He repeatedly broke them and threw them as he came.'

b. *ya-mpu-nanaŋ-**tacay**-ckam-tuk-mpun*

V.PL.OBJ-3PL.A-DUR-**see(RED: *tay-*)**-show-RM.PAST-3PL.D

'They were showing those to them very well (and they stared at those).'

(Foley 1991:319)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

❖ COMPLETENESS: a situation that is performed in its entirety, completely.

(11) Turkana (Nilotic, Eastern Nilotic)

a.   *-poc*   'pinch'   →   *a-poc-o-poc'*   'pinch repeatedly'

         -ìlug   'twist'   →   *a-k-ìlug-u-lug*   'twist repeatedly'

b.   *-ɲrl*   'crumble' →   *a-ɲrl-r-ɲrl'*   'crumble completely'

         -ìkic   'bone out'→   *a-k-ìkic-i-kic*   'bone out completely'

         (Dimmendaal 1983:106)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

❖ EMPHASIS: a situation performed with emphasis or affectedness.

(12) Batak Karo (Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian)

a.   *Sapu-**sapuna**   kucing   é.*

(PASS.)stroke-**stroke.she**   cat   that

'She stroked the cat again and again.'

b.   *Peturah-**turah**   sitik   ukurndu*

CAUS.grow-**grow**   SOF   mind.your

'Grow up a bit! (i.e. Act like an adult!)' (Woollams 1996:98)

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS

❖ **RECIPROCITY**: a function that encodes an occasion in which at least two participants perform the same situation each other, i.e., reciprocally.

(13) Jóola Karon (Atlantic, Bak)

a.   *Lopeel   a-muus-**ool**-a*

Robert   3SG-pass-**PLAC**-ACC

'Robert went and came back.' (adapted from Sambou 2014:150)

b.   *Sana   ni   Faatu   ka-cuk-**ool**-a*

Sana   and   Fatou   3PL-see-**RECP**-ACC

'Sana and Fatou saw each other.' (Sambou 2014:149)

THE CONCEPTUAL SPACE OF PLURACTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Figure 1 – Pluractional conceptual space (Mattiola 2017).

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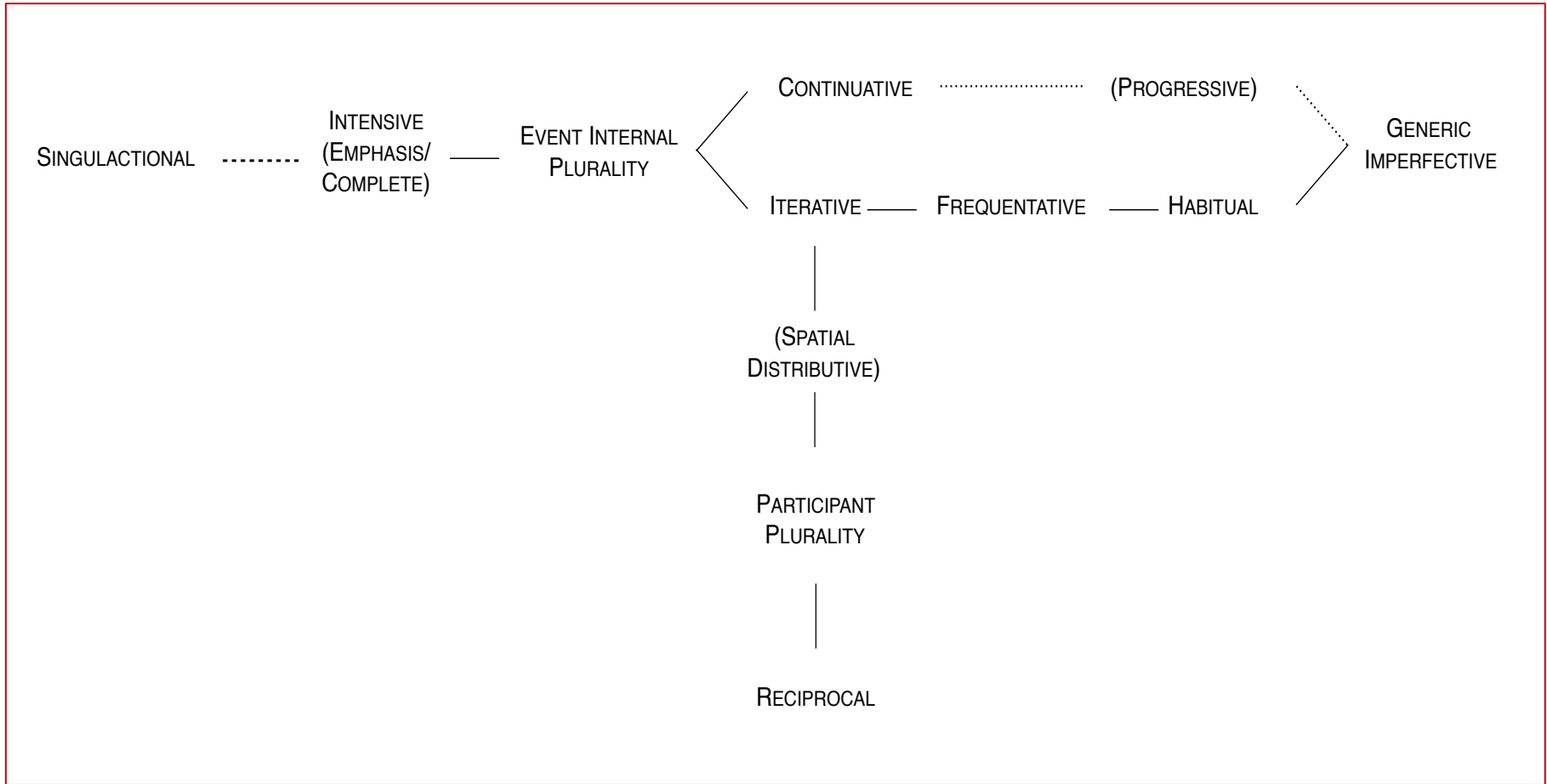# THE CONCEPTUAL SPACE OF PLURACTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Figure 1 – Pluractional conceptual space (Mattiola 2017).

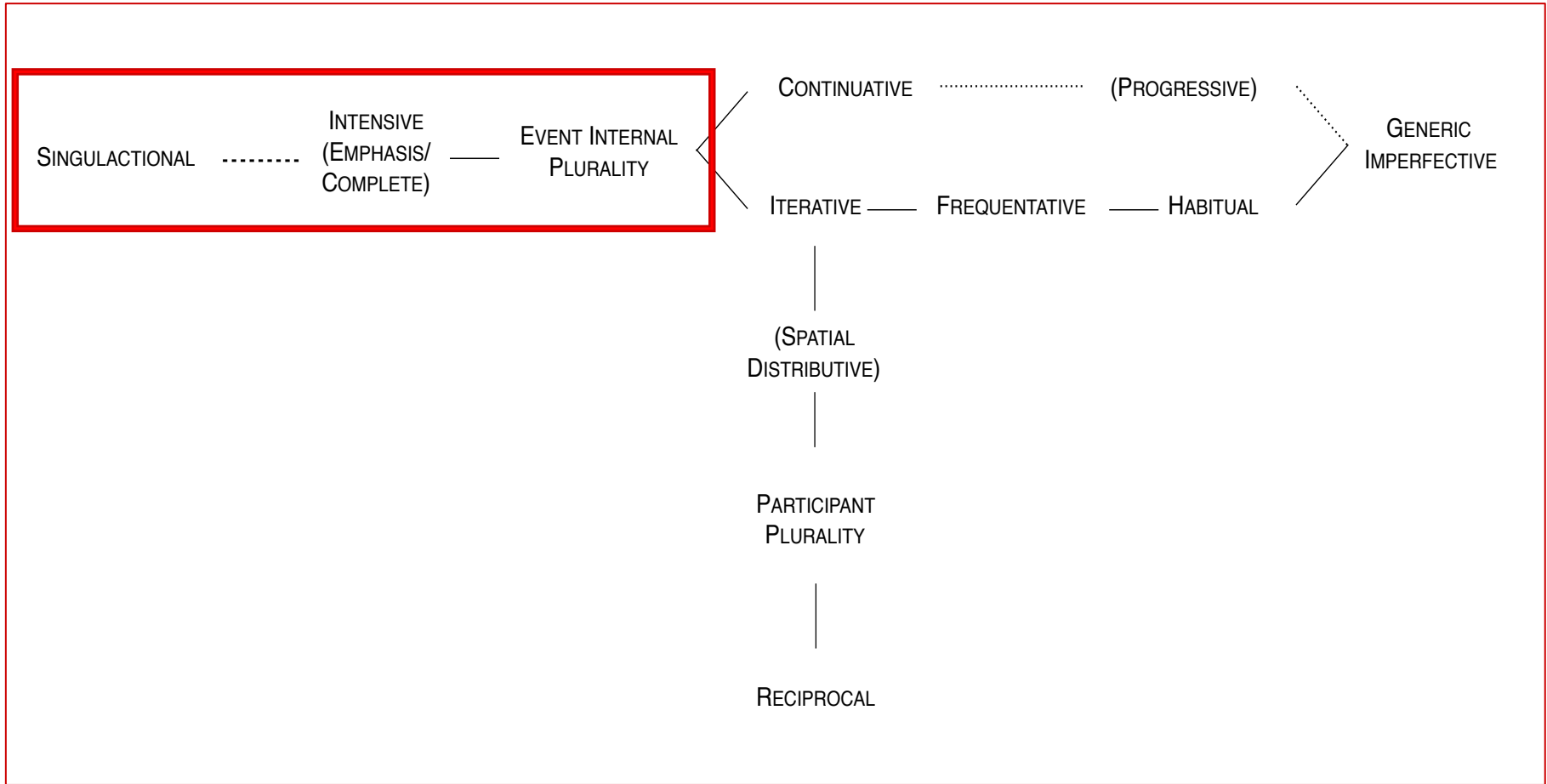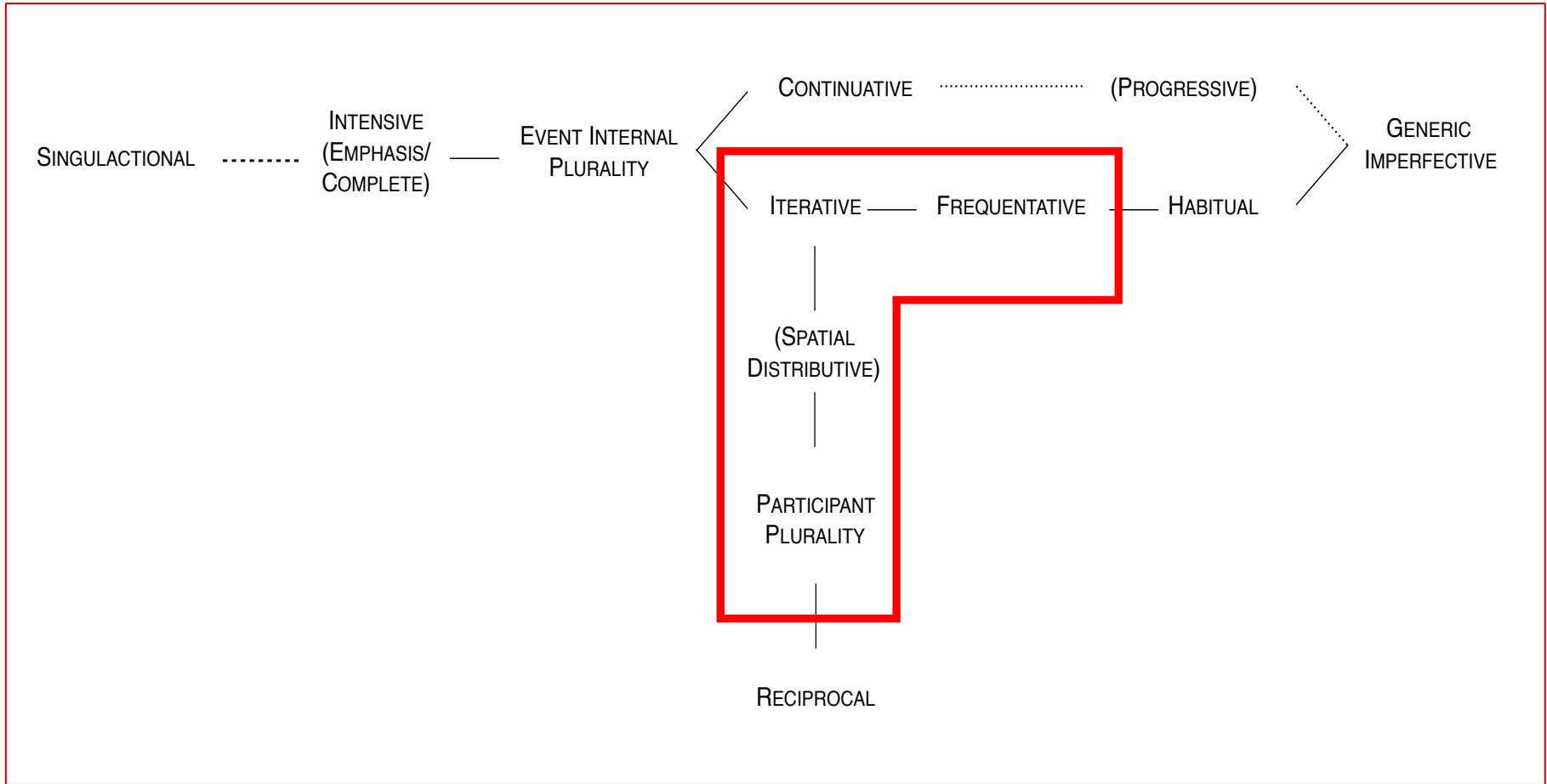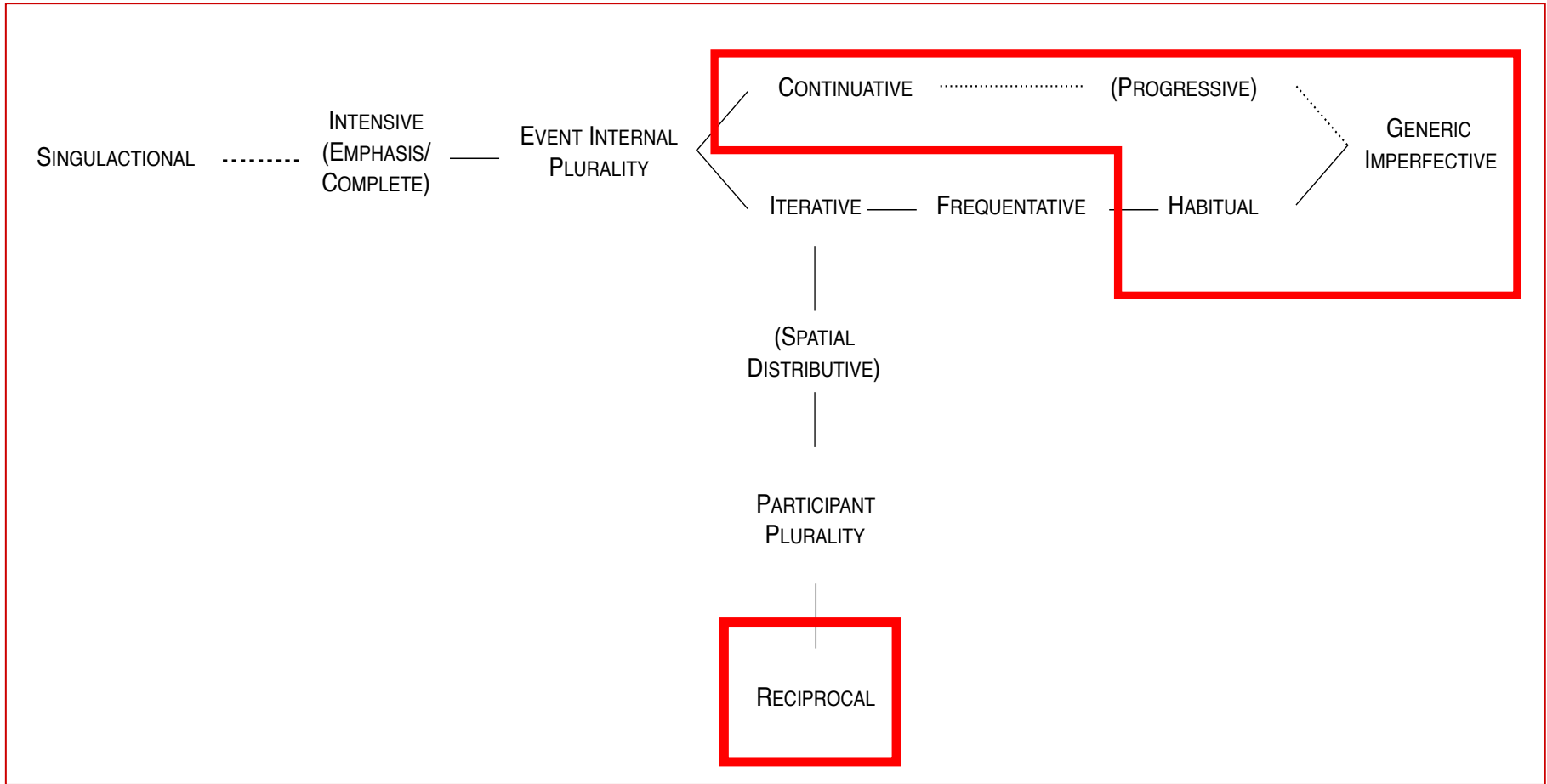# THE CONCEPTUAL SPACE OF PLURACTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

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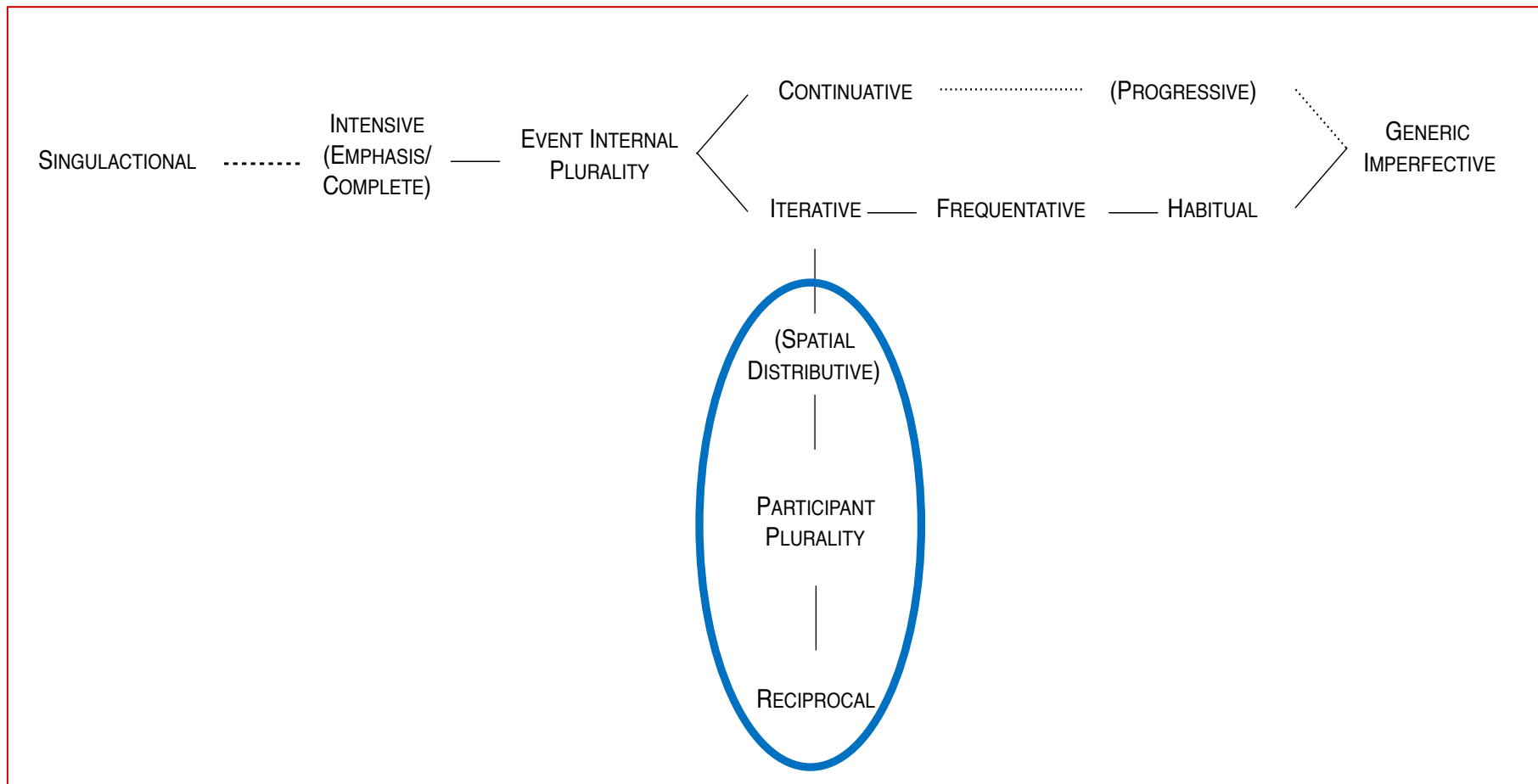
Figure 1 – Pluractional conceptual space (Mattiola 2017).

THE MORPHO-SYNTAX OF PLURACTIONALITY

THE MORPHO-SYNTAX OF PLURACTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

- Pluractional constructions can be formally marked through several strategies. However, there are three strategies that are sensibly more frequent than the others.

  1. AFFIXATION: it is the most frequent strategy. We can find all kinds of affixes: prefixes (cf. 14), infixes (cf. 15), and suffixes (cf. 16).

(14) Kuot (Isolate, Oceania)

u-me   ***da**-karət=oŋ*   *[i-sik*   *kapuna]*

3mS-HAB **PLURACT**-bite=3mS   3m-DEM   dog(m)

'that dog bites a lot' (Lindström 2002:7)

(15) Koasati (Muskogean, Alabaman-Koasati)

SINGULAR	PLURAL	GLOSS
aká:non	*aká**s**non*	'to be hungry'
akopí:lin	*akopí**s**lin*	'to knock something over'
apí:lin	*apí**s**lin*	'to throw something away'
maká:lin	*maká**s**lin*	'to open the eyes' (Kimball 1991:327)

(16) Huallaga Huanuco Quechua (Quechuan, Central Quechuan I)

Chay-pita	*paka-**ykacha**-y+lla+pa*	*qeshpi-ku-rqa-:.*
that-ABL	hide-**ITER**-ADV	escape-REFL-PAST-1

'After that I escaped, hiding here and there' (Weber 1989:150).

2. **REDUPLICATION**: it is a strategy that is very often connected with the notion of plurality. It is particularly frequent in African languages. We can find both partial (cf. 17) and total (cf. 18) reduplication.

(17) Hausa (Afro-Asiatic, Chadic)

Taa　　**tat**~*tàɓà*　　　*hancìntà*

3SG.F.PF **RED**~touch　　　nose.her

'She tapped her nose/touched her nose repeatedly' (Součková 2011:106)

(18) Burushaski (Isolate, Asia)

*e:gić</u>-mane~**e:gićⁱⁱu-mane***

sow[-PERF]-while~**RED**

'(while) sowing continuously' (adapted from Munshi 2006:226)

THE MORPHO-SYNTAX OF PLURACTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

3. **LEXICAL ALTERNATION (OR STEM ALTERNATION)**: it is an alternation between two completely different verb stems (two lexical items) that are connected only by their lexical meaning, but while a stem expresses a singular situation the second one a plurality of situations (cf. 19). It is particularly frequent in North American languages.

(19) Wari' (Chapacuran, Wari')

a. ***Xin*** *na-in*

throw:s 3S:RP/P-3N

'He throws it away'

(Everett & Ken 1997:337)

b. ***Wixicao'*** *na-in*

throw:P 3S:RP/P-3N

'He throws them away'

(Everett & Ken 1997:338)

THE MORPHO-SYNTAX OF PLURACTIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

- Several strategies can co-exist in related languages, and also in the same language.

LANGUAGES	STRATEGIES OF MARKING			
	AFFIXATION	REDUPLICATION	LEXICAL ALTERNATION	OTHERS
Hausa (Newman 2000, Jaggar 2001)	==	partial (initial/internal)	==	==
Lele (Frajzyngier 2001)	*-wì*	==	==	devoicing of initial consonant
Masa (Melis 1999)	NO DEDICATED PLURACTIONAL MARKERS			
Mupun (Frajzyngier 1993)	*-a-, -r-, -e, -ep, -wat, -k-*	==	yes	==
Wandala (Frajzyngier 2012)	*-a-*	partial	yes	==

The Diachrony of Pluractionality

DIACHRONY OF PLURACTIONALITY

- Unfortunately, in my sample, I could not find a big number of possible diachronic sources for pluractional constructions. However, for our purposes it is interesting to briefly present the few I found.

- I have found at least three different sources:

    1. DEMONSTRATIVES
    2. EMOTION VERBS ("LOVE/like")
    3. LOCATIONAL VERBS ("STAY/sit")

- It is also interesting to note that in some cases, pluractional affixes can be the source for other kind of phenomena.

DIACHRONY OF PLURACTIONALITY

1. **DEMONSTRATIVES**: as Frajzyngier (1997) has demonstrated, the pluractional affixes of Chadic languages probably have their origin in the Chadic demonstratives.

i.   DEMONSTRATIVE ⟶ OBJECT ANAPHOR ⟶ PLURAL OBJECT

ii. DEMONSTRATIVE ⟶ OBJECT ANAPHOR ⟶ CATAPHORIC MARKER OF DETERMINED OBJECT ⟶ PLURAL OBJECT

iii. DEMONSTRATIVE ⟶ OBJECT ANAPHOR ⟶ CATAPHORIC MARKER OF DETERMINED OBJECT ⟶ MARKER CODING DEFINITENESS OF THE OBJECT ⟶ PLURAL OBJECT

iv. DEMONSTRATIVE ⟶ OBJECT ANAPHOR ⟶ PLURAL SUBJECT OF THE INTRANSITIVE VERB

v.   DEMONSTRATIVE ⟶ OBJECT ANAPHOR ⟶ PLURAL SUBJECT OF TRANSITIVE

vi. DEMONSTRATIVE ⟶ OBJECT ANAPHOR ⟶ PLURAL SUBJECT OF TRANSITIVE ⟶ PLURALITY OF EVENTS

(Frajzyngier 1997:217)

2. **EMOTION VERBS**: for example, in Eton (Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo) the verb *dìŋ* 'love/like' can be used as a quasi-auxiliary to express iterative and habitual meanings.

(21) Eton (Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo)

àmé   dìŋgì   kwázî

*à-mɛ́   L-**dìŋ**-gì   L-kɔ́zì*

I-YIMPF   INF-**HAB**-G   INF-cough

'He coughed often.' (Van de Velde 2008:332)

DIACHRONY OF PLURACTIONALITY

3. **LOCATIONAL VERBS**: for example, in Lango (Nilotic, Western Nilotic) the verb *bèdò* 'sit/stay' can be used as an auxiliary to express an iterative meaning. We can find a similar situation also in Khwe (Khoe, West Kxoe) with the pluractional affix *-t.*

(22) Lango (Nilotic, Western Nilotic)

à-bédò   *lwòŋ-ŋò lócəə̀*

1SG.SBJ-**stay.PFV**   call-INF man

'I kept on calling the man' (Noonan 1992:140)

DIACHRONY OF PLURACTIONALITY

(23) Khwe (Khoe, West Kxoe)

á	*càá-hɛ̀*		*tí*	*kx'áà-ca*		*hĩ́ĩ*	*nò*	*càá*
DEM	water-3SG.F		1SG	drink-VOL		do	when	water

à	*tì*	*à*	*kwɛ́ɛ-ka-**ti-ta**-tè.*
O	1SG	O	refuse-CAUS-**FREQ-FREQ**-I-PRES

'When I want to drink water, (my friends) very often refuse me this water.'

(Kilian-Hatz 2008:146)

The origin of this suffix is unclear, but it is noteworthy to add that Khwe has an adverb, tĩ ('often'), which is placed clause initially, and two other adverbs, -tĭ-tá and -tĭ̀-yá ('often'), which are most likely frozen finite verb forms of the verb tĩ̀ ('stay'). (Kilian-Hatz 2008:146)

DIACHRONY OF PLURACTIONALITY

- In addition, in some North American languages, pluractional affixes can be probably considered as sources for nominal number affixes (distribution > individuation > plurality, cf. Mithun 1988).

(24) Cayuga (Iroquoian, Northern Iroquoian)

a.   *ęhsyé:tho*ʔ   'you will plant'

        *ęhsyęthwahso̜:*ʔ   'you will plant a lot of different things'

b.   *eksá:*ʔ*ah*   /   *kaeks*ʔ*ashǫ́: *ʔ*ǫh*

        'child, girl'   'children'

        hakę́htsih   /   *haekęhtsíhshǫ*ʔ

        'old man'   'old people' (Mithun 1988:228-229)

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- In the languages of the world, pluractional constructions are very different from language to language.

- This situation has challenged their grammatical classification. In the literature, we can find at least three different proposals:
  i. a case of verbal aspect (cf. mainly Corbett 2000);
  ii. a case of lexical aspect (Dressler 1968, Cusic 1981, Xrakovskij 1997, and Wood 2007);
  iii. an independent phenomenon (again Corbett 2000).

- All these proposals are correct and wrong at the same time. This is because in different languages pluractional constructions can actually be described as instances of different categories (cf. Mattiola 2016:127-205).

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- How can we describe such constructions (that are very different functionally, formally and diachronically) as part of the same (cross-linguistic) category?

> *classifying languages typologically does not entail that the terms employed in the typological classification correspond to categories in the language*
> *(Matthew Dryer in LingTyp discussion, 19th January 2016)*

- We can explain this situation in a better way only if we consider grammatical categories as entities that have an actual realization only in single languages (language-specific) rather than consider them as cross-linguistic consistent entities.

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- This is because:

> *describing or analysing a particular language is a completely different enterprise from classifying the language typologically. […] The former should be describing the language entirely in its own terms, rather than trying to fit into some typology*
> *(Matthew Dryer in LingTyp discussion, 20th January 2016)*

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- Categories are usually defined as "a class of elements that display at least partially overlapping grammatical properties" (Cristofaro 2009:441).

- Haspelmath (2007) notes that:

> *it is important to realize that similarities do not imply identity: It is very hard to find categories that have fully identical properties in two languages, unless these languages are very closely related. […] [O]ne has to start with the awareness that each language may have totally new categories*
> *(Haspelmath 2007:126)*

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- Linguists focus their attention more to the similarities giving no (or scarce) importance to the differences. However, constructions that apparently belong to the same 'category' can cross-linguistically be very different each other.

- This makes hard (if not impossible) to classify them as realization of the same (cross-linguistic) category.

- However, this does not mean that cross-linguistic comparison is impossible to carry out. In cross-linguistic perspective, we must consider grammatical categories only as classificatory labels that group together a set of constructions that are very different from one language to another.

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- However, these constructions share also a functional, semantic, pragmatic value:

> *The most important consequence of the non-existence of pre-established categories for language typology is that cross-linguistic comparison cannot be category-based, but must be substance-based, because substance (unlike categories) is universal. In phonology, this means that comparison must be phonetically based; in morphosyntax, it means that comparison must be semantically based*
> *(Haspelmath 2007:124)*

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- This common value is pointed out by the definition adopted by typologists in their research, and it corresponds to what is called *comparative concept* (cf. Haspelmath 2010).

- Consequently, constructions in single languages do not realize any cross-linguistic category, though they apparently do, but they match a comparative concept (cf. Haspelmath 2010:666).

> *The broader point is that there is no other way of doing rigorous typology than via separate comparative concepts, i.e. that we need to give up the hope that the categories that we find in individual languages will in the end converge on something universal.*
> *(Martin Haspelmath in LingTyp discussion, 20th January 2016)*

PLURACTIONALITY IN CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

- The difficulties of scholars in the typological classification of pluractionality are now explained: they tried to apply a label conceived as universally valid to constructions that are not homogeneous.

- In cross-linguistic perspective, grammatical categories are not universal entities, but they must be considered as language- and construction-specific (cf. Dryer 1997; Croft 2001; Haspelmath 2007, 2010; Cristofaro 2009).

- In this sense, pluractional constructions are a set of different constructions that share the same function of pluralizing the situation encoded by the verb.

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Thank you for your attention!

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My new project on list constructions:

http://www.lilec.it/list/