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Developing a framework for the cross-linguistic investigation of constituency

The notion of constituency has played a central role in linguistic description and theory for decades, and it has been applied to morphological, syntactic, and phonological constructions. However, while all languages have been assumed to have constituents of more or less the same “kind”, this assumption has yet to be systematically investigated cross-linguistically using the methods of linguistic typology.

For example, to what extent can all languages be shown to make a clear distinction between morphological constituents (i.e., “words”) and syntactic constituents (i.e., “phrases”)? How can we explore this kind of question in ways that avoid circularity or biasing the results due to preconceived ideas about constituency?

This talk will present initial work to develop a framework for the rigorous cross-linguistic comparison of grammatical patterns that have been associated with constituency. It is based on the fine-grained coding of the domains of language-specific processes followed by an assessment of the extent to which these converge in ways which would be predicted following standard ideas about the nature of linguistic constituents. Initial applications of the framework do not provide clear-cut answers to questions about constituency, but it can hopefully advance our understanding of this phenomenon over time as it is applied to more languages.