Contact and the diachrony of morphological complexity in Amazonian languages
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While Amazonian languages have presented us with numerous exceptions to wider typological and theoretical generalizations, the relative unexceptionality of many such features within the Amazonian context itself suggests an areal component to their maintenance and innovation. This observation is particularly pertinent to the proliferation of distinctions in a number of grammatical categories in western Amazonian languages, notably evidentiality, applicative marking, tense, associated motion, and nominal classification. The areal clustering of languages that exhibit complex sets of values within these categories suggests elaboration via contact, which would presumably have taken place via contact-driven grammaticalization, which in turn implies that many of the grammatical/functional elements in these systems are historically derived from lexical/content items.

In this paper, we explore the hypothesis that much of the proliferation of complexity in these grammatical categories has emerged via contact-driven grammaticalization. We predict that, within a given domain – both in a given language and across languages – a correlation will exist between three different dimensions of complexity, as identified by Anderson (2015), that is a direct result of these processes of contact-driven change. This correlation should link a) a greater degree of complexity relating to the number of distinctions morphologically encoded within a given semantico-grammatical domain (Anderson’s first dimension); b) a less clear distinction between morphological and lexical status (A’s third dimension), and c) a lower degree of other measures of morphological complexity (A’s second dimension), which we understand to include the amount of allomorphy, fusion, productivity of the morphological form in question, association of grammatical morphemes with dummy (i.e. ‘cranberry’) roots, and requirements of contiguity.

Our prediction is based on the view that processes of elaboration of a morphological system will be facilitated by a relatively loose division between the morphology and syntax, thus making systems more permeable to augmentation via grammaticalization, and also on the view that systems that are ‘younger’ (i.e. contain many recently grammaticalized elements) will be relatively regular, not having had time to develop the kinds of system-internal complexity (allomorphy, fusion, etc.) that can arise over time, especially via phonological processes.