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Voice constructions and efficiency of grammatical coding

In this talk, I argue that grammatical marking in voice constructions across languages is best explained by the efficiency theory of asymmetric coding: Languages tend to use longer (or “more marked”) forms for meanings that are less frequent or less expected, for an optimal trade-off between speaker and hearer needs. In line with recent work in syntactic typology, I define voice alternations as valency alternations with verbal coding. Given such definitions of “passive”, “antipassive”, “causative” and “anticausative”, we can formulate several universal generalizations, which are special instances of the highly general form-frequency correspondence universal. In particular, passive constructions (defined as constructions with verb coding and oblique agent coding) occur primarily in the unusual situation when the agent is nontopical and/or the patient is topical. I also note that the regularities for special argument coding and special verbal voice coding are quite similar, and that argument coding generalizations, too, can be explained by the efficiency theory. This perspective does not make an immediate contribution to our understanding of voice constructions (such as passives and causatives) in particular languages, but I note that without careful definitions of comparative concepts and statements of falsifiable universals, a general understanding of Human Language is hardly possible.