

Workshop proposal: Diachronic dynamics and Typology of Similarity and Identity Avoidance

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Languages often exhibit the avoidance of identity, or of similarity to a certain degree. Similarity and identity avoidance (henceforth SIA) can surface as a local dispreference, or shape the whole grammar of a language. It can affect units on various linguistic levels, including phonetics and (supra-)segmental phonology, morphology, syntax, and also semantics. For instance, haplology has been argued to be a strategy of identity avoidance on a phonetic level (Dressler 1977). A textbook example from phonology are Semitic roots, for which it is well documented that similarity in consonantal roots is disfavoured. This obligatory contour principle (OCP, McCarthy 1981) is also active on a tonal level (e.g. Singler 1980). An example where two formally too similar morphemes are avoided is provided by Spanish (and similarly in other Romance languages), where in clitic clusters, two pronouns beginning with *l* cannot occur adjacently (*se=lo=doy* instead of **le=lo=doy*). As for syntax, similarity avoidance could be one of the underlying reasons for the rarity of identical case marking for A and P arguments (transitive alignment) (e.g. Payne 1990: 168-170) in the world's languages. Regarding semantics, Smith & Wheeldon (2004) have shown that similarity of semantically similar nouns can produce inhibitory effects.

Different mechanisms have been proposed to be at the heart of disfavouring identity or even just strong similarity: the motor control system has been held accountable for the dispreference of adjacent identical syllables (Lancheros et al. 2020). Haplology has been suggested to be a strategy for maintaining isomorphism between syllables and morphemes, for ease of processing (Dressler 1977). Lexical similarity avoidance, on the other hand, has been associated with working memory and accessibility (MacDonald 2013). It is an open question whether SIA on different linguistic levels is caused by the same motivations or biases altogether. According to some, SIA is seen through the lens of communicative efficiency, and explained by the idea that similarity/identity on all levels can interfere with production and perception (Levshina 2023: 103).

In apparent contrast to these articulatory and processing-related motivations for SIA, we also find deliberate doubling of certain units. For morphological reduplication, for instance, it has been argued that identity is the result of the underlying iconic principle (Schwaiger 2017). Also, some cases of similarity seem to be less weighty than others, as there are plenty of examples of processes which establish similarity across units like local assimilation or long-distance assimilation (vowel or consonant harmony). Similarly, identity does not seem equally dispreferred in all positions: In Hebrew, for instance, identical consonants frequently occur at the end of putative roots, but rarely occur in their beginning (Berent et al. 2007).

Previous in-depth research has primarily focused on certain languages and language families, and the analyses and resulting conclusions from these studies have often been closely tied to specific linguistic theories (e.g. Yip 1989, Pierrehumbert 1993, contributions in Nasukawa & van Riemsdijk 2014, Tokizaki 2018). Consequently, there have been claims

about universal tendencies underlying this phenomenon, which makes it worthwhile to explore it in a broader linguistic context. Besides, this topic has mostly been looked at from a synchronic perspective, leading to a gap in our understanding of how diachronic dynamics actually interact and lead to the observed phenomena. This workshop aims to discuss patterns and strategies employed by languages to avoid or resolve similarity and identity, in order to get to a better understanding of its causes. It intends to bring together perspectives from different subfields, ranging from discussing the phenomena from diachronic points of view to possible cognitive motivations.

We invite abstracts for oral presentations focusing on the following topics:

Diachronic Processes: How do languages employ strategies to avoid or resolve identity or similarity in diachrony? How does similarity avoidance relate to assimilation phenomena?

Structural Sensitivity: Do languages exhibit differences in their sensitivity to different kinds of similarity? Are there preferences in the positions where such avoidance or resolution occurs, and do these preferences vary across linguistic levels?

Phonetic Patterns: How do the phonetic properties of sounds, such as place of articulation, voicing, and manner of articulation, influence SIA in adjacent elements within speech? What acoustic and auditory cues are involved in phonetic processes that facilitate or hinder SIA?

Cross-Linguistic Variation: Are there significant differences in the preference of locus of SIA across different structural levels, such as phonology versus syntax, and derivation versus inflection?

Unit Size: Do languages exhibit restrictions on the size of linguistic units affected by similarity avoidance? For instance, is the occurrence of dissimilation strategies related to the number of syllables within larger units like feet or verbs?

Mechanisms and biases: What cognitive and motor planning factors contribute to this phenomenon? Is there more systematic and cognition-based evidence that identity avoidance improves efficiency?

Experimental Approaches: What kind of experimental evidence or approach is helpful investigating SIA? Can we experimentally (e.g. psycholinguistically or phonetically) demonstrate the preference for or against similarity or identity in language structures?

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