Elevation as a deictic category. Typological and diachronic perspectives

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Elevation in a spatial deictic system is where a referent’s location or trajectory is identified as being at a certain elevation relative to the deictic centre. Although the topic of spatial language has subject to extensive cross-linguistic study in the last two decades (e.g., Taltmy 1983, 1985, Wilkins and Hill 1995, Slobin 1996, Diessel 1999, Levinson 2003, Levinson & Wilkins 2006, Dixon 2013, Levinson et al. 2018), there has little comparative treatment or typologisation of elevation components in deictic systems. The lack of systematic treatment is most patent in the many terms that have been used to describe elevation components in spatial deictic systems in the typological and descriptive literature, including: “spatial coordinate systems” (Burenhult 2008), “topographical deixis” (Post 2011), “elevational deixis” (Schapper 2014), “environmental space deixis” (Bickel 2001), “altitude” (Gerner 2009), “altitudinal case markers” (Ebert 2003), “height” (Dixon 2003), “verticality” (Imai 2003) and “vertical case” (Noonan 2006).

While a relatively rare feature world-wide (Diessel 2013), elevation is a common component of systems of spatial reference in several mountainous areas of the world. It is pervasive in the languages of the Caucasus (e.g., East Caucasian languages, Alekseev 1997, Schulze 2003), of the Himalayas (Cheung 2007, Bickel & Gaenszle 1999, Post 2011, Heegård & Liljegren 2018) and of the Melanesian area (Heeschen 1982, Senft 1997, 2004, Aikhenvald 2015). It is less common but recurrent in many other parts of the world, including pockets of the Americas (e.g., Inuit languages, Fortescue 1988, Uto-Aztecan languages such as Guarjio, Miller 1996), of northern Southeast Asia (e.g., Gerner 2009), of Ethiopia (e.g., Mous 2012).

This workshop will bring together descriptive and historical comparative linguists working on languages and language families in both well-known “elevational” areas such as the Caucasus and New Guinea, but also on elevation-coding languages in regions where it is not the norm. The aim of the workshop is to explore the various ways in which spatial deictic systems incorporate elevation as a category through in-depth case studies of elevational coding. The ultimate goal is create a cross-linguistic picture of the diversity of elevation marking systems in terms of their grammatical and semantic properties. The following synchronic questions are among those that will be considered by contributors:

1. In what parts of the grammar is elevation marked? Which of the following are cross-linguistically common, which unusual? spatial information is frequently marked by the following:
   - Demonstratives
   - Pronouns
   - Case markers
2. What elevation distinctions are coded cross-linguistically? In some languages we find a binary elevation distinction of HIGH/LOW, and in others a tripartite elevation distinction HIGH/LOW/LEVEL. Finer distinctions are also found in some languages, with, for example, steepness of the slope playing a role in some elevation coding distinctions.

3. In some languages elevation is tied to very specific aspects of geography such as mountains (UPHILL/DOWNHILL), but in others it refers to any higher or lower location (‘global’ elevation in Burenhult’s (2008) term). Are there systematic differences between elevation coding systems that are tied to specific geographic features and those with global reference?

4. What can be said about the relationship of elevation coding to other parts of spatial deictic coding? For example, what is the relationship between elevation and the PROXIMAL/DISTAL distinctions found in many spatial deictic systems? In some languages, elevation is only coded in the distal, whereas in others elevation is marked separately and can be used irrespective of distance.

5. How are elevational deictic systems used in real-world place- and path-finding? Are they subject to conventionalization at different scales of deictic reference? That kinds of social and cultural patterns might underpin use of elevational markers in ways that do not strictly conform to real-world elevation, e.g., in the house (cf. Yupno, Cooperrider et al. 2016), in relationship to important places such as religious or economic centres (cf. Bunaq, Schapper 2010)?

6. Are elevationally marked terms readily extended to non-spatial uses? If yes, what kinds of extensions beyond the realm of space are synchronically attested? To time (e.g., in Nungon, Sarvasy 2017), to narrative/discourse (e.g., in Siroi, van Kleef & van Kleef 2012), to social status (e.g., in Kryz, Authier 2009), to epistemic categories (e.g., in Blagar, Steinhauer 1991)?

The fact that elevation is frequent in certain parts of the world, but largely absent in others suggests that areal (including geographical/geo-physical) as well as genealogical factors play a role in explaining its distribution worldwide. As a result the workshop will also address comparative and diachronic questions on elevation marking systems, such as the following:

1. Are elevational deictic systems stable in families and/or areas? In what circumstances are elevational systems lost, maintained or innovated?
2. Where elevational deictic systems are innovated, what are the diachronic sources of elevational terms?
3. Where elevational systems are extended, are there patterns in the pathways for extension? Compounding of morphemes with one another to create complex reference is one attested pathway (e.g., in East Alor languages, Schapper 2014).
4. To what extent does Palmer et al’s (2017) *Topographic Correspondence Hypothesis* (i.e., that languages spoken in similar topographic environments tend to have similar systems of absolute spatial reference) hold in relation to elevational deictic systems?

We aim to develop papers out of this panel into a collected volume to be submitted to Language Science Press.

References


