

Niches in morphology

As a general principle for all organized systems, situations of competition for a particular niche are expected to be resolved either by elimination or adaptation of one or more of the competing elements (Gause 1934). Aronoff (2016) proposes to apply the notion of “niche” to linguistic systems, which allows him to describe a range of phenomena. A clear example of adaptation in language is the distribution of the affixes *-ic* and *-ical* in English, which appear to be completely synonymous, but occupy different morphological niches: While *-ic* is generally preferred, *-ical* is only derived from a subset of stems of the form *-ology* (cf. Lindsay & Aronoff 2013).

Aronoff’s proposal interestingly suggests that competition and its resolution in language is an instantiation of a much more general principle, which opens up an interdisciplinary dialogue about competition resolution across complex systems. Moreover, it provides a framework that can bring together phenomena not normally considered together. Aronoff (*to appear*), for instance, discusses allomorphy, ranging from resolved (complementary distributed) allomorphy to situations of (near-)equilibrium such as overabundance (cf. Thornton 2011), but he also addresses limits to defaults in inflection classes (cf. e.g. Carstairs-McCarthy 1994). Conceivably, the niche metaphor can be extended to many more phenomena. For example, Walsh (2012) describes a phenomenon in the Australian language Murrinh-Patha that might be termed templatic, or slot competition, where there is a particular slot on the verb that can be filled either by a direct object bound pronoun or by an indirect bound pronoun. Only when there is no direct object, or when the direct object has zero exponence can the indirect object appear in that slot.

In this workshop, we propose to explore the extent to which the notion of “niche” can be extended to linguistics (and therefore the extent to which an interdisciplinary dialogue becomes feasible and fruitful). In order to keep the range of phenomena within reasonable boundaries, we focus on morphological phenomena, and in particular on niches provided by the language system (thus excluding sociocultural niches such as register).

Call for papers:

We invite submissions of preliminary abstracts of max. 300 words (excluding references and contact details) for 20-minute presentations (plus 10 minutes for discussion), preferably in docx format, or otherwise in pdf format. Please send your abstract by **11 November 2016** to **igm [at] ds.uzh.ch**.

We propose four broad themes (but potential contributors should not feel limited by them):

- Explicit comparisons with ecological niches, addressing questions such as what would be the linguistic equivalent of environmental factors, what would a species mean in linguistics, to what extent do we see interaction between species and the environmental factors that is typical of ecological niches (e.g. depletion of the resources by growth rates that are too fast)?
- Studies of individual or sets of morphological phenomena that can be related to competition resolution and Gause’s axiom, or to further aspects related to niches like survival niches of gradually disappearing forms.

- Comparative (typological, areal, genealogical) perspectives on niches, addressing questions regarding the genealogical/areal (in)stability of niches, borrowability of niches, common versus uncommon niches.
- Corpus studies of niches. Competing exponents of a feature value (or a bundle of feature values) are ideally in complementary distribution. Corpus studies, however, may show that distributions are no more than statistical tendencies – or even very different than is claimed (see e.g. Lindsay & Aronoff 2013).

The workshop is planned to be held at the 50th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (Zurich, 10–13/09/2017).

Keynote speaker: Mark Aronoff (Stony Brook University, New York)

The workshop organizers

Rik van Gijn, Anja Hasse, Sandro Bachmann, Tania Paciaroni (all University of Zurich)

Important Dates:

11 November 2016: Deadline for submission of preliminary abstracts (max. 300 words) to igm [at] ds.uzh.ch

18 November 2016: Notification of acceptance

25 November 2016: Submission of the workshop proposals to SLE

25 December 2016: Notification of acceptance of workshop proposals from SLE

15 January 2017: Submission of abstracts to SLE (max. 500 words, excl. references)

31 March 2017: Notification of acceptance

10–13 September 2017: SLE conference.

References

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- Carstairs-McCarthy, Andrew (1994): Inflection classes, gender and the Principle of Contrast. In: *Language* 70, 737–788.
- Gause, Georgij F. (1934): *The struggle for existence*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins.
- Lindsay, Mark / Aronoff, Mark (2013): Natural selection in self-organizing morphological systems. In: Montermini, Fabio / Boyé, Gilles / Tseng, Jesse (eds.): *Morphology in Toulouse: Selected Proceedings of Décembrettes 7*. Munich: Lincom Europa, 133–153.
- Thornton, Anna M. (2011): Overabundance (Multiple Forms Realizing the Same Cell): A Non-canonical Phenomenon in Italian Verb Morphology. In: Maiden, Martin / Smith, John Charles / Goldbach, Maria / Hinzelin, Marc-Olivier (eds.): *Morphological Autonomy: Perspectives from Romance Inflectional Morphology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 358–381.
- Walsh, Michael James (2012): *The Muɲinyapata language of north-west Australia*. Munich: LINCOM.