

The relative frequencies of nouns, pronouns, and verbs cross-linguistically

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This project investigates the relative frequencies of nouns, verbs, and pronouns in spoken language corpora of Baure, Bora, Chintang, Even, N|uu, Sakha, Sri Lanka Malay, and English. We focus on two questions: (1) Why do languages vary so drastically in the overall ratio of nouns and pronouns per verb, ranging from roughly 1:1 (Chintang) to roughly 2:1 (Sri Lanka Malay)? Here we investigate typological factors such as argument indexing on verbs, which may make the overt realization of arguments as nouns or pronouns unnecessary. (2) Why are there regular peaks of heavy noun use as narrative texts unfold roughly every 10-15 clauses? Do these peaks reflect universal cognitive constraints which necessitate the re-introduction of discourse participants by full lexical nouns after their activation has decayed? Along with this, we investigate the role of the speakers' and listeners' mutual acquaintance and that of text genres, testing whether formal genres are universally 'nouny'. We apply computational methods for quantitative analyses of annotated textual data, mostly produced by DoBeS projects.

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