

# A typological approach to comparative sociolinguistics

Seminar Series “Grammatical Adaptation – Strategies and Methods”

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# Background and aim

- Growing interest in using comparative approach to social structure outside sociolinguistic proper.
  - sociohistorical context in language genesis (creole studies, sign lang. research)
  - socio-demographic features and language change (lang. contact, typology)
  - distribution of linguistic diversity (e.g. areal studies)
  - sociolinguistics of multilingualism (research on small-scale multilingualism)

# Background and aim

- In sociolinguistics proper “comparative sociolinguistics” has a specific meaning:
  - Comparability of data sources that enables comparing like-for-like in corpus data (e.g. parallel texts; Tagliamonte 2013; Grafmiller & Szmrecsanyi 2018).
- What to do
  - (1) when annotated parallel texts are not available?
  - (2) when comparing unrelated languages to one another?
- Our proposal:
  - look for cues from language typology and other comparative fields.

# What does “sociolinguistic” mean – within sociolinguistics proper?

- Broadly (Meyerhoff 2011):
  - Sociolinguistics as a field is interested in both social structure and linguistic structure and their relationship (to find out how people use language).
- Language is part of the social sphere.
  - The division between ‘linguistics’ and ‘sociolinguistics’ is disingenuous in the sense that language phenomena stem from humans being embedded in social contexts (Labov 1972; Sankoff 1980).
  - Language is one of the social institutions within which individuals and groups carry out social interaction (Foley 1997).
- What sociolinguists think about “sociolinguistic variable” is more context-specific compared to what other linguists might mean with it.

# What does “sociolinguistic” mean – outside sociolinguistics proper?

- Ideally: social structures that are related to patterns of language use.
  - Necessitates corpus-data/questionnaires/interviews, etc.
- Creole studies, language contact, areal studies, typology, ...
  - Sociohistorical / societal environment of language variation and change.
  - Part of wider ecology of language.
  - From the perspective of sociolinguistics proper, this is “macro-sociolinguistic” or about socio-demographic factors *not directly* connected with language use.
- Our research aligns more with macro-sociolinguistic analyses from creole studies, language contact, and areal studies.
  - Focus on socio-demographic factors that may *imply* some interactional characteristics within the language/speech community.

# Approaches to comparison in typology

- Categorical universalism (Newmeyer 2007)
  - Large set of universal categories from which languages “select”.
- Prototypes (Croft 2001)
  - Centers of conceptual space defined; borders fuzzy and language specific.
- Comparative concepts (Haspelmath 2010)
  - Universally defined concepts to which language specific categories are linked.
- Canonical typology (Corbett 2012)
  - A set of criteria defining canons and extremes in a multidimensional domain.
- Multivariate typology (Bickel 2010)
  - Developing maximally fine-grained variables to evaluate “similarity” quantitatively.

# What does “typology” mean?

- Purpose is NOT to classify languages into types but to understand and explain the world’s linguistic diversity.

*At its core, then, the typological method was not inherently about assigning objects to discrete categories [...] but about grappling in a scientific way with possible dimensions of comparison to use in the study of some domain of interest: how to discover them, evaluate them, and understand their contribution to the ultimate scientific goal of understanding the domain of inquiry.*

Round & Corbett (2020: 490)

# Application to social structures?

- We cannot assume the existence of universal social categories.
- Level of sociolinguistic description does not match that of linguistic description.
  - What are the relevant social categories? Not enough data.
- Sociolinguistic comparison cannot be based on social categories.
  - Emic approach (lg user's perspective) not possible in large-scale comparison.
  - Etic approach (researcher's perspective) necessary.

# How does this affect developing a comparative method?

- Social sphere is multidimensional
  - Break it down to multiple dimensions (cf. canonical and multivariate typology).
- We cannot utilize group-specific social categories.
  - Define “comparative concepts” that enable probing relevant dimensions.
- Avoid categorical questions whose formulation is affected by local categories.
  - E.g. Does this group have X? What is the dominant type of multilingualism?
  - We collect data mostly by collaborating with experts, e.g. field linguists, so we often use the five-point Likert scale instead.

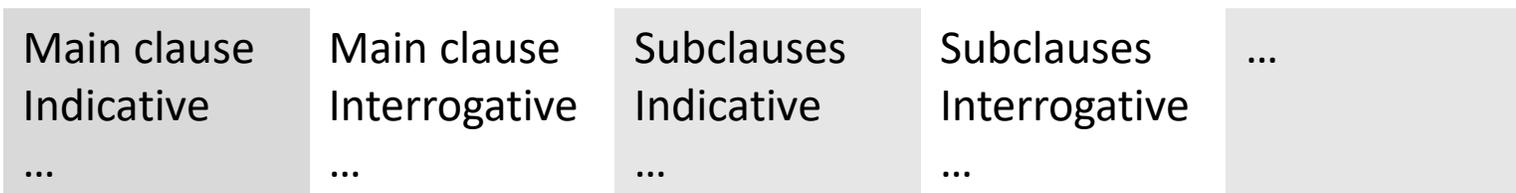
# Example

- Are interactions between people in the local community dyadic or group-based?
  - mostly dyadic
  - somewhat dyadic
  - mixed
  - somewhat group-based,
  - mostly group-based
- Dyadic = “up to four people”
- Group-based = involving ten or more people

# How to deal with language-internal variation?

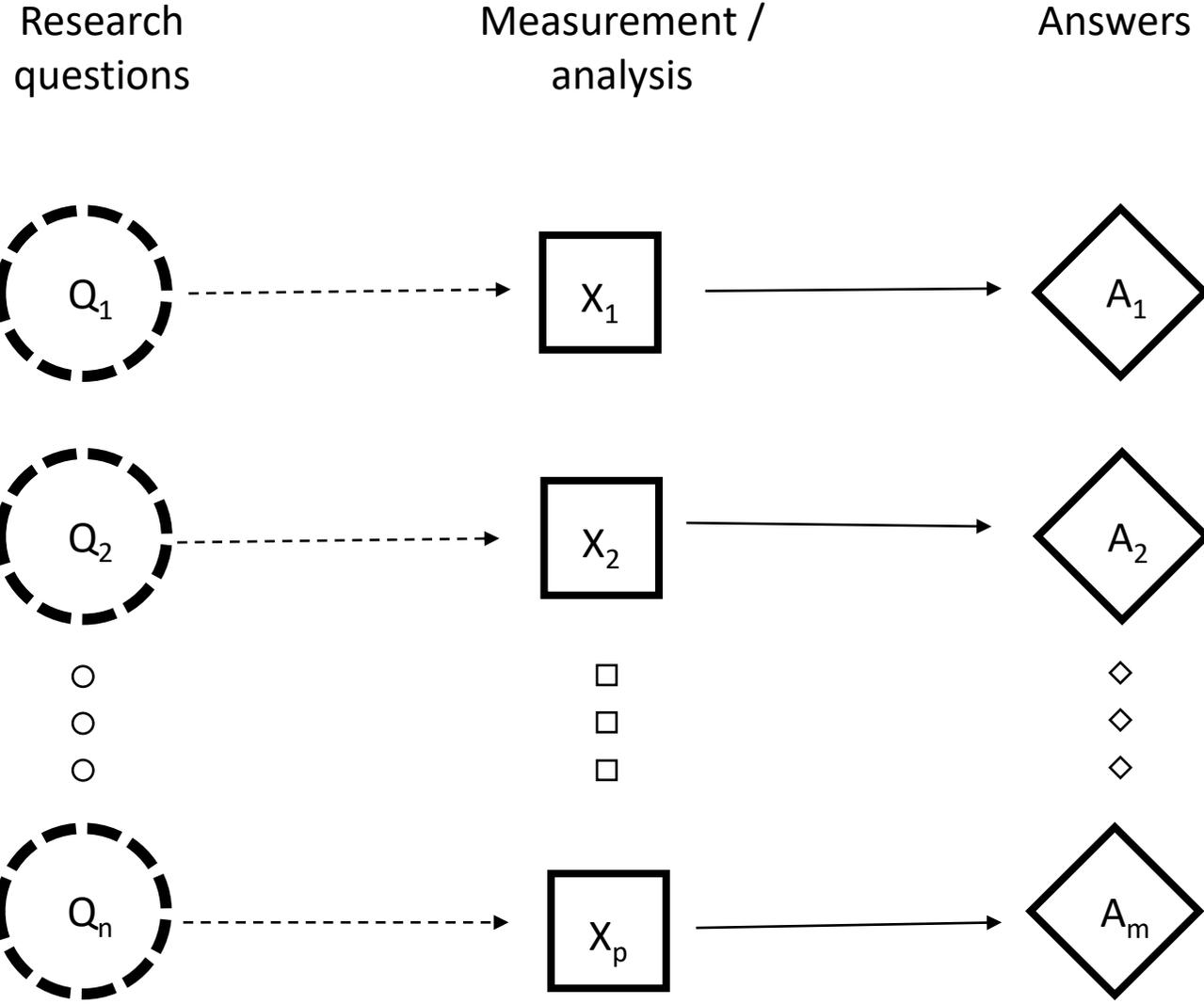
- Ideal: one language – one feature – one feature value
  - “Basic” word order in a language vs. context-specific word order variation.
  - “Prototypical” transitive verb vs. all two argument verbs.

- Case alignment (Comrie 2013)
  - Research delimited to main indicative clauses with prototypical transitive verbs.



## Values

- |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/>               | Neutral                                     |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>    | Nominative - accusative (standard)          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Nominative - accusative (marked nominative) |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>    | Ergative - absolutive                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>    | Tripartite                                  |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>    | Active-inactive                             |



Values	
●	SOV
●	SVO
●	VSO
◆	VOS
◆	OVS
◆	OSV
○	No dominant order

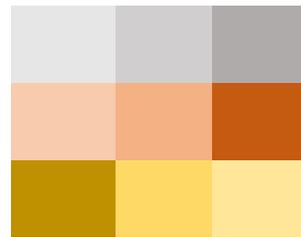
(Adapted from Vehkalahti 2019)

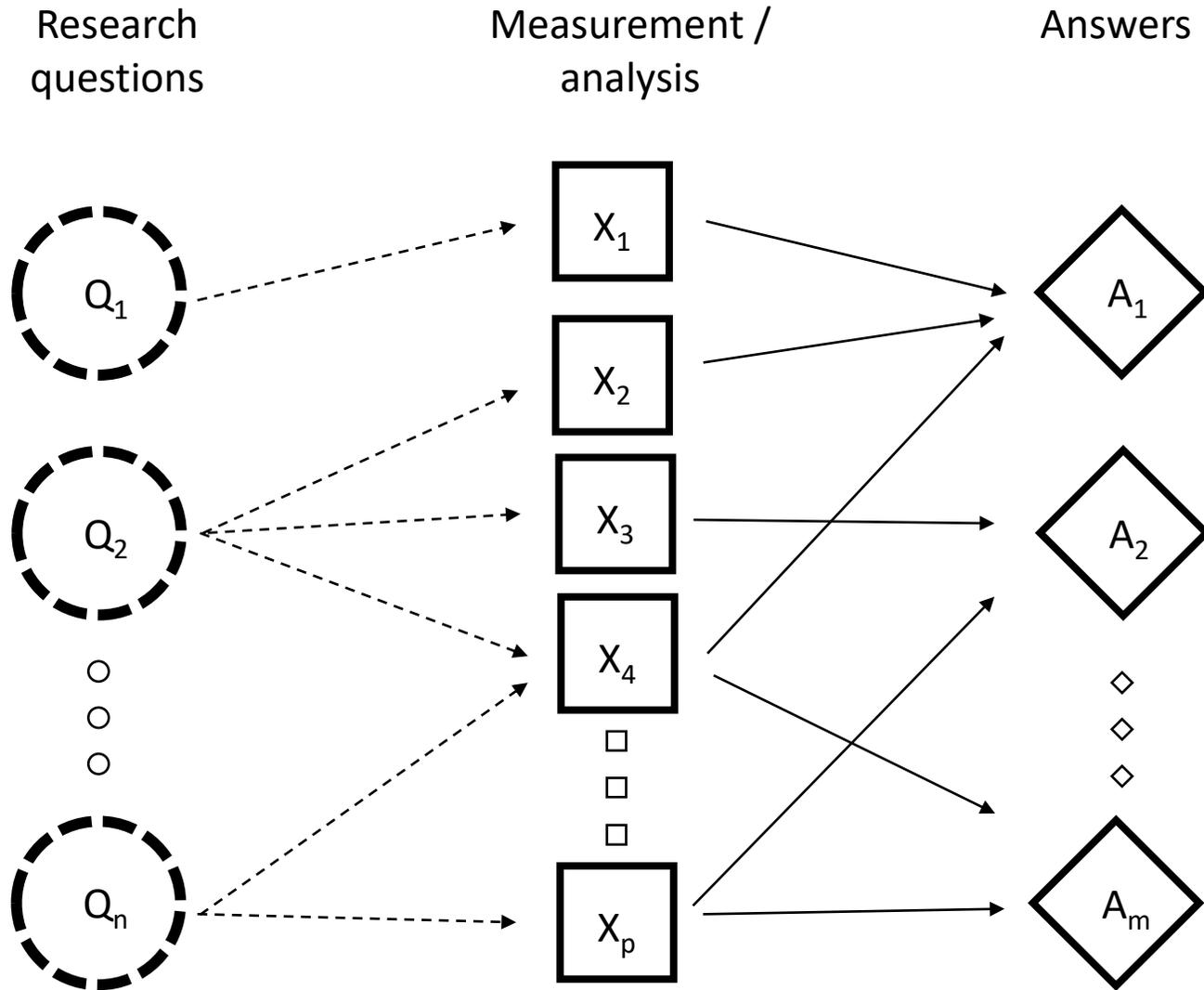
# How to deal with group-internal variation?

- If adapting one group – one feature – one feature value:
  - Are children typically bi-lingual or multilingual in this group?

# How to deal with group-internal variation?

- One set of mechanisms of language change deal with factors related to social cognition.
  - How much children are exposed to a contact language (L2)?
- We break “this” question into a set of questions that are asked relative to several social domains.





- Break down RQs into more fine-grained questions.
- What happens and in which context.
  - Cf. multivariate typology, canonical typology.

**EXPLANATORY FACTORS FOR CONTACT-INDUCED CHANGE**

**QUESTIONNAIRE  
(THE CONTACT SITUATION  
ACROSS DIFFERENT SOCIAL  
DOMAINS)**

Cognitive processing



Opportunities for language learning and use (L1, L2)

Interaction



Child socialization, accommodation, foreigner-directed speech

Network structures



Social network density, frequency of interactions, dyadic vs. group-based communication

Language ecology



Linguistic ideologies and attitudes towards the contact situation, vitality, language choice

# Social domains

## LOCAL COMMUNITY

Domain of interactions and contact beyond kin, and outside institutionalized practices related to domains of trade, labour, and knowledge.

## TRADE

Concerns transaction of physical objects. The prototype is an exchange of commodities (monetary, barter or other forms of exchange are also included).

## FAMILY & KIN

Concerns the interaction of three groups/relationships, and is often concerned with child bearing and rearing, as well as as food production and consumption: 1) family, 2) coresidential unit, and 3) affinal kin.

## LABOUR

Concerns economic activity in so far as it pertains to labour and production. Separate to trade, and knowledge.

## SOCIAL EXCHANGE

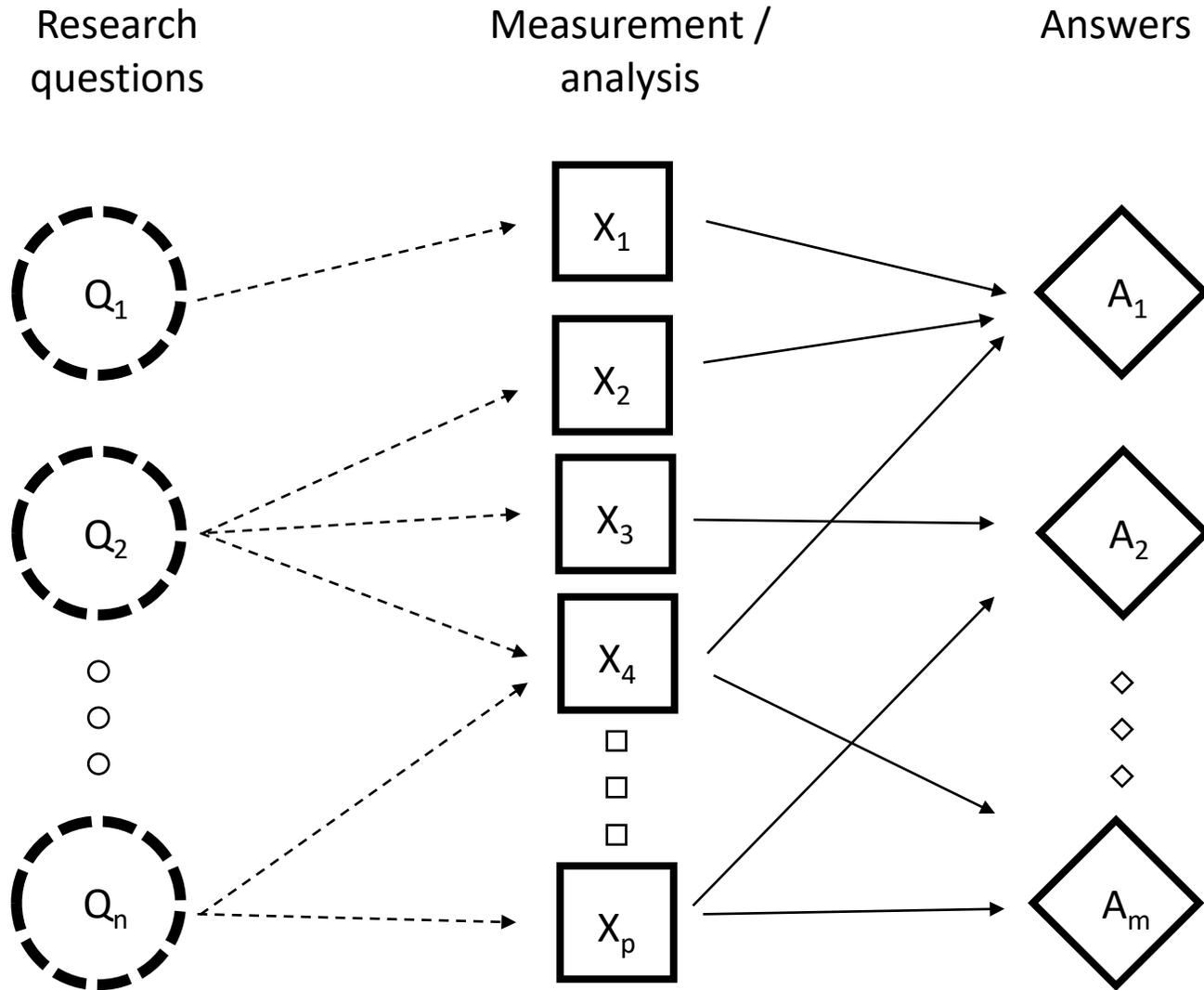
Highly codified practices of exchange that regulate relationships between individuals and groups within and across societies. Targetting: (1) gift exchange, including ceremonial exchange, and (2) marriage exchange.

## KNOWLEDGE

Domain of knowledge transfer, which is often highly structured in culturally specific ways. Covers institutions such as education, and religion.

# Questions related to language transmission in the domain “Local Community”

- How much do children participate in the activities of the local community?
- In the local community, by whom are children up to five typically likely to be socialized?
- In the space of the local community how much do adults participate in activities involving children, such as playing?
- Overall in the local community, what language is an adult Contact Group person likely to speak to a child from the Target Group?
- Typically, what language would a child from the Target Group prefer to use in the local community with their Contact Group peers?



- RQs operationalized by breaking them down to a set of questions.

- Measurements can be aggregated by
  - Social domain
  - Set of questions (which are related to mechanisms of language change)
  - In a specific way.
  - Overall.

to yield answers per language group.

Thank you for your attention!

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