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Johanna Nichols, Ph.D.

Professor (emer.) of Slavic Linguistics and Affiliate Professor (emer.) of Linguistics

University of California, Berkeley

Born in 1945 in Iowa City, Iowa

Studied French, Russian, Music, and Linguistics at the University of Iowa and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley

PROJECT

Noun/Verb Distinctions in Comparative Perspective

In some languages, nouns are basic and verbs derived; in others, verbs are basic and nouns derived. (There are also many languages of intermediate or neutral types.) In some languages, the morphological and syntactic difference between nouns and verbs is very clear; in others it is arguably nonexistent. Based on preliminary cross-linguistic research, I hypothesize that the verb-based type and the minimal noun/verb distinction correlate with lower overall complexity of languages and therefore with the sociolinguistic factors favoring low complexity (chiefly, contact and language shift). I will carry out large cross-linguistic surveys of structural grammatical properties of languages and wordlist comparisons to test for co-occurrence of these factors. The null hypothesis, consistent with what has long been received view in linguistics, is that there is no correlation. I will also do etymological and quantitative studies of the evolution of these properties, and of various structural sets of verbs, in a number of language families, to shed light on their stability and any tendencies in their overall evolutionary direction. If, as hypothesized, there proves to be a correlation between a minimal noun/verb distinction, overall structural complexity, and verbs as a closed class, we will have evidence bearing on the basicness and coevolutionary history of noun/verb distinctions and therefore on our understanding of the coevolutionary history of language and cognition. This project is designed to complement the project of William Foley, who will be at the Wissenschaftskolleg at the same time.

Recommended Reading

Nichols, Johanna. *Ingush Grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. (University of California Publications in Linguistics 143.)

- "Monogenesis or Polygenesis: A Single Ancestral Language for All Humanity?" In *The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution*, edited by Maggie Tallerman and Kathleen R. Gibson, 558-572. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- *Linguistic Diversity in Space and Time*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Nichols, Johanna (Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2017)

Noun-modifying constructions and relativization in the central and western Caucasus

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1681508729>

Nichols, Johanna (2009)

Linguistic complexity : a comprehensive definition and survey

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=81693519X>

Nichols, Johanna (2008)

Why are stative-active languages rare in Eurasia? A typological perspective on split-subject marking

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=816936161>