Towards Modelling Analogy in Syntax

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Analogy describes scenarios where a given linguistic expression A does not bear some property P(A) that would be intrinsically motivated for A (given the independently motivated rules and constraints of the language), but a property P(B) that is intrinsically motivated for a different linguistic expression B, but not for A. Analogy was first established as a relevant concept for grammatical theory in work like Baudouin de Courtenay (1870), Brugmann (1878), and Paul (1909). Since then, it has primarily been employed for morphology. Bloomfield (1933) argues that analogy also underlies creative language use in syntax. This view is called into question in more recent approaches to syntactic theory, though (see, e.g., Chomsky (1986)). In line with this assessment, closer inspection reveals that the formal modelling of analogy in syntax faces a huge number of non-trivial problems; simple-minded attempts at integrating analogy (e.g., via chunks, as in Blevins & Blevins (2009)) are incompatible with basic tenets of current syntactic theory.

Against this background, the main goal of this talk is to develop a coherent, principled approach to analogy in syntactic theory. I will argue that two fairly obvious candidates for handling analogy in syntax are not in fact viable options (viz., output/output correspondence, as in Benua (1997), and reanalysis, as in Rizzi (1982), Mueller (2025)). In contrast, sympathy theory (McCarthy (1999)) will be shown to allow for integrating analogy into syntax in a relatively straightforward, restrictive way that furthermore makes it possible to adhere to the original motivation underlying the concept. On this view, a linguistic expression A can acquire property P(B) (rather than P(A), which would normally be expected) via constraints demanding faithfulness to the sympathy candidate B, where B is a failed competitor that would nevertheless be optimal in a subset of the candidate set for A that only includes candidates respecting a given selector constraint.

Building on the study of scrambling and case morphology in Mueller (2002), I will discuss, as relevant case studies, the role of analogy in licensing extraction from infinitival clauses embedded under non-overt R-pronouns in German (Gunkel & Hartmann (2025)), extraction from German wenn-clauses (Zoefelt (2025)), and long-distance agreement with intransitive verbs in Hungarian (Barany (2023)).