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Since solid reconstructions and historical evidence is available only for extremely few families in the world, universal trends in diachrony can only be estimated on the basis of synchronic distributions. One method for such estimates is the Family Bias Method (e.g. Bickel in LT 15, 2011), which infers likely diachronic trends from distributional biases within established language families and applies probabilistic reasoning to extrapolate trends in small families and isolates.

In this presentation we apply this method to typological data from agreement system in order to evaluate two hypotheses that are generally accepted even though the evidence for them is only anecdotal: (a) zero forms are more likely to develop and be maintained in the third than in the first or second person ("Watkins' Law", going back to at least Benveniste 1946); (b) ergative alignment is more likely to develop and be maintained in the third person than in the first and second person (a hypothesis one could dub "Silverstein's Law").

Based on a detailed analysis of agreement paradigms in over 120 languages worldwide, we estimate diachronic trends on zero forms and alignment types. For alignment types, we find no evidence of a universal trend in line with Hypothesis (b) ("Silverstein's Law"), confirming earlier findings based on different methods. For Watkins' Law, we find no evidence if the principle is taken in its original sense, as bearing on paradigm shapes: there is no universal trend in our data for languages to (re-)structure paradigms so as to have more zeros in the third than in the first and second person, i.e. worldwide, there are about as many families showing such a trend as there are families with a trend towards the opposite or equi-proportional distribution of zeros.

However, the principle receives (weak) statistical support if it is taken to bear on individual markers (regardless of the rest of the paradigm): worldwide, there is a (borderline) significant trend for first and second person categories to develop and maintain overt agreement more often than third persons. This trend is likely to reflect grammaticalization processes of independent pronouns developing into agreement markers (along Givón's original proposal): since third person pronouns tend to be less frequent in discourse, they have an inherently smaller probability of developing into overt third person agreement markers than first and second person pronouns.