Gil (2012) defines predication as a complex emergent entity derived from the alignment of two independent elements of conceptual structure: thematic role assignment and headedness. Specifically, a predicate is a thematic-role-assigner head, while its arguments are its thematic-role-bearing modifiers. For example, given a simple juxtaposition of two words, denoting CHICKEN and EAT respectively, if EAT is the head, and EAT assigns a thematic role to CHICKEN, then according to the definition, EAT is the predicate and CHICKEN its argument.

Three interrelated arguments are presented therein in support of the emergent definition of predication. First, it is maximally parsimonious, drawing upon conceptual structures that are independently motivated and not specific to language. Second, it provides a framework for representing the development of predication both ontogenetically, in early child-language acquisition, and phylogenetically, in the evolution of language. Third, it facilitates an account for languages in which the clustering of thematic role assignment and headedness is at best weakly grammaticalized, and which may accordingly be viewed as languages without a prominent notion of predication.

This paper presents a fourth and novel argument in support of the emergent definition of predication, showing how it makes correct empirical predictions about correlations between thematic role assignment and the marking of Tense, Aspect and Mood (TAM) categories, which rely on the notion of headedness and the projection of features prototypically associated with verbs and verb phrases. Specifically, the convergence of thematic role assignment and headedness predicts that the grammatical expression of thematic roles will co-vary with that of TAM categories: where predication is present, the expression of thematic roles and of TAM will be strongly grammaticalized, whereas where predication is absent, their degree of grammaticalization will be lower. One well-known instance is provided by the contrast between finite clauses and various reduced clause types such as small clauses and other defective clause types, as discussed by Progovac (2015) and others. This paper presents evidence that a similar correlation holds cross-linguistically as well.

This paper presents some results of a cross-linguistic experiment conducted on a world-wide sample of over 60 genealogically and structurally diverse languages. Subjects are asked to judge the truth conditions of sentences with reference to test pictures; speakers' responses provide a measure of the degree to which thematic roles are grammaticalized in their respective languages. The results of the experiment provide evidence for a correlation between the grammaticalization of TAM and of thematic roles: whereas languages with obligatory TAM marking exhibit high grammaticalization of thematic roles, as expressed by word order, flagging, and other morphosyntactic devices, languages with optional TAM marking exhibit little grammaticalization of thematic roles. For example, whereas in English, a sentence such as The chicken is eating, with its obligatory TAM marking, unambiguously assigns the chicken the thematic role of agent, in Tobelo, a language of the North-Halmahera family of Indonesia, the corresponding sentence, O total eo iyoyomo (ART chicken 3INAN.SJ:3INAN.OBJ:eat), with no TAM marking, allows o total eo to be associated with either agent or patient roles. The significance of the cross-linguistic correlation is further enhanced by examination of "minimal pairs": languages that are closely related genealogically, structurally, and sociolinguistically, while differing with respect to the expression of TAM. For example, among two related Mayan languages of Guatemala, Tz'utujil, with obligatory TAM marking, has high grammaticalization of thematic roles, whereas Q'anjob'al, with optional TAM marking, emerges with significantly lower grammaticalization of thematic roles.

Thus, the cross-linguistic correlation between the grammaticalization of TAM and of thematic roles provides further support for the convergence of thematic roles and headedness, and ipso facto for the emergent definition of predication. In doing so, it provides evidence for a distinction between two types of languages, those in which predication plays a prominent role in the grammar, such as English and Tz'utujil, and those in which the role of predication is significantly diminished or even absent, such as Tobelo and Q'anjob'al.
