LINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY

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Linguistic typology is a discipline that studies linguistic diversity. Its main goal, as noted by Balthasar Bickel, is to explain "why linguistic diversity is the way it is". Linguistic typology is interested in both differences and similarities between the languages, because these are interrelated. Since languages can differ or be similar at various levels of language structure—phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, and so on—linguistic typology is relevant for all these domains. This entry discusses language universals; the role of a language sample; synchronic, diachronic, and areal typology; and the issue of crosslinguistic comparison.

The history of linguistic typology as a discipline goes back at least 2.5 centuries. During this period it has been shaped by numerous scholars, with Friedrich von Schlegel, Georg von der Gabelentz, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Edward Sapir, and Roman Jakobson among its founding figures. The discipline in its modern form took off in the 1960s influenced by Joseph Greenberg's study on word order universals.

Language Universals

What does linguistic typology encompass? A systematic comparison of language structures allows linguists to determine differences and similarities across languages. Every new difference that is observed between languages extends the limits of crosslinguistic variation, while every new similarity establishes new limits on structural variation within a human language. The two processes run hand in hand and form the core of linguistic typology. Similarities that constitute

recurrent patterns across languages are used by linguists to formulate typological generalizations, or *language universals*. This term is used for linguistic phenomena that are found in most or, at least, in a significant number of human languages. Language universals fall into four following types. First, language universals can be *implicational* and *nonimplicational* (the latter is alternatively called *unrestricted*). The term implicational infers a correlation of two or more parameters, and this is what these universals are about. An implicational universal can be schematized as "If P, then Q." A nonimplicational universal, on the other hand, does not involve any correlation and focuses on just one linguistic parameter. Second, both implicational and nonimplicational universals can be *statistical* and *absolute*. Statistical universals hold for most, but not all, languages. They are alternatively called universal tendencies. Absolute universals, on the other hand, are assumed to hold for every single language. Absolute universals are few in number, and in principle, they have a highly hypothetical nature for the reason that that we do not (and never will) have information about all of the world's languages. All universals, in general, give us an idea about *preferences* of languages for certain structures. Implicational universals, in particular, provide additionally an insight on the structure and *dependencies* within a language system. Table 1 gives an example of each type of language universals.

[Insert Linguistic Typology Table 1 about here]

Table 1   Examples of language universals

Source. Based on Moravcsik (2010. p. 70) and Velupillai (2012. pp. 31, 33).

        In fact, all linguistic universals—either statistical or absolute, implicational or not— are hypotheses that are continuously being tested against data that emerge from previously unknown or under-described languages all over the globe. An example is the discovery of languages with

object-before-subject basic word order. Greenberg's seminal study in the 1960s was the first to put forward a list of language universals, many of which hold until the current day. Greenberg was careful and cautious in his formulations, aware that most of them are tendencies rather than absolutes. However, the language sample that was used for the study did not contain any languages with object-before-subject word order, leading to a conclusion that such languages are nonoccurring at all or are excessively rare. It was generally assumed so, before Desmond Derbyshire demonstrated in the 1970s that a South American language Hixkaryana, spoken by about 350 people in northern Brazil, does have the object-before-subject as pragmatically unmarked (or regular) word order. Today, we know of more languages with this characteristic, leading to a rebuttal of an earlier suggested universal, and therefore to an adjustment to our understanding of what is possible in a human language.

Explanations for language universals have been a matter of some debate among scholars. Explanations that have been proposed include cultural–historical, functional, and cognitive factors, or a combination of these. Some examples involve the notions of processing, economy, and iconicity. An explanation in terms of processing suggests that those linguistic structures that require less cognitive effort and are easier to process will be preferred by languages. The notion of economy refers to the tendency for frequently used elements to get reduced, as well as the tendency for highly predictable elements to get eliminated. The competing notion of iconicity proposes that the more complex the formal expression, the more complex is the semantic notion that is expressed, and vice versa. Historical factors relate to universal sources and constrains on language change, as well as long-term genealogical inheritance of language structures, or language contact in the past.

Language Sample

To search for similarities, differences, and dependencies among language structures, it is important to consider a large variety of languages. Not only is it undoable to include all documented languages in a comparison, it can be also problematic. Most linguistic characteristics show some kind of skewing in their distribution, whether it is a geographic skewing (clustering of unrelated languages with a certain characteristic in one area) or a genealogical one (retaining of a certain characteristic within a language family). It is therefore important to have a language sample that is representative and balanced from genealogical and geographic points of view. That is, a sample should contain languages from maximally different genealogical units, and contain languages from diverse geographic areas (such as continents) but should also avoid clusters of languages spoken in a geographic proximity.

In general, the larger and the more diverse a sample is, the more robust the results are of a crosslinguistic comparison. However, the way a language sample is put together is determined by the exact purpose of a study.

Language typology depends considerably on the existence, quantity, and quality of data on the languages. It is often the case that a language sample has to be adjusted according to availability of sufficient data on a language. According to the overview by Harald Hammarström (the most systematic and thorough account of the current state of language documentation), about 30% of the world's languages have a full grammatical description and an additional 25% have a grammar sketch (which is, unfortunately, not always sufficient for typological research). Although there is lack of typological data for the other half of the world's languages, the overall picture now is more optimistic than 50 years before.

Synchronic, Diachronic, and Areal Typology

Language typology that has been considered so far is referred to as *synchronic* typology, that is, comparison of languages that are contemporaneous with each other. In synchronic typology, linguists are interested in language universals; however, for an explanation of exceptions to the universals they may need to turn to diachronic typology or areal typology. *Diachronic* typology involves comparison of languages at various stages of their development. As argued by William Croft, in synchronic typology, language types are viewed as states that languages are in. In diachronic typology, on the other hand, language types are taken as stages that languages pass through. Since deep-time historical data are available only on a fraction of the world's languages, this is a handy solution in order to explore—at least hypothetically—a development of certain structures. Examining genealogically related languages can be particularly valuable here: Related languages can be the best approximations for different stages of development of one initial language type as found in their proto-language. But here, of course, typologists have to abstract from the fact that the rules of language change can change too in the meantime. Finally, *areal* typology (a notion that combines areal linguistics and linguistic typology) is concerned with patterns in the geographic distribution of language structures. When speakers of two or more languages are in contact for a longer period of time, it is typical that characteristics of one language spread to another language. As a result, languages start to resemble each other. This leads to the emergence of *linguistic areas* or *Sprachbunds*, where unrelated or distantly related languages share linguistic characteristics that are not inherited from their respective proto-languages.

Issue of Crosslinguistic Comparison

One of the challenges in linguistic typology is the so-called problem of crosslinguistic identification. Since comparison of languages is central in the discipline, it is fundamental that linguistic phenomena that are being compared are indeed comparable. For example, a crosslinguistic study on word order of nouns and adjectives would likely run into a problem as to what can be taken as adjective in languages A, B, and C. In English, concepts such as "big," "old," and "red" are different from the concepts "eat," "grow," and "stand," denoting actions or states, for three major reasons. First, they show a different syntactic behavior (the role they play in a sentence or phrase). Second, they show different morphological behavior (use different sets of morphological markers), And third, the semantic notions they encode are, obviously, different. This gives us enough ground to identify adjectives in English. In a Sáliban language Mako, spoken in the Venezuelan Amazon, concepts such as big, old, and red differ neither syntactically nor morphologically from those such as eat, grow, and stand. Thus, using exclusively formal or structural criteria would not be helpful to identify a phenomenon crosslinguistically, particularly since structural variation among the world's languages is huge. A possible way out is to hinge the identification on semantic criteria or functional ones (taken broadly, with factors that are external to the language system). For a crosslinguistic comparison in phonology, one would likely use parameters based on articulatory–acoustic properties, and ultimately, speech organs.

See also Descriptive Linguistics; Diversity; Indigenous Languages; Language; Language Families; Language Sampling; Phonology; Morphology; Semantics; Syntax and Grammar

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