

Linguistic categories and language universals

Discussion session at SLE 2016 (Naples)

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The recent discussion in the LINGTYP@listserv.linguistlist.org mailing list (on multiple threads) on linguistic categories and universals has sparked a heated debate which highlighted the existence of vast differences (as well as much common ground) in the understanding of the basics of the whole typological enterprise among typologists, and of persisting uncertainties as to fundamental issues in the discipline, as e.g. the distinction between ‘comparative concepts’ and ‘language-specific categories’, or about the dichotomy (or non-dichotomy) between language description and ‘doing typology’ – and how the latter should be done.

The question is hardly a new one. For instance, in the middle of the 19th century, K.W.L. Heyse (1856) distinguished between a *philosophische Sprachwissenschaft* (‘philosophical language science’ – in a sense, a ‘Universal Grammar’) and a *geschichtliche Sprachforschung* (‘historical language research’ – which translates into ‘descriptive grammar’ in modern terminology). Accordingly, the task of the former was to explain, whereas that of the latter was to describe facts (see Ramat 1995). But the discussion on LINGTYP has shown that even the most basic statements as ‘the basic word order of Cantonese is SVO’ may be understood in a significantly different way by different typologists: namely as an actual statement about the ‘default’ order of the constituents Subject (as a syntactic pivot), Verb and Object in a language; as a generalisation about a preferred order of constituents which however are *not* necessarily a Subject and an Object, but possibly an Agent and a Patient; or even a meaningless association, given that the categories at issue may have no relevance for Cantonese.

It has been proposed that the discussion be turned into one or more publications (a special issue of Linguistic Typology, or an edited volume) and/or a workshop, possibly at the next (2017) annual SLE meeting in Zürich. We thus thought that it might be useful to have a preliminary meeting, in the form of a round table, at the upcoming SLE meeting in Naples. The topics which we believe should be addressed in this meeting include:

- a. Language-specific categories *vs.* comparative concepts: how do we define comparative concepts, and do we use them only for the purposes of typological comparison, or also in language description (including glossing)? [«But Adjective is not adjective; we haven't "discovered" an adjective class in the language, because adjective (lower case) is not a language-specific word class; it is a type of comparative concept.», Croft, LINGTYP 21.01] How do we deal with the basic intuition that an English adjective and, say a Portuguese adjective, despite having differences, are perceived to be instantiations of the same category, and with the fact that, by denying this, we may run into the risk of an unnecessary proliferation of (language-specific) categories?
- b. Hybrid formal/functional/semantic comparative concepts: is the above mentioned adjective an instance of a ‘hybrid’ category, defined both in terms of function/meaning (modification of a referent by a property concept; see Croft 2001; [«"adjective" is a hybrid comparative concept that is whatever construction expresses modification of a referent by a property concept », Croft , LINGTYP 21.01]) and in terms of the formal strategies it instantiates?

c. Do we accept that comparative concepts may have multiple definitions, as long as they serve the purposes of the proponent/user, or do we want consensus on what, say, 'noun' means? [«I find it important to recognize that typology works with a heterogeneous class of comparative concepts, which may be defined in a variety of ways (formally, functionally, with respect to discourse, with respect to translation equivalence, etc.). Typology does not (necessarily) work in terms of the descriptive categories that are the most useful in analyzing languages, and it need not define its concepts in a uniform way.»], Haspelmath, LINGTYP 18.01]

d. How do we deal with the (apparent?) contradiction in using labels as SOV, VOS and, at the same time, admitting that concepts as 'S' may be irrelevant for the grammar of some languages? And how do we cope with the fact that by rejecting such a method we also overlook important generalisations captured by the use of those labels? [«The point of classifying the language as SVO is that it behaves like an SVO language as far as word order correlations are concerned. Not classifying it as SVO means that one would fail to explain the correlations. Hawkins' theory predicts that such a language counts as SVO. The class of languages I treat as SVO is defined roughly as those languages where the statistically dominant order in usage is AVP. »], Dryer, LINGTYP 20.01]

e. How do we conceptualise the distinction between 'usage' and 'grammar' when it comes to issues as the order of constituents? Are the two really separated, or is it just an artifact of how we came to conceive 'grammars'? [«What this means is that the GRAMMARS of what I classify as VO languages have nothing in common. It is only the languages that have something in common at the level of usage. Hence any notion of SVO language restricted to languages in which there are subject and object categories and in which word order is determined by grammatical relations will necessarily fail as the basis of word order correlations», Dryer, LINGTYP 21.01]

f. Is the distinction between 'typologists' and 'documentary linguists' an actual one? Do we need (and, above all, do we *want*) a separation between the description of individual languages and typological comparison? [«What sometimes happens with putative rarities is that someone claims to have found a rarity and then others say 'hey, I have that in my language too.' This might be in part due to descriptive linguists taking existing typological accounts as a kind of baseline, but obviously the number of languages that *aren't* in typological samples is much greater than the number of languages that are», Grossman, LINGTYP 27.01]

References

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