

Explaining universals of syntactic argument coding

Martin Haspelmath
(University of Leipzig/MPI Jena)

In this presentation, I will discuss various ways in which the coding properties of verbal arguments have been explained by linguists, e.g. accusative and ergative marking, or presence or absence of person-indexing of objects. The focus will be on standard transitive and ditransitive constructions. I will distinguish between internal explanations, which are really the same as elegant descriptions, and functional-adaptive explanations, which make reference to language use and language change, and are necessarily explanations of language universals. I will evaluate a number of proposals that have been made recently and not so recently, putting emphasis on the form-frequency correspondence principle, which has wide-ranging explanatory power in diverse domains of grammar. I will argue that attempts to elevate internal explanations of particular phenomena to general principles of human language often fail because they make unwarranted (aprioristic) uniformity assumptions. Functional-adaptive explanations, by contrast, do not have to make such assumptions and are readily testable by cross-linguistic and usage data.