

Linguistic Typology: Summary and Problems

We have looked at a number of issues that lend themselves to typological examination: marking of core constituents, voice alternations, word order, relative clauses, tense, aspect and mood, and gender and number. Other issues would be worth looking at, but there is not enough typological literature: adpositions, conditional clauses etc.

Let us briefly look at these topics again:

- Core constituents: most languages have subjects and objects. It is not random what becomes subject — it is normally the most agentive participant in an event. Nominative-accusative languages mark transitive and intransitive subjects in the same way and objects in another way. Ergative-absolutive languages mark intransitive subjects like transitive objects, while transitive subjects are marked differently. Some languages employ both patterns, and the distribution of the two systems is not random: there are tense/aspect-based split systems, and here the ergative pattern occurs in the past or the perfective; and there are animacy based split systems, where the ergative pattern occurs among the less ‘animate’ entities.
- Voice alternations: we looked at passives, promotion of objects to subject status, and demotion of subjects to oblique functions; we also looked at antipassives as a way of intransitivizing clauses without changing the subject. The pragmatic rationales behind such voices are often similar.
- Word order: this is a difficult field. There are some tendencies though: subjects normally precede objects because subjects are the constituents from whose perspective you look at an event; objects are often immediately next to the verb; heavy constituents tend to come later in the clause; and to some extent cross-categorial harmony may explain some word order patterns.
- Relative clauses: we looked at different relative clause strategies, gapping, relative pronouns, and pronoun retention. These differ in their degree of explicitness, with gapping being least explicit and pronoun retention being most explicit. The less explicit a strategy is, the more likely it is to be used for subjects, and the more explicit a strategy is, the more likely it is to be used for less accessible functions, e.g. prepositional objects. Languages which only allow subjects as the heads of relative clauses often have complex voice systems allowing promotion to subject status for oblique constituents.

- Tense, aspect, mood: I tried to give an overview of absolute tense, relative tense, perfective and imperfective aspect, perfect aspect, and deontic and epistemic modality. In this field it is very difficult to come up with universals, so the typologies of tense, aspect, and mood tend to be inventories rather than predictive tools.
- Gender and number: we looked at different gender assignment strategies; gender assignment can be on a semantic basis, but also on a morphological or a phonological basis; in the latter two cases, there is often some semantic gender assignment as well. With regard to number I showed that number marking, especially for numbers like dual or paucal, need not be obligatory, and that number marking is not independent of the animacy hierarchy.

I hope that a few things about universals have become obvious over the last weeks:

- Implicational vs. non-implicational universals: absolute non-implicational universals are rare and do not advance our knowledge of language much, e.g. all languages have nouns and verbs; statistical non-implicational universals are more frequent and have interesting consequences for linguistic theory, e.g. languages prefer to place the subject before the object; most universals are implicational (hierarchies), and there are practically always functional explanations for such implicational universals.
- Constructions which are excluded in one language may not be excluded in another, but they are likely to be rare statistically; e.g. some languages have do not allow passives for stative verbs, while others do, but in these other languages the passive of stative verbs will be rarer than that of non-stative verbs.
- Large language samples are important for typological research, but typological research can also help with research on individual languages; once you know what patterns exist across languages, you will know what things are most likely to help you to solve problems you have when examining a single language.

The field of typology is much wider than what I have presented. I have restricted the class to synchronic syntax and to some extent morphology, but you can also examine phonology and pragmatics from a typological perspective. What is more, typology is particularly important for diachronic studies. To give one example, if you reconstruct the sound system of a language, the patterns you reconstruct must be attested elsewhere, and the sound changes you posit must also be attested elsewhere. If a language has relative clauses with gapping and is introducing new ones with subordinator and pronoun retention, you will know that these are more likely to be used for less accessible functions of the head of the relative clause and that gapping is presumably undergoing restrictions at that end.

I shall now look at some methodological problems I have not really discussed yet.

Problems of sampling

A typological survey is worthless unless its results are statistically significant. You will need a fairly large number of languages. How should they be chosen? The ideal selection comprises many languages which are:

- not genetically related, or only distantly related
- not in close contact, not part of a linguistic area

This is the ideal selection. Reality often looks different. You may not be able to have an ideal selection because:

- it is unknown what family a particular language belongs to, or what other languages it has been influenced by
- the grammars of that language are incomplete or do not discuss points you need to know about, or maybe the glossing is insufficient or the terminology is misleading
- the grammars are written in languages you don't understand
- the grammars are all right, but you are completely unfamiliar with any language of that family
- none of the above is a problem, but the relevant books are not available.

Problems of analysis

You now have a good sample of languages and want to examine relative clauses. Your sample is so big that you can afford to include a few related languages, so you have both English and German in it. Across languages, participles tend to function as relative clauses. How about English participles? Should they count as relative clauses? Think of *he had an annoyed look on his face*; is *annoyed* a relative clause? If not, what about *The man came in, clearly annoyed by the bad news*? What should be the cut-off point? Will the same rules apply to the German participles, which could be argued to be more verbal than the English ones? How can you achieve consistency of criteria across languages? Should there actually be consistency?