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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/042275ts>

Journal

Linguistic Typology, 20(3)

ISSN

1430-0532

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Publication Date

2016-12-01

DOI

10.1515/lingty-2016-0019

Peer reviewed

Typology, Documentation, Description, and Typology

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Abstract

If the goals of linguistic typology, are, as described by Plank (2016):

- (a) to chart linguistic diversity
- (b) to seek out order or even unity in diversity

knowledge of the current state of the art is an invaluable tool for almost any linguistic endeavor. For language documentation and description, knowing what distinctions, categories, and patterns have been observed in other languages makes it possible to identify them more quickly and thoroughly in an unfamiliar language. Knowing how they differ in detail can prompt us to tune into those details. Knowing what is rare cross-linguistically can ensure that unusual features are richly documented and prominent in descriptions. But if documentation and description are limited to filling in typological checklists, not only will much of the essence of each language be missed, but the field of typology will also suffer, as new variables and correlations will fail to surface, and our understanding of deeper factors behind cross-linguistic similarities and differences will not progress.

1. Typological awareness as a tool

Looking at the work of early scholars such as Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, it is impossible not to be amazed at the richness of their documentation and the insight of their descriptions of languages so unlike the more familiar languages of Europe. It is unlikely that Boas first arrived on Baffin Island forewarned to watch for velar/uvular distinctions and ergativity. Now more than a century later, an awareness of what distinctions can be significant in languages and what kinds of systems recur can provide tremendous advantages, allowing us to spot potentially important features sooner and identify patterns on the basis of fewer examples.

As typological findings become finer-grained, they serve as ever sharper tools for observation and analysis. It is now well known, for example, that languages are not simply nominative/accusative, ergative/absolutive, or agent/patient; different areas of grammar often show different patterns. Where there are differences, we know where to start looking for sub-patterns: pronominal systems are more likely to show nominative/accusative or agent/patient patterning, even if lexical noun phrases show ergative/absolutive patterning, but not the reverse, for example. We know, furthermore, that differential argument marking is not uncommon across languages. Rather than standing by helplessly when our ergative/absolutive patterns seem to founder, we can jump right into searching for principles behind the apparent exceptions. Perhaps only animate or identifiable (definite) expressions can carry absolutive marking, or can even have absolutive status at all.

Awareness of typological variation can point us toward questions we may not have thought to ask otherwise. We now know, for example, that some causative and applicative formations apply only to intransitive bases. Each time a new causative or applicative construction comes up, we can scrupulously check whether it occurs with both intransitive and transitive bases. We know, furthermore, that when valancy-increasing operations like these are applied to transitive bases, there is cross-linguistic variation in the argument structure of the derived construction. Some such operations simply add an argument and create a ditransitive verb. Others result in the expression of one of the participants as an oblique. Forewarned, we can pay careful attention to the grammatical fate of each participant in the derived constructions.

2. Typological awareness and the shape of description

A primary task of the grammarian is to make sense out of apparent chaos: to find the systematicity underlying the mass of data in the documentary record. Like most of science, this undertaking typically involves categorialization and generalization. Linguistic typology involves similar methods, with the establishment of variables and linguistic types. The bases for comparison and classification emerging from typological work can provide helpful organizing principles for the grammarian. At the same time it is important that the resulting categorizations not impede nuanced description.

In principle any feature can serve as the basis of a type. We talk about polysynthetic languages, OV languages, pro-drop languages, and tone languages. Types become more interesting when they are predictive of features beyond those used to define the type in the first place. Accordingly, much typological work is directed at finding correlations among features. The earliest linguistic typologies classified languages on the basis of their word-internal structures, ultimately degrees of synthesis and fusion. (A history of such work is described in detail in Plank 2001.) Still today, grammars often open with statements like ‘L is a polysynthetic, fusional language’. Such classification can orient the reader to the description to come. But it is important that it not be taken as an end in itself.

Questions remain about not only the essence of types like ‘polysynthetic’, but also their predictive power (Fortescue, Mithun, and Evans in press). If we decide that the defining feature of polysynthesis is a high average number of morphemes per word, in keeping with the etymology of the term and Greenberg’s 1960 quantitative approach, additional questions arise. Is it the average number of morphemes per word in a 200-word text? Is it the largest possible number of morphemes in a word? Is it the number of slots in a template? Is it the number of morphemes that can occur in each slot? For polysynthesis to define a meaningful linguistic type, there should be other structural correlates. Does it entail holophrasis in a specific sense, the inclusion within a single word of both predicate (verb stem) and arguments (pronominal affixes)? If it does, it would constitute an important advance in the field, correlating essential features of morphology and syntax. But the issues are still more complex. Identification of arguments is not an either/or matter. Some languages contain reference within the verb to all arguments except inanimates, some to all arguments except third person objects, some to all arguments except third persons, etc. Does polysynthesis entail the possibility of noun incorporation, whereby a noun stem is integrated into the verb word? But languages with noun incorporation vary widely in the productivity of the construction. Some no longer have productive incorporation, but do contain affixes with highly concrete meanings typical of nouns

in other languages, in constructions which are likely descendents of noun incorporation. If the grammarian is to capture the essence of a language, it is important not to stop at a type label, but investigate potential variables in detail, variables which may in turn enrich the field of linguistic typology.

Some typologists have bemoaned the fact that the particular feature they are researching cannot be found in the same section of every grammar. Particularly now, as the audience for descriptive grammars is widening beyond academic specialists to speaker communities, we can hope that grammar writers take pains to create coherent, accessible descriptions. Their fundamental task is to make sense of the systems they are describing. The organization of a successful description should accordingly reflect the categories inherent in the language, in ways that make their interrelations clear. The various aspects of any language are rarely islands: most are intertwined, sometimes in ways not immediately noticeable. If the connections are obscured by rigid organization of descriptions imposed from outside the language, opportunities will be missed for new generalizations across diversity, the very kind of generalizations that are a goal of typology.

3. The shape of description and understanding diversity

Perhaps the most widely discussed linguistic types in recent times have been those first proposed by Greenberg in 1963 based on word order: I VSO, II SVO, and III SOV. Additional features were correlated with these types, among them the relative order of adpositions and their objects, and prefixing versus suffixing tendencies. Greenberg's proposals and work since then have stimulated fruitful discussions about why the correlations should exist. Explanations have ranged from cognitive requirements of speakers for general organizing principles (head-dependent versus dependent-head order) to diachronic connections between constructions (the grammaticalization of matrix verbs to affixes). The impact of this typology and its descendants is clear in the many typological surveys and databases in which languages are simply listed under one of the three types. But we know that most languages contain inventories of constructions with different constituent orders, used for different functions. Languages vary not only in their inventories, but also in the relative pragmatic markedness of the alternatives: in some languages there is a strong basic order, and alternatives are highly marked; in others order is more fluid, alternative orders are much more frequent, and particular orders less marked; in still others there may be no basic, syntactically-defined, pragmatically neutral order at all. Assigning a language to a type on the basis of a single word order without further elaboration risks cutting off our understanding of important domains of language.

One such domain is information structure, the choices speakers make in packaging their messages according to the current knowledge and attention of their listeners. As is now well known, intonation plays a major role in the expression of focus in many languages. English, Italian, and French all express focus primarily by prosody. But as described in detail by Lambrecht (1994) and many others, these languages differ in their strategies for aligning focused constituents with prosodic peaks. Essentially, in English, pitch accent is mobile: speakers may simply pronounce a focused constituent with marked pitch, intensity, rhythm, etc. In Italian, pitch accent is less mobile, so alternative constituent orders are exploited to ensure that focused constituents are aligned with accented positions within the sentence. In French, where neither pitch accent nor constituent order are very mobile, additional syntactic strategies come into play,

such as clefting. But even the association of prosodic prominence with focus is not consistent across languages. Rialland and Robert (2001) show that Wolof, a non-tone language of the Atlantic branch of Niger-Congo, has no intonational marking of focus whatsoever. Focus is marked by verbal inflection. And in their discussion of information structure in other African languages, Fiedler and Schwarz conclude that ‘tone languages -- to which the majority of African languages belong -- exploit morphological and/or syntactic devices to a much higher degree than intonational ones’ (2010: viii). Links between constructions used for the expression of information structure and other aspects of grammatical structure might be missed if attention is directed to only one feature of grammar at a time. Such correlations are the stuff of typology.

Other important interconnections within languages are those between structure and substance, grammatical constructions and the lexical items that carry them. Such links can sometimes help us make sense of the kinds of typological diversity that exist. Grammatical constructions rarely burst forth fully-formed in a language: they more often develop gradually over time. They may begin in phrases containing concrete lexical items with relatively specific meanings. When these phrases are used with increasing frequency and extended to more contexts, their meanings may, over time, become more general and abstract. The original meanings of the lexical sources typically constrain the contexts in which they occur at the outset, and subsequently the patterns by which they are extended and generalized. An awareness of recurring trajectories can be key to understanding patterns of cross-linguistic diversity which correspond to stages of development through time.

4. Typology, documentation, description, and typology

As noted at the outset, in his call for contributions to this issue on the relevance of typology, Frans Plank (2016) characterized the primary goals of linguistic typology as (a) to chart linguistic diversity, and (b) to seek out order or even unity in diversity. Findings from the first are invaluable to those documenting and describing languages, alerting them to details to watch for and chronicle. At the same time, documentation and description based solely on features recognized in the current typological literature will not only inhibit a full understanding of the language in question, but also impede progress in typology. Documentation that is limited to filling in a typological questionnaire will miss too much. The myriad features that might emerge in spontaneous speech but have not yet come under scrutiny by typologists will remain unnoticed, and the charting of linguistic diversity will not move ahead.

A major endeavor on the part of typologists is to find order in the cross-linguistic diversity, correlations among features that differ across languages. An admonition to grammarians often attributed to Boas is that each language should be described in its own terms, advice that would seem to be at cross purposes with those seeking general principles. But if grammarians do not portray the order within individual languages, the field of typology stands to lose opportunities for discovering correlations beyond those already known, and for understanding the deeper factors behind the shapes languages take. And premature abstraction away from the details of individual languages can hide factors that might be crucial to explanation. Documentation, description, and typology are symbiotic: each can provide tools important to progress in the others.

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