

Linguistic categories, language description and linguistic typology

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Linguistic Field(s): Typology, descriptive linguistics, theoretical linguistics

Meeting Description:

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. Position papers summarising the views of some of the participants to the LINGTYP mailing list have been collected in a forthcoming issue of *Linguistic Typology*.

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.

Moreover, the opposition between ‘categorial universalism’ – the assumption of a set of universal cross-linguistic categories from which languages may pick – and ‘categorial particularism’ – the idea that there are no universally valid crosslinguistic categories, and that languages should be described in their own terms (Croft 2001, Haspelmath 2010) – does not necessarily overlap with the distinction between generative approaches and functional-typological approaches to language; actually, typologists themselves seem to be divided between these two opposed standpoints (compare Dixon 2010 and Haspelmath 2010). Even among ‘particularists’ there are important divergences of opinion as well: while usually they “agree that language description should be inductive and based on the facts of the language”, and that “there are no cross-linguistic categories”, not everybody agrees on the separation between language description and comparison – that is, that categories identified for individual languages should not be taken as the base for typological comparison (LaPolla 2016). Lastly, a compromise view between particularism and universalism has also been proposed (Moravcsik 2016).

After a fruitful preliminary meeting in Naples (SLE 2016), we decided to submit a proposal for a workshop for the next annual SLE meeting in Zürich. Many of the participants to the discussion in Naples already agreed to contribute a paper for a workshop-to-be in Zürich. We invite contributions on any topic related to linguistic categories, both in typological comparison and in language description, including (but not limited to):

a. **Language-specific categories, cross-linguistic categories and comparative concepts** (Haspelmath 2010). Are language-specific categories instantiations of comparative concepts, or are they just a good 'match', with no taxonomic relation implied (see Moravcsik 2016)? Do we use comparative concepts only for the purposes of typological comparison, or also in language description (including glossing; Haspelmath 2016)? How do we deal with the basic intuition that, say, an English adjective and 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 (see Croft 2001, Haspelmath 2012, Moravcsik 2016)?

b. **The definition of comparative concepts / cross-linguistic categories.** 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 some general consensus on what, say, 'noun', 'subject' or 'relative clause' mean (see e.g. Dixon & Aikhenvald 2004, Aikhenvald & Dixon 2005 on adjectives and serial verb constructions; LaPolla 2016)?

c. **Hybrid categories.** Is the above mentioned adjective an instance of a 'hybrid' category, defined both in terms of function and meaning ("[a]n adjective is a lexeme that denotes a descriptive property and that can be used to narrow the reference of a noun"; Haspelmath 2010: 670)? Are we supposed to combine semantic, functional *and* formal criteria to identify the constructions to be compared, or should we rely primarily on function (see Rijkhoff 2009, 2016)?

d. **The feasibility of large-scale typological comparison.** 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 (see LaPolla 2002, 2016)? 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? And, most importantly, how can we conduct research on large samples if we cannot rely on the 'traditional' category labels for comparison?

e. **Typology vs. language description.** 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 (Haspelmath 2010), or is it more fruitful to have typologically-informed language description?

Papers that deal with the use of categories in large-scale comparison, and with the relation between categories in the description of individual languages and in current linguistic theories are especially welcome.

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