Introducing Language Typology

Language typology identifies similarities and differences among languages of the world. This textbook provides an introduction to the subject which assumes minimal prior knowledge of linguistics. It offers the broadest coverage of any introductory book, including sections on historical change, language acquisition, and language processing. Students will become familiar with the subject by working through numerous examples of crosslinguistic generalizations and diversity in syntax, morphology, and phonology, as well as vocabulary, writing systems, and signed languages. Chapter outlines and summaries, key words, a glossary, and copious literature references help the reader understand and internalize what they have read, while activities at the end of each chapter reinforce key points.

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Note: Every chapter begins with an outline and a list of key terms and ends with a summary, activities, and a list of further reading.

Figures

Preface

The goal of this book is to offer a few glimpses into the vast research area of linguistic typology – the study of the similarities and differences among languages that hold across genetic, areal, and cultural boundaries. It is meant for students and a general audience with some prior exposure to linguistics, such as an introductory course, but not necessarily anything more. No knowledge of foreign languages is presupposed. The glossary in the back of the book explains terms specific to language-typological research and provides references that define general grammatical terms.

Here are four features of the presentation. First, the survey of language-typological research is intended to be broad in topical coverage. Beyond the basic components of grammar – phonology, morphology, and syntax – it also offers a chapter on lexical semantics and brief sections on writing systems and sign languages. In addition to synchronic data, crosslinguistic generalizations about historical development, language acquisition, and language use are also discussed.

Second, the approach is broad in another way as well. Instead of adopting a particular descriptive framework, data are presented in a pre-theoretical metalanguage that hugs the facts as much as possible. This feature should render the text relatively accessible to non-linguist readers.

Third, the pre-theoretical approach is also apparent in the selection of the crosslinguistic generalizations discussed. Hypotheses about language universals may be supported in three ways: by a set of crosslinguistic data, by a theory that predicts them, or by a combination of both. This book focuses on data-based, primarily inductive generalizations.

Fourth, a comprehensive survey of the literature on language typology is not attempted. The focus is mostly on analysis and documentation; the goal is to introduce the reader to the kind of argumentation used in crosslinguistic research and to show its close relationship to the modes of thinking employed in other sciences and in everyday life.

Here is a brief synopsis of the book.

Chapter 1 What is language typology illustrates differences and similarities among languages and presents the statement types that serve as tools to capture their similarities.

Chapter 2 The worlds of words is about similarities and differences in the meanings of words across languages, with a few comments on what this might mean for the way people actually see the world.

Chapter 3 Assembling words, **Chapter 4 Dissembling words, and Chapter 5 The sounds of languages** present crosslinguistic generalizations about syntax, morphology, and phonology, with a few remarks on writing systems and sign languages.

Chapter 6 Language in flux turns to the genesis of synchronic structure by presenting crosslinguistic generalizations about historical evolution, language acquisition, and language use.

Chapter 7 Explaining crosslinguistic preferences attempts historical, acquisitional, and usage-based explanations of synchronic crosslinguistic generalizations.

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Abbreviations

Most of the abbreviations used here are taken from the Leipzig Glossing Rules (www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/files/morpheme.html).

A	the agent noun phrase of a two-argument verb
ABS	absolutive case
ACC	accusative case
ASP	aspect
CAUS	causative
CL	class
CLF	classifier
CMP	comparative
DAT	dative case
DC	declarative clause marker
ERG	ergative case
FEM	feminine
GEN	genitive case
GER	gerund
IMPF	imperfective
INDOBJ	indirect object
INF	infinitive
L1	first language (a language already acquired)
L2	target language (a language to be acquired)
MRK	marker
MSC	masculine gender
NEU	neuter gender
NMLZ	nominalizer
NOM	nominative case
OBJ	object
OM	object marker
ORD	ordinal
P	the patient noun phrase of a two-argument verb
PART	partitive case
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
POSS	possessive marker
PREF	prefix
PRF	perfect
PRIV	privative
PRT	particle

PST	past tense
S	the single noun phrase of a one-argument verb
SBJ	subject
SING	singular
SUP	superlative
1S	first person singular
2S	second person singular
3S	third person singular
1P	first person plural
2P	second person plural
3P	third person plural
A & B	A immediately precedes B
-	boundary between stem and affix
=	boundary between word and clitic
#	boundary between words
[…]	phonetic transcription
/…/	phonemic transcription
′	stress
‘ ’	idiomatic translation
“ ”	literal translation