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Edited by Ricardo Mairal and Juana Gil
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Linguistic Universals

The discovery of “linguistic universals” – the properties that all languages have in common – is a fundamental goal of linguistic research. Linguists face the task of accounting for why languages, which apparently differ so greatly from one another on the surface, display striking similarities in their underlying structure. This volume brings together a team of leading experts to show how different linguistic theories have approached this challenge. Drawing on work from both formal and functional perspectives, it provides a comprehensive overview of the most notable work on linguistic universals – with chapters on syntax, semantics, phonology, morphology, and typology – and explores a range of central issues, such as the relationship between linguistic universals and the language faculty, and what linguistic universals can tell us about our biological make-up and cognitive abilities. Clear, succinct, and fully up-to-date, it will be invaluable to anyone seeking a greater understanding of the phenomenon that is human language.

RICARDO MAIRAL is Professor of English Language and Linguistics in the Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED).

JUANA GIL is Senior Lecturer in the Departamento de Lengua Española y Lingüística General, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED).

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RICARDO MAIRAL, Professor of English Language and Linguistics,
Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas, UNED, Madrid

JUANA GIL, Senior Lecturer in Linguistics, Departamento de Lengua
Española y Lingüística General, UNED, Madrid

KEES HENGVELD, Professor of Theoretical Linguistics, University of
Amsterdam

CEDRIC BOECKX, Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics, Harvard
University

IAN MADDIESON, Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of
California, Los Angeles

ANDREW SPENCER, Professor of Linguistics, University of Essex

BERNARD COMRIE, Professor, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary
Anthropology, Leipzig

ROBERT D. VAN VALIN, JR., Professor, Department of Linguistics,
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York

JOAN BYBEE, Professor of Linguistics, University of New Mexico

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Preface

Any mention of linguistic universals means the continuation of a journey begun many years ago, and refers to a topic of debate among both linguists and philosophers, which has been a constant in the history of linguistics throughout the ages.

The debate regarding universals is one of the most fundamental chapters – perhaps the most fundamental – in the history of grammar, and its genesis can be traced back to the very dawn of linguistic reflection. Furthermore, it is a subject that transcends boundaries between academic disciplines since it is one of the cornerstones of the philosophical debate between rationalism and empiricism. Consequently, it is of vital interest not only to linguists, but also to philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, psychobiologists, and ethnologists – in other words, to researchers of all academic disciplines that are involved in what is known today as *Cognitive Science*.

However, linguistic universals are currently in the limelight because any linguistic theory that aspires to explanatory adequacy must offer a satisfactory answer to the question of why languages that are so apparently different on the surface at the same time present undeniable regularities in their underlying structure. It is no longer a question of merely discussing the existence of universals, but rather of making their existence compatible with the epistemological premises of different theoretical approaches. This book is an explanation of how these approaches have dealt with this task.

Thus, the organization of the book is as follows: in chapter 1, we have endeavored to present concisely and selectively the major theoretical positions regarding universals, from the beginning of linguistic reflection up until modern times. Our purpose in providing such a panorama is to offer readers (even those without previous knowledge of linguistics) an overview of the multiple perspectives regarding this issue, which, in our opinion, will help to contextualize the research in this volume. Furthermore, one of the strong points of this chapter is that we maintain that an approximation between formal and functional approaches is not only possible, but crucial for a deeper comprehension of certain aspects of linguistic behavior; the fact that certain grammatical phenomena are motivated by factors derived from cognitive processing limitations in human

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beings does not necessarily mean that the explanation of *all* linguistic events need be set out in these terms, and, conversely, the fact that certain grammatical principles cannot be externally justified by cognitive or communicative factors should not lead to the rejection of such a possibility for *all* other principles. In essence, although this duality between formalism and functionalism still persists, now, more than ever, there is the necessity for formalist and functionalist theories to work together and offer an integrated explanation of the phenomenon of linguistic universals.

After this introductory chapter which is intended to serve as a backdrop for the rest of the book, chapters 2 and 3 offer very accurate and rigorous accounts of specific aspects that have guided research into linguistic universals from the viewpoint of formal and functional theories. Thus, Hengeveld, as a representative of the functional-typological paradigm, concentrates on the explanatory scope of implicational hierarchies for the analysis of language data. In contrast, Boeckx offers an illuminating account of the notion of universals within the different and successive versions of Generative Grammar from Chomsky's *Aspects* to the Minimalist Program.

As a general rationale, these two chapters clearly illustrate the following two apparently contradictory theses on the origin of universals. Whereas formalist theories link universals to specific characteristics of the human language faculty, functionalists tend to view them as a logical consequence of the fact that languages are ultimately devices for communication. These two rather different conceptions of universals are reflected in a series of differences stemming from the methods used and the more internal or external perspective adopted by each framework, something which the other chapters of this volume, which examine the question of universals from the perspective of a specific linguistic component (i.e., phonetics, morphology, syntax, lexis, and diachrony), are eloquent proof of.

In this regard, Bernard Comrie, in his chapter on relative clauses, shows how typologists attempt to establish a workable hypothesis regarding the geographical distribution of a phenomenon or linguistic structure; how this hypothesis is confirmed by studying a set of languages; and, above all, how this whole process contributes to a deeper understanding of this or that structure or phenomenon, and, subsequently, to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and strategies that make up the language faculty.

Accordingly, in the chapter on phonetic and phonological universals, Ian Maddieson, after pointing out four basic characteristics shared by all languages (orality, being sound-based, sequential variation, and paradigmatic contrast), argues that although the linguistic analysis of a wide range of languages can clearly provide the key to the specification of a series of universals, the interest of such shared characteristics and other similar factors will only be truly significant if it is used to lay the foundations for more ambitious and far-reaching ideas

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regarding the biological setting of language, as well as other human cognitive abilities. In other words, the issue of universals inevitably leads us to more ambitious research regarding the language faculty.

The specificity of this faculty is questioned by Joan Bybee in her chapter on the diachronic dimension of universals. In this chapter the author argues that the true universals are not synchronic patterns but rather the mechanisms of change which underlie those patterns and create them. What is even more meaningful from a theoretical perspective is that those mechanisms of change that function in language (e.g. the repetition of linguistic structures and their subsequent automatization) are much the same as those of other cognitive and neuromotor abilities. The author thus maintains a theoretical position that is clearly different from that defended in more orthodox formalism.

In contrast, Andrew Spencer is very skeptical about the existence of morphological universals, or, at least, about the possibility of formulating them with any degree of success at the present time. Spencer argues that, in a way, the specification of morphological universals would necessarily presuppose a prior universal characterization of the word as a unit whose structure has traditionally been the focus of study in morphology. Since there are no clear, generally valid principles that help us to distinguish words from non-words, it is virtually impossible to go beyond the establishment of certain apparently universal tendencies that Spencer analyzes in his chapter.

In the same way as in morphology, but in contrast to phonological and syntactic universals, very little attention has been paid to the study of semantic universals. Accordingly, Van Valin deals with this subject – more specifically, those referring to verb semantics. Based on the work of Vendler, Van Valin's work distinguishes a set of *Aktionsart* distinctions which are common to the verb systems of all languages, and which can be regarded as prime candidates for semantic universals. Furthermore, he develops a system of lexical representation for each of these distinctions and shows their interlinguistic validity by bringing evidence from a wide range of different languages.

All of the aforementioned contributions make this book primarily a monograph on linguistic universals. However, it is also about language as viewed from different perspectives by specialists of recognized prestige, who represent a wide range of theoretical positions, and different ways of understanding linguistics.

We would like to conclude this preface by thanking José María Brucart, Juan Uriagereka, and Robert Van Valin for their ongoing support and encouragement throughout the duration of this project.

RICARDO MAIRAL
 JUANA GIL

Abbreviations

ABIL	ability
ABS	absolute
ACC	accusative
ACT	active
ADJ	Adjective
AOR	aorist
ART	article
ASP	aspect
BENEF	benefactive
CERT	certainty
CMPV	completive
CN, CONN	connective
COLL	collective
CONNEG	connegative
CONT	continuous
COP	copular
DAT	dative
DEM	demonstrative
DM	diminutive
DU	dual
ERG	ergative
F/FEM	feminine
FOC	focus
FUT	future
GEN	genitive
GER	gerund
GG	Generative Grammar
IMM	immediate
IMPFV	imperfect/imperfective
INCH	inchoative
IND	indicative
INFER	inference

INSTR	instrumental
INTR	intransitive
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
IPV	imperfective
IRR	irrealis
ITER	iterative
LDP	left detached position
LGB	<i>Lectures on Government and Binding</i> (Chomsky, 1981)
LOC	locative
NEG	negative
NFUT	nonfuture
NM	Noun marker
NMZ	nominalizer
NOM	Nominative
NP	Noun Phrase
NSM	Natural Semantic Metalanguage
O	Object
OBL	oblique
OPT	optative
OT	Optimality Theory
P&P	Principles and Parameters
PASS	passive
PF	perfect/perfective
PL	plural
PLD	primary linguistic data
PNCT	punctual
POS	“Poverty-of-Stimulus” argument
POSS	possessive
PP	past participle
PrC	precore slot
PRED	predicate
PREP	Preposition
PRO	Pronoun
PROC	process
PTP	Prepositional Phrase
PRS.PRT	present participle
PST	past
PTCPL	participle
PURP	purposive
RDP	right detached position
RECIP	reciprocal
REDUP	reduplicative

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REFL	reflexive
REL	relative
REL.INS	instrumental relative
REL.NS	relative non-subject
REL.OBJ	object relative
REL.OBL	oblique relative
REL.SBJ	subject relative
REM.PAST	remote past
RES	result
RRG	Role and Reference Grammar
S	Subject
SG	singular
TAM	time, aspect, and modality
TOP	topic
TR	transitive
UG	Universal Grammar
V	Verb
VP	Verb Phrase