

Typology and formal theories

Workshop proposal for the 52nd Annual meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea, Leipzig, August 21–24 2019.

Workshop convenors:

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Our aim for this workshop is to bring together typologists with a theory-neutral background and linguists working in formal theories and who are at the same time interested in crosslinguistic variation and universal tendencies.

The discussion will center around the relation between typology and theory-driven linguistic research. The main question guiding the discussion will be: which aspects of formal linguistic theory are necessary, complementary, orthogonal or even misleading for typological research?

We ask for non-anonymous 300-word abstracts (.doc & .pdf) for inclusion into the workshop proposal to be submitted to the SLE organizers.

Please send your abstract to: mguzmann89@gmail.com

Deadline: November 4, 2018

Workshop description:

Typology is concerned with the grammatical phenomena and their variation across languages, universal tendencies, and areal patterns (e.g. Bickel 2007, Lazard 2005, Nichols 2007). While typology has traditionally been associated with a theory-neutral approach, several typologists have advocated that it nevertheless presupposes a “Basic Linguistic Theory” (e.g. Dixon 2010, Dryer 2006a,b), and is therefore not atheoretical. Nevertheless, most typological research does not assume particular formal theoretical views on how linguistic structures work, how grammatical information should be represented, whether constraints or rules as well as which syntactic, morphological, or phonological operations should be employed.

On the one hand, there are at least two main motivating factors behind the preference for theory neutral approaches in typology. First, explanations for the attested crosslinguistic patterns are viewed to lie outside of grammar (e.g. diachrony & language change, economy & frequency, iconicity, parsing & processing), which means that a grammatical theory needs to adequately describe any given language (what are languages like?), but it does not need to be explanatory itself (why are languages the way they are?) (Dryer 2006a). Second, formal theories are often seen as being incompatible with and insufficient for describing linguistic diversity (e.g. Haspelmath 2010b).

On the other hand, we find important theoretical work with a heavy typological component in a variety of different frameworks. Some examples include: Aissen (1999, 2003) in Optimality Theory (OT) which models grammatical relations and differential object marking; similarly,

Malchukov (2006) provides an OT analysis (and explanation) of nominalization patterns in the world's languages. From the Distributed Morphology (DM) perspective, Bobaljik (2012) establishes (and aims at explaining) universal patterns in comparative morphology. Cinque (1999), who proposes a universal syntactic structure within a cartographic, generative syntax based on large-scale crosslinguistic observations, or Baker (2015) which develops a morphosyntactic theory of case, couched in generative syntax and which is equally built on a large number of typologically diverse languages. Mycock (2015) provides a survey of constituent questions from an Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) perspective. Ackerman and Nikolaeva (2014) offer a typological overview of relative clauses from a constructionist and Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) perspective. Also based on large sample, Stiebels (2002) models the interaction between economy and expressivity in argument linking using Minimalist Morphology (MM) and Lexical Decomposition Grammar (LDG).

The formal theories in these examples aim at being typologically adequate, and in some cases even at explaining typological diversity. However, it is not clear whether the formal machinery has led to or has been fundamental to their typological generalizations, and not the other way around.

A considerable number of studies have argued against the universality of language-specific concepts; in other words, grammatical relations are viewed as language-specific (e.g. Croft 2001, Dryer 1997, Cristofaro 2009). Along these lines, Haspelmath (2007, 2010a, 2011, 2016, to appear) argues that the concepts of e.g. "subject" or "object" are not the same for any given pair of languages, and that we have to distinguish concepts used for typological comparison from the concepts used for language-specific descriptions. This, however, seems inconsistent with a view where a single theory could be successfully applied to many (or all) languages, given that theories make reference to language-specific criteria. However, a formal theory that uses more abstract, language-independent criteria to define grammatical concepts may as well provide comparative concepts that can be used for typology (cf. Newmeyer 2007).

One possible example of using a formal theory as the basis of comparative concepts is the CoreGram Project (Müller 2015). The approach taken here is to write formal (HPSG) grammars of typologically diverse languages, and to compare which principles and structures, if any, are common to all of them. It is still, however, too early to draw any definitive conclusions. In a sense, HPSG then becomes a framework for defining comparative concepts.

Despite such examples of works that crosscut between formal linguistic theory and typology, there is still a lot of disagreement and uncertainty regarding the nature of the relationship between typology and formal grammar (e.g. Cinque 2007, Dryer 2006a,b, Haspelmath 2010b, Newmeyer 2002, 2007, 2010, Nichols 2007).

Possible topics for papers in this workshop include, but are not limited to, the following ones:

- How can formal theoretical views help to develop or to guide typological studies?

- What are possible advantages or disadvantages of theory-neutral vs. theory-driven typology?
- When have formal theories misled typological research? What are potential dangers of theory-driven typological studies?
- Finding comparative concepts on which crosslinguistic studies can be based being a core issue in typology; can formal theories help in establishing more precise and fine-grained comparative concepts that allow us to adequately capture crosslinguistic variation and guarantee crosslinguistic applicability?

We invite both general contributions to these topics as well as case studies concerned with specific phenomena that help us to understand how linguistic theory and typology can interact, or that relate in some other way to the main questions of the workshop.

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