Linguistic Universals

EDITED BY
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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.

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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

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

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.

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Abbreviations

ABIL	ability
ABS	absolutive
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	*Lectures on Government and Binding* (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
PrP	Prepositional Phrase
PRS.PRT	present participle
PST	past
PTCPL	participle
PURP	purposive
RDP	right detached position
RECIP	reciprocal
REDUP	reduplicative

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

Contents

1 A first look at universals

Ricardo Mairal and Juana Gil

Grammatica una et eadem est secundum substantiam in omnibus linguis, licet accidentaliter varietur. Roger Bacon

1 The debate on language universals

1.1 Introduction

For the last several decades we have been living in what has been called, for better or for worse, the *postmodern era*, a cultural movement or climate of social sensitivity, which, in contrast to the traditional values of the rationalistic, globalizing version of Modernism inherited from the Enlightenment, defends ideological positions based on heterogeneity, dispersion, and difference. Over the past years, contingency and individuality have gradually taken precedence over permanence and universality. As Harvey (1989) so accurately states, the views that are presently most highly valued in the postmodern world are generally those that concede greater importance to particularism and fragmentation, focus on the individual nature and interest of the parts rather than the whole, and are ultimately conducive to the disarticulation or deconstruction of all human sociocultural and economic activities. In the same way that moral values and instruction are not thought to be universally applicable, many well-known scholars of this era, even in the realm of science – especially the social sciences (e.g. the work of Lyotard) and, to a lesser extent, physics and mathematics (in line with Spengler) – affirm that there are no general principles that can be objectively evaluated independently of the spatiotemporal context in which they were initially proposed.

Given the present state of affairs, all research on language universals (i.e. properties shared by all languages) may now seem almost paradoxical, to say the least, whereas it is hardly accidental that enthusiasm for the analysis

The authors would like to thank Ignacio Bosque, José María Brucart, Violeta Demonte and Carlos Piera for their useful suggestions regarding the first draft of this chapter, which were invaluable for the final version. Of course, any errors or oversights still remaining in the text are our responsibility. This chapter was translated into English by Pamela Faber of the University of Granada, Spain.

of linguistic variation in all of its manifestations has increased. Yet, the quest to discover what is invariable and what is shared still persists, as do the results of this quest, because, while certain scholars fervently defend individual truth, many others, who are just as prestigious in their respective fields, strive to find proof of universal reason in all areas of knowledge, including language.

As is well known, the dialectical tension between these two positions is not a recent state of affairs. For several centuries, particularly in the area of philosophy, the same questions have repeatedly surfaced in relation to the possible existence of universal entities: which properties, relations, functions, numbers, classes, etc., can be considered universal, and, supposing that universals actually do exist, what is the exact relation between these abstract universal entities and the "particular" entities that embody them.

The answers to these questions have laid the foundation for philosophical schools of thought throughout the ages: *realism*, in the early Middle Ages; *nominalism*, which dominated the latter part of the fifteenth century – with the sudden appearance of empiricism and positivism – and its variant, the *conceptualist* approach; and finally the *rationalist* revolution[1] in the seventeenth century, which provided an especially fertile context for the discussion of universals, which concerns us here.

To a great extent, the Renaissance was an individualistic and plural era, which fomented the meticulous description of events (and languages), rather than an explanation for them based on general underlying principles. However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the Scientific Revolution or the Enlightenment, the concept of universal *reason* first arose, according to which the general takes precedence over the particular, the abstract over the concrete, and the non-temporal over the historical (Pinillos, 1997, 76ff.). This historical period produced philosophers such as Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Condillac, Diderot, and Rousseau; linguists and pedagogues such as Bauzée, Comenius, and Wilkins; physicists such as Newton; as well as many other great scholars in all realms of knowledge, an exhaustive list of whom would be too numerous to cite in its entirety. To a greater or lesser extent, all of them influenced the linguistic ideas of the time,[2] which were centered on efforts to

[1] In the history of philosophy, the term *rationalist* is generally used as an antonym for *empiricist*, but especially from the nineteenth century on. In its widest sense, *rationalist* refers to any school of thought that is based on the use of reason to obtain knowledge. However, if we interpret the term in this way, it would be extremely difficult to differentiate rationalists like Descartes from empiricists like Locke, since the philosophies of both are based on reason. The divergence between the two is best understood if we consider *rationalist* from a different perspective, in other words, in terms of the treatment that each philosophical school gives to the origin of knowledge (see the discussion in Copleston, 1971, 26ff.).

[2] Bartlett (1987, 24ff.) makes a series of generalizations about the period stretching from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, which, for our purposes, can be summarized in the following three ideas: (1) in those centuries, grammatical and linguistic issues

create new artificial and universal languages,[3] and produced pioneering work in the comparison of languages[4] as well as the publication of philosophical grammars that were theoretical rather than descriptive, the most important of which was the *Grammaire générale et raisonnée de Port-Royal* by Claude Lancelot and Antoine Arnaud (Paris 1660). And in this *Grammaire*, which is *générale* in the sense of aiming to be valid for all languages, and based on the philosophy of Descartes,[5] the authors formulate a series of universal principles underlying language in general.

Cartesian philosophy opened the door to the serious discussion of universals. One of its basic premises was the defence of innateness, or the belief that if objects in the real world are knowable, which they evidently are, it is because of the existence of innate ideas or conceptual structures that have not reached us by way of our senses or imagination, and which are not generalizations made by induction, or are even in need of empirical confirmation. Rather they already *exist* in the mind and constitute an eminently human characteristic. If certain ideas are innate, they must then be shared by everyone, and can thus be regarded as universal. This leads to the conclusion that innate ideas are universal, and experiential data, which can be considered contingent, is deduced and interpreted on the basis of innate ideas.

had a decidedly epistemological dimension; (2) philosophers, rather than grammarians, were the ones who determined how grammatical questions should be theoretically and methodologically formulated; (3) the linguistic discussion shifted from the study of word meaning and word classes to the study of propositional meaning.

[3] Universal languages were proposed by the Czech pedagogue and linguist Comenius, the Scottish linguist Dalgarno, the English linguist Wilkins, and Leibniz himself (his *Characteristica universalis*) (see Koerner and Asher, 1995). These early efforts are noteworthy because they were the forerunners of the formal languages of the twentieth century. However, the truth is that the authors hoped not only to achieve a formal logical expression of states of affairs, but also to create "philosophical" languages, capable of accurately transmitting all of the knowledge derived from the real world. An extremely early and illustrious precedent can be found in the second half of the thirteenth century in Ramón Llull's *Ars magna* (see Slaughter, 1982; Eco, 1994, chs. 10–16; Frank, 1979, on Wilkins; Cram and Maat, 2001, on Dalgarno).

[4] Especially worthy of mention is the work of the German philosopher and philologist, Johann Gottfried von Herder, who published *Über den Ursprung der Sprache* [Essay on the Origin of Language] (1772) followed by *Stimmen der Völker* [Folksongs] (1798), a comparative ethnography on the oral cultural manifestations of different countries. Just as significant in this respect were the earlier studies carried out by Leibniz, which will be discussed in greater detail later on.

[5] Whether the *Grammaire générale et raisonnée de Port-Royal* is primarily a philosophical grammar has been a subject of considerable debate. Its initial purpose may have been pedagogical, although with the passing of the years other objectives have been attributed to it. Regarding the debate concerning Descartes' influence on this grammar, see R. Lakoff (1969) and Salmon (1969). For a more recent analysis, see Aarsleff (1982), particularly the chapter "The history of linguistics and Professor Chomsky," in which he harshly criticizes the vision of Cartesian philosophy offered by Chomsky. In his opinion, the rationalist grammar of the seventeenth century is not, as Chomsky would have it, a direct consequence of the philosophy of Descartes, but a continuation of the logical and grammatical tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. Chomsky's answer to this criticism can be read in Huybregts and van Riemsdijk (1982, 37–38); see Bracken (1983, ch. 7).

It is precisely this conception of the origin of knowledge that is the criterion which established an opposition (more conventional than real) between the two most prominent schools of pre-Kantian philosophy (see footnote 1): the dividing line between continental rationalism (e.g. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz) and British empiricism (e.g. Locke, Berkeley, Hume). In vivid contrast to rationalists, empiricists affirmed that all knowledge comes from perception, and thus cannot be derived from innate principles, but rather solely from experience. What is interesting for our purposes is that both schools have had an important impact on the contemporary discussion and consideration of the problem of universals.

Let us first focus our attention on the rationalists. It is well known that rationalism greatly influenced not only the general intellectual panorama of its era, but also the more recent generative model of linguistic analysis, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections. These conceptions were passed on to new generations of linguists through the writings of Descartes and his followers, and also thanks to the legacy of rationalist thinkers such as Leibniz, whose ideas on language and thought coincide to a great degree with those of Descartes, e.g. Cartesian *innate ideas* essentially correspond to Leibniz's eternal and necessary *truths of reason*, although part of the difference between *innate ideas* and *truths of reason* is evidenced in the fact that they have been used as the basis for different research perspectives on language universals.

In fact, in the strictly Cartesian concept of language, as Acero (1993, 15ff.) very clearly states, innate universal ideas are always accurate and valid, regardless of the data provided by experience and knowledge: "Whatever the real world may be like . . ., it has no effect on the fact that my ideas regarding objective reality are ideas and thus have a typically representational function. The access of understanding to ideas, to the content within them and to its operations with that content – what Descartes euphemistically calls 'self-knowledge' – does not depend on any connection with the real world. According to Descartes, even if such links were severed, representations would not be affected" (Acero, 1993, 16).[6] Strictly speaking, this Cartesian postulate is static in that it presupposes a predetermined, clearly delimited, and non-externally-modelable schema, to which human knowledge and experience must adapt.

On the other hand, according to Leibniz, truths or innate principles (e.g. principle of contradiction) and ideas or innate concepts (e.g. cause, unity, identity, etc.) are only those that can be derived from pure understanding and common sense, and therefore from the mind, never from the senses. This notwithstanding, experience may be necessary to enable us to know these innate ideas or truths: the mind has the power, faculty or *competence* to find within itself those ideas that are virtually innate, and which experience helps it to discover. As a

[6] Translated from the Spanish.

result, there is a dynamic, circular conception of the interrelation between mind and objective experience.

Moreover, Leibniz believes that human beings mentally configure what they apprehend through experience, and that this configuration is, to a certain extent, mediated by language and intimately related by it to the cognitive process of which it is a part. Since there is not one language but many, and all of them are the product of an innate human language faculty and of the diversity of human interactions with their surroundings, experiential data from the outside world will be mentally structured according to the dictates of each individual language.[7] This premise, which is at the same time both philosophical and anthropological, explains the interest shown by Leibniz in the study of different languages as a means of discovering features shared by all of them (Wierzbicka, 2001).[8] It is directly linked to the ideas of other great philosophers and linguists, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt,[9] Franz Boas, and Edward Sapir, who, despite accepting the possibility of the "universal unity of language" (above all, in the case of Humboldt), clearly opted for an anthropological approach based on the principle of linguistic relativity with its extreme corollaries regarding the subjectivity of speech and the social nature of languages.[10]

It thus becomes increasingly evident that even among the so-called "rationalists," there are important differences regarding the conception of innate universal ideas. On the one hand, we have a conception that can be described as more *intrinsic*, in the sense that such intellectual truths are considered to

[7] Leibniz considers language as a means of communication, as a cognitive instrument, given that the present state of language, namely the vocabulary that a generation finds, substantially determines one's knowledge (cf. Arens, 1969).

[8] Heinz Holz (1970, 162ff.) underlines this characteristic, which is not unrelated to the philosophy of Leibniz. This philosopher considered concrete, individual manifestations as a representation of what is universal, and for this reason studied specific languages, which he considered to be realizations or reflections of a general universal language (the still-visible trace of the language of Adam and Eve, according to other authors). Heinz affirms that Leibniz, by contrasting the greatest possible number of languages, made an important contribution to the development of comparative linguistics. For more information on this subject, see Aarsleff (1982) or De Mauro and Formigari (1990).

[9] Leibniz, as well as Humboldt, along with other scholars such as Adam Smith or August and Friedrich Schlegel, are often cited as pioneers in the study of typological linguistics, which had become a separate discipline from historical and comparative linguistics, which had acquired great popularity in the nineteenth century: "Humboldt carefully distinguishes typological affinity from any other sort of affinity – but especially from genetic relationships – and thereby lays the foundations for typological linguistics as an autonomous discipline within linguistics" (Di Cesare, 1990, 173).

[10] Lafont (1993, 51) writes: "In the continental interpretation of Humboldt, the universalist perspective underlying Humboldt's general conception of language is an unquestionable truth. The consideration of Humboldt as a representative of linguistic relativism is typical of the American tradition, in which he is considered to be a representative of the 'principle of linguistic relativity' or, what is the same, his writings are regarded as a European contribution to the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis" (translated from the Spanish). As Lafont goes on to affirm, Humboldt's stance was never as radical as the position later taken by the two American linguists.