Comparison and Universal Grammar

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I hope that this book, whatever its further merits may be, will be accepted as a tribute to those linguists who, far from the turmoil of theoretical debate, devote their lives to a minute description of the facts in what is called 'exotic' languages. Writing a book like this simply would not have been possible if these specialists had not been willing to share their knowledge with me. In the course of my investigation, I have also become deeply impressed by the profundity of the insights of older, often long-forgotten, descriptivist grammarians. Hanoteau (1896), Hoffmann (1903), Taylor (1921), Lafitte (1944) or Lukas (1953) are not exactly household names in current linguistics; but they have become my friends, and their work has an enduring value, to which this essay may bear testimony.

Abbreviations

In the glosses of the example sentences the following abbreviations have been used:

ABL	ablative case	EMPH	emphasis marker
ABSTR	abstract form	ERG	ergative case
ACC	accusative case	FEM	feminine gender
ADESS	adessive case	FUT	future tense
ADHORT	adhortative mood	GEN	genitive case
ADV	adverbial marker	GER	gerundial marker
AG	agentive case	GOAL	goal case
AOR	aorist tense	HAB	habitual aspect
ART	article	INAN	inanimate marker
ASS	assertive marker	IMP	imperative mood
CAUS	causative marker	IND	indicative mood
CLASS	classifier	INDEF	indefinite marker
COMPLET	completive aspect	INESS	inessive case
CONCESS	concessive mood	INF	infinitive
COND	conditional mood	LOC	locative case
CONJ	conjunctive mood	MASC	masculine gender
CONT	continuative aspect	MED	mediative case
CONV	converb	MOMENT	momentanous aspect
COP	copula	NARR	narrative mood
DAT	dative case	NEG	negative marker
DEM	demonstrative	NOM	nominative case
DEP	dependent mood	NONFUT	non-future tense
DET	determiner	NOUN	nominalization marker
DISJ	disjunctive mood	PASS	passive voice
DUAL	dual	PAST	past tense
DUR	durative aspect	PCP	participial marker
ELAT	elative case	PERF	perfect marker

1PL., 2PL, 3PL	1st, 2nd, 3rd person plural	SER. MARK	serial marker
		SUBJ	subject marker
POSS	Possessive	SUBJCT	subjunctive marker
PRES	Present tense	SUBORD	subordination marker
PROG	Progressive aspect	SUP	supplementary element
PRT	Particle (unspecified function)	TEMP	temporal mood
		TOP	topic marker
Q	question marker	TNS	tense marker
REFL	reflexive	TRANS	transitive marker
REL	relative marker	UNSPEC	marker of non-specificity
REM	remote past tense		
1SG, 2SG, 3SG	1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular	VN	verbal noun

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Part Three: Towards an Explanation of Comparative-type Choice

Part One

A Cross-linguistic Typology of Comparatives

1

Introduction

1.1 General background

The present essay must be placed within the framework of Typological Universal Grammar, a trend in linguistic investigation which is relatively young, but which constantly increased in importance throughout the seventies. Taking the pioneering research on word-order by Greenberg (1963, 1966) as a starting point, universalist authors have begun to tackle a variety of topics, such as coordinate ellipsis (Sanders, 1976; Harries, 1978), relative-clause formation (Keenan and Comrie, 1977, 1979; Downing, 1978; C. Lehmann, 1984), reflexivity (Faltz, 1977), causative formation (Comrie, 1975, Shibatani, 1975), the expression of grammatical functions and the phenomenon of ergativity (Keenan, 1976a, 1976b; Schachter, 1977; Comrie, 1978a; Plank, 1979; Hopper and Thompson, 1982), verbal aspect (Comrie, 1976) and word-order variation (W. Lehmann, 1973; Vennemann, 1974; Steele, 1978; Hawkins, 1979, 1980, 1984); in all these cases, new discoveries and illuminating insights into the nature of human language have been brought to light. The history of this new universalist trend has been documented in Ferguson (1978). Basic principles of the approach, and discussions of the results in some of the better-known areas of universalist research, can be found in the textbooks by Comrie (1981) and Mallinson and Blake (1981).

As I see it, the goals of Typological Universal Grammar do not differ essentially from those of other forms of linguistic inquiry. Universal Grammar, too, tries to contribute to a solution of the problem of how to define the notion 'human language' in terms of a set of restrictive principles; that is, like any other approach in theoretical linguistics, Universal Grammar is in search of the essential features of the rule system (or rule systems) known as 'natural human language'. The differences between Universal Grammar and other schools within the field of

theoretical linguistics are, in my opinion, mainly a matter of method and perspective. I think it is safe to say that most of the recent research in theoretical linguistics (e.g., the research conducted within the framework of the Extended Standard Theory; see Chomsky, 1981) has tried to arrive at the underlying basic principles of human language by means of an in-depth investigation of a very small set of languages; usually, English is the sole language which is taken into consideration. While universalist authors do not deny the validity of this type of 'narrow' approach, they nevertheless feel that a broadening of the scope of linguistic investigation is in order; therefore, Universal Grammar bases its inquiries on data from an extensive sample of (preferably unrelated) languages. It is expected that, by a comparison of the structural properties of a large variety of languages, new generalizations as to the nature of human language may come to be formulated. These generalizations may then be used as a supplement (or, as the case may be, as an evaluation measure) of the regularities which have been discovered in the study of single instances of natural language.

It will be obvious that the broad, survey-type perspective adopted by Typological Universal Grammar calls for a specific type of methodology, which differs from established linguistic practice in a significant number of respects. Therefore, the remaining part of this chapter will be devoted to an exposition of the way in which a universalist linguistic investigation is conducted, and a discussion of a number of methodological problems which may be raised in connection with this type of research. Throughout this chapter, it should be kept in mind that universalist methodology is still in its infancy, and that therefore no hard-and-fast rules of proper conduct can be prescribed. However, notwithstanding this rather early stage of development, there are a number of issues which must be clarified before any universalist research project can be undertaken; and the least that can be asked of any universalist grammarian is that he state explicitly what solutions he has adopted towards these preliminary methodological questions.

1.2   Stages in a universalist research project

From a methodological point of view, the conduct of a universalist research project can be split up in a number of successive stages. As a first step, one must establish a *language sample*, which forms the empirical basis of the research project at issue. The choice of an adequate language sample for a given descriptive purpose is not without its problems; I will say more about this point in section 1.3.1. For the moment, however, I

will assume that we can succeed in setting up a language sample which meets at least some general requirements of representativity.

Once a more or less adequate language sample has been assembled, one arrives at the stage of *typology*. At this stage, the languages in the sample are investigated for one or several structural features, which form the *parameter* of the typology, and which must have been defined beforehand in a language-independent fashion (see section 1.3.2). When this basic feature has been attested and documented in all of the languages in the sample, a number of different situations may arise. On the one hand, it may turn out that none of the languages under investigation has the features for which the survey was undertaken. In that case (given that the sample which is used has some degree of representativity), one may formulate one's findings in a statement of the following general form:

No human language exhibits feature/property X.

Statements of this form are known in the literature as *absolute negative universals of language.*

The opposite situation may also be encountered. That is, it is also possible that all languages in the sample exhibit the feature upon which the typological survey was based. In such a case, the results of the investigation may be summarized in a statement of the following general form, a so-called *absolute positive universal of language*:

All human languages exhibit feature/property X.

It will be obvious that absolute universals, whether they be positive or negative, tell us something about the restrictions on the notion 'possible human language' in a very straightforward way; they formulate conditions which any rule system must meet if it is to be called a natural language, and as such they can be viewed as the ultimate and optimal research result for any form of linguistic inquiry. Recently advanced instances of absolute universals include, among others, the island constraints established by Ross (1967), the Subjacency Condition proposed by Chomsky (1973), and the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy put forward by Keenan and Comrie (1977). All of these are abstract principles which are meant to constrain the structural possibilities of natural language systems in a non-trivial way.

Absolute universals, however, are not the only kind of results to be produced by universalist inquiries, nor are they necessarily the most interesting ones. When searching for absolute universals, one deliberately abstracts from the highly characteristic and significant phenomenon of *variation* among languages, and it is, more often than not, this variation

which is particularly revealing as to the restrictions that are imposed on natural language systems. It is for this reason that, at least up to now, some of the more exciting results of universalist research have come from cases in which a 'real' typology could be established, that is, cases in which the parameter X had been defined in such a way that the following descriptive result could be obtained:

Feature/property X is exhibited by natural languages in n different ways.

In cases where such a situation holds, the linguistic manifestations of the parameter X across languages can be *classified* into a number of different *types*; these types represent the possible *options* which languages may select in the formal expression (or *encoding*) of the parameter X. Related to the classification of (construction) types, the *languages* in the sample can also be classified into a number of *categories*, on the basis of difference and similarity in the ways in which various groups of languages select their options for the encoding of the parameter X. In short, a cross-linguistic typology consists of two related categorizations, viz. the typology of a certain construction type and the classification of the sampled languages in relation to the types attested in the typology of the parameter.

Typologies, in the sense defined above, are interesting for a number of linguistic and non-linguistic reasons. Their main linguistic importance lies in the fact that such typologies can be used as data for a further exploration into the *non-randomness of linguistic encoding*. That natural languages show variation in their encoding properties is an irrefutable empirical fact; but it is a basic assumption in all universalist work that languages do not vary in unpredictable ways and that, therefore, typological variation can be subject to explanation. Of course, this point of view is a matter of faith; it cannot be refuted by single counter-examples, and it will be abandoned only if the research which is based on it does not yield sufficient results. In other words, the assumption that typological variation among languages is non-random belongs to the core of the research programme[1] of Universal Grammar, and is therefore immune to direct falsification.

If we accept the basic premise that linguistic encoding across languages is (at least in principle) non-random, we may conclude (following Sanders, 1976: 15) that the major function of typologies is 'to serve as the raw materials for explanation, the most refined and manageable raw materials that are available concerning the nature of the objects they typologize'. Thus, typologies are adequate to the extent that they 'generate significant questions that are clear, explicit and likely to be

productively answerable' (Sanders, ibid.). Now, given that our data-sampling results in a typology in which the languages in the sample are classified into a number of different categories, the explanatory questions that can be asked are at least of the following two distinct types.

The first explanatory question with regard to a typology concerns the question of *the occurrence of attested and non-attested categories*. When a typology has been established, it will generally be the case that it is not immediately clear why that typology contains just these attested types, instead of other, non-attested but also imaginable, alternatives. Thus, it is perfectly justifiable to ask the question: 'Why is the typology as a whole the way it is' (Sanders, 1976: 15). Clearly, a principled answer to this question will lead to a further understanding of the restrictions which delineate the concept of 'possible human language'.

The second, and related explanatory question concerns *the attested distribution of languages over the types in the typology*; that is, it is a question about the explanation of type-membership. One might phrase this question in the following form: why should it be that certain languages in the sample are members of category X, and not of category Y? In other words, typological analysis assumes that the grouping of languages in the typology reflects a division into *natural classes*, and attempts to formulate a basis for the explanation of this naturalness.

In summary, then, we may say that Typological Universal Grammar will try to discover a set of statements which predict attested and non-attested types, and which can account for the attested distribution of languages over these typological variants.

Among the strategies which are employed in Universal Grammar to solve the explanatory problems posed by a multi-categorial typology, a natural and widely used strategy involves the identification of a determining 'outside' factor, that is 'some additional common distinguishing property or set of properties of all members of a given type' (Sanders, 1976: 15). In practice, this strategy leads to the formation of· a second typology, which is based on a new parameter; this additional typology should be set up in such a way that its categorizations provide a match for the distinctions which were attested in the original typology. If such a new parameter (or set of parameters) can be identified, it should be possible to formulate so-called *implicational universals of language*, which have the following general form:

> If a language belongs to category X in typology A, it belongs to category Y in typology B.

In statements of this form, one of the properties mentioned refers to the 'outside factor' or 'determinant', which is used as the basis for the

prediction of the other typological property; this latter property commonly refers to the category in the original typology to which the language in question belongs. In this way, various typologically relevant structural properties of languages can be brought together in a cluster of implicational relations.

It should be pointed out immediately that implicational universals cannot, in themselves, count as an *explanation* of the attested facts in the first typology. As they stand, universals of this kind merely state a *correlation* between two different typological options for a given category of natural languages. In other words, such universals are the expression of a *descriptive* research result of typological linguistic analysis. Now, it goes without saying that the statement of this kind of research result is certainly a valuable contribution to the progress of linguistic theory, and one of the most urgent tasks of Universal Grammar is to state such clusters of properties as precisely as possible, and for as many properties as is feasible. However, it will also be clear that, if such implicational statements are to transcend the level of pure description, some further requirements should be imposed on them, in order to ensure their status as an *explanatory framework*.

The concept of explanation is far from clear in linguistics in general, and even less so in a relatively young field such as Universal Grammar. As I see it, linguists commonly employ a more or less intuitive notion of explanation; they would say that a certain analysis explains a body of facts if that analysis leads to a deeper and hitherto unformulated insight, which establishes regularity in a seemingly irregular phenomenon. Thus, explanation presupposes the demonstration of a non-randomness, or regularity, in the data, by means of principles which are, in some intuitive sense, viewed as the causal factor of that regularity. Now, if we apply this intuitive notion of explanation to the version of Universal Grammar which is adopted in this study, we can single out at least three conditions which the second typology in (a set of) implicational universals must meet if it is to be rated as the *explanans* of the first typology, the *explanandum*.

The first condition on explanatory typologies which I would like to advance is the following. In order for a typology A to count as an explanation of a correlated typology B, it should be the case that the categories in typology A *exhaust* the theoretically possible variations in the expression of the linguistic parameter upon which it is based. That is, if A is to count as an explanation of B, it should be the case that the categories of which A consists can, in some explicit way, be shown to cover all the possible categories for this typology. (An example of a typology which is exhaustive in this sense would be a typology in which

languages are classified on the basis of whether or not they have the possibility of Equi-NP-Deletion.[2] Given this particular parameter, it will be clear that such a typology will maximally consist of only two categories, one containing the languages which do have Equi-NP-Deletion, and another which contains the languages without Equi-NP-Deletion. Thus, a two-category typology is exhaustive of the theoretical possibilities of variation for this particular parameter.) I take it to be a defensible conclusion that, if a certain typology B is correlated with a typology A which is exhaustive in this sense, we can say that typology A *explains* typology B. In such a situation, the attested occurrence of types in B is no longer a matter of chance; it can now be shown to be non-random, by virtue of the fact that these types in B are in correlation with a typology which contains all possible variations of its parameter, and is therefore by definition non-random.

Apart from this notion of exhaustiveness, there is a second condition which, if met, will increase the credibility of a certain typology as an explanans for another typology. This condition has to do not so much with the explanans-typology itself, but rather with the kind of correlation which exists between the two typologies at issue. I think it is justifiable to say that a typology A will stand a better chance of being accepted as the explanation of a correlated typology B if *the match between the categories in the two typologies is optimal*. That is, it should not be the case that only some categories in A can be correlated to categories in B, while other categories in A do not have their match in B; conversely, one may require that all, and not just some, categories in B have their counterpart in some category (or categories) in A. If such an optimal match between the two typologies can be demonstrated, we are in a position to say that the facts in the explanandum-typology B are *fully and exhaustively predictable* from the facts in A. In other words, in such a situation there is a sense in which we can say that typology B is the way it is *because* typology A is the way it is, and this formulation corresponds largely to the intuitive notion of explanation outlined above.

The two conditions on explanatory adequacy discussed so far can both be regarded as *formal requirements on explanans-typologies*; they involve properties of typologies which are independent of the actual parameters on which these typologies are based. In addition, there is also a *conceptual factor* which determines the explanatory value of additional typologies. In order for a typology A to count as the explanation of a typology B, one will generally require that the parameter of A represent some 'deeper-lying', 'more elementary' or 'more fundamental' linguistic property than the parameter upon which typology B is based. Of course, the notion of 'degree of fundamentality' which is involved here is very

hard to operationalize; moreover, any claim as to the 'fundamentality' of one linguistic feature over another is bound to meet with controversy, since such a claim will inevitably be tied up with a priori ideas about the aims and methods of linguistics in general. Nevertheless, there are at least some areas of linguistic theory where the fundamentality of certain concepts over others has been explicitly advocated. To be specific, grammarians of the so-called 'localist' school have claimed that various types of constructions in natural languages (such as possessive constructions, existentials, aspectual expressions and types of case marking) can be shown to be derived from the expression of *spatio-temporal relations*. Accordingly, this latter type of relations may be advanced as a candidate for the status of 'fundamental linguistic feature'.[3] As will become clear in the following chapters, my own approach to the explanation of the implicational universals which I will propose can be said to be sympathetic to the localist viewpoint. It must be understood, however, that I do not necessarily adhere to all the opinions and analyses that have been put forward by authors who work within a localist framework.

Needless to say, the above three conditions are not intended to provide a full and explicit account of the concept of explanation in Typological Universal Grammar. They are meant as a first approximation, which should give us at least some foothold in deciding upon the explanatory value of implicational universals. If one or more of these conditions are met by an additional typology, I think we have some extent of justification for the claim that this second typology is more than just a correlate of the first; it can now be viewed as the *determinant* of that first typology, that is, as a deeper-lying causal principle by which the non-randomness of variation in the original typology can be predicted and explained.

Naturally, implicational universals of the kind discussed above cannot be the last word on the subject of human language, even if some degree of explanatory validity can be attached to them. As is the case in any worthwhile form of scientific investigation, the statement of regularities of the kind that are laid down in implicational universals gives rise to further problems of explanation. Clearly, in pursuing these problems one will inevitably reach a point where the investigation must transcend the boundaries of linguistics proper; the ultimate explanation of linguistic universals, if it can ever be reached at all, will have to be found by a combination of efforts from various scientific branches, such as linguistics, psychology, neurology, biology and perhaps even physics. Therefore, to require of Universal Grammar that it have a definitive explanation for all the regularities it discovers would be too much to ask. What can be asked, though, is that Universal Grammar make a thorough and exact inventory of these regularities, and that it play an active role in the