Language universals

We must divide our discussion into two sections. In section one, we will discuss about what human languages have in common, and then will talk about various kinds of **language universals**.

In the second section, we will talk about the ways in which languages differ from each other and how they differ in a surprisingly systematic manner.

Meaning, we can predict these differences very well despite the fact they are not the core domain of research in language universals.

If you recall, we did talk about the system of language in terms of '….it is but natural for the languages to display the differences. Thus, it is natural that languages in different parts of the world are extremely different'.

But what makes these languages displaying similarities is something that we want to analyze!

For example, when we compare the structure of **Japanese** and **Arabic** and then we compare them to **Fula** (spoken in west and central Africa), the similarities are not immediately striking as the differences are very natural to notice which show up from the languages across the globe.

So, let us start comparing the structures of three languages we have just mentioned in the earlier slide and then discuss the points that can interest us in the long run!

(1) *'The servant gave the horse water' in Japanese, Arabic, and Fula*

(1a) Japanese:	*Shiyooni*	*ga*	*uma*	*ni*	*mizu wo* *ageta*
	servant	NOM	horse	DAT	water ACC gave
(1b) Arabic:	*ʿaʿṭ̣ā*	*l-kh ādimu*	*l-ḥ̣iṣāna*		*mā ʿan*
	gave	the-servant-NOM	the-horse-DAT		water-ACC
(1c) Fula:	*Suka*	*hokkii*	*puccu*	*ndiyam.*	
	servant	gave	horse	water	

The differences amongst these three languages are minimally based on the following facts;

Pronunciation i.e. velarized consonants **t̩** and **s̩**

Word order : SOV, VSO, SVO

Markers : subject and direct and indirect objects

The similarities

In spite of the differences, these languages still have a lot in common- **one may even claim that the similarities are more striking than the differences**.

For example, the **central components of the event i.e. an action of giving with three "participants**": the servant, the horse, and the water.

In all three languages, the **action of giving is denoted by a verb.**

Moreover, the other participants such as the servant, the horse and the water are **denoted by nouns**.

These four components of the event are assembled into a sentence by putting them into the notions of a subject ('servant'), two objects ('horse', 'water'), and a verb ('give').

Most or all languages in the world share these and many other formal and notional features.

Thus, in typology, we can discuss about the features which human languages have in common, and are known as **language universals**.

Types of language universals

Formal and Substantive Universals

Formal universals are statements on form of rules of grammar. For example, the verb must be conjugated with the subject or the object is a rule of grammar for many languages.

Although it is important to distinguish amongst necessary, possible and impossible properties of rules of grammar in human language, but rules are always there in the grammars and they constitute universals.

We might make a formal claim that no language can have a **formal rule that operates by giving a left-right inversion of a string of arbitrary length** for interrogative sentences.

There has to be some systematic rules and they must be followed to get the interrogatives in many languages.

The above mentioned rule means that no language could form a question sentence just by inverting the word order of the sentence and has no rule(s) for it.

There are 'aux inversion-rule' in English and it is complemented with 'Affix-hopping', but it is not simply an inversion of a string of arbitrary length.

When we accept such grammatical rules as the legitimate rules to be followed for the structure of any language, ***this kind of formalization of universal will be called formal one***.

Substantive universals: the substantive universals are those **categories of human language** out of which universals in languages are posited (read Comrie 1981 LU).

For example, in syntax they might include such categories as noun, verb, noun phrase, verb phrase subject, direct object and indirect object etc.

In phonology, a clear example of substantive universals would be the distinctive features of Jakobsonian phonology, such as +/- Vocalic, +/- Consonantal, +/- Nasal and +/-Continuent etc.

In morphology, the kind of morphemes and the quantity of morpheme that are used in different languages would decide the 'type of languages'.

We have seen how languages of the world are classified into types and can be grouped together universally on the basis of their choice of 'kind and quantity of morphemes'.

In a very simple term, the substantive universal is the identification of a feature/category of human language that can be found/substantiated in different languages and thus form the groups of languages.

Absolute universals

Absolute universals: An absolute universal holds true for all the languages. The following examples are worth explaining here:

a. All languages have consonants and vowels.
b. All languages make a distinction between nouns and verbs.
c. All languages have ways to form question sentences.

Absolute universals are assumed to be true for all languages at all times, even for the languages for which no written record is available.

Even for those languages that have become extinct without leaving any document.

The last point is just a claim, it may be challenged and thus it may not be true in all the cases!!

It is often difficult to ascertain what constitutes absolute universals, especially because we do not have access to reliable information about all languages in the world.

- For instance, while it is very likely that all languages of the world make a distinction between vowels and consonants, we can't a priori rule out the possibility of a language with only vowels or only consonants.
- The way in which Arabic makes the distinction between a consonant sound and a vowel sound is very different from the rest of the languages of the world.
- Meaning, the Arabic speakers don’t differentiate the vowels as the inventories of sound, but they rather learn them as the derivational makers.
- Also, in a majority of languages, the subject usually precedes the object, but there are also languages where this does not hold true, and there are languages in which even the distinction between subject and object does not apply.
- So, the grounds on which ‘absolute universals’ are accounted for have not been explained in any categorical way.
- We seem to accept absolute universal on the face value!

Non-absolute or tendencies

Non-absolute universals: This kind of universal accepts exceptions.

They are properties of languages that usually hold true. Despite the fact that these properties do not reflect something that are essential for all human languages, they represent significant tendencies.

But when we mark one of the features of human language as a non-absolute universal, we must keep in mind that **the more exception we come across, the less is the tendencies of a feature**. For example:

a. Most languages have the vowel [i] as in the English word *feet*
b. Most languages have adjectives.
c. Many languages usually employ rising intonation to signal an interrogative sentence

All these statements have a high degree of probability, but they obviously do not apply to all the languages and the degree also varies for different non-absolute universals.

Implicational VS non-implicational

There are some properties of human language which might not need reference of any other property for their existence.

For example, the statement that all languages have ORAL VOWELS makes no reference to any other items that must or must not be present in languages.

The statement mentioned above and the universals that it implies will be called **non-implicational**.

However, there are statements regarding the properties of human language which will require the presence of some other property in that language.

This kind of universal is called **implicational universal**.

For example: if a language has VSO as basic word order, then it has prepositions.

In this universal, two properties are involved: the presence or absence of VSO, and the presence or absence of preposition.

If we combine these properties, we get four possibilities for this universal: e.g.

Let us symbolize the presence of VSO = X (thus the absence of VSO will be *not X)*

And the presence of preposition = Y (the absence of preposition is *not Y*)

The four possibilities:

A. X ---- Y

B. X ---- not Y

C. Not X --- Y

D. Not X---- not Y

Welsh is a language that has VSO word-order and it also has preposition and thus Welsh exemplifies the A.

We know that **English** does not have VSO word-order, but it has preposition and thus English will justify the C type.

We also know that **Japanese** with no VSO word-order and no preposition will prove the D type.

However, type B is not attested by any language where there is VSO but no preposition.

We, however, have to be little alert in terms of framing the implicational universals.

It is assumed that we can easily implicate the presence/absence of a smaller category of human language by the presence/absence of any bigger category.

However, the vice-versa leads to a difficult situation. For example:

If a language has nasalized vowels, then it also has oral vowels.

Let us see the possibilities as we attempted earlier:

The four possibilities:

A. X ---- Y = ok

B. X ---- not Y =??????

C. Not X --- Y =ok

D. Not X---- not Y =??????

There are two problems that we encounter when we make the implication of the features of human language like above.

The type of language typified by (B) is difficult to hypothesize. The D is just too bad as to how can we have a language with no vowel at all???).

- Another example of implicational universal would be something like;
- if a language has voiced fricatives like [v] and [z] (property A), it would also have devoiced fricatives like [f] and [s] (property B).
- The implicational universal is unilateral, and the bilateral reading of the universal is not needed, as
- The reverse is not true, since many languages have devoiced fricatives, but not voiced fricatives.
- For an implicational universal to make sense, there must also exist languages that have neither property A nor property B.
- This might sound complex/difficult to perceive, but we can help ourselves to understand what it means;
- Now let us combine Absolute VS non-absolute with implicational VS non-implicational universals for a four way distinction.

Complex Universals

A. Absolute implicational universals: such as if a language has SOV as the basic word order, it will have postpositions.

Most of the Indian languages except Khasi can be exemplified by this complex universal.

B. Absolute non-implicational universals: such as all languages have vowels.

C. Implicational non-absolute universals (tendencies): such as if a language has SOV, it will have postpositions.

Though this implicational universal seems to be absolute in terms of languages from India, however, if we consider Persian, we will say the following;

Persian has SOV as the dominant and default word-order and it has postposition, however, it also has prepositions.
And thus, considering the fact that Persian has preposition as well, it will exemplify the 'implicational non-absolute universal'.

D. Non-implicational and non-absolute universals: This kind of universal would say that '…nearly all languages have nasal consonants, but there has to be some exceptions to this in order to make it non-absolute'.

There are languages spoken in the Pacific Northwest in North America and they are called Salishan.

Well, we know that Salishan languages have no nasal consonants.

That's all for today ☺