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There are three important types of universals:

(1) Absolute universals, e.g.

All languages have vowels.

All languages have consonants.

All languages have nouns.

All languages have verbs.

(2) Near-universals or tendencies, e.g.

Nearly all languages have at least one nasal consonant.

Nearly all languages have at least one voiceless stop.

Nearly all languages have some form of subordinate clause.

These are, in some instances at least, very important facts, but because they are not absolute, they can be something of an embarrassment, in the sense that it is difficult to explain on the one hand, why these are so common, and on the other, why they are absent from a few languages.

(3) Implicational universals; the presence of one feature implies the presence of another, e.g.

If a language has [p’] it also has [t’].

If a language has nasal vowels, it also has oral vowels.

We can also have implicational universals that are tendencies, though I haven’t listed this as a separate type. For example,

If a language has OV word order, it is statistically very likely that it also has postpositions.

The **goal** of typology (and universals), in my view, is simply to learn more about the nature of language, in particular, more about the ways in which all languages are the same and the ways in which languages can vary. This is also the goal of this course. This does not imply that this is the only way, or even the best way, to learn about the nature of language, but it is one way.

Although I am using a number of facts about phonetic inventories today, the course will go into depth only on the subject of morphological and syntactic typology and universals.

The database for the study of typology and universals is, in principle, the languages of the world. Therefore, the student needs to know something about these families. There is an introductory list on pages xx-xxiii of the textbook. Each student should go over this list now and during the course try to familiarize himself with a number of languages, learning also their geographical situation and family affiliation. We need to discuss in detail the groups listed here, since they do not all have the same status

Sources that cover a large number of languages:

Comrie, Matthews, and Polinsky, *The Atlas of Languages*, 1996. [This is a very attractive book, and it provides information on family affiliation, geographical location, and some typological features of a number of languages from all parts of the world, but it is somewhat superficial and does not give detail on individual languages.]

Lyovin, *An Introduction to the Languages of the World*, 1997. [This is less attractive but provides much more .information on specific languages.]

Grimes, *Ethnologue,* various editions. [This provides accurate, nearly exhaustive information on thousands of languages, but lists only language names, dialects, genetic affiliation, number of speakers, and location.] [Main Library Reference PB32.L27 1988 ‑ No Loan ] http://www.ethnologue.com

Comrie, Bernard, ed. 1987. *The world’s major languages.* NYC: Oxford. [Main Library Reference P371.W6 1987 ‑ No Loan ]

Do **not** consult Ruhlen 1987, which is mentioned in your book; it is not reliable.

There are numerous handbooks on specific families, subgroups of a family, or regions; these often provide a lot of information in a compact space.

The terms *phylum/phyla* and *family.*

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Notes

Let us return to the example of a typology according to whether a language has ejectives or not, and another typology according to whether it uses finite relative clauses or participles. I said that it is highly unlikely that there is any correlation between the two. But let us examine the hypothetical case that there were a correlation. If we could predict that a language lacked finite clauses on the basis of its possessing ejectives, we would have a **whole-language typology**, that is a typology that would involve the whole language, in this case specifically the phonetic inventory and the syntax. (Whaley calls this a **holistic** typology.) In the 19th century, it was widely believed that one could indeed establish whole-language typologies, and for most the starting point was the agglutinating-inflectional-isolating distinction. [Handout] That is, it was believed that other facts about phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax followed from this classification. It is now known that this is not true, and that linguists of that era had that impression because their experience of languages was too narrow. For example, if one takes a superficial look at languages of Asia, one might get the impression that isolating languages are also tone languages. Even in Asia, however, this turns out not to be true on closer inspection.

It is often possible to relate one characteristic to another, if both are of the same type. For example, if a language uses N - A order, it is also most likely to use N - G order.

Linguists recognize now that in order to be accurate, they must classify constructions or some other single domain in a language, not whole languages. As we will see, many are not very careful about this when it comes to ergativity.

In a related way, it has been learned that some characteristics are not discrete. For example, even in a single construction a language, a language may not be consistent. For example, the paradigm of the Georgian verb below, shows some agglutinative characteristics and some inflectional ones.

Singular Plural

1st v-c’er v-c’er-t ‘write’

2nd c’er c’er-t

3rd c’er-s c’er-en

Thus, in this language, even if we are careful to limit our attention to person-number agreement, we still find that it does not fit neatly into the agglutinating basket or neatly into the inflecting.

**Methods**

***Database***

To research typology and universals, ideally we would compare some characteristic, say morphological type, in all languages of the world. This is not possible for a number of reasons. First, many, many languages have never been described at all. For many others the description is only of the most meager sort. For a linguist to do a moderately complete description from scratch requires many years of work, often a lifetime. Realistically, then, it is not possible for a study to include original research on each language in the world. Linguists therefore use **samples**, that is selections of languages.

It might seem that it would be a simple thing to assemble one speaker from each of the languages in the sample and ask the one or two questions that would elicit the information needed. For example, if one is researching the correlation mentioned above between N -A order and N - G order, why can’t one linguist simply ask 100 speakers, in your language how do you say ‘blue sky’ and ‘Jane’s book’? In some languages, a single example will get results that are atypical; e.g. French adjectives. And in language it is the very common examples that are most likely to be exceptions. In a language there could be a difference between alienable and inalienable possession. These facts show two things: 1. In order to do typological research accurately, **one needs to understand the grammar of the whole language**, not to simply translate a single example. 2. One must make **hard decisions about what “counts”**. What decision would you make about French? About the hypothetical language with a difference in WO between alienable and inalienable? Are you happy about that?

Given the necessity of sampling and the need to know something broadly about the languages in the sample, it is inevitable that typological studies rely for the most part on published grammars written by a variety of linguists. Yet if the descriptions are done by different linguists, different criteria will be used, resulting in inconsistent analyses. **Consistency** in the sources used is a major problem in typological research. For example, you decided to count the order of alienable/inalienable possessors and to ignore the other, but a different researcher might make the opposite decision, and you might end up with inconsistent statements about languages that actually have the same characteristic.

Sampling techniques are a major issue in typological research. It is clear that the **size of the sample** is of major importance. Why would that be? It is also clear that we need to **avoid many languages from a single family.** Why? In addition, we must **avoid the inclusion of many languages from a single area.** Why? In recent years some linguists have suggested that in order to construct a sample that fairly represents the language faculty, we must compensate for the relative frequency of members of some language families, by using only a fixed number from each family. You can learn more about sampling techniques on pp.38-42 in Whaley.

This raises another problem with constructing a sample: It is agreed that reference must be made to genetic groups (language families), but linguists do not agree about which are valid families. For example, if one is constructing a sample that includes one language from each family, how many languages come from Altaic? How many families is Altaic? One or two or three or four or five? This is not simply that linguists cannot agree. The real point is at a language family in 2002 is actually a reflection of how much we know now; in 2012 or 2022 or 2052, we may understand more about which languages belong to Altaic. If our knowledge of families is provisional in this sense, how can we construct accurate samples?

**Explanation in typology**

The results of language typologies demand explanation, especially when two char acteristics are correlated in an implicational universal.