

Empirical consequences of universal claims in grammatical theorizing

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Workshop description

Universals of grammar have played a prominent role in general linguistics since the 1960s, but the connection between universal claims and empirical testing has often been tenuous. The great majority of linguists have always been working on a single language, but many of them now strive to contribute to a larger enterprise. Thus, general claims have often been based initially on a few languages, or even just on one. As a result, the literature is full of proposals that have broad implications while we do not know to what extent they are true.

This workshop is intended to complement the conference theme of “linguistic diversity” by focusing on empirical evidence for linguistic uniformity, but from a variety of different perspectives. Evidence for universal claims can come from a wide range of sources, e.g.

- large-scale worldwide grammar-mining (along the lines of Greenberg’s seminal work)
- large text collections, either parallel (Cysouw & Wälchli 2007), or annotated in a parallel way (Universal Dependencies, Nivre et al. 2016)
- artificial language learning experiments, because these remove the conventionality that is associated with all naturally developed languages (e.g. Culbertson 2012)
- the absence of a credible way of learning the relevant pattern (poverty of the stimulus, Lasnik & Lidz 2016)
- the absence of published counterevidence to well-known claims

This workshop brings together general linguists with diverse theoretical outlooks, so in addition to papers that discuss actual evidence for actual universal claims, it is also open to well-argued contributions questioning the idea that special evidence is needed for universal claims, and/or that justifying the widespread practice of basing general claims on few languages.

References: Culbertson, Jennifer (2012). Typological universals as reflections of biased learning: Evidence from artificial language learning. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 6(5), 310–329. Cysouw, Michael & Bernhard Wälchli (2007). Parallel texts: Using translational equivalents in linguistic typology. *STUF-Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung* 60(2), 95–99. Lasnik, Howard & Jeffrey L. Lidz (2016). The argument from the poverty of the stimulus. In Ian G. Roberts (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of universal grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Nivre, Joakim, Marie-Catherine De Marneffe, Filip Ginter, Yoav Goldberg, Jan Hajič, Christopher D. Manning, Ryan T. McDonald, Slav Petrov, Sampo Pyysalo & Natalia Silveira (2016). *Universal Dependencies v1: A multilingual treebank collection*. LREC 2016.