Searching for universals:
Deriving generalizations from data

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Stefan Müller (Invited speaker)

Humboldt-Universität Berlin

st.mueller@hu-berlin.de

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This talk deals with the methodology for finding universals that is used in the CoreGram project. We develop grammars based on language internal facts. This means that we do not use data from Basque or Japanese to motivate constituent structures in German, that we do not assume empty antipassive heads in a German grammar on the basis of the existence of antipassive in other languages. Cinque/Rizzi-style grammars, in which functional heads are present in all languages provided they exist in any of the languages spoken world-wide, are impossible in this setting. We believe that this is the only legitimate way if one follows Hauser, Chomsky, Fitch in assuming that there is no innate language specific knowledge or very abstract language specific knowledge like Merge. I discuss objections by Croft and Haspelmath against the generative methodology of examining one language at a time and show that non-formal typological research also relies on grammars and categorizations and hence would suffer from the same alleged problems if one accepted them as problems.

The CoreGram project develops constraint-based grammars of several languages. The constraints that hold for more than one language are collected in sets. The higher the number of languages for which a constraint holds, the more general it is. If a constraint holds for all examined languages, it is a candidate for a universal. If this process is continued long enough, a set with few, very general constraints results. Given what we know so far about languages, a likely result is that the only property that all languages share is that we combine words and phrases into larger units. This constraint is trivial. It is also known under the name Merge.