

Hypotheses meet their worst enemy – empiricism

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Given that linguistics rightfully claims the status of a proper science, it must aim at making testable i.e. falsifiable generalizations about its own research object (Lazard 2006). In connection with this task, linguists have to face the still widely understudied structural diversity of human languages (Haspelmath 2019). Our limited knowledge as to the range of the extant (and extinct) live forms of human language constitutes a risk factor for any hypothesis – be it about human language in general (“universals”) or about cross-linguistic distributions (“areal/ typological preferences,” etc.). However, in the spirit of Levinson (1991), it can be assumed that every hypothesis that fails is interesting linguistically.

In this talk, four generalizations or hypotheses are discussed to show what we can learn from their failure. On closer inspection, each of the hypotheses can be disproved empirically, i.e. there are numerous languages which, contrary to expectation, behave differently from what the generalizations would predict. The four cases to be scrutinized are

- (a) the well-known Companion Metaphor as put forward by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and critically assessed by Stolz, Stroh & Urdze (2006),
- (b) the supposed absence of the Alienability Correlation from the languages of Europe as assumed by Nichols (1992) – an assumption with which Stolz et al. (2008) have taken issue,
- (c) the supposed absence of (Total) Reduplication from the languages of Europe as pro-pagated by Rubino (2005a;b) and shown to rest on shaky foundation by Stolz, Stroh & Urdze (2011),
- (d) the supposed dominance of certain types of Comparative Constructions throughout Europe as argued by Stassen (1985; 2005) and Heine (1997) but rejected by Stolz (2013).

The talk aims at identifying those factors shared by all four of the rebutted generalizations which have contributed to their being incompatible with the empirical facts. The counter-evidence is numerous so that it cannot be discarded sweepingly as isolated exceptions. Nevertheless, it is argued that the above generalizations have not been put forward in vain. They have stimulated others to check their validity and come up with counter-claims. Put differently, jumping to conclusions is not such a bad thing provided someone (else) goes to the pains to test them.

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