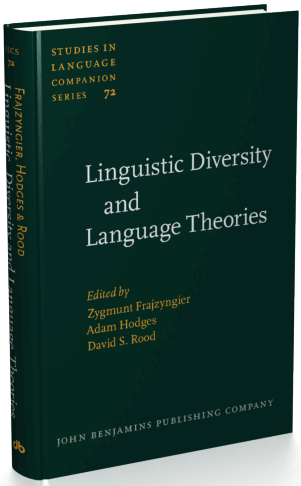
Studies in Language Companion Series
72

Introduction

Zygmunt Frajzyngier
David S. Rood

https://doi.org/10.1075/slcs.72.01fra



Pages vii–xii of
Linguistic Diversity and Language Theories
Edited by Zygmunt Frajzyngier, Adam Hodges and David S. Rood
[**Studies in Language Companion Series**, 72]
2005. xii, 432 pp.

Introduction

Zygmunt Frajzyngier and David S. Rood

The chapters included in the present volume constitute a selection from the papers presented at the International Symposium on Linguistic Diversity and Language Theories held in Boulder, Colorado in May 2003. The purpose of the Symposium was to identify hitherto unstated or understated fundamental issues in linguistic theories, taking into the account the rich variation of forms and functions observed in the languages of the world. We wished to examine the goals of both theories of language structure and theories of language evolution. An expected outcome of the symposium, although not explicitly stated, was an answer to the question of whether taking into consideration a wide rage of languages will result in changes in the categories, processes, and principles postulated by linguistic theories with respect to language structure and with respect to language change.

Some of the questions put before the participants with respect to the theories of language structure were:

1. What should be the proper object for theories of language structure?
2. What should a theory of language structure explain?
3. Should there be common formal elements in the theories of language structure?
4. Should there be common functional elements?
5. What elements should a theory of language structure contain?
6. What should be the relationship between theories of language structure and the theories of cognition?

Some of the questions with respect to theories of language change were:

1. What are motivations for language change and grammaticalization?
2. What are the roles and properties of functions in language change?
3. What are the roles and properties of forms in language change?
4. Does human conscious choice play a part in language change?
5. Is there a role for adaptability in language change? What would such a role be?

Some of the participants addressed some of these questions directly, some have addressed the questions obliquely, and still others addressed different questions that they thought to be relevant to the aims of the Symposium. There was a consensus, however, that linguistic theories should take into consideration the wide variety of forms and functions found in languages of the world and therefore, theory building in linguistics must involve typological research. Questions concerning theory do involve questions concerning methodology.

Three chapters address the problems of methodology in typological research. Given that functions across languages seldom completely overlap, and that forms are always different, a typologist faces the dilemma of what should be the proper object of comparison. After providing a sketch of theoretical issues involved in linguistic typology, Lazard proposes postulating 'intuitive and explicit notions' with respect to certain functions as tools in linguistic typology. Then the actual connections found in various languages can be compared with respect to those tools. Lazard illustrates the proposed methodology with respect to transitivity, object, subject, and voice. Lazard postulates the notion of invariants, which are neither forms nor functions, but rather abstract relations between form and function. Lazard concludes his chapter by a provocative discussion of the relationship between cognitive studies in linguistics, postulating essentially that each should develop its own theory and argumentation and should not be influenced by external factors.

The fundamental issues of methodology in typology are also raised in Corbett's chapter. In order to resolve the question of how to compare categories across languages Corbett proposes postulating canonical properties of categories. A canonical definition of a given function can then be used as benchmark in the description of forms and functions in linguistic typology. The canonical properties are to serve as tools, and do not necessarily represent the most frequent set of properties. Corbett illustrates the application of the canonical approach in syntax and morphology, with data assembled and analyzed with the help of the Surrey morphological data base. With respect to syntax, the canonical method is applied to the analysis of agreement, and with respect to morphology, the canonical method is applied to the determination of syncretism and suppletion. The outcome of this approach is a set of criteria for determining a possible word. The aims of Corbett's approach are similar to Lazard's, and in a way supplement Lazard's approach by providing a method of determining how much a given form differs from the canonical characteristics of a given category.

A fundamental issue in all linguistic research is to determine the function and meaning of a linguistic form. Pierre-Yves Raccah's study starts with an explicit description of one of the traditional approaches to determine the meaning of a linguistic form, that of observing the effects the use of the forms has upon the hearer. In his own approach to semantics, the meaning of a sentence includes the pragmatic purposes for which the sentence is used. He proposes the same method for the description of the meaning of words.

Four of the chapters specifically discuss the way particular kinds of language change address topics in the theory of language change, issues that are not restricted to single languages or language families. Claude Hagège establishes that speakers often make purposeful, considered choices in language use, thus directing, consciously, some phenomena of language change; not all change is accidental or driven by language internal pressures. Describing several individual case studies, he demonstrates that intentional attempts by writers, politicians, and even linguists to change linguistic forms may actually have a lasting effect on the language. His chapter dem-

onstrates that we need to accept the notion that speakers make conscious choices of linguistic forms and thus contribute intentionally to the evolution of language.

Robert Nicolai demonstrates that the traditional method of establishing genetic relationships among languages runs into serious problems when dealing with languages like Songhai, a language spoken in West Africa. He claims that some of the characteristics of Songhai resemble Nilo-Saharan languages, other characteristics resemble Afroasiatic languages, and still others resemble Niger-Congo languages. He proposes a new model of emergence of language as a product of interaction of many languages within the same geographical and cultural environment. In such an interaction, the newly emerging language acquires features from all languages that interact in the given area. In the process, he shows that calculating the assignment of a language to a family must include attempts to reconstruct the social situations in which the language in question is used.

Regina Pustet looks at language change and grammaticalization through the lens of Zipf's famous statistical observation that word frequency correlates with word size — short words are used more often — and argues that this observation can and should be extended to the evolution of grammatical morphemes.

Stéphane Robert observes that languages often show multiple meanings for particular grammatical or function morphemes, and proposes that these meanings can be sorted out by speakers if they can be associated with contextual cues, such as the level (word, phrase, sentence, discourse) at which they occur. At the same time, their basic meanings are also reflected at each level. She finds this reminiscent of fractal patterns, where an invariance (basic meaning) recurs at different scales (linguistic levels), albeit with some scale-conditioned variation.

Several studies in the volume address the problem of fundamental properties of languages, more specifically the issue of fundamental categories, processes and principles as found in a wide range of languages.

Juliette Blevins discusses phenomena of syncope and antigemination in several languages. The fundamental question here is why in languages that do have syncope and antigemination, the two processes do not occur in certain cases. The explanation for the blocking of the two processes is that were these processes allowed to operate, there would be a collapse of grammatical paradigm and important functions coded by language forms would be lost. The discussion in Blevins provides evidence for the functional transparency principle as postulated in Frajzyngier's chapter, because syncope and antigemination are blocked when they would result in the elimination of functional distinctions coded by the paradigmatic forms.

Whether the 'sentence' should be considered a basic unit in syntactic theory and language structure is the question addressed by Marianne Mithun. She proposes that the category 'sentence', as commonly understood, while a useful category in some languages, does not necessarily constitute a universal basic category in language. A detailed analysis of Hualapai demonstrates that certain markers of syntactic dependency have developed into markers of pragmatic dependency. Natural discourse in Hualapai is composed of pragmatically independent and dependent

sentences. The existence of pragmatically dependent and pragmatically independent clauses, observed and described in languages from various families (Frajzyngier 2001; Frajzyngier with Shay 2002) transcend the distinction between syntactically main and syntactically dependent clauses.

Michael Cysouw raises the issue of the need of a very large sample in order to determine what is frequent and what is rare in languages of the world. A detailed catalog of categories and syncretisms in pronoun and pronominal agreement systems reveals that "rare" is a relative term; he calculates that some 16 per cent of languages have "rare" systems. Cysow asks, "who are we linguists to rate such 'rare' systems", which function perfectly well for their speakers, "as strange"?

Scott DeLancey takes up the issue of the definition of lexical categories, and more specifically two types of definitions, distributional and functional. His focus is adpositions, which are considered universal lexical categories in many theories. He proposes that adpositions cannot be considered universal under a distributional or functional approach, as demonstrated by the existence of languages without adpositions. Nevertheless, adpositions may be universally available as a product of grammaticalization of various constructions, such as verbs, and genitive constructions.

Zygmunt Frajzyngier addresses the issue of principles guiding language structures. In particular he postulates a principle of functional transparency, whereby the role of every element in an utterance must be transparent to the hearer. Transparency is formulated in terms of functional domains coded in the language. The application of the principle of functional transparency is illustrated using the coding of grammatical and semantic relations between verbs and noun phrases. The study demonstrates adaptability of the language, in that once the principle of functional transparency is affected, the grammatical systems undergo compensatory changes.

Each of the chapters which conclude this collection addresses a specific problem in a language or in languages, and proposes a solution which involves a new model, or some other expansion or refinement of linguistic theory.

Liang Tao recounts the history and the state of the art in the study of classifiers in Chinese, noting that in modern spoken Chinese, a new pattern is developing in which some nouns can be counted without a classifier. She proposes to account for this phenomenon by careful study of current spoken data.

Anders Soegaard examines the properties of two constituent, N–N compounds across languages, and proposes a model that, in contrast with current compounding theories, deals with all the types he finds. He is particularly interested in handling both endocentric and exocentric compounds, and proposes to expand the traditional generative lexical model into a construction hierarchy with distinct but interrelated levels of constructions. Among the parameters his new model includes is one which takes account of conceptual relations such as literal vs. metaphorical relatedness, and a diminished role for the non-universal concept of "head'" especially in exocentric constructions.

Frank Lichtenberk, in his study of Oceanic languages, demonstrates that languages can grammaticalize the means to code possession individuation, a category

different from alienable and inalienable possession. He proposes a cognitive explanation for the development of various possessive constructions in Oceanic and other languages, postulating that formal distance of linguistic forms corresponds to cognitive distance.

Marina Gorlach applies the principles of sign-oriented theory to study the reasons for English speakers' choice between separated and contiguous transitive phrasal verbs (*she broke the glass up* vs. *she broke up the glass*). Using literary texts as her data and translation into Russian as an investigative tool, she concludes that the separated forms regularly encode resultative constructions, in contrast with the incompletive meaning of contiguous verb-particle constructions.

Edward Vajda demonstrates that the morphological typological category "polysynthetic" is too broad; he proposes to replace it with "holistic grammar", a categorization based on an intersection of formal (lexical, morphological, syntactic) and functional (referential, discourse, phrasal) properties. He applies this to the argument number agreement system in Ket to show how its categories enable the typologically unusual Ket system to be compared comfortably with other languages.

Evidential systems in most languages have usually been included in discussions of modality, since they often entail a speaker's degree of commitment to the truth of a statement. Ferdinand de Haan argues that this is wrong, and that evidentials are in fact deictic, marking the relationship between the speaker and an event. His primary evidence comes from the observation that evidentials seem to develop from deictics diachronically.

From the refinement of general methodology, to new insights into language from studies of synchronic and diachronic universals, to specific studies of specific phenomena, this collection demonstrates the crucial role that language data play in the evolution of useful, accurate linguistic theories. Issues addressed include what to compare and how to determine meaning when doing typology; how to refine our understanding of diachronic processes by including consideration of intentional, social, statistical, and level-determined phenomena; reconsideration of categories such as sentence, evidential or adposition and structures such as compounds or polysynthesis; the tension between formal simplicity and functional clarity both in phonology and in general; the inclusion of unusual systems in theoretical debates; and fresh approaches to Chinese classifiers, possession in Oceanic languages, and English aspect. We think the Symposium has met its goal of confronting theories of linguistics with the diversity of languages.

References

Frajzyngier, Zygmunt. 2001. *A Grammar of Lele*. Stanford Monographs in African Linguistics. Stanford: CSLI.

Frajzyngier, Zygmunt with Erin Shay. 2002. *A Grammar of Hdi*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.