INTD0111A

The Unity and Diversity of Human Language

Lecture #2
Feb 11th, 2009

Announcements

➢ Presentations for projects?
➢ Take-home exams.

Brief comments on questionnaire feedback

➢ Thanks for filling in the questionnaire, with many interesting suggestions and comments.
➢ If you have not sent me your responses yet, please do so later today.

Brief comments on questionnaire feedback

➢ Stages in the history of a particular language; language evolution; how new languages are formed from two or more other languages;
➢ What different language families that exist, and how and why they are classified as such.
➢ How the sounds of a particular language develop and why sounds simply do not exist in some languages. Also, how accents develop among native speakers themselves, and how one's own native language influences their accent when acquiring a second or third language.

Brief comments on questionnaire feedback

➢ different modalities of language (aka sign languages); know about languages I've never heard of; why a language differs from one region to another;
➢ cultural/verbal interactions involved with language; relation between language and culture; non-verbal communication;
➢ gain a greater understanding of the various ways people communicate;
➢ want to know what language is; also how slang comes into existence in a language.

Brief comments on questionnaire feedback

➢ why there are drastic differences between languages the way they are; phonetic differences between languages; possibilities of new language creation;
➢ how languages diverge from a parent language, how they become extinct, how a language is invented, and why there might be 10 different languages in a small geographical area.
➢ Linguistic similarities between different language families

Brief comments on questionnaire feedback

➢ the history of languages and how they've changed over time; why some languages (like Latin) ended up dying out while others like English survived.
➢ Etymology; the connections between different languages
➢ How linguistic differences alter the way people understand or relate to the world

Where did we stop last time?

➢ The number of languages in the world is huge (at least 7000), and an exact count is hampered by the fact that many languages haven't been discovered yet, as well as the vagueness of what counts as "language" and what counts as "dialect".

Where did we stop last time?

➢ "Hi, I'm sorry for being late, Mr. Linguist."
➢ "No problem. So, we were saying that …"

➢ Despite the enormous number of languages, linguists can still study unity and diversity of human language by relying on the method of sampling. But we have to be careful when using samples …

Mr. D. Advocate interrupts:

➢ "I see what you're saying, but do we really need a linguist to tell us why languages share some properties. I'm not a linguist, and I can tell you why: Languages share linguistic properties because they're genetically related, I mean, historically, they evolved from the same parent language. It's pretty simple, really."

Genetic classification of human languages

➢ This is absolutely correct. Remember, though, that the people who told us about genetic classification of languages were language scholars, so yes we do need linguists. But you are 100% right:

➢ If two languages are historically related, they will exhibit similar properties in their sound patterns (called *phonology*), word formation (called *morphology*), and sentence structures (called *syntax*).

Genetic classification of human languages

➢ In fact, why don't we look at some sample maps for language families from N. Y. Falk's website, based on information in Bernard Comrie's 1989 book on linguistic typology.

Genetic classification of human languages

➤ Genetic classification can thus explain to us why some languages share several linguistic properties.

➤ So, Romance languages like French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, are similar since they all descended from Latin.

➤ Same for Korean and Japanese.

➤ And same for the 100s of languages of the Australian aborigines.

Similarities without a genetic basis

➤ But now, let's all consider this extra fact:

Greek (Hellenic), Albanian (Albanian), Romanian (Romance), and Bulgarian (Slavic), are not genetically related (ignoring the very distant Indo-European affinity), yet they exhibit similar linguistic properties.

Similarities without a genetic basis

➤ Same is also true of Amharic, a Semitic language, that shares linguistic properties with Cushitic languages such as Somali, even though they're very distantly related.

➤ And Thai and Vietnamese look similar to Chinese, even though they do not actually belong to the same language family.

A second type of linguistic similarity: Areal

➤ Answer: Languages can come to share linguistic properties under *contact*.

➤ This could be as simple as borrowing some words (e.g., English and French), or it could lead to sharing complex grammatical properties as well (e.g., the situation in the Balkans, Ethiopia, or South Asia).

Mr. D. Advocate sums up the discussion so far:

➤ Mr. D. Advocate: "So, if I understood you correctly, linguistic similarity can be attributed either to *genetic ancestry* or *areal contact*. But is that it? I mean, are we done here?"

➤ Actually, we haven't even started yet. Let's consider these extra facts:

More cross-linguistic similarities: basic word order

➤ English (Germanic), Edo (Niger-Congo), and Thai (Thai-Kadai), all share the same basic word order **SVO** (i.e., subject-verb-object):

[John$_S$] [read$_V$] [the book$_O$].

(Note: For convenience, for now we'll use English words, but later on we'll use actual examples from all these different languages.)

More cross-linguistic similarities: basic word order

➢ Meanwhile, Japanese (Japanese-Korean), Lakhota (Siouan), and Basque (an isolate), all share the same basic word order **SOV** (i.e., subject-object-verb):

[John$_S$] [the book$_O$] [read$_V$].

More cross-linguistic similarities: basic word order

➢ Welsh (Celtic), Berber (Afro-asiatic), and Tagalog (Austronesian), all share the same basic word order **VSO** (i.e., verb-subject-object):

[read$_V$] [John$_S$] [the book$_O$].

More cross-linguistic similarities: Wh-questions

➢ English (Germanic), Classical Arabic (Semitic), Russian (Slavic), form wh-questions by placing the wh-phrase at the front of the sentence (called *wh-fronting* or, more technically, "wh-movement"):

(1)   a. Who did you meet?
       b. What did he do?

More cross-linguistic similarities: Wh-questions

➢ By contrast, Chinese (Sino-Tibetan), Japanese (Japanese-Korean), and Egyptian Arabic (Semitic), form wh-questions by leaving the wh-phrase "in situ". Using English words for now, that would be something like:

(2)   a. You met who?
       b. He did what?

More cross-linguistic similarities: Wh-questions

➢ Malayalam (Dravidian) and Igbo/Yoruba (Niger-Congo) seem to form wh-questions with "clefting", using structures like (3) (again using English words for now):

(3)   a. Who is it that you met?
       b. What is it that he did?

A third type of cross-linguistic similarity?

➢ So, how do we explain these similarities between languages that are neither historically related nor is there evidence that they were in areal contact with one another at one point?

A third type of cross-linguistic similarity: Typological

> Answer: We call these "typological" similarities. In other words, some languages share certain linguistic properties because they belong to the same "**type**".

A third type of cross-linguistic similarity: Typological

> As Whaley notes (in the book on reserve):
"In its most general sense, typology is [t]he classification of languages or components of languages based on shared formal characteristics."

> Significantly, notice that typological classification is based on "formal features of language," e.g., properties of sounds, words, and sentences.

A third type of cross-linguistic similarity: Typological

> Linguistic typologists, thus, in their pursuit of characterizing what is and what is not "a possible human language", are mainly concerned with studying the range of typological similarity and variation that human languages exhibit.

A third type of cross-linguistic similarity: Typological

> In this class, we will be talking about these language "types", and we will try to explain why certain types exist while others do not, why some types are more frequent than others, and what kind of linguistic properties hold of all languages (i.e., the so-called *language universals*).

A point of methodology

> Mr. D. Advocate: "I'm sorry but I remember you saying that we have to rely on sampling when studying linguistic similarities and differences, but how can we make sure we choose the right representative sample to form the right generalizations?"

> Actually, that was where we ended the class on Monday, where I said we have to make sure that our language sample is *unbiased.*

A point of methodology

> A good representative language sample should avoid genetic bias and areal bias, to be able to allow us to form feasible typological generalizations.

> Having said that, now is probably a good point to start looking at some of these typological generalizations that linguists proposed by working on language samples, also known as *language universals*.

Language universals

> There are two types of universals in human languages: *absolute* and *implicational*.

Absolute universals

> Absolute universals hold of *all* languages, e.g.,
>> (a) All languages have consonants and vowels.
>> (b) All languages have ways to form questions.

Implicational universals

> Implicational universals, by contrast, hold of *most* languages, and take the form "$p \rightarrow q$"

> Some of the most discussed universals are due to Greenberg's seminal work in the 1960s, e.g.,

Implicational universals

> *Universal 3*: Languages with dominant VSO order are always prepositional (i.e., vs. postpositional).

Language	Word order type	Adpositional type
Welsh	VSO	Prepositional
Berber	VSO	Prepositional

Implicational universals

> *Universal 4*: With overwhelmingly greater than chance frequency, languages with normal SOV order are postpositional.

> Examples: Japanese, Korean, Turkish, Basque.

Implicational universals

> "If a language has an indefinite article, it also has a definite article, but not vice versa."

Type	Indef.	Def.	Language
A	Yes	Yes	English
B	No	Yes	Arabic
C	No	No	Korean
D	Yes	No	Unattested

Implicational universals

➢ "If a language has subject-verb inversion in yes-no questions, it will also have subject-verb inversion in wh-questions."

Type	Y/N-INV	WH-INV	Language
A	Yes	Yes	English
B	No	No	Korean/Japanese
C	No	Yes	Lithuanian
D	Yes	No	Unattested

Mr. D. Advocate sums up the discussion

➢ "This is pretty interesting stuff, actually. I honestly didn't know about these implicational principles. So, I guess this is what you meant when you said typologists try to determine what is a possible human language and what is not, right?"

➢ Exactly. Implicational universals show us how the space available to human languages is actually constrained. Certain combinations of linguistic properties are possible; others are not.

Basic word order

➢ Mr. D. Advocate: "hmm. Can we talk about basic word order please. I mean, how many basic word orders are there? What is the most frequent word order? Etc."

➢ Actually, this has always been one major area for typological research, but I'm afraid we ran out of time today. But should you be here next week, we'll talk about word order in detail.

Next class agenda

➢ Read chapters 1-2 from Baker.

➢ Also, read Whaley chapter 3: pp. 30-53 (there will be a link on the syllabus table online).

➢ Visit Ethnologue or similar websites and try to learn more about unfamiliar languages.