Reflexive and reciprocal constructions: Comparisons and explanations without true analyses

Martin Haspelmath (MPI–SHH Jena & Leipzig University)

This paper will offer some reflections on the widespread practice in linguistics to require that general explanations be based on "true analyses" of language-particular phenomena, primarily using the example of reflexive and reciprocal constructions (but also the relation between property concept roots and result roots). I take it as uncontroversial that theoretical explanations at the level of general linguistics need to involve language comparison (unless they are based on non-conventional aspects of language such as reaction times or stimulus poverty).

How comparison of grammatical patterns should be done is currently not clear in theoretical linguistics. A widely assumed requirement is that comparisons presuppose framework-based analyses of particular languages, but these are in turn taken to presuppose a unversal framework based on cross-linguistic comparison. This circle means that progress is very slow, and analyses of well-known languages such as English and Dutch are still more influential in general linguistics than they probably should be.

An alternative to framework-based comparison is phenomenologocal comparison. This is not well known as a theoretical approach and is rarely argued for, but it is widely practiced (e.g. in the *World atlas of language structures*, 2005/2013). It carries prestige among fieldworkers, but not so much among general linguists. Here I spell out the methodological underpinnings of the phenomenological approach and show that it avoids the problem of comparison relying on its own results. It is more rigorous in that the comparative concepts are defined in the same way for all languages, so that the subjectiveness of diagnostics-fishing plays no role (i.e. what Croft 2009 and Baker & Croft 2017 call "methodological opportunism").

It would make good sense to base comparisons on "true analyses" if the only goal were to identify the preestablished features, categories and architectures of the innate language blueprint. But we don't know if any of the features and categories of languages are innate, and many of their general properties are apparently due to a preference for systems that support efficient communication (Gibson et al. 2019). Just as functional adaptation in biological systems can be studied without knowing the genetic blueprints of the organisms, I argue that functional-adaptive pressures can explain a large number of general grammatical properties of languages that are based on phenomenological analyses/descriptions (Haspelmath 2020).

In the talk, I will show how this works in practice for reflexive constructions (Haspelmath 2008; 2019), reciprocal constructions (Haspelmath 2007), and property concept roots vs. result roots (Beavers et al. 2017). In each case, one needs to set up universal comparative concepts that do not rely on non-universal criteria, then one tries to identify general properties of constructions in the world's languages, and finally one can ask how these general properties (empirical universals) can be explained. I will argue that functional-adaptive explanations fare very well, and are perhaps all we need to explain the striking similarities between languages.

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