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Language universals and their characteristic features

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ANNOTATION

This article gives information about language universals and their characteristic features.

Key words: Syntax, patterns, types, factors, researches.

A linguistic universal is a pattern that occurs systematically across natural languages, potentially true for all of them. For example, All languages have nouns and verbs, or If a language is spoken, it has consonants and vowels. Research in this area of linguistics is closely tied to the study of linguistic typology, and intends to reveal generalizations across languages, likely tied to cognition, perception, or other abilities of the mind. The field originates from discussions influenced by Noam Chomsky's proposal of a Universal Grammar, but was largely pioneered by the linguist Joseph Greenberg, who derived a set of forty-five basic universals, mostly dealing with syntax, from a study of some thirty languages.

Though there has been significant research into linguistic universals, in more recent time some linguists, including Nicolas Evans and Stephen C. Levinson, have argued against the existence of absolute linguistic universals that are shared across all languages. These linguists cite problems such as ethnocentrism amongst cognitive scientists, and thus linguists, as well as insufficient research into all of the world's languages in discussions related to linguistic universals, instead promoting these similarities as simply strong tendencies. In a range of influential papers, Ohala (1981, 1983, 1989, 1993) gives examples of recurrent sound changes which are drawn from "a pool of synchronic variation". Ohala (1989) identifies a range of variation types, separating them broadly into those due to phonetic variation on the part of the speaker and those due to transforms on the part of the listener. These variation types are then associated with universal phonetic tendencies which lead to sound change. Universal phonetic trajectories on the speaker's side can result from aerodynamic constraints, elasto-inertial constraints, constraints on gestural coordination, and, as suggested by Maddieson in his paper, from the still mysterious complex of transforms which relate clear speech to casual speech. Aerodynamic constraints are implicated in common

patterns of obstruent devoicing, with devoicing more likely in oral stops with longer closure durations, and those farther back in the mouth. Elastoinertial constraints include relationships between the amplitude of articulatory movements (e.g. jaw opening), and rate of articulation (fast vs. slow). As rate increases, amplitude decreases, meaning that certain properties of fast speech, including vowel reduction and consonant lenition, will be recurrent. Some universal phonetic trajectories, like utterance-final devoicing, may involve a confluence of these factors: voicing decay has been attributed to anticipation of a non-speech breathing vocal fold configuration, where both aerodynamics and laryngeal inertia are involved (Klatt and Klatt 1990:821; Myers and Hansen 2007).

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