

Interview with
Matthew Dryer

PS

Let me start with our traditional question. Why linguistics? What motivated you to study language and to deal with it from the typological perspective?

MD

While there are many different stories about how linguists got into linguistics, mine is a bit unusual, especially for someone of my generation, in that I got interested in linguistics before I went to university. My favourite subjects in high school were Latin, Greek and Mathematics, and my father was a professor of philosophy and was aware of Chomsky and his work and suggested that I might like to be a linguist. So I started reading before going to university.

I also got interested in typology in a rather fortuitous way. My undergraduate degree was a combination of linguistics, philosophy, mathematics, and computer science, so I have a more formal background than most typologists. As a graduate student, I attend a summer LSA institute and took a course in typology from Ed Keenan. His approach was more mathematical in the sense that he looked at linguistic operations as functions and this fit in with my background. It is unlikely that I would have become a typologist if I hadn't taken that course from Keenan.

PS

You are known for, inter alia, research into the typology of word-order. What progress has been achieved in this respect since Greenbergian times? And more generally, what is the impact of Chomskyan and Greenbergian approaches upon the current typological research?

MD

I believe that there has been substantial progress in word order typology, because of work of my own and of John Hawkins, among others. The real challenge that has not fully been solved is how to know whether particular crosslinguistic patterns reflect something linguistic as opposed to being accidents of history.

I am inclined to say that current typological research IS simply the Greenbergian approach extended to the current day. The more interesting question is whether Chomskyan approaches have had any impact on typological research. On this point, I probably have a different view from that of most typologists, most of whom probably believe that Chomskyan approaches have had no impact whatsoever.

I believe that it has has some impact. First, there is a sharp contrast between the pre-Chomskyan approach of Greenberg and the pre-Chomskyan approach of structuralist approaches. In contrast to both early generative grammar and structuralist approaches, Greenberg assumed to a large extent notions from traditional grammar: most of his universals in his classic 1963 paper are formulated in terms of notions from traditional grammar. But apart from Greenberg, the dominant paradigm until the mid-1960s were structuralist and while structuralist approaches dealt well with phonology and morphology, their approaches to syntax were clearly inadequate. While typologists did not adopt the machinery of generative grammar, generative grammar did a lot to raise the level of syntactic awareness that has contributed, I think, significantly to typological approaches.

A second reflection of the way in which generative grammar contributed to typology is the fact that linguistic typology really took off in the 1970s, and the most important paper that signaled this was Keenan and Comrie's paper on the accessibility hierarchy. But that paper was clearly an offshoot of the work in the late 1960's and early 1970's by generative linguists

looking at extraction constraints, starting with Ross's 1967 dissertation and subsequent work in the early 1970's by Chomsky. Thus the widespread increase in interest in typology in the 1970's was clearly influenced by generative grammar.

A third reflection of the impact of generative grammar on typology in the 1970's is due to Relational Grammar, a particular version of generative grammar. Relational Grammar differed from other versions of generative grammar in two ways that are relevant to typology. One was that it looked at lots of languages, in a way largely unknown in generative grammar at the time, but clearly typological. The other was the emphasis on grammatical relations. There is little question that although Relational Grammar did not last long as a theoretical framework, a lot of its ideas about grammatical relations had a major impact on typology in the 1970s that continue to this day. So, there are these three ways in which the development of typology in the 1970s was influenced by generative grammar, and overall positive influence.

However, I must immediately add that generative grammar has had next to no impact on typology since the 1970s. The impact was therefore from early version of generative grammar, which were quite different from more recent approaches

PS

Recently, there has been extensive discussion of comparative concepts reflecting different approaches to this topic. What is your standpoint to this issue?

Some proponents of the view that there are no crosslinguistic categories, such as Martin Haspelmath and William Croft, cite my 1997 paper "Are grammatical relations universal?" as the starting point for this view. Although my arguments in that paper were directed specifically at grammatical relations, arguing that grammatical relations are always language-specific and arguing against the notion of crosslinguistic grammatical relations, my arguments apply to crosslinguistic categories of other sorts as well.

But I should add that my views on this reflect two features of my educational background. The most important is the fact that my original linguistic training was in American Structuralism and the view that there are no crosslinguistic categories, at least substantive ones like nouns, subjects, agreement, and case, was assumed by American Structuralism. The situation is far less clear with respect to what one might call formal categories, like words, morphemes, phrases, sentences, phonemes, affixes, inflection, compounds, assimilation, and vowel harmony. Here, I am not so sure and it may depend on the particular notion. While American Structuralists rejected crosslinguistic substantive notions, they assumed at least some crosslinguistic formal notions, like phonemes.

A second factor behind my views on these matters reflects my background in philosophy, from which I acquired a type of ontological conservatism, not positing the existence of things without there being good reason to believe they exist. There is no evidence for crosslinguistic categories, nor is there anything that positing them explains. The attraction of crosslinguistic categories to many linguists arises from the clear similarities between language-specific categories in different languages. But I believe that we can explain these similarities without recourse to crosslinguistic categories.

PS

What are the main current tasks of typological research in your view?

MD

My own view is that people should work on whatever interests them, so I don't see things in terms of there being main current tasks.

PS

Typologists heavily depend on the data from informants. How is the reliability of data guaranteed in the remarkable project of the WALS database?

MD

While some typologists depend heavily on data from informants, many others do not. In my own research, I do not use data from informants, but instead depend almost entirely on published (and unpublished) grammatical descriptions. I look on languages as holistic systems so that one cannot really understand a particular feature of a language without knowing how it fits into the overall system. When one collects data from informants, one cannot know how that data fits into the system as a whole. It is for that reason that I do not use data from informants and most of the data in the WALS database was not based on informants. In fact, the WALS editors specifically forbade contributors to WALS from using questionnaires as a way to obtain data for their chapters, again for the same reason. We did use experts on particular languages to some extent, but that is a more reliable source of data than informants.

PS

This like any other source of cross-linguistic data is biased for morphosyntax. On the other hand, some other areas, such as word-formation, are not well represented. Do you and your WALS co-editors plan to rectify this lack of balance?

MD

The selection of topics for WALS was based on what people offered to produce chapters on. Some topics were not chosen simply because nobody proposed doing a chapter on them. Although we have not closed the door to additional WALS chapters and would accept such if someone could propose one based on a large crosslinguistic sample, nobody has yet actually followed through on proposed new chapters. In fact, apart from correcting errors, no authors other than me have added data to WALS since 2005. For these reasons, the WALS editors have no plans on filling gaps in WALS, though we are open to the possibility.

PS

Do you think that typology is paid relevant attention in university curricula in the USA and other countries?

MD

Certainly not in North America. It is paid better attention in Europe and especially Australia.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Pavol Štekauer

In SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics [online]. 2018, vol. 15, no. 3 [cit. 2018-13-12]. Available on web page http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTL38/pdf_doc/14.pdf. ISSN 1336-782X.