

Discussion

Is typology relevant?

Introduction

As typologists, and in particular as the Editorial Board of a typological journal, we have sometimes been asking ourselves how linguistic typology relates to the world-at-large, and vice versa. There is a lingering feeling here that these relations could be more intense and rewarding in both directions; but, rather than gratuitously mongering gloom, or being unduly complacent on the part of those feeling more optimistic, we thought we had perhaps better ask around. Which is what we did, and this juncture in the history of our journal seemed the right opportunity. To be on the safe side, we prefaced our *enquête* with the briefest of reminders of the nature of our specialisation, along the following lines.

Typology's remit is simple in principle, though beset with huge practical difficulties: it is (a) to chart linguistic diversity and (b) to seek out order or even unity in diversity and to make sense of it. Just how diverse languages are has long been underestimated, and typological generalisations have often turned out to be premature in light of improved knowledge about languages. Just how orderly crosslinguistic diversity is and to what extent it is reined in by universals, be they categorical or preferential, linguistic or of a more general cognitive or physiological nature, continues to be debated among typologists, as does typological methodology for recognising orderliness. Top of their research agenda has always been, not language classification, but the identification of implicational dependencies between individual variables, without whom anything about lexicon and grammar could be expected to vary across languages independently of anything else.

Since languages are as diverse and uniform as they have become over time – during the lifespan of individual speakers; across generations of language acquirers; through contacts between speech communities and the acquisition of further linguistic

know-how; in the evolution of our species – typology’s closest ally and rival is developmental linguistics. To the extent that linguistic diversity is systematic rather than random, what is shaping it, other than population-historical contingencies, could be timeless typological laws of co-variation of structural variables, or laws of co-evolution, superintending change and stability over time (in the above four senses), or of course both.

The typological(-cum-developmental) research programme has been under way for centuries now and has gained unprecedented momentum in recent decades. Typology had long been a specialist enclave, but these days descriptive and theoretical linguistics, in whatever structural domain (from phonetics to pragmatics, not to forget the lexicon) and in whatever framework (of a “formal” or “functional” slant, if this is a distinction that you find helpful), is rarely done unaware of the aims and achievements of the typological programme. In this respect it is clear that typology is no longer only for typologists: linguistics has become typologically infused at its core. Occasionally recurring bouts of diversity-denying or belittling on the one hand (most relentlessly by Noam Chomsky; to quote randomly: “the apparent richness and diversity of linguistic phenomena is illusory and epiphenomenal”, *The Minimalist program*, MIT Press, 1995, p. 8) and of universals/system-denying on the other (Stephen Levinson comes to mind, with associates including Nicholas Evans; to only quote their most notorious title: ‘The myth of language universals’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, 2009) are transparently elements of rhetorical warfare, and attempts at mediation such as Frederick Newmeyer’s ‘The irrelevance of typology for grammatical theory’ (*Syntaxis* 1, 1998) nowadays come across as hair-splitting and love’s labour lost. Effectively linguistics has become so typological a specialised typological journal has almost become redundant. (But don’t quote me.)

Now, what is less easy to ascertain is where else in language-related disciplines, pure as well as applied, typology has had an impact too, and where typologically better informed expertise might be beneficial. To take stock as well as to further mutual awareness and interaction, *LT* asked practitioners active in such potential partner fields to assess whether and how typology, as they perceive it, is relevant for their own concerns. What about typology do they find useful? What else would they ideally like to know

from typology in future? Where has typology, though relevant, failed to deliver? Or, honestly, is there no reason for them to care, with typology-as-it-is-now being tangential to or irrelevant for their own research objectives?

Our addressees were not sampled randomly, insofar as to make it onto our list some typological awareness was assumed (we charitably did not request proof through a personal or library subscription to *LT*), and some respondents indeed are, if among other things, self-declared and recognised typologists. All genres of responses – opinion pieces, position papers, surveys, research articles – were welcome, and all offers would be subject to editorial vetting.

There are certainly more areas that one could think of than those represented in the following pages, which are centring on language description and documentation (only peripherally including fieldwork, amply considered elsewhere in handbooks and textbooks); historical linguistics; micro-variational studies; contact or areal linguistics; sign language linguistics; writing systems; language evolution, genetics, population history, human geography, and archaeology; psycho- and neurolinguistics and cognitive neuroscience; and speech technology and computational linguistics.

The perhaps most conspicuous absence is language acquisition (L1, L2, L3 ...); but for aspects of this connection we can refer to previous treatments of typology's involvement in accessible places – such as Dan Slobin & Melissa Bowerman's 'Interfaces between linguistic typology and child language research' (*LT* 11, 2007), Bowerman's and Fred Eckman's chapters on L1 and L2 acquisition respectively in the *Oxford handbook of linguistic typology* (edited by Jae Jung Song, Oxford University Press, 2010), Slobin's *The crosslinguistic study of language acquisition* in five volumes (Erlbaum, 1985–97) as well as *Crosslinguistic approaches to the psychology of language: Research in the tradition of Dan Isaac Slobin* (edited by Jiansheng Guo, Elena Lieven et al., Psychology Press, 2010), or Anna Giacalone Ramat's collection *Typology and second language acquisition* (De Gruyter Mouton, 2002).

It would be instructive to also know how relevant typology has been found in foreign language teaching or language pedagogy more generally, or indeed in general education: but has it been seriously applied here? (Or playfully for that matter, as long as done knowledgeably.)

There is not much on sociolinguistics and anthropology here, either, and there ought to be more. We do have languages-in-contact, and one other way how typology and sociolinguistics might bear upon one another has previously been highlighted, and controversially debated, in this journal, namely in Peter Trudgill's 'Linguistic and social typology' (*LT* 8, 2004; eventually followed up by Trudgill's monograph *Sociolinguistic typology*, Oxford University Press, 2011).

Is typology relevant for translation and interpreting and many other practical enterprises involving multiple languages as they meet in individuals or in cultures and societies? Yes, obviously, one would think (I would) – but then you are in for disappointment when, for example, a monumental three-tome handbook *Übersetzung/Translation/Traduction* has one lone article, Götz Wienold's 'Translation between distant languages' (vol. 1, De Gruyter, 2004), ably elaborating on an affirmative answer. Lexicography; text and discourse analysis, rhetorics, stylistics, and poetics; philosophy of language; artificial language design; language decipherment; speech and language impairment; ...: continue this list of current gaps – of our coverage, or of typology's impact – at your discretion.

But give linguistic typology (and *Linguistic Typology*) another twenty years and full scope and extent of its relevance will be beyond all question.

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