

Linguistic Typology and Language Diversity

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The distinction Language (“langage” in French) vs natural languages (“langues” in French) (Benveniste 1996: 19) is essential to discover language invariants as well as relationships between language invariants and variations observed across languages. A number of questions arise: What is exactly the nature of Language? What are its principal functions: communication, dialogs...? To give answers from broad cross-linguistic comparison, linguistic typology must find out common features and general conceptualizations in order to establish plausible language invariants by means of an abductive process (in Pierce’s sense which therefore cannot be reduced to induction) and to define the similarities and differences across languages.

Variation across languages shows a wide range of syntactic patterns, morphological, syntactic and semantic categories and grammaticalization processes (Comrie, Croft, Haspelmath, Lazard, Plank...). To take into account this diversity, we need to elaborate and to define, in operational terms, general and abstract concepts which can be used not only to describe the specific categories of different natural languages but also to study their similarities and differences.

Two examples of general problems will be taken to illustrate the discussion: the grammatical category of aspect and the notional category of evidentiality. For this purpose, we must precise the notion of “grammatical category” which cannot be confused with syntactic categories. A grammatical category (as aspect or tense, for instance) is a system with three components: (i) an organization of grammatical forms (paradigms of forms) in a particular language; (ii) a network of meanings analysed by abstract concepts and formal concepts (defined, when it is possible, from mathematical and logical concepts); (iii) a set of precise relations between grammatical forms and corresponding meanings (forms and meanings are not in one-to-one relation). The comparison between languages develops into (or becomes) a comparison between networks of concepts.

In the analysis of aspectuality for example, many linguists start with binary semantic oppositions as “perfective vs imperfective” and analyse all systems of languages based on such oppositions. Even though “the Slavic systems are in fact rather idiosyncratic in many ways” (Dahl 1985: 69), these systems grammaticalize the notion of ‘perfectivity’. We have proposed the concept of “achievement” (in French, *achevé*, which cannot be confused with Vendler’s achievement) which is expressed in Slavic by grammatical forms (specific prefixes and suffixes) (Guentchéva & Desclés, 1982): this concept concerns the final boundary of a dynamic situation (Fr. *situation évolutive*) or of other phase (not necessary the final) of this situation (Ex. *deteto izpälzja / dopälzja do ogradata* ‘the child crawled to the fence’; *zalazi po xälma* ‘got to crawl up the hill’). In Semitic languages, the fundamental opposition “accomplishment vs non accomplishment” (for instance, the traditional opposition *made* vs *mudare* in arabic language) is different from the Slavic opposition since these languages do not grammaticalize the notion of “perfectivity”. For us, a more abstract semantic organization of concepts as “state”, “event” and “process” (Lyons 1980, Comrie 1976, Mourelatos 1981, Desclés 1989, Guentchéva 1990...), founded on categorizations obtained by our ability of perception, is more relevant: humans have the ability to distinguish what is stable and what is evolutive; the transition between states and processes in development ; \accomplishment of a process creating an event; occurrence of an event and resultative states... A network of aspectual concepts is more useful than simple binary oppositions (state / event; perfectivity / imperfectivity, accomplishment / inaccomplishment..) for studying how a particular language categorizes aspectual distinctions inside the general grammatical system of this language and for comparing with the system of another language. From a typology point of view, when we compare different languages it is important to show that the scope of aspectuality is not only the verb (according to the morphology of some languages) but also the situation denoted by the sentence.

In typology studies, the notion of evidentiality is generally understood as the ‘source of information’ or ‘source of knowledge’ (Aikhenvald, 2003; 2004) . This characterization is too general, too vague and therefore, not very operational. This characterization includes, for instance, ‘the direct and indirect reported speech’ but we can argue that the reported speech act must be excluded from ‘evidentiality’; one might ask whether the so called ‘visual evidentials’ can really be considered to be evidentials (Guentchéva, forthcoming) at all since the same grammatical forms can be used in proverbs, in transmission of cultural traditions, in myths ... Furthermore, evidentiality must be distinguished from epistemic modalities (de Haan 1999, van der Auwera & Plungian 1998) ... Before formalizing a semantic notion as evidentiality, it is necessary to elaborate a clear and operational definition that helps oppose evidentiality to other concepts expressed by languages. For us, evidentiality is defined as the expression of the plausibility of a fact which is reconstructed through an abductive reasoning.

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