

**Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach**  
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**Lecture – 63**  
**Typology and Universals**

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Typology and Universals

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Introduction to Language Typology  
By  
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Hi everyone, welcome to this session of our NPTEL course Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach. We are going to talk about the connection between typology and language universals. Since the title of the course gives us enough scope to include various kinds of typological approach to languages, I wanted to include some universal component so that you are not only going to be familiar with the differences you should also be aware about what kind of similarities do languages have.

Is there anything which is common to all languages and if we find out some commonality how to account for it. What kind of commonality do we see? Do we see them as absolute commonalities or implicational commonalities? Do you think there are particular linguistic phenomena which are available across languages or there are something which might be quantified or there is an if and whether clause can be adjusted to it.

On that note, we are going to understand universals first and once we get an idea about the universals we can move to the relation between typology and universals. On the surface you might feel that typology and universals are diametrically opposite; they are in diametrically opposite directions. They do not have any overlapping, they do not have any commonality as far as understanding of language is concerned, because universals focus on similarities or commonness, typology focuses on primarily differences or individual types.

So, on the surface it looks different, but actually it is not. We will talk about these conceptual questions in a few minutes of discussion. Before I lead you through the different kinds of universals that we have, I would like you to know what are the methodological approaches that linguists have taken so far to understand language universals. There are two major methodological approaches to understand language universals and in the recent linguistics work you can find out both the domains or both the schools of thoughts or both the arguments have equal number of solid points. But these two approaches can be contrasted on a number of parameters.

The most important of these parameters is following the database for research on language universals. One school of argument would consider a wide range of languages; so it depends on which school do you belong to. One side of the argument considers as many languages as possible to come up with some universals. To suggest the existence of certain universals you have to consider maximum languages possible, that is one side; the other side of story is that you can always come up with the suggestions on universals by taking into account a highly restricted set of languages, that is also possible.

This restricted set of languages is related to the abstractness, you are not really talking about the data on the surface, rather you are trying to understand the theory underlying structure of it, the abstractness of analysis, that is required to understand the language universals. For instance in terms of more concrete or more abstract analysis. There are two different kinds of analysis possible, there are two different kinds of methodological approach which have been considered so far. One school or one method is more the inclusion of more number of languages or more concrete analysis; the other one the restricted set of languages, but

focusing on the abstractness of the principle of languages so the abstractness of the parameters.

So, on the basis of these two very different linguistic methodologies, people have worked to identify universals in language. Since one school of thought like one methodology focuses on the number of languages, the most pioneering work in this area has been done by Joseph H Greenberg. So, we call it Greenbergian universals. The other side so Greenbergian universals are more concrete, that includes more number of languages and sample size has been more. Considering a lot of languages or a lot of empirical data, Greenberg has come up with some nice examples of universals.

The other side of story deals with the abstractness of language. This is the second type or the other type as I just mentioned, this is more closely associated with the work of Noam Chomsky. This kind of work is mainly related to the abstractness of language and this is also called the linguistic universal or generativist universals.

So, Greenbergian universals and Chomskyan universals; Greenbergian universals would focus on more concreteness, bigger sample size, Chomskyan universals will consist of more abstractness and generative principles. So, at very first sight what happens, when you look at the database for language and universals, you might feel that Greenberg's approach is necessarily correct because it includes a lot of languages to establish your claim or to claim that this particular linguistic phenomenon is available across languages. Then you need to get data from each of the languages that you want to study.

It seems Greenbergian universals are more concrete, and obviously, because of the limitations human beings cannot really study all the languages in the world. Practically or humanly it is not possible. So, whatever sample size that Greenberg has studied so far, his way of studying universals seems to be more correct or more necessarily correct if you compare with the other one. But that does not mean that a generative description of a language is flawed, not really, a generative description of language more specifically of the syntax.

When you are talking about the generativist principle-based universals, it is mainly syntactic universals. So, in this case it maintains that there would be a syntactic representation which are highly abstract objects and to understand the abstractness of syntactic structure we need to

find out the syntactic representation that characterizes most versions of the generative grammar.

So, both the approaches, one is the Greenbergian typology, the other when a Chomskyan generativist typology they seem to be completely or diametrically opposite to each other. But if you look at it carefully then you see that one school of thought would focus on bigger sample size, more concrete analysis; the other school of thought would focus on acquisition based abstractness. Why children acquire their first language in a certain way and what are the potential problems that children face while acquiring the language?

Do you think these potential problems can result in this way by which the children are acquiring language does it say anything about the universal pattern of human language, which is why we have the universal grammar. So, if we have something called universal grammar, can we link it with the universal phenomenon that language has? Can we really come up with some kind of combination with this? Language acquisition is going to be a very strong tool to identify Chomskyan type of universals and empirical study is going to be a very important tool to understand the Greenbergian study.

So, what does this imply? It implies that if we follow the generativist approach, we must internalize rules for passing from the abstract structures to the more concrete levels. This transfer of the abstract structures to the concrete levels; that means, there must be some kind of universal feature at the abstract level. That also has to be taken care of as far as universals are concerned.

Since I always focus on both the aspects and I told you when I say typological approach I am going to talk about formal typology which is a generative typology and the functional typology which is let us say all these descriptive typology. I will give you a lot of data from the descriptive point of view, but that does not mean that I am not going to talk about formal universals much.

I will very briefly talk about the formal school of thought, how the generativists approach universals, but primarily I will focus on the functionalist approach.

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## Classification of Language Universals

- I. Formal and Substantive
- II. Implicational and Non-Implicational
- III. Absolute and Tendencies



The best possible way to advocate the generativist work on language universal is the child language acquisition. Why do you think the reason why the child acquires her first language so effortlessly? It is the crucial abstract principle of generative grammar, Comrie would say that following Chomsky's the innateness hypothesis.

A human child acquires all these complexities of human language so effortlessly; that gives us an idea that there must be something universal, there must be something common among all the human languages. This is available to the child since her birth, and probably a certain period soon after the birth as part of the growing process. As a part of the growing process the language has always been there with the child there must be something universal about it. That is how the generativists will approach linguistic universals.

With this information about the two different methodologies that we have, let us focus on the functionalist perspective first and then if given time we will move to more discussions on formal linguistic universals. But, as of now, we will just try to figure out what are the different kinds of universals that have the restricted ones, unrestricted ones, absolute ones or let us say implicational ones. What are the different kinds of universals that we have as far as human languages are concerned? And then we will see how the universals can be linked to typology.

So, if we follow Comrie's work, Comrie would work on language universals following an empiricist approach or following a descriptive approach taking into account a lot of language samples. Data from a wide range of languages have been studied and on the basis of that they have come up with some classification of universals.

Some of them could be the implications, some of them could be the absolute ones. If you look at the way language universals have been studied so far, you can categorize them in a certain way and how you are going to categorize them, that is important to understand the types of universals from a typological fashion.

Since we just had a brief idea about how the universals are accounted for, or how the universals are understood following both the methodologies, both the approaches, one is data rich approach, the other one is abstractness rich approach. In one way following the Greenbergian approach you are taking into account a lot of languages and you are collecting data, you are trying to identify what are the possible constructions which can be considered as universal.

The other hand you are working with a restricted set of data or restricted set of languages, but what you are trying to aim at you are trying to figure out what is the what is the abstractness, or when you approach it from the acquisition perspective, is there anything that can be considered as universals across languages; specially, when you are trying to understand the child language acquisition. If a child is able to acquire complex constructions at a very young age, does it say anything about the universal features of the language?

We will first focus on classification of this. I will just give you a broad classification of language universals. The first type could be formal versus substantive universals; implicational versus non-implicational universals and absolute universals and what are the tendencies.

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## I. Formal and Substantive Universal



- Substantive universals are those categories, taken in a wide sense, are posited as language universals
- A substantive universal is a category that must be present in each individual human language. *g.p.n?*
- The set of substantive universal, in a given area might represent a set from which individual languages can form a subset.

*Substantive Universals*  
Verbs NP Sub DO IO



These are the three primary sets of discussion or the three primary areas of discussion that I am going to talk about in a while. Let us begin the discussion with formal and substantive universals. So, what happens in the generative literature on language universals? There is a particular distinction and this distinction has been playing a very significant role in both formal and substantive one. As the name suggests, when you say formal; that means, you are talking about the abstractness of universals.

When you are talking about the substantive; that means, you are substantiating with the empirical data. So, what is the distinction which will help us to segregate or to differentiate the formal ones from the substantive ones? So, let us say substantive universals, the first point that you need to highlight, that you need to remember that the substantive universals when you take it in a wide sense, they are considered as language universals. Let us say in syntax you have something the categories like verb, so here I am going to write; the substantive universals.

So, you have categories like verbs, then let us say you have noun phrase, subject, direct object, NP is noun phrase, then subject then direct object a few things, indirect object these are the things which are going to be a part of the language universal. It is in syntax, let us say

in phonology you might have phonemes, you might have phones, in morphology you might have morphemes.

These are very common things which are available across languages. So, when you were trying to understand the substantive universals; that means, this is a category that must be present in each individual human language. The second point on the slide is very important. These are the features or these are the items in any language you are going to encounter.

If it is a verb, if it is a noun phrase, if it is a direct object, if it is an indirect object, anything that clearly gives us an idea that distinguishes that these are the features of a possible language and if these features are not there the language seemed to be impossible to conceive. So, that means, if you put it together, the substantive universals are distinctive and necessary characteristics of human language, and these would be either the possible characteristics or impossible characteristics.

If it is possible characteristic, that means, each language will have that; impossible characteristic then definitely these features are not going to be available in any of the languages like 1 and 0. When you focus on the substantive universal it will give you an idea that there are certain features which are available across the languages. The second point is very important. So, the linguistic items like this when they are considered to be substantive universal; that means, they are available across all the individual languages.

And the set of substantive universal they might represent a form which the individual language is a subset. So, a substantive universal is like a bigger umbrella term. In this bigger umbrella term individual languages will have a subset of it, individual languages will have certain kind of tiny items from the bigger whole or from the bigger paradigm called substantive universals.



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## I. Formal and Substantive Universal



- Formal universals are statements on the form of rules of grammar.
- E.g. "no language could form a question by simply inverting the word order"
  - 1(a) This is the house that Jack built.
  - \* (b) built Jack that house the is this?
- This is true for a wide range of languages

• *Substantive vs Formal: The former distinguishes what is necessary from what is unnecessary, the latter distinguishes between what is possible and what is impossible.*



On the other hand you have formal universals. Formal universals are rather statements on the form of rules of grammar; these are not about independent linguistic units rather these are statements. So, what these statements they would say for example, let us look at the example over here. "No language could form a question by simply inverting the word order" if you just invert the word order, it may not be considered as a question. The example is here, this is the house that Jack built.

If say built Jack that house the is this it is not going to be considered as a sentence or as a question. This particular phenomenon seems to be true for a wide range of languages. That means, when you compare substantive with formal, substantive universals would target certain linguistics unit a noun, a verb, an adverb or a direct object, indirect object. These are the individual items that the language would target and keeping that in mind we would identify or we would try to figure out what would be the difference with the formal universals.

When we move to the formal universals, these are not related to individual linguistic items, rather these are related to the statements. One such statement the example could be this. No language could form a question by simply inverting the word order. Just by changing the

word order it does not seem to be like it I do not think you can actually form a kind of question in it, it is true or it is acceptable in most of the individual languages.

So, that is the basic difference. If you write something like substantive versus formal, substantive universal distinguishes what is necessary from what is unnecessary, and the formal universal would tell you what is possible and what is impossible. So, one is the demand of necessity, the other one is the demand of the possibility or impossible things. So, when it is substantive, it will tell you whether a language needs something or not, whether something is necessary or unnecessary.

If you have possible ones or the impossible one; so, the possible and impossible would be under the formal category, let us say when you change the word order it is not possible for most of the languages to be considered as a question statement or as a question or an interrogative sentence, to frame a question you just cannot do it like that you start it from the right hand side or you start it from the you just invert the word order and the sentence is going to be a question that does not work.

So remember, substantive universal talks about independent or individual linguistic units formal universals rather would talk about the statements. So, substantive universal would distinguish what is necessary and what is unnecessary and formal universals would talk about what is possible and what is impossible. This is just a broad way of dividing the universals on the basis of their substantiveness and formal categories. They are more into it and we are going to discuss it in the coming session.

Thank you.

Keywords: typology, Greenbergian universal, Chomskyan universal, generativist universal, absolute universal, implicational universal, formal universal, substantive universal