

LANGUAGE UNIVERSALS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

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Annotation: This article gives information about language universals and their characteristic features. Language universals are patterns or principles that are found across all languages and are not specific to any one language or language family. These universals are considered to be innate to human language and can help researchers understand the common features and structures that underlie all human communication. They can include phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic features of language. By studying language universals, linguists can gain insight into the fundamental properties of human language and the ways in which it is structured and used across different cultures and communities. Understanding these universals can also help researchers develop theories about the origins and evolution of language.

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. Languages we do not speak or understand may sound like meaningless babble to us, but all the human languages that have ever been studied by linguists are amazingly similar. They all share a number of characteristics, which linguists call language universals. These language universals can be considered properties of the Universal Grammar that Chomsky proposed. Here is a list of some of the major ones. All human cultures have a human language and use it to

communicate. All human languages change over time, a reflection of the fact that all cultures are also constantly changing. All languages are systematic, rule-driven, and equally complex overall, and equally capable of expressing any idea that the speaker wishes to convey. There are no primitive languages. All languages are symbolic systems. All languages have a basic word order of elements, like subject, verb, and object, with variations. All languages have similar basic grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs. Every spoken language is made up of discrete sounds that can be categorized as vowels or consonants. The underlying structure of all languages is characterized by the feature duality of patterning, which permits any speaker to utter any message they need or wish to convey, and any speaker of the same language to understand the message. 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). The study of the structures of language is called descriptive linguistics. Descriptive linguists discover and describe the phonemes of a language, research called phonology. They study the lexicon (the vocabulary) of a language and how the morphemes are used to create new words, or

morphology. They analyze the rules by which speakers create phrases and sentences, or the study of syntax. And they look at how these features all combine to convey meaning in certain social contexts, fields of study called semantics and pragmatics. A phoneme is defined as the minimal unit of sound that can make a difference in meaning if substituted for another sound in a word that is otherwise identical. The phoneme itself does not carry meaning. For example, in English if the sound we associate with the letter “p” is substituted for the sound of the letter “b” in the word bit, the word’s meaning is changed because now it is pit, a different word with an entirely different meaning. The human articulatory anatomy is capable of producing many hundreds of sounds, but no language has more than about 100 phonemes. English has about 36 or 37 phonemes, including about eleven vowels, depending on dialect. Hawaiian has only five vowels and about eight consonants. No two languages have the same exact set of phonemes. A morpheme is a minimal unit of meaning in a language; a morpheme cannot be broken down into any smaller units that still relate to the original meaning. It may be a word that can stand alone, called an unbound morpheme (dog, happy, go, educate). Or it could be any part of a word that carries meaning that cannot stand alone but must be attached to another morpheme, bound morphemes. They may be placed at the beginning of the root word, such as un- (“not,” as in unhappy), or re- (“again,” as in rearrange). Or, they may follow the root, as in -ly (makes an adjective into an adverb: quickly from quick), -s (for plural, possessive, or a verb ending) in English. Some languages, like Chinese, have very few if any bound morphemes. Others, like Swahili have so many that nouns and verbs cannot stand alone as separate words; they must have one or more other bound morphemes attached to them.

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