Language universals

There are two sections of the presentation in the class today. In section one, we will discuss about what human languages have in common, and then will talk about various kinds of **language universals**.

In the second section, we will talk about the ways in which languages differ from each other and how they differ in a surprisingly systematic manner.

Meaning, we can predict the differences very well despite the fact they are not the core domain of research in language universals.

If you recall, we did talk about the system of language in terms of '….it is but natural for the languages to display the differences. Thus, it is natural that languages in different parts of the world are extremely different'.

For example, when we compare the structure of **Japanese** and **Arabic** and then we compare them to **Fula**, the similarities are not immediately striking as the differences are very natural to notice which show up from the languages in general across the board.

 So, let us examine the structure of these languages and talk about the differences first;

(1) *'The servant gave the horse water' in Japanese, Arabic, and Fula*

(1a) Japanese: *Shiyooni ga   uma   ni   mizu wo   ageta*
        servant   NOM horse DAT water ACC gave

(1b) Arabic: *'a͡tā l-kh ādimu   l-h͡is͡āna   mā'an*
        gave   the-servant-NOM the-horse- ACC water-ACC

(1c) Fula: *Suka   hokkii puccu ndiyam.*
        servant gave   horse   water

The differences amongst these three languages are minimally based on the following facts;
Pronunciation i.e. velarized consonants **t͡** and **s͡**
Word order : SOV, VSO, SVO
Markers : subject and direct and indirect objects

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The similarities

In spite of the differences, these languages still have a lot in common- **one may even claim that the similarities are more striking than the differences**.

For example, the **Central components of the event i.e. an action of giving with three "participants"**: the servant, the horse, and the water.

In all three languages, the **action of giving is denoted by a verb.** while the servant, the horse and the water are **denoted by nouns**.

These four components of the event are assembled into a sentence with a subject ('servant'), two objects ('horse', 'water'), and a verb ('give').

Most or all languages in the world share these and many other features.

Thus in typology, we can discuss about the features which human languages have in common, and are known as **language universals**.

Types of language universals

Formal and Substantive Universals

Formal universals are statements on form of rules of grammar.

It is though necessary to distinguish amongst necessary, possible and impossible properties of rules of grammar in human language, but rules are always there in the grammars and they constitute universals.

We might make a formal claim that no language can have a **formal rule that operates by giving a left-right inversion of a string of arbitrary length** for interrogative sentences.

The above mentioned rule means that no language could form a question sentence just by inverting the word order of the sentence and have no rule(s) for it.

There are 'aux inversion-rule' in English that we know as 'aux-hopping', but it is not simply an inversion of a string of arbitrary length.

If accepted as the legitimate question to be asked about the structure of a language, this kind of formalization of universal will be called formal one.

Substantive universals: the substantive universals are those categories of human language out of which universals in languages are posited (I hope you also have the same reading of Comrie's line).

For example, in syntax they might include such categories as noun, verb, noun phrase, subject, direct object, indirect object, verb phrase.

In phonology, a clear example of substantive universals would be the distinctive features of Jakobsonian phonology.

Absolute universals

Absolute universals: An absolute universal holds true for all the languages. The following examples are worth explaining here:

a. All languages have consonants and vowels.

b. All languages make a distinction between nouns and verbs.

c. All languages have ways to form question sentences.

Absolute universals are assumed to be true for all languages at all times, even for the languages for which no written records is available.

Even for those languages that have become extinct without leaving any document.

- It is often difficult to ascertain what constitutes absolute universals, since we do not have access to reliable information about all languages in the world.

- For instance, while it is very likely that all languages of the world make a distinction between vowels and consonants, we cannot a priori rule out the possibility of a language with only vowels or only consonants.

- For instance, in the vast majority of languages, the subject usually precedes the object, but there are also languages where this does not hold true, and there are languages in which even the distinction between subject and object does not apply.

Non-absolute or tendencies

Non-absolute universals: This kind of universal accepts exceptions. They are properties of languages that usually hold true. Despite the fact that these properties do not reflect something that are essential to all human languages, they represent significant tendencies. The more exception, the less is the tendencies. For example:

a. Most languages have the vowel [i] as in the English word *feet*

b. Most languages have adjectives.

c. Languages usually employ rising intonation to signal a *yes* or *no*

All these statements have a high degree of probability, but they obviously do not apply to all the languages and the degree also varies for different non-absolute universals.

Implicational VS non-implicational

There are some properties of human language which might not need reference of any other property for their existence. For example, the statement that all languages have ORAL VOWELS makes no reference to any other items that must or must not be present in languages. The statement mentioned above and the universals that it implies will be called non-implicational.

However, there are statements regarding the properties of human language which will require the presence of some other property in that language. This kind of universal is called implicational universal.

For example: if a language has VSO as basic word order, then it has prepositions. In this universal, two properties are involved: the presence or absence of VSO, and the presence or absence of preposition. If we combine these properties, we get four possibilities for this universal: e.g.

Let us symbolize the presence of VSO = X (thus the absence of VSO will be *not X*)

And the presence of preposition = Y (the absence of preposition is *not Y*)

The four possibilities:

A. X   ----   Y

B. X   ---- not Y

C. Not X --- Y

D. Not X---- not Y

Welsh with VSO and preposition exemplifies the A. English with no VSO has preposition as in C. Japanese with no VSO and no preposition proves D. However, type B is not attested by any language where there is VSO but no preposition.

We, however, have to be little alert in terms of framing the implicational universals. It is assumed that we can easily implicate the presence/absence of a smaller category of human language by the presence/absence of any bigger category. However, the vice-versa leads to a difficult situation. For example:

If a language has nasalized vowels, then it also has oral vowels.

Let us see the possibilities as we attempted earlier:

The four possibilities:

A. X   ----   Y   = ok

B. X   ---- not Y =??????

C. Not X --- Y   =ok

D. Not X---- not Y =?????? (how can we have a language with no vowel at all???).

- Another example would be something like, if a language has voiced fricatives like [v] and [z] (property A), it also has unvoiced fricatives like [f] and [s] (property B).

- The reverse is not true, since many languages have unvoiced fricatives, but not voiced fricatives.

- For an implicational universal to make sense, there must also exist languages that have neither property A nor property B.

- Now let us combine Absolute VS non-absolute(tendencies) with implicational VS non-implicational universals for a four way distinction.

Complex Universals

a. Absolute implicational universals: such as if a language has SOV as the basic word order, it will probably have postpositions.

b. Absolute non-implicational universals: such as all languages have vowels.

c. Implicational non-absolute universals (tendencies): such as if a language has SOV, it will have postpositions, however, Persian with SOV has prepositions.

d. Non-implicational tendencies (non-absolute universals): such as nearly all languages have nasal consonants, although some Salishan languaes have no nasal consonants.