Language universals

In this section, we will first discuss about what human languages have in common which can lead to generalization, and then will talk about various kinds of language universals.

In our next discussion, we will talk about the ways in which languages differ from each other and how their differences can be mapped 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 both of them to Fula, the similarities are not immediately striking as the differences are very natural that surface from these languages in a general comparison.

So, let us examine the structure of these languages and talk about the differences first;
The differences amongst these three languages are minimally based on the following facts;

Pronunciation i.e. velarized consonants $\text{t}_\zeta$ and $\text{s}_\zeta$

Word order: SOV, VSO, SVO

Subject, direct object and indirect object markers
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.
- We have the central component of an 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 referred to with a verb,
- while the servant, the horse and the water are referred-to with 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, we shall discuss about the features which human languages have in common, and are known as language universals.
Types of language universals

Formal Universals and Substantive Universals:


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.

The above mentioned rule means that no language could form questions by simply inverting the word order of the sentence.

But, if we know the way ‘aux-inversion’ brings ‘yes-no’ question sentences in English and many other languages.

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 universal.
**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 cf. Comrie, 1981: Pp. 15).

For example, in syntax they might include such categories as noun, verb, noun phrase, subject, direct object, indirect object, verb phrase. A substantive universal may be a category that must be present in each individual human language (e.g. in phonology, vowel would be a good candidate).

On the other hand, the set of substantive universals in a given area might represent a set from which individual languages select a subset, i.e. they would define the total range available to natural languages, items from outside this range being defined as impossibilities.

For example, in phonology, a clear example of substantive universals would be the distinctive features of Jakobsonian phonology. Each language has to have a set of distinctive features that are given in the total possible number of distinctive features of Jakobsonian phonology.
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 records or documents.

The claim made in the last line may not qualify a rigorous and critical discussion, but this is supposed to be true at its face value!
• It is often difficult to ascertain what constitutes absolute universals!
• It is so because 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.
• Though, there is a physiological constrain that a consonant sound can’t be produced without the help of a vowel sound!
• However, there are exceptions. Not that Arabic doesn’t have vowels, but the way Arabic language make use of vowel is a very different story! But, of course, it makes a distinction of consonant and vowel sounds.
• Another example is given that 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 at all.
• So, how do we ascertain the ‘absolute universals’!
Non-absolute Universals 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 front high vowel [i] as in the English word *feet*.

b. Most languages have adjectives.

c. Languages usually employ rising intonation to signal a *yes* or a *no* in the speech of their speakers.

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 statements.

All the above statements in the form of generalization represent non-absolute universals.
Implicational VS non-implicational

There are some features/properties of human language which might not need reference of any other feature/property for their existence or attestation in languages.
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.
That is, in order to have its existence in languages, ‘oral vowels’ need no reference of any other feature of the language.
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 features/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 \( \text{not } X \))

And the presence of preposition = \( Y \) (the absence of preposition is \( \text{not } Y \))

The four possibilities:

A. \( X \) ---- \( Y \)
B. \( X \) ---- \( \text{not } Y \)
C. \( \text{not } X \) --- \( Y \)
D. \( \text{not } X \) ---- \( \text{not } Y \)

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???).

Hope the students understand as to what is the problem in such generalization.

I would also like to request the students at this stage that you all should read Comrie’s chapter on language universals.
• Another example would be something like this....
• ‘... 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 some 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 languages (also Salish languages) are a group of languages of the Pacific Northwest in North America and they have no nasal consonants.

That’s all 😊