

## Framework-free grammatical theory

Martin Haspelmath

July 2008

To appear in: Heine, Bernd & Narrog, Heiko (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Grammatical Analysis*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Framework-free grammatical description/analysis and explanation is argued here to be superior to framework-bound analysis because all languages have different categories, and languages should be described in their own terms. Frameworks represent aprioristic assumptions that are likely to lead to a distorted description of a language. I argue against restrictive theoretical frameworks of the generative type, against frameworks of functional approaches such as Functional Grammar and Role and Reference Grammar, and against Basic Linguistic Theory.

### 1 Why framework-free?

While some readers may find this surprising, in this chapter I claim that there are many linguists who carry out theoretical research on grammar but do not work within a theoretical framework, and I show how this is done. As far as I know, this theoretical stance has not been articulated in detail before, at least not in contrast with the typical 20th-century frameworks, some of which are represented in this book. There is a widespread view that it is in principle impossible to do framework-free grammatical research, and that those who do not adhere to a particular framework in fact work in an "eclectic" framework or in the framework of "Basic Linguistic Theory". I will argue here that this is not the case. Framework-free grammatical theory is not only possible and widely practiced, but is, I believe, the best approach to the scientific study of language structure, though of course the space limits of this chapter do not allow me to make a full case for this assertion.

Most linguists seem to agree that we should approach any language without prejudice and describe it in its own terms, non-aprioristically, overcoming possible biases from our native language, from the model of a prestige language (such as Latin or English), or from an influential research tradition (such as that of Donatus's Latin grammar, or Chomsky's generative grammar). I argue that this is absolutely essential if we want to come even close to doing justice to our research object, and that moreover any grammatical framework is precisely such a "prejudice" that we want to avoid. Frameworks set up expectations about what phenomena languages should, can and cannot have, and once a framework has been adopted, it is hard to free oneself from the perspective and the constraints imposed by it. What we need instead is the researcher's ability to discover completely new, unexpected phenomena, to detect previously unsuspected connections between phenomena, and to be guided solely by the data and one's own thinking.

One might object that while this is a noble goal, it is in fact impossible, and that it is better to adopt some off-the-shelf framework and work within it, even if one is aware of some of its limitations. Against this, I argue that framework-free theorizing is possible, and that it is practiced more widely than many linguists think. But before we can get to some concrete examples, a few key concepts need to be discussed in the next section (§2). (Readers with time constraints may skip §2 and read it only at a later stage, to allow them a deeper understanding of the main points and the terminology adopted here.) In §3, I argue for and exemplify framework-free grammatical analysis, and in §4-6 I discuss the problems associated with three kinds of frameworks, restrictive frameworks (§4), functional frameworks (§5), and Basic Linguistic Theory (§6). In addition to grammatical analysis, grammatical theory also has comparative and explanatory tasks, and the framework-free approach to these is presented in §7.

## 2 Some fundamental concepts

**2.1 Grammar.** My topic here is grammatical theory, i.e. theory of morphosyntax. Very similar issues arise in phonology, but I will not discuss phonological frameworks and framework-free phonological theory here (but see Mielke 2008 for a recent account of phonology that is very similar in spirit).

**2.2 Framework.** A framework (also called *descriptive framework*, or *theoretical framework*) is a sophisticated and complex metalanguage for linguistic description that is intended to work for any language. As Dryer (2006a: 29) notes, it is often possible to "translate" a particular analysis from one framework into another framework (e.g. from Relational Grammar into Government-Binding Theory), as is expected if frameworks are metalanguages. Such translations are often not completely equivalent, i.e. the two analyses are more than notational variants of each other. But since descriptive frameworks tend to be complex and difficult to master, and few linguists specialize in translating between frameworks, it is often difficult to see which aspects of an analysis are specific to a particular framework and do not translate readily.

Descriptive frameworks are often called *theoretical frameworks* or simply *theories*, but this practice is not followed here because the term *theory* has multiple senses and is best reserved for another sense, as we will see in the next subsection.

**2.3 Theory.** I distinguish four senses of the term *theory* here, all of which are common in current linguistics. I find it most useful to limit the application of this term to senses 3 and 4. The term *theory* in the title of this chapter is intended in sense 4.

Sense 1: As we saw in the preceding subsection (§2.2), *theory* is often used in the sense 'descriptive framework', for a sophisticated metalanguage for describing languages.<sup>1</sup> Some of these frameworks have *theory* in their name (e.g. Government-Binding Theory, Optimality Theory, Basic Linguistic Theory). Framework-free descriptions are sometimes seen as "atheoretical", and this is correct if *theory* is used in sense (1).

Sense 2: A theory is sometimes understood as an abstract model or description of a complex empirical domain. Thus, one can say that a description of English is a theory of the competence of an English speaker.

Sense 3: A theory can be a set of coherent hypotheses or claims about a particular phenomenon, e.g. a theory of what caused dinosaurs to die out, or a particular theory of restrictions on *wh*-movement.

Sense 4: Finally, the term *theory* can be used in a loose sense, referring to theoretical (i.e. non-applied) scientific work, or "theorizing". It is in this sense that *usage-based theory* and *valency theory* should be taken in this handbook, and it is in this sense that *theory* is used in the title of this chapter.

Thus, in this chapter I discuss theorizing about morphosyntactic phenomena that makes no use of descriptive frameworks.

**2.4 Description.** By *description* I mean the characterization of grammatical regularities of particular languages. Grammatical descriptions must make use of abstract general entities such as rules, schemas and constraints, because all languages allow an indefinitely large

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dryer (2006a:28-29): "The notion of theory widely assumed in formal linguistics is essentially equivalent to that of a metalanguage for describing languages. Providing an analysis of a particular set of data within a formal theory involves providing a description of that data within the metalanguage that constitutes that theory."

number of sentences and it is therefore not possible to describe a language by listing all its sentences.

It is often said that linguists should strive not only to describe the rules in such a way that speaker behaviour can be predicted accurately ("phenomenological description" in Haspelmath's 2004 terms), but they should also strive to describe languages in such a way that the description reflects the speakers' internal generalizations correctly ("cognitive description", or "descriptive adequacy" in Chomsky's terms). However, it is far from clear that the latter is an attainable goal, because often different generalizations are compatible with the facts, and we have no way of knowing which generalization is adopted by the speakers (note that it could be that different speakers have different generalizations). Thus, linguists must by and large be content with descriptions that accurately predict the behaviour of speakers in natural corpora and experimental contexts.

**2.5 Analysis.** I use the term *analysis* synonymously with *description*. In linguists' current usage, *analysis* generally seems to imply a higher level of generalization, but this is a matter of degree. All linguistic description must involve generalizations (rules, schemas, constraints), and there is no distinction in principle between shallower and deeper generalizations. (Another usage of the term *analysis* is in the sense 'description within a particular framework'. Many papers in the generative tradition first provide a fairly framework-free description of the relevant phenomena ("the data") and then go on to provide a second, framework-bound description ("the analysis"). Since this chapter argues against framework-bound descriptions, this second sense of the term *analysis* is not of interest here.)

### 3 Framework-free grammatical analysis

#### 3.1 Advantages

Most linguists agree that in describing or analyzing an unfamiliar language, we should strive to avoid being biased by our native language or other languages we know well. The practice of pre-modern linguists that described non-European languages in terms of Latin grammar has been thoroughly discredited. Now that English grammar has replaced Latin grammar as a tradition that is (almost) universally known among linguists, we do not want to repeat the errors of the pre-modern era and carry over concepts from English grammar to other languages. Likewise, we do not want to be biased by influential descriptions of other languages. Thus, linguists describing Australian languages do not want their descriptions to be Dyirbalocentric, despite the enormous influence of Dixon's (1972) description of Dyirbal. Since the advent of the Boasian approach in ethnography and structuralism (both European and American) in linguistics, it has been the goal of descriptivists to approach a language without prejudice and to do justice to its system, regardless of what systems other languages might have. We want to describe each language in its own terms.

Now my observation is that this goal of prejudice-free non-aprioristic description (or analysis) conflicts with the idea that a description should be based on a framework. It is well-known that some frameworks have an English bias (cf. Van Valin 2005, who criticizes Chomskyan generative grammar in this regard; see also Van Valin, this volume). But even if it were possible to create a framework that avoids the bias of a particular language, the framework itself would constitute a bias, a set of prejudices with which a language is approached. A metalanguage by definition provides a pre-established set of expressions with a certain meaning, and by limiting ourselves to such a metalanguage, we would not be able to do justice to a language whose system does not correspond exactly to the concepts provided by the metalanguage. As has been argued at length by Croft (2001) (see also Dryer 1997,

Haspelmath 2007, 2008+c, Cristofaro 2008+), grammatical categories and relations are language-specific, for all we know at the moment.

Of course, things could be simple: There could be a small set of innate grammatical categories and relations ("substantive universals") from which languages may choose, and a simple grammatical architecture linking the various components of the grammar ("formal universals"). It would be the linguists' task to determine the substantive and formal universals (in other words, universal grammar), and this would constitute the framework. Since it is innate, all languages must be describable within this framework. If this picture corresponded to the reality of languages, linguists' life would be easy and description could be based on a framework. However, all practicing linguists know that things are vastly more complicated: If a universal grammar, as envisaged in the Chomskyan tradition, exists, we are still very far from knowing what it is like. Almost every language presents us with new puzzles, with new categories and structures that do not fit into our frameworks. The idea that a single uniform framework could be designed that naturally accommodates all languages is totally utopian at the moment. So instead of fitting a language into the Procrustean bed of an existing framework, we should liberate ourselves from the frameworks and describe languages in their own terms.

This has in fact been practiced widely by grammarians in the 20th century, especially by linguists working in the Boasian tradition of linguistic fieldwork or the traditions of European or American structuralism. Let us now look at two concrete examples of framework-free description.

### 3.2 First example: Tagalog basic sentence structure

Schachter & Otnes (1972: 59-85), still under the influence of American structuralism, describe Tagalog basic sentence structure in its own terms, and the result is a picture that is rather different from what is found in English (with which the authors contrast Tagalog). The basic pattern of Tagalog is not [<sub>sentence</sub> NP VP], but [<sub>sentence</sub> Predicate Topic]. There is a very rough correspondence between the Tagalog Topic and the English Subject NP, as can be seen in (1a). But the Topic may also correspond to the English Direct Object (as in 1b) or an English Prepositional Object (as in 1c). It is defined by its position (following the Predicate) and by its marking (Topic marker *ang*, used with non-pronominal, non-proper name Topics), not by its semantic role, which may be quite diverse.

(1) Tagalog (Schachter & Otnes 1972)

- a. [*Gumising*]<sub>PRED</sub> [*ang bata*]<sub>TOP</sub>. (p. 60)  
awoke TOP child  
'The child awoke.'
- b. [*Sinulat ko*]<sub>PRED</sub> [*ang liham*]<sub>TOP</sub>. (p. 60)  
wrote I.CORE TOP letter  
'I wrote the letter.'
- c. [*Sinulatan ko*]<sub>PRED</sub> [*ang titser*]<sub>TOP</sub>. (p. 60)  
wrote I.CORE TOP teacher  
'I wrote to the teacher.'
- d. [*Artista*]<sub>PRED</sub> [*ang babae*]<sub>TOP</sub>. (p. 61)  
actress TOP woman  
'The woman is an actress.'

- e. [Artista]<sub>PRED</sub> [ang nagluto ng pagkain]<sub>TOP</sub>. (p. 61)  
 actress TOP cooked CORE food  
 'The one who cooked some food is an actress.'

However, Topics have a semantic peculiarity that has no counterpart in English syntax: they must be definite. The main word of the Predicate is often a Verb (as in 1a-c), but it may also be a Noun (as in 1d-e) or an Adjective, so that calling the Predicate a "VP" would not make sense from the Tagalog point of view. Likewise, the main word of the Topic is often a Noun (as in 1a-d), but it can also be a Verb, as in (1e). While English needs a special Relative Clause construction (*the one who...*) to make a referential expression corresponding to Tagalog *ang nagluto ng pagkain*, Tagalog can combine the Topic marker *ang* directly with the verb *nagluto*. Thus, even describing the Topic as a kind of "NP" would be very misleading, and Schachter & Otnes do not do this. Concepts from Latin and English grammar such as "subject", "NP" and "VP" play no role in their description of Tagalog. The terms "Predicate" and "Topic" are taken from the Western tradition, but they are given meanings that are specific to Tagalog (hence the capitalization of the terms here.)

### 3.3 Second example: German sentence-level word order

Since Drach (1937), descriptions of German word order have often posited a sentence schema for German that consists of at least five linear positions: Prefield, Left Bracket, Middlefield, Right Bracket, and Postfield. This way of describing German word order has come to be known as "field topology". Drach, a European structuralist, noted explicitly that his description was an attempt to "separate it from the ways of thinking of Latin grammar", he wanted to present German in a way that was founded in "the nature of the German language", and he urged that German be studied "without presuppositions, from outside", and "not through the Latin lens" (Drach 1937:§4, §16).

A recent summary of German field topology is found in Zifonun et al. (1997.2: 1498-1505). In field topology, the verbal complex is the central element of the sentence. Its two elements in main declarative clauses constitute the Sentence Bracket (see the boldface elements in 2a-c).

- (2) a. *Das Kind **hat** den Apfel heute **gegessen**.*  
 the child has the apple today eaten  
 'The child ate the apple today.'
- b. *Mutti **ruft** dich heute **wahrscheinlich an**.*  
 mom calls you today probably up  
 'Mom will probably call you today.'
- c. *Er **ist** dann **natürlich gerannt** wie ein Verrückter.*  
 he is then naturally run like a fool  
 'Then of course he ran like crazy.'

The finite verb (*hat, ruft, ist* in 2a-c) is the Left Bracket, the non-finite verb (*gegessen, gerannt*) or the verb particle (*an*) is the Right Bracket. The position before the finite verb is called the Prefield, the position inside the bracket is called the Middlefield, and the position following the right bracket is called the Postfield. Thus, all German sentences follow the schema in (3).

- (3) Prefield – Left Bracket – Middlefield – Right Bracket – Postfield

A whole range of generalizations can be formulated in terms of this schema, e.g.

(i) The elements of the verbal complex occur in the Left Bracket (finite verb) and in the Right Bracket (particle, nonfinite verb, in this order) in clauses without a subordinator.

(ii) The Prefield can only be filled by one single constituent (cf. 4a, where *das Kind* and *heute* are two constituents).

(iii) The Postfield can only be filled by clausal and other heavy constituents (though in the spoken language this condition is often relaxed) (cf. 4b, which is only possible in the spoken language, and not generally considered correct).

(iv) In main declarative clauses, the Prefield and the Left Bracket have to be filled (cf. 4c).

(v) In polar questions (and a few other specific sentence types), the Prefield is empty (cf. 4d).

(vi) In clauses with a subordinator, the subordinator occurs in the Left Bracket position, the Prefield is empty and the entire verbal complex occurs in the Right Bracket (the order is: particle, non-finite verb, finite verb) (cf. 4e)

- (4) a. \**Das Kind heute hat den Apfel gegessen.*  
 the child today has the apple eaten  
 'The child today ate the apple.'
- b. ??*Das Kind hat den Apfel gegessen heute.*  
 the child has the apple eaten today  
 'The child ate the apple today.'
- c. \**Mutti dich heute wahrscheinlich an-ruft.*  
 mom you today probably up-calls  
 'Mom will probably call you today.'
- d. *Ruft Mutti dich heute an?*  
 calls mom you today up  
 'Will mom call you today?'
- e. ...*dass Mutti sie gestern wahrscheinlich an-gerufen hat.*  
 that mom her yesterday probably up-called has  
 '...that mom probably called him yesterday.'

These generalizations do not exhaust the word order rules of German, but other regularities mostly have to do with information structure. Crucially, grammatical relations such as "subject" and "object" (terms from Latin grammar) or constituents such as "VP" (a concept derived from English grammar) play no role in field topology.

### 3.4 Possible disadvantages

Two possible disadvantages of the framework-free approach to theoretical grammatical research are obvious and should be mentioned here. Both have to do with difficulty: Framework-free grammatical descriptions are more difficult to construct and more difficult to understand than descriptions built on familiar frameworks.

That creating a coherent, framework-free description of a language requires a major intellectual effort was recognized by the American structuralists, who typically assigned their doctoral students the task of describing a little-known language in its own terms. In the 19th

century, when the need to create a new system of categories for each language had not yet been recognized and the framework of Latin grammar was thought to be universally applicable, description per se was rarely considered sufficiently demanding to give the author much scientific prestige. Similarly, in the generative tradition the description of (part of) a language in the generative framework is not considered sufficiently challenging; in addition, dissertation authors are normally required to make novel proposals about the framework itself.

In addition, it is also easier to understand a grammatical description if it is written in a familiar framework. To understand the descriptions of Tagalog and German that we just saw requires the reader to first comprehend the novel notions of Topic, of Prefield, of Middlefield, etc.

But such considerations are of course irrelevant from a scientific point of view and cannot be used to argue for framework-bound grammatical theory. If each language has its own categories, then it is simply wrong to carry over a category from one language to another language, and to use a framework that was created for one set of phenomena to describe another set of phenomena in a different language. If the correct approach involves greater effort, we have to make this effort.

In practice, however, the difficulties of framework-bound description can be significant, too. Descriptive frameworks have tended to grow in complexity over the last few decades, and mastering a complex framework puts a heavy burden on both the author and the reader. Since this effort is not creative in the same way as framework-free description is, many students of linguistics still find it easier (and professors find it easier to teach), but it binds many resources that are freed in the approach advocated here.

Moreover, the recognition that each language has its own categories does not mean that one cannot learn from other languages, because languages tend to exhibit great similarities in their categories and grammatical patterns. A linguist who has studied twenty (framework-free) grammatical descriptions of different languages will find the twenty-first language description fairly easy to follow, because there will be much that looks familiar from earlier descriptions. Because of the striking similarities between languages, it is often possible to use familiar transparent terminology (e.g. "Noun" for a word class denoting mostly people and things in English, and "Noun" for a semantically similar word class in Tagalog), rather than completely new or opaque terminology ("class B words"). The capitalization of language-specific grammatical terms helps the reader to remember that these are different categories (as with proper names; e.g. Mérida in Spain and Mérida in Venezuela are different cities).

Another objection that has sometimes been raised against framework-free descriptions is that they are "unconstrained". In the following section, I argue that the idea that frameworks should be restrictive is fundamentally mistaken.

## **4. Restrictive frameworks and their problems**

### **4.1. Explanation by constrained description**

One of the main attractions of descriptive frameworks has been the widespread idea that proposed frameworks are not just convenient metalanguages for the explicit, formal(ized) description of any language, but that frameworks are themselves explanatory. Such framework-based explanation is derived from the understanding of frameworks as restrictive: A framework is intended to allow the description of only those languages that actually occur. This idea, which has been prominent in Chomskyan generative linguistics since the 1960s and has been very influential in related approaches as well, is often expressed by its proponents in terms of a notion of descriptive power. Obviously a framework should be powerful enough to describe all languages, but in addition, in this view, it should not be too powerful (or

"unconstrained") and allow the description of all sorts of languages that never occur. In other words, a descriptive framework should be able to describe all possible languages, but impossible languages should not be describable by it. This approach is reflected in the following quotation from Travis:

The problem that the principles and parameters framework seeks to solve is: How can a grammatical system be flexible enough to account for language variation while at the same time be, to a large extent, restricted in order to account for the relative ease of language acquisition and the impossibility of certain language types? (Travis 1989: 263)

If descriptive frameworks were conceived of in the simplest terms, as metalanguages for precise description, they could not have any explanatory role. Notice that outside the field of linguistics, metalanguages do not seem to have the role of excluding impossible phenomena. Ordinary language can describe impossible things ("a rectangular triangle") and events ("the stone fell upwards"); the language of arithmetic can describe impossible numbers ("33/0", or thirty-three divided by zero); and the language of heraldry can describe ill-formed coats of arms (e.g. the coat of arms of Samogitia is a sable bear on a gules field, which violates the rule of tincture that a colour may not be placed on another colour, only on a metal).

But in linguistics, especially generative linguistics, descriptive frameworks have been given an explanatory role. The descriptive framework of generative syntax has been equated with a theory of children's initial state in language acquisition, also called universal grammar (UG). "Universal grammar provides a genuine explanation of observed phenomena" (Chomsky 1988: 61-62), in the sense that only grammars consistent with UG can be acquired by learners and hence occur as adult languages. The fact that some logically possible languages do not occur is expressed in the lack of a possible description in the framework, and it is explained by the hypothesis that the framework reflects the child's innate knowledge of grammar. Thus, the idea that descriptive frameworks should be restrictive (should not be "too powerful", or "unconstrained", or should not "overgenerate") in order to be explanatory presupposes a fairly strong commitment to innateness.

In §4.2-5 we will see four examples of explanation by constrained description. Then in §4.6 we will see that alternative explanations are available for these phenomena, so that there is no good reason to invoke restrictive frameworks.

#### 4.2. First example: X-bar theory

A simple example that illustrates the idea of explanation by constrained description is X-bar theory. Phrase structure rules in human languages are quite diverse (e.g. 5a-c), but some logically possible phrase structure rules seem never to occur (e.g. 6a-c).

- (5) a. NP  $\rightarrow$  D [<sub>N'</sub> N PP] (e.g. *the* [*horse on the meadow*])  
 b. VP  $\rightarrow$  Adv [<sub>V'</sub> V NP] (e.g. *often* [*eats white flowers*])  
 c. PP  $\rightarrow$  Adv [<sub>N'</sub> P NP] (e.g. *right* [*under the tree*])
- (6) a. NP  $\rightarrow$  VP [<sub>N'</sub> Adv P]  
 b. VP  $\rightarrow$  P [<sub>P'</sub> NP Adv]  
 c. PP  $\rightarrow$  [<sub>V'</sub> P NP] V

Phrase structure rules of the traditional sort are thus too powerful and unconstrained, but "with the development of X-bar theory in the late 1960s, substantive constraints were placed on the form that [phrase structure rules] could take, constraints which expressed a particular set of empirical claims about what possible phrase structure arrangements can be found across languages." (McCloskey 1993: 497). X-bar theory, as it has been widely adopted since the



1980s and 1990s, basically only allows phrase structures of the type  $XP \rightarrow YP [X' X ZP]$ . Other phrase structure rule types cannot be formulated in the X-bar framework, and thus their non-existence is explained.

### 4.3 Second example: inflection outside derivation

Greenberg (1963, Universal 28) had observed that derivational affixes always come between the root and inflectional affixes when both inflection and derivation occurs on the same side of the root. Anderson (1992) proposed a model of the architecture of universal grammar from which this generalization falls out: If the lexicon and syntax are two separate components of grammar, and derivation is part of the lexicon, while inflection is part of the syntax, and if rules of the syntactic component, applying after lexical rules, can only add material peripherally, then Greenberg's generalization follows from the model of UG. Words with inflection inside derivation cannot be described in this model, and thus their presumed non-existence is explained.

### 4.4 Third example: antisymmetry and word order asymmetries

Kayne (1994) discusses the mainstream view of phrase structure in generative grammar (i.e. X-bar theory) and finds it "overly permissive", "too unconstrained". He proposes that the precedence relation and the hierarchical relation of c-command should not be independent of each other, but should be directly linked: "If X asymmetrically c-commands Y, x precedes y" (where X and Y are nonterminals and x and y are terminals they dominate; Kayne 1994: 33). This proposal (called *antisymmetry*) entails that all languages have an underlying SVO order, and other surface orders must be derived by movement. This has a number of interesting empirical consequences. For instance, in languages with clause-final complementizers, one has to assume that the entire rest of the clause ("IP") moves to a position preceding the complementizer (C), because underlyingly the complementizer (as the head of the clause) must be clause-initial. Thus, a sentence such as Japanese (7a) has the underlying structure (7b) and the derived structure (7c).

(7) Japanese

- a. *Yooko-wa Masa-o aisite iru ka?*  
Yoko-TOP Masa-ACC loving is Q  
'Does Yoko love Masa?'
- b.  $[_{CP} [_C ka] [_{IP} Yooko-wa [_{VP} aisite iru Masa-o]]]$
- c.  $[_{CP} [_{IP} Yooko-wa [Masa-o_i [_{VP} aisite iru t_i]]]_j [_C ka] t_j]$
- d. *Yooko-wa dare-o aisite iru ka?*  
Yoko-TOP who-ACC loving is Q  
'Whom does Yoko love?'

The landing site for this movement is presumably the specifier of C, a position that in many languages is used as a landing site for *wh*-movement in questions. According to Kayne (1994: 54), this explains that OV languages with final complementizers like Japanese tend not to have *wh*-movement in questions (cf. 7d). In Kayne's antisymmetry framework, such languages cannot be described, and thus their non-existence is explained.

#### 4.5. Fourth example: argument-flagging in Optimality Theory

Like other brands of generative grammar, mainstream Optimality Theory (OT) practices explanation by constrained description. According to McCarthy,

One of the most compelling features of OT, in my view, is the way that it unites description of individual languages with explanation in language typology... OT is inherently typological: the grammar of one language inevitably incorporates claims about the grammars of all languages. (McCarthy 2002: 1)

A striking difference between OT and the proposals in the preceding subsections (§4.2-4.4) is that the interesting aspects of the framework are the constraints, which are often fairly concrete, and not highly abstract principles such as antisymmetry or the lexicon-syntax bifurcation. There is thus often a more direct relationship between the explanatory mechanisms (the constraints) and the explananda (the cross-linguistic patterns).

Here I have space only for one concrete example, the distribution of argument-flagging patterns (i.e. case and adpositional marking) in intransitive and transitive clauses, as discussed and explained by Woolford (2001). Woolford observes that languages may show the patterns in (8a), but do not generally show the patterns in (8b).

(8)	intransitive patterns	transitive patterns
	a.    nominative ergative dative	nominative–accusative ergative–nominative dative–nominative
	b.    accusative	ergative–accusative dative–accusative

Woolford explains these patterns by positing for each of the cases a markedness constraint against it, and a universally fixed ranking of these constraints: *\*ERGATIVE*/*\*DATIVE* >> *\*ACCUSATIVE* >> *\*NOMINATIVE*. This means that other things being equal, nominative is favoured over accusative, and accusative is favoured over ergative and dative (ergative and dative are not ranked with respect to each other). In addition, Woolford posits a faithfulness constraint *FAITHLEX*, which requires that the lexically specified case features must appear on the surface. (The presupposition is that agentive arguments are lexically specified as [+ergative subject], and experiencer subject arguments as [+dative subject].)

Given this system, languages that do not allow non-nominative subjects at all (such as English) are described by the ranking *\*ERGATIVE*/*\*DATIVE* >> *FAITHLEX* >> *\*ACCUSATIVE* >> *\*NOMINATIVE*, i.e. in these languages the markedness constraints against ergative and dative outrank faithfulness. Since nominative is universally least marked, it appears instead of ergative or dative. In languages where faithfulness to role-based lexical specification is ranked higher, ergative and dative subjects can surface (as in Basque and Japanese, for instance). Crucially, the object of ergative/dative-subject clauses can never appear in the accusative because accusative is less favoured than nominative. The intransitive argument cannot appear as accusative for the same reason: *\*ACCUSATIVE* is universally ranked higher than *\*NOMINATIVE*, so that the nominative candidate always wins the competition. Accusative case appears only when another nominative is present, because a higher constraint against equal cases in transitive clauses rules out the nominative–nominative pattern.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a language

---

<sup>2</sup> Woolford assumes another constraint, which is unviolable and outside her OT analysis, that restricts accusative to positions within VP, thus accounting for the impossibility of the accusative–nominative pattern.

with intransitive accusative arguments or transitive ergative–accusative or dative–accusative patterns cannot be described in this system, while attested language types can be described by different constraint rankings.

Analyses of various split marking patterns have been proposed by Aissen (1999; 2003), in much the same spirit as Woolford's. I have discussed and criticized Aissen's proposals elsewhere (Haspelmath 2008b; 2008+d).

#### 4.6 Against restrictive frameworks and explanation by constrained description

As we saw in §4.1, the general strategy of explaining observed constraints on attested languages by a constrained descriptive apparatus presupposes the assumption that this descriptive apparatus is innate (i.e. the assumption of universal grammar). The basic idea is that unattested languages are unacquirable languages. For some reason, generative linguists have by and large ignored the possibility of constraints on attested languages coming from factors of language use rather than language acquisition. But if explanations from language use (also called *functional explanations*) are considered seriously, it soon becomes apparent that they can account for a wide range of constraints on attested languages (cf. Moravcsik 2008+). To be transmitted in a speech community, a language must be usable, not just acquirable. This point has occasionally even been made by generative linguists (see the quotations below), but its consequences for the enterprise of framework-bound grammatical theory have not been widely realized.

...the scope of the language faculty cannot be derived even from an exhaustive enumeration of the properties of existing languages, because these contingent facts result from the *interaction* of the language faculty with a variety of other factors, including the mechanism of historical change.

...observations about preferences, tendencies, and which of a range of structural possibilities speakers will tend to use in a given situation are largely irrelevant to an understanding of what those possibilities are. (Anderson 1999: 121)

[M]any of the so-called *phonological universals* (often discussed under the rubric of markedness) are in fact epiphenomena deriving from the interaction of extragrammatical factors like acoustic salience and the nature of language change... Phonology [i.e. a theory of UG in this domain, M.H.] is not and should not be grounded in phonetics since the facts that phonetic grounding is meant to explain can be derived without reference to *phonology*. (Hale & Reiss 2000:162)

It is not the job of generative theory to account for typological generalizations. Attempts to do so by means of parameterized principles have been failures. Such generalizations belong to the domain of performance, rather than to the domain of formal grammar and, as a consequence, Universal Grammar itself can be relieved of the responsibility of accounting for them. (Newmeyer 2005:126-127)

In Haspelmath (2004), I have summarized the arguments against basing a theory of the cognitive code for language (= universal grammar) on the range of attested languages, pointing out that the situation in biology is quite parallel: The genetic code allows a much wider range of organisms than are actually found in nature. The narrow range of actually existing organisms is primarily determined by survival (i.e. the chance of successful replication), not by constraints on what the genetic code allows. To study the nature of the cognitive code, we should study the acquisition of unattested language types under natural or artificial conditions, but we should not hope to derive much insight from constraints on attested languages. Most of these constraints have very good functional explanations, i.e. explanations deriving from different chances of being replicated in language use (Croft 2000).

For instance, the major true generalizations of X-bar theory (§4.2), that phrases of particular types have heads of particular types, can easily be explained by the task of syntax to express conceptual constituents with similar conceptual structures (cf. Jackendoff 1983, 2002,

Chapter 12). Attempts at extending X-bar theory from NPs, VPs and PPs to other syntactic phrases (such as IP, CP, FocP) are not particularly plausible and have not been fruitful outside a particular narrow framework.

Another example is the position of inflectional affixes and derivational affixes with respect to each other and to the stem (§4.3). Bybee (1985a: 33-35; 1985b) has shown that there is a broader generalization such that grammatical categories whose meaning is more relevant to the verb stem's meaning tend to occur close to it, subsuming Greenberg's Universal 28 under it. She attributes this regularity to iconicity: Meanings that are more relevant to each other are mirrored by forms that occur closer to each other.

Next, what about the position of *wh*-phrases in a clause and other word order properties of the language (§4.4)? Hawkins (2002, §4.3; 2004, §7.3) argues that *wh*-movement creates filler-gap relationships that cause processing difficulty, and that the processing difficulty is greater if the verb (to which most *wh*-phrases are connected semantically) is further away. This predicts that VSO languages should favour *wh*-fronting the most, while SOV languages should favour it the least, with SVO languages in between, and this is borne out by the available cross-linguistic data.<sup>3</sup>

And finally, the occurrence of various argument-flagging patterns in transitive and intransitive clauses is also amenable to a functional explanation. With core arguments, the most important role of argument flagging is distinguishing the arguments, and for this it is sufficient if one of them is marked overtly. The case that is not marked overtly is generally called "nominative", so this functional consideration is sufficient to explain the absence of ergative–accusative and dative–accusative patterns. It does not explain an alleged asymmetry that Woolford's OT system captures: According to Woolford, intransitive clauses with a single ergative argument occur (e.g. in Basque), but intransitive clauses with a single accusative argument do not occur. However, this claim is not backed up with cross-linguistic data, and it is not difficult to find in the literature examples of languages whose intransitive clauses may have accusative single arguments. A language of this kind (the mirror image of Basque) is Central Pomo (a language of California, Mithun 1991: 518-523):

- (9) a. *ʔa· mú:tu ʔé:yčadiw.* (p. 518)  
 I.NOM he.ACC chased.away  
 'I chased him away.'
- b. *Mu-l qʰaʔán:ɬaw.* (p. 522)  
 he.NOM dreamed  
 'He was dreaming.'
- c. *Q'alá·w mú:tu.* (p. 521)  
 died he.ACC  
 'He died.'

This is not common, but languages like Basque in which some intransitive single arguments may be in the ergative are not common either, so it is not clear that there is a generalization that needs to be explained.

<sup>3</sup> In the data of Dryer (2005a) and (2005b), the figures are as follows (the figures refer to languages, before the slash, and genera, after the slash):

	SOV	SVO	VSO
<i>wh</i> -fronting	52/38	65/35	42/23
no <i>wh</i> -fronting	225/109	188/57	16/6

Thus, gaps in the observed range of linguistic diversity typically have functional explanations, and there is no need to invoke theoretical frameworks (reflecting the innate universal grammar) to explain them (this point is also made by Dryer 2006a, using similar arguments).

But innate theoretical frameworks are not only unnecessary, they are also insufficient to explain gaps in typological patterns. The reason is that framework-based explanation can only explain absolute universals, but not statistical universals (or universal tendencies). However, most empirical universals are tendencies: There are numerous exceptions to the generalization that inflection occurs outside derivation (e.g. Bochner 1984, Rainer 1996), numerous exceptions to the generalization that languages with final subordinators do not have *wh*-fronting (the databases of Dryer 2005b and 2005c contain 33 such languages), and, as we just saw, exceptions to the generalization that intransitive clauses with a single accusative argument do not occur.

Another serious problem with framework-based/UG-based explanation of typological patterns is the diversity of categories across languages. Strictly speaking, categories such as "accusative case", "inflection" and "preposition" cannot be defined across languages, but only in language-specific terms (Dryer 1997; Croft 2001; Haspelmath 2007). This means that it is unclear how the claims made by innatist frameworks should be tested. Proponents of framework-based description and explanation tend to simply ignore this problem.

I conclude that a major reason for adopting universally applicable descriptive frameworks in theoretical linguistics is not well-founded: Frameworks, interpreted as innate restrictions on what can be acquired, are not well-suited to explaining patterns in linguistic diversity.

But descriptive frameworks have also been proposed by functional linguists with little or no interest in the generative enterprise of explanation by constrained description, so we should now turn to such functional frameworks.

## 5 Functional frameworks and their problems

The two most prominent frameworks developed by functional linguists are Functional Grammar (FG, see Dik 1997)<sup>4</sup> and Role and Reference Grammar (RRG, see Van Valin 2005, Van Valin 2008+). Since other functionalist approaches are framework-free and do not propose a universally applicable set of concepts for structure description, these two frameworks are sometimes called "structural-functional theories" (e.g. by Butler 2003, who provides a detailed comparative discussion of FG, RRG, and Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar). Linguists working in these frameworks do not assume that the framework's concepts and structures are innate, and they do not try to explain gaps in attested languages by making the framework restrictive. So in the practice of these linguists, there is no place for explanation by constrained description, but what they share with generative linguists is the assumption that there is a set of universal categories and concepts by which all languages can be described in an insightful way. These frameworks are thus as aprioristic as generative grammar, and they inherit the problems of apriorism. Both FG and RRG emphasize that they want to avoid the well-known Anglocentrism of generative syntax, but they do not draw the conclusion (which I regard as compelling) that one should not approach languages with a pre-established set of concepts at all and describe each language in its own terms, i.e. without a framework. Van Valin (2005:1) asks: "What would linguistic theory look like if it were based on the analysis of languages with diverse structures such as Lakhota, Tagalog and Dyrbal, rather than on the analysis of English?" This describes precisely the problem that a non-aprioristic, framework-free approach tries to avoid: The analysis of one

---

<sup>4</sup> Functional Grammar has meanwhile been superseded by Functional Discourse Grammar (see Hengeveld & MacKenzie 2008+a, 2008+b).

language should never be "based on" the analysis of another language. Lakhotacentric or Tagalocentric frameworks are in no way better than Anglocentric frameworks.

Let me illustrate some concrete problems arising from apriorism in FG and RRG, using the example of ditransitive constructions (cf. also Haspelmath 2008+b). A much-discussed issue is the description of contrasts such as that between the Prepositional Dative Construction and the Double Object Construction in English:

- (10) a. *Aisha gave the money to Pedro.*  
 b. *Aisha gave Pedro the money.*

In FG, this is analyzed by saying that the recipient (*Pedro*) has the syntactic function of "object" in (10b), but not in (10a), where it is marked by the preposition *to* according to its semantic role, and where the theme (*the money*) has the object function (Dik 1997, Chapter 10). In FG, "subject" and "object" functions are assigned only if there is an alternation, i.e. a passive construction or a "dative shift" construction as in (10a-b). Similarly, in RRG it is claimed that recipient (*Pedro*) is assigned the semantic macrorole of "undergoer" in (10b), but not in (10a), where the theme (*the money*) is assigned the undergoer role (Van Valin 2005: 114), as a "marked option". Both FG and RRG assume the universality (or at least cross-linguistic applicability) of their concepts "object" and "undergoer", and this leads to problems with languages that diverge from the English pattern in (10a-b). Many languages have only a pattern that resembles (10b), but no pattern resembling (10a). In FG, this would mean that object assignment is obligatory, counter to a principle of the theory (cf. Dik 1997: 282-285 for discussion), and in RRG, it would mean that a language has "marked" undergoer assignment as the only option, counter to the spirit of markedness (cf. Van Valin 2005: 123-127 for discussion). Van Valin eventually revises his principles for actor and undergoer selection in a fairly drastic way in recognition of this, leading to a more complex, less elegant descriptive theory (Van Valin 2007).

Thus, although both FG and RRG have always been aware of the problems of potential Anglocentrism, they were not able to avoid an Anglocentric proposal for this particular phenomenon, presumably because at the time when the proposals were first made (around 1980), no significant cross-linguistic research on ditransitive constructions had been carried out. So one lesson is that it seems to be impossible to construct a non-biased framework unless one has done a significant amount of cross-linguistic research. But cross-linguistic research is always preliminary, and thus the framework is always biased against those languages that have not been studied yet. And a second lesson is that frameworks that can extend to more languages equally naturally are inevitably more complex and less elegant. The question is how complex the framework will be once the full range of cross-linguistic evidence has been examined. My suspicion is that it will be so complex that it is not really distinguishable anymore from the position advocated here, i.e. not to work with a catch-all framework, but to construct the needed descriptive categories anew for each language.

## 6 Basic Linguistic Theory and its problems

Some authors (notably Dixon 1997: 128-138 and Dryer 2006b) have emphasized that descriptive work on the world's languages resulting in reference grammars is by no means "merely descriptive", but is theoretical, not just in the general sense (sense 4 of §2.3), but also in the sense of "theoretical framework". These authors refer to the theoretical framework employed by grammar writers, historical linguists and typologists as *Basic Linguistic Theory*. They would probably object to the main thrust of this chapter and argue that grammatical theorizing should not be framework-free, but should use the framework of Basic Linguistic

Theory. Dryer (2006b), in particular, notes that frameworks in the Chomskyan tradition are intended as descriptive and explanatory theories at the same time, and argues that if one drops the nativist presuppositions of this approach, then one must conclude that languages are best described (and cross-linguistic generalizations, the basis for functional explanations, are best formulated) in terms of Basic Linguistic Theory.

However, Dixon and Dryer seem to contradict themselves when they emphasize that work in the framework of Basic Linguistic Theory attempts to describe languages in their own terms, rather than on the model of a well-known language or of some prestigious framework. According to Dixon,

When writing a grammar in terms of Basic Linguistic Theory one takes nothing for granted. Each analytic decision has to be approached as an open question... In contrast, each of the non-basic theories posits that certain categories are relevant for all languages – one only has to find them. (Dixon 1997: 132)

Similarly, Dryer observes that

Basic Linguistic Theory differs from traditional grammar most strikingly in its attempt to describe each language in its own terms, rather than trying to force the language into a model based on European languages. (Dryer 2006b: 211)

The contradiction lies in the claim that "one takes nothing for granted" and each language should be described "in its own terms", while at the same time it is claimed that Basic Linguistic Theory consists of certain concepts that grammar-writers must know before they can describe a language ("the fundamental theoretical concepts that underlie all work in language description", Dixon 1997: 128; "the descriptive tools assumed in descriptive grammars", Dryer 2006b: 210). What Dixon and Dryer probably have in mind when they refer to "theoretical concepts" or "descriptive tools" of Basic Linguistic Theory is the kinds of concepts that are presented in works such as Payne (1997) and Shopen (2007), two widely used works that prospective grammar authors are typically directed to for inspiration.

However, if these concepts and tools are treated as a true framework, i.e. as a set of options from which descriptivists and languages may choose, they defeat the stated goal of open-minded, bias-free description. Grammar authors have to be ready to create completely novel concepts, because no two categories are completely identical across languages, and often the categories are not even particularly similar across languages. If one approaches a language with a particular set of concepts and tools in mind, one is no longer open-minded and bias-free.<sup>5</sup>

I hasten to add that the kinds of concepts found in typologically oriented handbooks for grammar writers (such as Payne 1997 and Shopen 2007) are very useful to know for every linguist, and that by making use of these concepts, grammar writers will probably write less biased grammars than if they use other frameworks. But it remains true that ideally, they would not make use of pre-established concepts and tools, but would create the tools they need during the process of writing the grammar.

Fortunately, in actual fact, this is what grammar writers do most of the time, or in any event very often and characteristically. They introduce concepts that are justified by the phenomena of the language at hand and that need no justification beyond it. They do not feel bound by a particular framework, but they create new concepts as they see the need for them.

---

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Dryer (p.c.) has told me that he regards the principle of describing each language in its own terms as the most important principle of Basic Linguistic Theory. If this is so, Basic Linguistic Theory would be equivalent to framework-free grammatical theory as advocated here, and it could not be a "descriptive/theoretical framework" in the sense of this paper.

Thus, I do not accept the assertion that "there is no such thing as atheoretical description" (Bach 2004: 50, Dryer 2006b: 207), if "atheoretical" here means 'framework-free' (as it seems to mean from the context). I agree with Dixon (1997: 134) that "every person who describes a language is also a theoretician... Every point in a grammatical description is a theoretical statement, and must be justified by appropriate argumentation" (if "theoretician" is meant in sense 3 or 4 of "theory", see §2.3), and also with Dryer (2006b: 212) that "the analytical concepts one assumes necessarily constitute a set of theoretical assumptions", but one can make theoretical statements without presuppositions about which concepts should be used.<sup>6</sup>

Dixon implies that his own work is formulated in terms of Basic Linguistic Theory, but on closer examination, his work is full of concepts that are by no means readily applicable to any language. Consider one of the examples he mentions in Dixon (1997: 132): "Is it appropriate to recognise one unit 'word' or two (a 'phonological word' and also a 'grammatical word')?" Dixon's view that phonological and grammatical words may but need not coincide is well-known (see also Dixon & Aikhenvald 2002), but he does not seem to allow for the possibility that languages do not make use of a word-like unit at all, or make use of several different phonological and grammatical words, or make use of a word-like unit that is defined by both phonological and grammatical criteria but contrast with other word-like units. The framework-free approach allows for these possibilities as well.

In some of his works Dixon insists on a particular meaning of a traditional term, as when he emphasizes that a *predicate* in linguistics is a verb and its modifiers, not (as in Greek logic) what remains of a clause after subtracting the subject, so that a copula complement should not be called "predicate nominal" (Dixon 2004: 7). There is nothing wrong with such a terminological choice, but it is misleading to suggest that Dixon's proposals are equal to "the fundamental theoretical concepts that underlie all work in language description" (= his definition of Basic Linguistic Theory). Work in language description operates with a wide range of theoretical concepts, and with a fair amount of terminological diversity. But it tends to be terminologically conservative, and this seems to have led to the view that the concepts used in language description are also conservative (cf. Dryer's (2006b: 211) assertion that Basic Linguistic Theory can be "roughly described as traditional grammar, minus its bad features"). But this is not necessarily the case. Good descriptive grammars do not adopt their concepts from earlier work, but they are often terminologically conservative, because they want to reach a wide audience (unlike works in particular frameworks, which mostly address colleagues working within the same framework and can therefore be terminologically innovative).

## 7 Framework-free comparative and explanatory theory

Since all languages have a huge amount of properties that are due to historical accidents and cannot be explained except with reference to these accidents, true explanation in linguistics is restricted to explanation of language universals. Explanatory theoretical work must therefore adopt a broadly comparative approach, a point about which there is widespread agreement:

In order to explain the data in individual languages, a theory must make falsifiable empirical claims about the entire class of natural languages. (Perlmutter 1980: 196)

---

<sup>6</sup> I would be happy to accept the possible view (which I have not seen expressed by anyone) that a description of a language necessarily involves a framework, but that it could (and should) be a different framework for each language. This would be equivalent to what I am proposing, but since the term *framework* has always been used for universally applicable frameworks, I chose to argue here against frameworks *tout court*, rather than against "universally applicable frameworks". This is of course just a terminological matter.



The generativist will have to compare English with other languages to discover to what extent the properties he has identified are universal and to what extent they are language-specific choices determined by universal grammar ... Work in generative linguistics is therefore by definition comparative. (Haegeman 1994: 18)

In Chomskyan generative linguistics, the descriptive framework also plays a crucial role in comparison and explanation: As we saw, it is assumed that the same framework can be applied to all languages, and that once the right framework has been found, it can also be used to compare the languages, in order to determine how they differ. This is a very difficult process, because the framework is both the ultimate result of the comparison (a characterization of UG explaining the limits on variation) and a prerequisite to the comparison (languages cannot be compared unless they are first described in the correct framework, Newmeyer 1998: 337-8). As a result, comparative studies in the generative framework have not been very successful, at least much less successful than was expected in the 1980s, when the Principles and Parameters programme was initiated (Haspelmath 2008+a).

By contrast, framework-free comparative linguistics is thriving (e.g. Haspelmath et al. 2005). Large-scale cross-linguistic comparison without a framework is not free of difficulties either, but it has become easier because of the availability of a steadily increasing number of detailed reference grammars written in a framework-free but accessible format. Dixon (1997: 128, 132) has claimed that Basic Linguistic Theory is the framework that underlies such typological work, but this is not correct. Typological work as represented by *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (WALS) is just as framework-free as most of the grammatical descriptions it is based on, though it is of course highly theoretical, just like the descriptive work it depends on.

In this regard, Dixon's view of the role of Basic Linguistic Theory in linguistics is similar to the generative view: The same concepts are used for description and comparison. However, in actual typological practice, a rather different picture emerges: Typologists make up their own concepts (called *comparative concepts* in Haspelmath 2008+c) and match them against the facts of each language, but they do not expect to find the same categories in all languages, and their comparisons can accommodate great variation in the actual categories of languages (called *descriptive categories* in Haspelmath 2008+c). For instance, typologists often work with a comparative concept 'ergative case' (overt case of the transitive agent as opposed to the case of the intransitive single argument), but if a language has a case that marks both the transitive agent and the possessor (like the Eskimo Relative case), this also counts as an ergative case. Cases that count as ergative can thus be quite diverse. Similarly, typologists work with the comparative concept of 'adjective' (= property word), but if a language has a word class ("Verb") comprising both action words and property words, they still count as adjectives in the comparative sense. Again, words that count as adjectives can be very diverse. As a final example, consider the comparative concept 'wh-word' (used to question particular sentence parts). If a language has a class of "indeterminate" pronouns that can be used both for questioning and for indefinite reference ('who; someone'), these count as wh-words, too. Thus, the typologists' comparative concepts are not necessarily equatable with the descriptive categories of languages.

Since grammatical categories are different in different languages (just as word meanings are different in different languages), comparative linguists cannot help but create specific concepts for the purpose of comparison (comparative concepts). The criterion of adequacy for comparative concepts is not the correctness of the description (as for descriptive categories), but the fruitfulness of the resulting comparison (see Haspelmath 2008+c). Since comparativists can approach languages from multiple angles, there is no single correct set of comparative concepts. In *WALS*, for example, different authors have opted for slightly different "case" concepts (Baerman & Brown 2005, Iggesen 2005), but there is no contradiction. The concepts are not identical, only the chosen terms happen to coincide. Like

descriptive grammarians, typologists tend to be terminologically conservative, because their work addresses a wide range of potential users. This practice should not be mistaken as the use of a common framework by all typologists.

In the approach advocated here, explanatory theory primarily consists of functional explanation (cf. §4.6 above). Like functional explanation in biology (cf. Nettle 1999), functional explanation in linguistics is necessarily diachronic (Bybee 1988; Keller 1994; Kirby 1999; Haspelmath 1999; 2008a). As Dryer (2006a: 56) puts it, "a theory of why languages are the way they are is fundamentally a theory of language change". Explanatory grammatical theory of this sort (as exemplified by works such as Givón 1979, Bybee et al. 1994, Heine 1997, Frajzyngier & Shay 2003, Hawkins 2004) has no need for (descriptive/theoretical) frameworks.

## 8 Conclusion

This is not the first work to reject framework-bound grammatical theorizing. Givón (1984:25) said:

"Framework", "format", "theory" and "Grammar" are words that have been much maligned in the past three decades in linguistics. Ever since the Bloomfieldians, such labels have meant, more likely than not, the closing of one's horizons and the wedding of oneself to a restrictive, counter-empirical and anti-explanatory formalism. (Givón 1984: 25)

Even though Givón did not include this statement in the revised (2001) version of his two-volume work on syntax, I still think that he was basically right in 1984.<sup>7</sup> When approaching a language, we should not close our horizons by applying an aprioristic, pre-established framework to it.

I have argued here that the set of concepts needed for the description (or analysis) of a language must be constructed separately for each language, because all languages have different structures. I gave two extended examples from well-known framework-free descriptions of Tagalog and German clause structure, and I noted that many good grammars follow these examples, even though the originality of the descriptions (or analyses) is often concealed by the use of familiar terminology. I observed that in generative linguistics, frameworks are invoked both for description and for explanation (by constrained description), and that the idea that frameworks should be restrictive makes sense only if they are equated with an innate universal grammar. I further noted that structural-functional descriptive frameworks and the descriptive framework of Basic Linguistic Theory also contradict the methodological imperative of bias-free grammatical analysis, and that explanatory theory does not consist in the construction of frameworks, but in (ultimately diachronic) functional explanation of universal tendencies.

At this point, some readers may ask: If there are no frameworks, then what should I teach my students in syntax classes? My answer is: The best syntax class is a field methods course, and the second best syntax class is a typology course. If we want to understand the nature of syntax, we have to study the syntactic patterns of concrete languages, preferably unfamiliar languages, to broaden our horizons. Since they cannot get first-hand experience of a larger number of languages, students should study existing framework-free descriptions of

---

<sup>7</sup> In Givón (1995), there are two chapters entitled "Taking structure seriously", in which Givón tries to counter a perceived "grammar denial syndrome" among some functionalists. In view of the flood of descriptive grammars that have been written in the last two decades, I see no sign of such a trend (except perhaps among a few American functionalists who shifted their interests from grammar to discourse).

languages from around the world, be encouraged to ask critical questions about each analysis, and learn to compare languages with diverse categories by means of universally applicable comparative concepts.

## References

- Aissen, Judith. 1999. "Markedness and subject choice in Optimality Theory." *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 17: 673-711.
- Aissen, Judith. 2003. "Differential object marking: Iconicity vs. economy." *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 21, 3: 435-83.
- Anderson, Stephen R. 1992. *A-morphous Morphology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, Stephen R. 1999. "A formalist's reading of some functionalist work in syntax." In: Darnell, Michael et al. (eds.), *Functionalism and Formalism in Linguistics, vol. 1*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. Pp. 111-135.
- Bach, Emmon. 2004. Linguistic universals and particulars. In: van Sterkenburg, Piet (ed.) *Linguistics today – facing a greater challenge*, 47-60. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Baerman, Matthew & Brown, Dunstan. 2005. Case syncretism. In: *WALS*, 118-121.
- Bochner, Harry. 1984. Inflection within Derivation. *The Linguistic Review* 3: 411-421
- Butler, Christopher S. 2003. *Structure and Function: a Guide to Three Major Structural-Functional Theories*. 2 vols. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Bybee, Joan L. 1985a. *Morphology: A Study of the Relation between Meaning and Form*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Bybee, Joan L. 1985b. Diagrammatic iconicity in stem - inflection relations. In: Haiman, John (ed.) *Iconicity in Syntax*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 11-47.
- Bybee, Joan L. 1988. "The diachronic dimension in explanation." In: John A. Hawkins (ed.), *Explaining Language Universals*. Oxford: Blackwell. Pp. 350-379.
- Bybee, Joan L.; Pagliuca, William; and Perkins, Revere D. 1994. *The Evolution of Grammar*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1988. *Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
- Cristofaro, Sonia. 2008+. Grammatical categories and relations: universality vs. language-specificity and construction-specificity. Ms., University of Pavia.
- Croft, William. 2000. *Explaining Language Change: An Evolutionary Approach*. London: Longman.
- Croft, William. 2001. *Radical Construction Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dik, Simon C. 1997. *The Theory of Functional Grammar, vol. 1-2*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Dixon, R. M.W. 1972. *The Dyirbal language of North Queensland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 1997. *The Rise and Fall of Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 2004. Adjective classes in typological perspective. In: Dixon, R.M.W. & Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. (eds.), *Adjective classes: a cross-linguistic typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 30-83.
- Dixon, R.M.W. & Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2002. Word: a typological framework. In: Dixon, R.M.W. & Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. (eds.), *Word: a Cross-Linguistic Typology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 1-41.
- Drach, Erich. 1937. *Grundgedanken der deutschen Satzlehre*. Frankfurt am Main. (Usually cited after 4th edition: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963.)
- Dryer, Matthew S. 1997. "Are grammatical relations universal?" In: Bybee, Joan & Haiman, John & Thompson, Sandra A. (eds.), *Essays on language function and language type*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. Pp. 115-143.
- Dryer, Matthew S. 2005a. Order of subject, object, and verb". In *WALS*, 330-333. (also available online)
- Dryer, Matthew S. 2005b. Position of interrogative phrases in content questions. In *WALS*, 378-381. (also available online)
- Dryer, Matthew S. 2005c. Order of subordinator and adverbial subordinate clause. In *WALS*, 382-385.

- (also available online)
- Dryer, Matthew S. 2006a. "Functionalism and the theory-metalanguage confusion." In *Phonology, Morphology, and the Empirical Imperative: Papers in Honour of Bruce Derwing*, edited by Grace Wiebe, Gary Libben, Tom Priestly, Ron Smyth, and Sam Wang. Taipei: The Crane Publishing Company. Pp. 27-59.
- Dryer, Matthew S. 2006b. "Descriptive theories, explanatory theories, and basic linguistic theory". In *Catching Language: The Standing Challenge of Grammar Writing*, edited by Felix Ameka, Alan Dench, and Nicholas Evans. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. Pp. 207-234.
- Givón, Talmy. 1979. *On Understanding Grammar*. New York: Academic Press.
- Givón, T. 1984-1990. *Syntax: A Functional-Typological Introduction*. Vol. I. 1984, Vol. II. 1990. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Givón, T. 1995. *Functionalism and Grammar*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Givón, T. 2001. *Syntax: An Introduction*. Vol. I-II. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Greenberg, Joseph H. 1963. "Some universals of grammar with particular reference to the order of meaningful elements." In: Greenberg, Joseph H. (eds.), *Universals of Grammar*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. Pp. 73-113.
- Haegeman, Liliane. 1994. *Introduction to Government and Binding Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hale, Mark & Reiss, Charles. 2000. " "Substance abuse" and "dysfunctionalism": Current trends in phonology." *Linguistic Inquiry* 31: 157-69.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 1999. "Optimality and diachronic adaptation." *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 18, 2: 180-205.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2004. "Does linguistic explanation presuppose linguistic description?" *Studies in Language* 28, 3: 554-579 (special issue on linguistic evidence, guest edited by Martina Penke and Anette Rosenbach)
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2007. "Pre-established categories don't exist: consequences for language description and typology." *Linguistic Typology* 11, 1: 119-132.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2008a. "Creating economical morphosyntactic patterns in language change." In: Good, Jeff (ed.), *Language universals and language change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 185-214.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2008b. "Frequency vs. iconicity in explaining grammatical asymmetries." *Cognitive Linguistics* 19,1: 1-33.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2008+a. "Parametric versus functional explanations of syntactic universals." To appear in: Theresa Biberauer (ed.) *The Limits of syntactic variation*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2008+b. "Ditransitive constructions: towards a new Role and Reference Grammar account?". To appear in: Van Valin, Robert D. (ed.) *Proceedings of the Role and Reference Grammar 2006 Conference*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2008+c. Comparative concepts and descriptive categories and in cross-linguistic studies. Unpublished, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2008+d. Comparative scales and descriptive scales. To appear in: Malchukov, Andrej & Richards, Marc (eds.) *Scales*. (Linguistische Arbeitsberichte, 85.) Leipzig: University of Leipzig, Institut für Linguistik.
- Haspelmath, Martin, Matthew S. Dryer, David Gil & Bernard Comrie (eds.). 2005. *The World Atlas of Language Structures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hawkins, John A. 2002. Symmetries and asymmetries: their grammar, typology and parsing. *Theoretical Linguistics* 28, 2: 95-149.
- Hawkins, John A. 2004. *Efficiency and Complexity in Grammars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heine, Bernd. 1997. *Cognitive Foundations of Grammar*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hengeveld, Kees & Mackenzie, J. Lachlan 2008+a. Functional Discourse Grammar. In: Bernd Heine and Heiko Narrog eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hengeveld, Kees & Mackenzie, J. Lachlan 2008+b. *Functional Discourse Grammar: A Typologically-Based Theory of Language Structure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Iggesen, Oliver A. 2005. Number of cases. In: *WALS*, 202-205.
- Jackendoff, Ray. 1983. *Semantics and Cognition*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Jackendoff, Ray. 2002. *Foundations of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kayne, Richard S. 1994. *The Antisymmetry of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Kirby, Simon. 1999. *Function, Selection, and Innateness: The Emergence of Language Universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCarthy, John J. 2002. *A thematic Guide to Optimality Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCloskey, James. 1993. Constraints on syntactic processes. In: Jacobs, Joachim & von Stechow, Arnim & Sternefeld, Wolfgang & Vennemann, Theo (eds.) 1993. *Syntax: An international handbook of contemporary research*. Vol. 1. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. Pp. 496-506.
- Mielke, Jeff. 2008. *The Emergence of Distinctive Features*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mithun, Marianne. 1991. Active/agentive case marking and its motivations. *Language* 67: 510-546.
- Moravcsik, Edith A. 2008+. Explaining language universals. To appear in: Song, Jae Jung (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nettle, Daniel. 1999. Functionalism and its difficulties in biology and linguistics. In: Darnell, Michael & Moravcsik, Edith & Newmeyer, Frederick & Noonan, Michael & Wheatley, Kathleen (eds.) *Functionalism and formalism in linguistics. Volume 1: General papers*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. Pp. 445-467.
- Newmeyer, Frederick J. 1998. *Language Form and Language Function*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Payne, Thomas E. 1997. *Describing Morphosyntax: a Guide for Field Linguists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Perlmutter, David M. 1980. Relational grammar. In: Moravcsik, Edith A. & Wirth, Jessica R. (eds.) *Current approaches to syntax*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Rainer, Franz. 1996. Inflection inside derivation: evidence from Spanish and Portuguese. *Yearbook of Morphology* 1995: 83-91.
- Schachter, Paul & Otanes, Fé T. 1972. *Tagalog Reference Grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shopen, Timothy (ed.) 2007. *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*. 2nd edition. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Valin, Robert D., Jr. 2005. *Exploring the Syntax-Semantic Interface*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Valin, Robert D., Jr. 2007. "The Role and Reference Grammar analysis of three-place predicates." *Suvremena lingvistika* 33, 1: 31-63.
- Van Valin, Robert D., Jr. 2008+. Role and Reference Grammar. In: Bernd Heine and Heiko Narrog (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WALS: see Haspelmath et al. 2005.
- Woolford, Ellen. 2001. Case patterns. In: Legendre, Géraldine & Grimshaw, Jane & Vikner, Sten (eds.) *Optimality-theoretic syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Pp. 509-543.
- Zifonun, Gisela & Hoffmann, Ludger & Strecker, Bruno. 1997. *Grammatik der deutschen Sprache*. 3 Bände. Berlin: de Gruyter.