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Typology and diachrony

This course deals with the relationship between typology and the study of language change, with particular focus on the theoretical implications of a number of known processes of change (particularly grammaticalization processes) for the explanation of typological universals. Diachrony is at the hearth of the typological approach that originated from the work of Joseph Greenberg. In this approach, recurrent cross-linguistic patterns are a result of diachronic processes that take place in different languages and lead speakers to create the relevant constructions at some point in the evolution of the language, as well as processes of transmission whereby these constructions are passed on from one speaker to another over time (Greenberg 1978 and 1995, Bybee 1988, 2006, and 2008, Mithun 2003, Dryer 2006, Newmeyer 1998, 2002, and 2005, Cristofaro 2011). This is in contrast with a number of formally oriented approaches to language universals (for example, Optimality Theory), where cross-linguistic patterns originate from synchronic constraints that are built directly into a speaker's mental grammar.

In spite of the theoretical emphasis placed on diachrony, however, typological investigations have remained mainly synchronically oriented so far. Typological universals and explanations thereof usually refer to synchronic distributional patterns for particular grammatical phenomena, not the actual diachronic processes that give rise to these patterns from one language to another. Over the past decades, several typologists (Bybee 1988, 2006, and 2008, Aristar 1991, Dryer 2006) have raised the point that explanations of typological universals should be based on these processes, rather than the synchronic distributional patterns in themselves. In spite of a substantive body of relevant data collected within grammaticalization studies and cross-linguistically oriented studies of language change in general, however, this line of research has not been pursued systematically, neither in typology nor in historical linguistics.

After reviewing the fundamental assumptions made by typologists about the role of diachrony in the shaping of cross-linguistic patterns (including assumptions about transmission factors such as transition probabilities from one language type to another, genetic inheritance, and language contact), different types of cross-linguistic data will be examined on a number of actual diachronic processes that give rise to various patterns captured by the major typological universals. Attention will be focused on patterns pertaining to number marking, alignment systems, possession, word order, and clause combining. Diachronic data about the development of these patterns challenge current assumptions about typological universals in at least two major ways (Bybee 1988 and Bybee 2006 Aristar 1991, Gildea 1998, Newmeyer 2002, Creissels 2008, Cristofaro 2013 and 2014). First, they suggest alternative explanations for the patterns captured by individual universals. Second, they suggest that these patterns emerge from several particularized diachronic processes, not amenable to a unified explanation. A thorough understanding of individual universals requires qualitative and quantitative data about these processes, rather than data about the resulting patterns in themselves. This view has a parallel the Evolutionary Phonology model advocated by Blevins (2004), and its consequences for language documentation and description will also be discussed.

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