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Typology for the masses

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I will start with the conclusions: yes, linguistic typology is extremely important to my work and I definitely think it is an essential ingredient to a proper understanding not only of language and its dynamics, but also of human history and (maybe) even human evolution. However, the process of “democratization”, “opening up”, and “audience design” that is already underway must be accelerated for typology to become even more useful.

Now, my particular trajectory and interests might mean that my opinion is either completely irrelevant for this question, or very relevant, depending on your views of linguistic typology, its aims, and intended audience. Not being a linguist by training, but deeply interested in linguistic change and diversity, my first contact with typology came in the early 2000s through Bernard Comrie’s (1989) and Johanna Nichols’s (1999) books, some years after my first inkling into the patterns of linguistic diversity through Cavalli-Sforza and colleagues’ seminal 1994 book. Since then, I realized that linguistic diversity is not just some sort of “random noise” on a simple deep universal “essence”, but an essential property of language, just like variation is the essence of the biological world due to the processes – evolution – that made it exist in the first place. Thus, I can say that linguistic typology fundamentally shaped my view of language and the type of questions that are relevant and worth asking.

On a more practical side, while typology is more than crosslinguistic data and fundamentally also concerns the patterns of (co-)variation and their causes, I have been a consumer of typological data throughout my career in the form of databases such as *WALS* (Dryer & Haspelmath (eds.) 2013), *UPSID* (Maddieson 1984), and more recently *PHOIBLE* (Moran et al. (eds.) 2014), either looking for patterns and processes in the sea of linguistic diversity (Dediu 2011; Dediu & Levinson 2012; Dediu & Cysouw 2013) or for extralinguistic factors that might have affected language change and evolution (Dediu & Ladd 2007; Moisik & Dediu 2015). The latter is an especially exciting new endeavor, coming with the normal growing pains, controversies, and big claims, that was made possible in

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large part by the very existence of linguistic typology and the accessibility of large typological databases, that allowed, in many cases, non-linguists (such as myself) to bring to linguistics points of view, parallels with, and methods from other scientific disciplines (such as evolutionary biology, genetics, physics, and computer science, to mention just a few), a process that would have been otherwise much slower and difficult. The typologists' hard work, exquisite crosslinguistic knowledge, and dedication to hard fundamental issues of comparability allowed the "cutting of linguistic diversity at its joints" as it were, and even if these are mostly hidden from the users of such databases, they are always essential to the interpretation of the data and results.

However, this rises a new set of interesting issues, including the dismissal by knowledgeable typologists of broad, statistical results, many times on the grounds that the researchers do not have in-depth knowledge of the fascinating typological details behind *WALS* and friends, and the reciprocal dismissal of these genuine issues as mistaking the trees for the forest (see, for example, the exchanges surrounding Atkinson 2011). Or the feeling that "non-linguists" misuse such databases in superficial ways, accompanied by the requests to make such databases less prone to misuse and more computational processing-friendly.

Which brings me to the future: to reiterate, linguistic typology is essential, we need to understand linguistic diversity and the processes that generate it before we can start asking questions about the very nature of language, but it needs to adapt to a new scientific landscape. No matter what the practitioners of a scientific field might desire, there's a reality out there that requires relevance for the wider science and the public at large, and all this keeps changing with maddening speed. I would urge typologists to not just grudgingly accept that "their" data (and databases) might be "misused" by non-linguists with methods that become more and more arcane, complex, computer-intensive, and featuring assumptions that seem (and may be) outrageously unfit, but to actively engage with these developments and adapt them to the realities of language (a few recent examples are Bickel et al. (2015) and Chang et al. (2015)). An essential component is the creation of databases that are as much as possible explicit in their assumptions and easy to use by computational methods, my current favorite being *PHOIBLE*. I know that the comparison with bioinformatics is a tired (and, in many respects, misleading) one, but where would modern genetics, evolutionary biology, and medicine be without the massive open databases that exist and without the biologists with extremely specialized knowledge that build them having computational processing as a primary desideratum? And, who knows, it might turn out that changing the perspective and trying to transform your data into food for a machine will in the end throw new light on the right way to cut nature at its joints and understand linguistic diversity ...

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