A (brief) history of typology

The history of language typology may go earlier than 1800s, but it is assumed that the great contribution of two German linguists, Friedrich von Schlegel and Wilhelm von Humboldt and their work reflected the sparks of typological research.

Broadly speaking, typology has a twofold purpose: ***to identify universals and to establish the potential range of variation among languages***.

The two German linguists were very much interested in working on various languages and try to fulfill the abovementioned purposes of typological research. However, unlike contemporary typologists, they were interested almost *exclusively in morphology*. By looking at the *word-formation processes* that were employed in languages, they proposed to categorize languages on the basis of *how much morphology was used in the construction of a word* and *how this morphology was used.*

Although contemporary linguistics still uses some of the terminology they developed in their investigations, modern typology has little in common with the research of these pioneers. The assumptions, methods, and focus of current typological research have all changed dramatically.

Early Typologists

The research work of Schlegel, Humboldt, and their contemporaries was carried out under a very different presupposition. Moreover, it was very significant for the growth and development of typology that they believed that languages have ***an abstract organic unity***. That is, the formal aspects of language (its sounds, morphemes, grammar etc.) and the changes that happened to these forms over time *were not random or arbitrary* because these changes were reflections of an inner character of the speakers of languages.

Like any organism, a language could develop over time, but it would always have the same essence. They believed Chinese, English, Korean, and Uganda, as well as any other language, differed because *the inner character of the people*, *the differences in their culture*, which gave rise to the languages, was not the same.

Such a notion is difficult to grasp as it is far removed from the current understanding of language. *Today, for example, most of the researchers doing work in different areas of linguistics begin their work with the belief that language (and all other mental activity)*

is explicable in purely physical terms. Under this view the production and comprehension of sentences is ultimately nothing more than the firing of neurons which would have been incomprehensible for a good share of human history and a laughable stuff for most of civilization. However, in modern times it is well known fact that the neurons themselves are subject to the same physical laws which account for planetary motion, the properties of light, and reproduction.

Therefore, we should not hold it against the scholarship of the researchers or the value of the work just because it can not be accepted hundred percent in modern times. Coming back to Humboldtian view of language and the typological classification, it seems obvious that the morphological differences between languages are so striking that it became the best mirror for the **organic essence** behind languages. According to Schlegel and Humboldt the basic distinction was among **affixal** (1a), **inflectional** (lb), and **no structure** (lc) languages.

(1) a. *Affixal:* Kirundi (Niger-Congo: Burundi)

Y-a-bi-gur-i-ye abana
CI-PST-C8-them-buy-APPL-ASP   C2-children
'He bought them for the children'.   (Adapted from Sabimana 1986)

b. *Inflectional:* Attic Greek (Hellenic: Greece)

hoi stratiōtai ēgoradz-on ta epitēdeia
the   soldiers   buy-3P-IMPF-ACT-IND   the   provisions
'The soldiers were buying the provisions'. (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.5.10)

c. *No structure:* Mandarin Chinese (Sinitic: China)

wo mǎi le shuǐguǒ le
I   buy   ASP   fruit   PTL
'I have bought the fruit'. (Adapted from Li and Thompson 1981)

Kirundi (1 a) is representative of an affixal language in that it permits a series of morphemes to be affixed to a lexical head (i.e., a verb, noun, or adjective). Consider the verb, *yabiguriye.* There are three prefixes: *y-,* which indicates that the subject of the verb belongs to noun class1; the past tense marker is *a-;* and 'b*i-',* a morpheme that denotes a direct object belonging to noun class8. In addition, there are two suffixes. The applicative morpheme, *-i,* being used here to identify the noun *abana* (children) as the beneficiary of the act of buying, and *-ye,* which is an aspect marker.

Inflectional languages, like Greek (1b), also show affixation, but the affixes that are employed typically contain a great deal of semantic information. For example, the suffix *-on* reveals that the subject is third person (i.e., refers to someone other than the speaker or listener), and the subject is plural, that the verb is past tense and has a durative aspect, and that the sentence is a statement of fact rather than a command or a condition. In inflectional languages, all this meaning is fused into a single affix, unlike affixal languages which tend to employ affixes that provide one piece of information each.

In no structure languages, as the name suggests, little affixation is used at all. Note that Mandarin Chinese (1c), which is commonly used as the quintessential example of a no structure language, has no verb agreement with the subject and the aspect marker, when it occurs, shows up as a separate particle rather than a verbal affix.

Because language was thought to be unified, morphological classification such as that discussed here was thought to be very useful to categorize languages into groups. An examination of the syntax, for instance, would ultimately reveal the same inner character of the language as the morphology and, consequently, there was no reason why it should be studied separately. This assumption permitted a benign neglect of syntax in typology that was not corrected for roughly a century.

Similar to the mainstream thinking of modern linguistics, Humboldt assumed that ***language had an inseparable association with the human mind***. In fact, he believed that ***universals of language were actual manifestations human thought*** (Brown 1967). However, unlike modern linguists, Humboldt (1971) also thought that differences among languages reflected the basic differences in the mental life of various speech communities. The quality of languages, he thought, could be determined by how closely they resembled to an idealized linguistic system.

Humboldt also claimed that ***language structure was revelatory(indicative) of intellectual capacity***. It may be the case that because of this, his linguistic philosophy has been manipulated into claims of cultural superiority using the following logic. ***Because German more closely matches the structure of the perfect language than Chinese, it is superior to Chinese. Also, because language structure derives from intellectual prowess, it follows that German thought is superior to Chinese thought.***

Having rejected both the assumption that languages can be judged against any ideals and the claim that variations in language structure can relate things to the intellectual capacity, linguists in the present time find it absurd to make any judgments about the quality of a culture on the basis of how words are formed and sentences are composed.

Revolutions in Typology:

In later half of 1800, there started a shift in the research of the thrust areas of linguistics. Even in Humboldt's era, linguistics was becoming dominated by a ***historical-comparative method*** to language study. That is, the major goals of linguistics were seen as understanding the processes that gave rise to language change and determining the historical relationship among languages. For this reason, typology was marginal to linguistics in the first half of the 1900s.

However, in the early twentieth century several important changes took place with the advent of Ferdinand de Saussure, he and his contemporary linguists began to argue that, ***although language may be organic and therefore changing, at any given point in time language is a self-contained system***. With this notion of language being put forward, there was a demand to work on the languages looking at the features at a given point of time. Thus, Leonard Bloomfield (1933, 19) wrote, " …in order to describe a language one needs no historical knowledge whatsoever." This brought a shift from a ***diachronic*** (historical) perspective to a ***synchronic*** perspective (looking at a language at a single stage in its development).

Although linguists like Bloomfield and other linguists from American Structuralist School of thought continued to emphasize morphology in their research on languages, they ***completely rejected any belief that differences in morphological form revealed differences in the "inner form" of the language or anything about the intellect of the people who spoke it.***

Across the Atlantic, another School of Thought, the Prague School, was also looking at languages similar to what one would like to call typological approach. They argued that ***certain characteristics of language are inherently linked***. Roman Jakobson (1929, 1963) pointed out that the vowel inventory and consonant inventory in languages are connected in predictable ways. For example, if a language has nasal vowels, it will also have nasal consonants. Statements like this capture facts about language that are always

true. Later work by the Prague School, particularly by *Skalička* (1935, 1979), recognized that many ***language properties are associated in probabilistic rather than absolute fashion***. In describing them, then, ***one can only propose a universal tendency and should have space for the others who will further take up the issue and continue the research***.

Although the American Structuralists and the linguists from Prague School helped the discipline of typology to flourish, it was Joseph Greenberg who made a landmark change in the outlook of the field of typology and the nature typological work on languages. His contributions in the field can not be described in some numbers or points, however, some very important ones can be stated for pedagogical purpose as follows:

First, Greenberg (1954) pioneered to establish a quantitative and qualitative basis for typological study. Until the time of Greenberg, typology was highly subjective. And thus it did not meet the "scientific" standards that American linguists who were trying so desperately to achieve it in the 1940s and 1950s. Greenberg developed a strategy to measure numerically both the degree and the types of morphology present in a language. His quantitative approach showed that languages did not fall into discrete morphological types (Croft 1990). That is, a language such as English cannot be said absolutely to be ***an inflecting*** or ***no structure language***, rather, it is closer to being a no structure language than Greenlandic Eskimo (EskimoAleut: Greenland) but more inflecting than Khmer (Mon-Khmer: Cambodia).

The second contribution of Greenberg in the field was that he said that the proper task of typology is not comparing languages per se, instead comparing the constructions. The aim of typology was not to answer "What kinds of languages are there?" but to answer "What kinds of structures are in languages?" This assumption has become explicit in the work of many current typologists and also in several theories of grammar (e.g., Relational Grammar).

Third, Greenberg made full use of the Prague School notion that certain aspects of structure in languages correlate and the implicational universals can be stated in terms of the correlation. These implicational universals have the form, "given X in a language, Y is also found." His seminal paper, "Some Universals of Grammar with Particular Reference to the Order of Meaningful Elements" (Greenberg 1966), laid out 45 implicational universals.

Greenberg's ***fourth contribution*** happened to be the focus on the ways that language changes through time. Greenberg's interest in diachrony was in many ways a throwback to the earlier days of typology in which historical-comparative linguistics predominated. The uniqueness of Greenberg's work, however, was in his use of language change as an explanation for language universals. The basic insight is the following; because the form that a language takes at any given point in time results from alterations that have occurred at a previous stage in the language, one should expect to find some explanations for (or exceptions to) universals by examining the processes of language change.

Finally, Greenberg helped to draw attention to the importance of ***a proper database in the research for language universals***. He made at least some attempt to remove the ***genetic biases from his claims about universals*** by using what at the time was considered a large sample of languages (30 languages altogether) and including languages from ***many language families***.

The last development in linguistics which has great impact on typology is Noam Chomsky's model of linguistic competence (its evolution can be traced through Chomsky 1957, 1965, 1970, 1981, 1988 and 1992). For those who are familiar with the field of linguistics, the inclusion of Chomsky as one of the major molders of typology may appear awkward or even objectionable. After all, Chomsky himself has never engaged in typological research and has been generally skeptical about typology's capacity to inform him in his own work on syntax. The fact remains, however, that the cornerstone concept of Chomsky's model, Universal Grammar, has greatly affected typology and his notion of universal grammar has some bearings to the typological investigation into the nature and function of languages.