



INFLUENCE OF DIFFERENT FACTORS ON THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY

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Abstract

Linguistic typology is a major branch of linguistics that compares and classifies languages according to their structural features. Its historical development has been influenced by grammatical traditions, comparative-historical linguistics, morphological classification, structuralism, language universals, functional approaches, language contact, and technological progress. The article examines these major factors and highlights the contributions of leading scholars such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Edward Sapir, Joseph Greenberg, Bernard Comrie, and William Croft. It also shows how modern linguistic typology has developed into a comprehensive field concerned with linguistic diversity, universals, language change, and cross-linguistic comparison.

Keywords: Linguistic typology, language universals, historical development, language classification, morphological typology, comparative linguistics, structural typology, language contact, linguistic diversity, cross-linguistic comparison.

Introduction

Linguistic typology occupies an important position in contemporary linguistics because it seeks to identify both similarities and differences among the languages of the world. Unlike genealogical classification, which groups languages according to their historical origin and common ancestry, typological classification is primarily concerned with structural properties. Languages belonging to completely different families may therefore be typologically similar, whereas closely related languages may develop significant structural differences.



The formation of linguistic typology was a gradual historical process. Its development was influenced by changing conceptions of language, the discovery and description of previously little-known languages, advances in comparative linguistics, the emergence of structural and functional theories, improvements in research methodology, and, more recently, the availability of large electronic databases.

The history of typology also shows a gradual transition from attempts to place entire languages into a small number of rigid categories toward multidimensional comparison based on individual linguistic features. Modern typologists investigate word order, case systems, grammatical relations, morphological structure, phonological inventories, tense and aspect, evidentiality, negation, possession, relative clauses, causative constructions, and numerous other phenomena.

Consequently, the historical development of linguistic typology should be viewed as the result of several interconnected factors rather than as the achievement of one linguistic school. Understanding these factors makes it possible to explain how typology developed from early philosophical classifications of languages into a major empirical and theoretical field of twenty-first-century linguistics.

One of the earliest factors influencing linguistic typology was the development of grammatical traditions in different civilizations. Long before typology emerged as an independent branch of linguistics, scholars attempted to describe and organize the grammatical structures of individual languages.¹

Ancient Indian linguistic scholarship, particularly the grammatical tradition associated with Pāṇini, developed highly systematic methods for describing Sanskrit. Greek and Roman grammatical traditions created categories that strongly influenced European linguistics for centuries. Scholars identified such notions as noun, verb, case, gender, number, and tense and attempted to describe language according to systematic principles.

However, early European grammatical descriptions were largely based on Greek and Latin. As a result, grammatical categories originally developed for classical European languages were frequently applied to structurally different languages.

¹ Greenberg, J. H. (Ed.). (1966). *Universals of Language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.



The gradual realization that languages could not always be adequately explained through Latin grammatical categories became an important stimulus for typological thinking.

The increasing description of non-European languages demonstrated that grammatical categories are not identical across all linguistic systems. Modern typology continues to confront this problem. Haspelmath (2007), for example, emphasizes the importance of distinguishing language-specific descriptive categories from concepts employed for cross-linguistic comparison.

Thus, one fundamental factor in the historical emergence of typology was the tension between universal grammatical models and the structural diversity revealed by actual languages.

Another major factor was the expansion of geographical and linguistic knowledge. From the period of European maritime exploration onward, scholars, missionaries, administrators, travelers, and later professional linguists encountered languages with structures considerably different from those of familiar European languages.

Grammars, vocabularies, dictionaries, and translations of languages spoken in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania significantly increased the amount of material available for linguistic comparison. Although much early documentation was connected with colonial and missionary activity and therefore emerged within unequal historical and political circumstances, the resulting descriptions nevertheless exposed European scholars to enormous linguistic diversity.

Researchers discovered languages with extensive case systems, complex agreement patterns, polysynthetic morphology, grammatical gender systems different from those of Indo-European languages, unfamiliar constituent orders, inclusive–exclusive distinctions, evidential systems, and many other structural phenomena.

This new linguistic material challenged the assumption that categories derived from a small group of classical languages represented language in general. The broader the empirical database became, the clearer it was that linguistic theory required systematic methods for comparing structurally diverse languages.



The geographical expansion of linguistic knowledge therefore played a decisive role in transforming the study of language from the description of a relatively limited set of languages into a genuinely cross-linguistic discipline.

The development of comparative-historical linguistics in the nineteenth century strongly influenced linguistic typology. Scholars demonstrated systematic relationships among languages and reconstructed earlier stages of language families by comparing sound correspondences, grammatical forms, and vocabulary.

Comparative linguistics primarily concentrated on genealogical relationships. Nevertheless, it indirectly encouraged typological research by establishing systematic linguistic comparison as a valid scientific method.

An important distinction gradually emerged between **genealogical classification** and **typological classification**. Genealogical classification answers the question of whether languages originate from a common ancestor, while typological classification asks how languages resemble or differ from one another structurally.

For instance, English, Persian, Russian, and Hindi belong to the Indo-European family despite significant structural differences. Conversely, languages from unrelated families may share the same dominant constituent order or similar morphological strategies.

The development of historical linguistics also revealed that typological characteristics are not permanent. Languages change from one structural type to another over time. Changes in word order, case marking, grammatical agreement, and morphological complexity demonstrate that typology and diachrony are deeply interconnected.

Comrie (1989) consequently treats historical and areal dimensions as important components of typological investigation. The interaction between diachronic linguistics and typology later became especially significant in research on grammaticalization and pathways of language change.

Morphological classification was among the earliest explicit forms of linguistic typology. Nineteenth-century scholars attempted to classify languages according to the internal structure of words and the ways grammatical meanings were expressed.



Languages were traditionally divided into several major morphological types:

Isolating languages tend to use separate words rather than extensive inflectional morphology to express grammatical meanings.

Agglutinative languages typically combine several identifiable morphemes within a word, with individual affixes tending to express relatively distinct grammatical functions.

Fusional languages frequently employ morphemes that simultaneously express several grammatical categories.

Polysynthetic languages may incorporate many lexical and grammatical elements into a single highly complex word.

Wilhelm von Humboldt played a particularly important role in the early development of morphological typology. His work encouraged scholars to regard languages not merely as collections of words but as structurally organized systems.

However, subsequent research demonstrated that languages rarely belong completely to a single morphological type. English, for example, contains both relatively analytic structures and inflectional morphology. Typological characteristics are therefore better understood as tendencies rather than absolute categories.

This realization contributed to one of the most important methodological changes in linguistic typology: the movement from holistic classification of entire languages toward classification according to specific structural parameters.

The emergence of structural linguistics in the twentieth century significantly altered linguistic analysis. Structuralists emphasized that linguistic elements should be understood through their relations within an organized system.

The structural approach encouraged linguists to analyze phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns systematically rather than interpreting languages through traditional grammatical categories alone.

Edward Sapir made particularly important observations regarding linguistic diversity and structural classification. In *Language* (1921), he proposed a more flexible approach to language classification than earlier morphological schemes. Sapir considered several structural dimensions rather than assigning languages exclusively to a single category.



Structuralism also stimulated more accurate descriptions of individual languages. Such descriptions became essential to typology because reliable cross-linguistic comparison depends on high-quality language-specific data.

At the same time, structuralism highlighted a methodological difficulty that remains important today: linguistic categories identified in one language cannot automatically be transferred to another. Typologists must establish comparison criteria capable of identifying functionally or semantically comparable phenomena across different linguistic systems.

Thus, structuralism strengthened the methodological foundations upon which modern linguistic typology was later built.

Joseph Greenberg and the Development of Modern Linguistic Typology

One of the most decisive factors in the development of modern typology was the work of Joseph H. Greenberg. His research transformed typological investigation by replacing broad classifications of entire languages with systematic comparisons of particular structural variables.

Greenberg's famous research on word order examined a sample of genetically and geographically diverse languages and identified recurring correlations between different structural features.

For example, the relative ordering of verbs and objects was shown to correlate statistically with the ordering of other elements, including adpositions and nominal modifiers. Instead of claiming that every language followed an absolute pattern, Greenberg formulated both absolute and statistical tendencies.

This represented an important methodological advance. Linguistic universals were no longer necessarily interpreted as exceptionless rules. They could also represent strong cross-linguistic tendencies.

Greenberg's work helped establish several principles central to modern typology:

1. languages should be compared through clearly defined structural parameters;
2. samples should include languages from different families and geographical regions;
3. typological generalizations should be based on empirical cross-linguistic evidence;



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4. correlations among linguistic features may reveal deeper principles of language organization;
 5. universals may be absolute or implicational, but many are statistical tendencies.

Greenberg's contribution therefore marks an important transition from earlier classificatory typology to contemporary empirical typology.

The search for linguistic universals became another major influence on typological development. Linguists began asking not only how languages differ but also which structural characteristics recur across languages and why.

A distinction can be made between **absolute universals** and **statistical universals**. Absolute universals are proposed to apply without exception, whereas statistical universals describe patterns that occur significantly more often than alternatives.

Another important distinction concerns **implicational universals**, which can be represented in the form: if a language possesses feature X, it will normally or necessarily possess feature Y.

The study of universals shifted the purpose of typological classification. Typology was no longer limited to placing languages into descriptive groups; it became a method for developing and testing hypotheses about the nature of human language.

Comrie (1989) emphasized the close relationship between linguistic typology and universals, while Croft (2003) further developed the theoretical foundations of cross-linguistic comparison.²

Typological research therefore began addressing deeper explanatory questions: Why are certain linguistic structures common while others are extremely rare? Why do some grammatical features frequently occur together? What constraints determine the possible organization of human languages?

These questions contributed to the transformation of linguistic typology into an explanatory discipline.

² Shopen, T. (Ed.). (2007). *Language Typology and Syntactic Description* (2nd ed., Vols. 1–3). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



The growth of functional linguistics also influenced the historical development of typology. Functional approaches attempt to explain linguistic patterns by considering how language is used in communication.

According to this perspective, cross-linguistic tendencies may reflect pressures connected with processing efficiency, frequency of use, information structure, semantic distinctions, discourse organization, and communicative needs.

For example, some recurring word-order patterns may be connected with the efficiency with which speakers produce and listeners process linguistic information. Hawkins (2004) develops an extensive account of relationships between grammatical patterns and language-processing efficiency.

Cognitive approaches have similarly contributed to typological explanation by investigating the relationship between linguistic categories and general properties of human cognition.

Such approaches changed the focus of typology from asking simply **what types of structures exist?** to asking **why are these structures distributed across languages in the ways that they are?**

The increasing search for explanations therefore represents an important factor in the theoretical maturation of linguistic typology.

Diachronic Change and Grammaticalization

Historical change itself is another factor influencing typological patterns. Languages constantly change, and their typological properties change with them. One particularly important concept is **grammaticalization**, the process through which lexical items or less grammatical constructions gradually develop grammatical functions.

For example, words expressing movement, possession, desire, location, or existence may develop into auxiliaries, tense markers, aspect markers, future markers, or other grammatical elements.

The study of grammaticalization has helped typologists understand that synchronic diversity may be partly explained through recurrent historical pathways. Structures that appear typologically different may represent different stages of similar processes of linguistic change.



Consequently, modern typology increasingly incorporates diachronic evidence. The objective is not merely to establish which structures exist but also to understand how those structures develop.

This connection between language change and cross-linguistic variation has strengthened cooperation between linguistic typology, historical linguistics, and grammaticalization studies.³

Genealogical, Areal and Contact Factors

Typological distributions cannot always be interpreted independently of linguistic history and geography. A structural feature may be common among a set of languages because they inherited it from a shared ancestor rather than because it represents an independent universal tendency.

Similarly, geographically neighboring languages may develop common structural features through prolonged contact even when they are genealogically unrelated. This phenomenon has led to the development of **areal typology**, which studies structural similarities associated with geographical regions and language contact. Language contact may influence phonology, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and discourse. Long-term multilingual interaction can produce linguistic areas in which several languages share features that cannot be explained solely by genealogical inheritance.

Nichols (1992) demonstrated the importance of incorporating geography, historical stability, and population patterns into research on linguistic diversity. For modern typology, controlling for genealogy and geography is methodologically essential. If dozens of closely related languages share a characteristic inherited from a common ancestor, counting each language as completely independent evidence may exaggerate the apparent universality of that characteristic.

Thus, genealogical and areal factors have influenced not only theoretical explanations but also methods of language sampling.

³ Song, J. J. (2001). *Linguistic Typology: Morphology and Syntax*. Harlow: Pearson Education.



Language Sampling as a Methodological Factor

The reliability of typological conclusions depends heavily on the languages selected for investigation. Earlier studies sometimes relied disproportionately on well-documented European languages. Such samples could create misleading generalizations.

Modern typology attempts to construct samples that represent different language families and geographical regions.

Sampling became especially important after Greenberg's research demonstrated that meaningful universals and correlations could be discovered through systematic cross-linguistic comparison.

Typologists distinguish different sampling strategies depending on the research objective. A probability sample may be used to estimate the frequency of a feature, whereas a diversity sample may attempt to maximize genealogical and structural differences among the selected languages.

Improvements in sampling methodology have therefore influenced the accuracy and scientific validity of typological generalizations.

The growth of documentary linguistics has consequently expanded the empirical foundation of linguistic typology.⁴

Consequently, contemporary typology is increasingly integrated with broader investigations into human cognition, history, culture, and population movement.

Main Stages in the Historical Development of Linguistic Typology

On the basis of the factors discussed above, the historical evolution of linguistic typology can be summarized through several major stages.

The **first stage** consisted of early grammatical descriptions and philosophical reflection on differences among languages.

The **second stage**, especially prominent in the nineteenth century, involved morphological classification and the development of comparative-historical linguistics.

⁴ Whaley, L. J. (1997). *Introduction to Typology: The Unity and Diversity of Language*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.



The **third stage** was connected with structural linguistics and increasingly systematic descriptions of languages during the first half of the twentieth century. The **fourth stage** emerged particularly strongly with Greenbergian typology in the second half of the twentieth century and was characterized by cross-linguistic sampling, word-order research, implicational universals, and statistical generalization.

The **fifth stage** involved the expansion of functional, cognitive, diachronic, areal, and grammaticalization-based explanations.

The **contemporary stage** is characterized by digital databases, quantitative analysis, computational modelling, increased documentation of linguistic diversity, and interdisciplinary research.

These stages should not be understood as completely independent periods. Earlier approaches continue to influence modern studies, and contemporary linguistic typology combines ideas originating from several traditions.

Conclusion

The historical development of linguistic typology has been shaped by a complex interaction of intellectual, empirical, methodological, geographical, social, and technological factors. Early grammatical traditions provided the first systematic categories for describing language, while increasing knowledge of the world's linguistic diversity demonstrated the limitations of models based exclusively on classical European languages.

Comparative-historical linguistics established systematic comparison as a scientific method and helped distinguish genealogical relationships from structural similarities. Nineteenth-century morphological classification introduced the idea of organizing languages according to structural characteristics, while structuralism contributed more rigorous methods for analysing language as a system.

The work of Joseph Greenberg represented a major turning point by establishing empirical cross-linguistic comparison, language sampling, word-order correlations, and implicational universals as central components of modern typology. Scholars such as Bernard Comrie, William Croft, Johanna Nichols,



Martin Haspelmath, and others subsequently expanded its methodological and theoretical foundations.

Functional, cognitive, diachronic, and areal approaches further demonstrated that linguistic patterns must not only be described but also explained. Language processing, communicative efficiency, cognition, grammaticalization, genealogy, geography, and language contact can all influence the distribution of linguistic structures.

Finally, technological development and the creation of resources such as the World Atlas of Language Structures have transformed linguistic typology into an increasingly data-intensive and quantitative discipline.

Thus, linguistic typology has developed from relatively simple attempts to classify languages into a multidimensional science of linguistic diversity and universality. Its historical evolution demonstrates that progress in typology is closely connected with the expansion of empirical linguistic knowledge. As more languages are documented and new analytical technologies become available, linguistic typology will continue to contribute significantly to our understanding of the limits, possibilities, history, and universal properties of human language.

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