Toward a Typology of European Languages
Empirical Approaches to Language Typology

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Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York
Toward a Typology of European Languages

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Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 1990
Contents

Foreword by Bernard Pottier ........................................ vii
Introduction ......................................................... ix

1. General problems ................................................ 1

Standard Average European as an exotic language
Östen Dahl ......................................................... 3

Typological contrasts between pidgin and creole languages in relation
to their European language superstrates
Suzanne Romaine ................................................... 9

Area influence versus typological drift in Western Europe: the case of
negation
Paolo Ramat and Giuliano Bernini ................................ 25

2. Deixis ................................................................. 47

Deixis — a pragmatic universal?
Barbara Kryk ....................................................... 49

Possessive adnominal modifiers
Gianguido Manzelli ................................................ 63

3. Morphology ......................................................... 113

The structure of the noun in European languages
Johannes Bechert .................................................. 115

L’infinitif dans les langues romanes et les langues germaniques: essai
d’approche typologique
Claude Buridant ................................................... 141

The infinitive in south-east European languages
Emanuele Banfi ..................................................... 165

Conjugation of the verb in modern Celtic and Basque: from inflection
to periphrasis
Malachy McKenna ................................................. 185
4. Tense, aspect and modality ............................. 193
   Types of tense and aspect systems
   Wolfgang Raible ........................................ 195
   On the coding of sentential modality
   Dietmar Zaefferer ..................................... 215

5. Actancy/voice ............................................. 239
   Caractéristiques actancielles de l'"européen moyen type"
   Gilbert Lazard ......................................... 241
   Processes and actions: internal agentless impersonals in some European languages
   Juan Carlos Moreno ................................... 255
   Questions of the investigation of the complements of adjectives in European languages
   László Dezső ............................................. 273

6. Complementation and subordination .................. 305
   The evolution of certain patterns in subordination in Romance and English
   Martin Harris .......................................... 307
   Usages normatifs et non normatifs dans les relatives en français, en espagnol et en portugais
   Claire Blanche-Benveniste ............................ 317
   Adverbial participles, gerunds and absolute constructions in the languages of Europe
   Ekkehard König and Johan van der Auwera ........... 337

Index of names ............................................ 357
Index of languages ....................................... 365
Index of subjects ........................................ 373
Foreword

The Standing Committee for the Humanities of the European Science Foundation aims at the development of high-level research topics which require the cooperation of scientists from all European countries as well as the frequent collaboration of non-European researchers.

Within the field of linguistics, a few projects on typological research have been set up, particularly at the suggestion of P. Ramat. This topic has presently received a world-wide attention as it is so closely connected with research on language universals. In Europe, the UNITYP group — supervised by H. Seiler — had, in fact, already provided a noteworthy contribution in the field.

After a number of preparatory meetings, the Standing Committee decided to hold a conference in Rome to give European and non-European linguists an opportunity to talk about the results of their investigations. This volume will thus offer a wide-ranging spectrum of issues on language typology. In addition to studies on syntactic classes and semantic categories, attention is drawn to the relationship between certain types and their geographical diffusion through genetically unrelated languages (areal linguistics), as well as to the notion of "possible types" in the perspective of language universals.

On the basis of the conference outcomes and of their personal experience, a committee of linguists who represented the scientific community drew up the EURO-TYP project, which was adopted by the ESF General Assembly in November 1989.

Nine research groups have been organized under E. König’s supervision. The research will develop from the themes discussed in the present volume and an Advisory Committee, composed of European as well as American and Russian linguists, will follow the development of the project. After a planned period of five years, the project will result in a joint publication, which will doubtless leave a mark on linguistic studies in Europe. We have, in fact, the opportunity to investigate diversified language groups, such as Finno-Ugric, Turkic, Basque, Maltese Arabic or Caucasian languages.

A convergence of interests among linguists must be moreover noticed. Comparative grammar, typological research, language universal investigations, the publications of new language descriptions are restoring world languages to the place they deserve after a period when theories based on a few examples detached from social context dominated the research scene. So-called “exotic” languages are included in the corpus of the languages inves-
tigated. They belong to the schemes established on the basis of languages traditionally studied, but they also bring in their specificities, which advance our knowledge.

At present we are therefore witnessing an increasingly cooperative *dialogue* between specialists of language descriptions and theoreticians, which is resulting in a cross-fertilization beneficial for both parties. Other fields connected with linguistics will profit from this interaction, particularly the field dealing with knowledge representation — semantic or noemic models, inspired by the study of natural languages, but which have assumed the status of *tertium comparationis* — and the field of machine translation, such as the EUROTRA project.

Typology thus appears a "coalescing theme" for present interests focussed on a better knowledge of the mental mechanisms which are revealed by the many world languages, both in a non-random fashion — cf. language universals — and as realizations which can attain great specificity (cf. linguistic variation).

Bernard Pottier

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Professor at the University of Paris-Sorbonne
Introduction

This volume contains 17 of the 20 papers read at the Workshop on Typology of Languages in Europe held at the Consiglio Nazionale delle Richerche in Rome, January 7—9, 1988. The workshop was organized by the Standing Committee for the Humanities of the European Science Foundation with the aim of exploring the possibilities of launching a Program in Language Typology, following a joint proposal put forward in 1985 by four European scholars since then called “The gang of four”: Johannes Bechert (Bremen), Claude Buridant (Strasbourg), Martin Harris (formerly Salford, now Essex), Paolo Ramat (Pavia). This initiative actually resulted in a five-year “Program on Language Typology”, started in 1990, which will be the main activity of the Humanities section of the European Science Foundation till 1994. The Program, under the “trademark” EURO-TYP, is directed by Ekkehard König (Berlin, Freie Universität) and will involve almost a hundred scholars from all over Europe (including the USSR) and the USA, organized in nine Thematic Groups ranging from pragmatics to prosody.

In this respect the volume actually reflects the first attempts at finding a set of features common to all languages spoken in Europe irrespective of their genetic affiliation. The topics dealt with broadly anticipate the nine themes constituting the main concern within EURO-TYP.

It is generally recognized that the languages of Europe represent a particular group — a sort of “Sprachbund” — with striking similarities shared by both Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages and reflecting a prolonged cultural contact within Europe over the centuries. This phenomenon of linguistic convergence opens a wide field of investigation not only in its own right, but also because of the long period for which records are available and the wealth of linguistic scholarship relating to the individual languages of Europe which has been amassed, specially during the last 150 years, but within a linguistic tradition going back to Ancient Greece.

The methodological approach adopted by the contributors is indeed typological, linguistic typology aiming at identifying those features which characterize particular groups of languages, related or otherwise, and wherever possible at uncovering the underlying principles which give coherence to surface phenomena that may at first sight appear unrelated. Moreover, the typological principle, mainly comparative-functionalist, does not exclude the variety of points of view and of theoretical positions allowing a very rich and comprehensive analysis of different phenomena.
From the papers read in Rome the following perspectives emerge, which are in many ways of interest for general linguistics:

— a preoccupation with central theoretical questions, partly from the point of view of formal logic, partly from the perspective of different linguistic traditions;
— the importance of an areal (geographical) approach to language typology, centering around the notion of "continuum" in various domains;
— the importance of gradation on scales in analysing the basic structures of the languages under consideration;
— the significance of the sociolinguistic approach drawing on notions such as language variety, register, dialect, standard *vs.* non-standard language and the like;
— the centrality of diachrony (language history) as a basic ingredient of the typological approach, with "drift" as a key notion.

As a first step toward the definition of a cluster of features typical of European languages and the explanation of their emergence in the diachrony either through typological drift or as a result of long-lasting contacts and influences under the same roof of Greek and Latin culture, the volume already presents some features that can be tentatively considered as typical of languages of Europe, and which will be incorporated into a full-scale investigation.

The volume is also an attempt at a first instantiation in linguistic terms of the notion of Standard Average European, suggested in 1939 by Benjamin Lee Whorf in order to refer to the cognitive background of Europeans as against that of American aboriginal populations (notably the Hopi) as manifested by their strongly divergent linguistic structures. The EURO-TYP Program will have attained one of its aims if at the end of its course it is possible to see Standard Average European in fact as an exotic language, as the keynote paper of the Workshop puts it, i.e. more objectively and more from the outside than now.

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