Universals of Language 3.0

Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, Universität zu Köln

The hypothesis is proposed that there are universal levels (or aspects) of linguistic structure that are directly derivative of the biological and social infrastructure for communication. Unlike universals of the Greenbergian and Chomskyan type, which typically involve controversial analytical categories such as 'subject' or 'maximal projection', the universal layer of linguistic structure targeted here is defined by being amenable to direct empirical testing. There may, however, be different ways for providing empirical evidence for a presumed universal of language 3.0. Thus, some proposals for a universal of this type may be investigated with psycholinguistic or neurolinguistic experiments, others with knowledge-free structure discovery algorithms, and still others with kinematic measures of articulatory gestures.

The core examples to be discussed in this presentation are two levels of prosodic structure, i.e. syllable and intonation phrase, but Dingemanse et al.'s (2013) proposal for "universal words" is also briefly commented on. Other kinds of phenomena that may be candidates for universals of language 3.0 include so-called information structure, indexical categories (person, demonstratives), and some register distinctions (narrative vs. non-narrative, for example), inter alia.

It is unclear at this point whether it is warranted and useful to subsume the fairly heterogeneous set of phenomena just mentioned under a single category. Importantly, in addition to being amenable to direct empirical falsifiability, the universal linguistic structures of the type intended here should provide a link between the general biological and social infrastructure for communication and specific, language-particular structures. That is, on the one hand it should be possible to show precisely and in detail how they are derived from the general biological and social infrastructure for communication, for which Levinson's (2006) 'human interaction engine' is taken as a framework for the current argument. On the other hand, it should be possible to show how language-particular forms and constructions are derived from them (via grammaticisation, for example).

This latter point is of particular relevance for the current debate regarding language universals, as it implies a clear separation between an (empirically verifiable) universal (proto-)structure and language-specific instances thereof which may differ from each other in important regards.