

The Basic Word Order Typology: Universality, Genealogy, Areality

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This paper will investigate one of typology's most celebrated themes, the so-called *basic word order* typology, popularized by (Greenberg 1963) in a study comprising 30 languages. Since then, basic-word-order statistics from ever wider arrays of languages have been presented (Dryer 2005, Haarmann 2004, Hawkins 1983, Tomlin 1986). We are now in a position to present results from over 3000 languages (combining WALS, Ethnologue and the database of the author). Using orthodox sampling procedures, there are no significant correlations between word order type and population sizes, as has sometimes been suggested using unorthodox sampling procedures (Nettle 1999). We propose that the distribution of word order frequencies can be accounted for by three factors (remaining variance can be accounted for by chance):

Universal: A consistent frequency distribution with SOV being the most common word order reappears across genealogically and areally stratified subsamples. This effect must thus be accounted for as a universal functional tendency. Contrary to popular belief, SVO is not “almost” as common as SOV, neither is it consistently the 2nd most common word order across genealogically and areally stratified subsamples.

Genealogical: Large families exhibit vastly different internal basic word order frequency distributions, which is difficult to account for simply by universal transition probabilities and birth-death effects within a family (as per, e.g., Maslova 2000). It seems necessary, therefore, to invoke family specific biases, which are perhaps transmitted with the remaining (non-basic-word-order) typological profile of the family.

Areal : Using novel techniques for inducing areas without starting from a set of pre-defined areas (Hammarström and Güldemann 2012), we can show that, with respect to basic word order, large (i.e. continent size) areas do exist.

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