# Language types

Parallel structures in languages may occur because the languages are of a similar type. Just as one can divide human beings into different racial types on the basis of characteristics such as bone structure, skin colour, blood group and so on, so one can divide languages into different groups.

The recent interest in **linguistic typology** has arisen in part out of the failure to find large numbers of language universals. Absolute universals, characteristics shared by all languages, proved to be hard to identify, and those attempting to list them were driven back onto vague statements such as: 'All languages have the means of asking questions'. When people tried to pin these statements down further, such as querying *how* questions were asked, it became clear that certain devices recurred in human languages, though different languages favoured different constructions.

Of course, the observation that different languages use different constructions is by no means new. What is new, is the recent interest in **implicational universals** and implicational tendencies. That is, if a language has a particular construction, it is also likely to have further predictable characteristics. Just as one can say that, if an animal has feathers and a beak, it is also likely to have wings, so one can make statements of the type: 'If a language has a basic pattern of subject, verb, object, it is also likely to have prepositions (rather than postpositions)'.

## Morphological criteria for language classification

What criteria should form the basis for language classification? There is considerable controversy about this. The earliest work on the topic, in the last century, was based on the way in which morphemes were handled.

The number of morphemes per word varies from language to language – so does the way in which morphemes are combined within a

word. In the 19th century, scholars tried to use such criteria for dividing languages into different types. They recognized at least *three* different morphological types.

An **isolating** (or analytical) language is one in which words frequently consist of one morpheme. This is often the case in English:

*Will you please let the dog out now.*

An **agglutinating** language (from the Latin word for 'glue together') is one in which words can be divided into morphemes without difficulty. Turkish and Swahili are well-known examples. But agglutination is also used to a limited extent in English:

*lov-ing-ly  faith-ful-ness*

A **fusional** language is one such as Latin which fuses morphemes together in such a way that they are not easily recognizable as separate elements. For example, *-us* on the end of *taurus* 'bull' indicates that it is masculine, singular, and the subject of the sentence, but these three aspects cannot be disentangled. Occasional examples of fusion occur in English:

*went = go + past tense*

At one time it was thought that languages followed a fixed pattern of development. The first stage was an isolating one, the second agglutinating, the third fusional. Greek and Latin were spoken of in sentimental terms as representing the highest and best of language types. Everything else was regarded as an aberration, or a symptom of decline and decay. The fallacy of such a belief is pointed out vividly by the American anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir: 'A linguist that insists on talking about the Latin type of morphology as though it were necessarily the high-water mark of linguistic development is like the zoologist that sees in the organic world a huge conspiracy to evolve the race-horse or the Jersey cow.'

The main flaw in the type of classification outlined above is that no language is a 'pure' morphological type. A few languages fit into one category rather than another, but many appear to have mixed morphological processes. So nowadays, most linguists use other criteria for dividing languages into different types.

## Word order criteria

English uses word order as a basic syntactic device. In linguistic

terminology, it is a **configurational language** (Chapter 7). Perhaps for this reason there has been an enormous amount of interest in word order as a typological characteristic. Among the possible word orders, only a limited number are commonly used, and each of these is likely to possess certain predictable characteristics.

The most usual preliminary classification is in terms of subject, verb, object. In theory, there are six possibilities:

| Subject first | Verb first | Object first |
| --- | --- | --- |
| SOV | VSO | OVS |
| SVO | VOS | OSV |

In practice, the ones on the left (subject first) are considerably more common than the ones in the middle (verb first), whereas the ones on the right (object first) are extremely rare. In fact, no sure example of OSV has ever been found, and the few examples of OVS are clustered together in South America.

Examples of languages which fit each of these types, with the literal order in which they would express a sentence *The dog killed the duck* are:

SOV  *The dog the duck killed* (Turkish).
SVO  *The dog killed the duck* (English).
VSO  *Killed the dog the duck* (Welsh).
VOS  *Killed the duck the dog* (Malagasy (Madagascar)).
OVS  *The duck killed the dog* (Hixkaryana (S. America)).
OSV  *The duck the dog killed* (? Apurina (S. America)).

This preliminary classification is useful, but it also presents some problems. The most obvious difficulty is that there are a number of languages which do not fit easily into one of these categories, for various reasons. In some languages, such as the Australian languages Dyirbal and Walbiri, it seems to be impossible to identify a 'basic' word order. These appear to be genuine non-configurational languages: their word order is extremely free and flexible. In other languages, the word order seems to be fixed, but mixed. For example, German has SVO order in main clauses, but SOV in subordinate clauses. It says in effect:

*The dog killed the duck* (SVO, main clause).
*I heard that [the dog the duck killed]* (SOV, subordinate clause).

Furthermore, in several languages, it is extremely difficult to identify the 'subject' of the verb. Take the sentences:

*The dog killed the duck.*
*The dog ran away.*

In English, *the dog* would be regarded as the subject of both these sentences. But in some languages, such as Inuit, an Eskimo language, *the duck* in the first sentence would be given the same inflectional ending as *the dog* in the second sentence. Situations such as this make it difficult to make reliable decisions about what is a 'subject', and what is an 'object'. The rationale behind the Inuit situation (somewhat simplified) is that there is a standard ending put on most nouns, but this is changed in cases where there are two nouns in a sentence, in which case the more active participant, the 'agent', is given a special ending.

In addition, so-called **pro-drop** languages cause problems. These are languages which can omit pronouns, usually the subject pronoun. In Latin, for example, *cano* 'sing-I' was commoner than *ego cano* 'I sing-I', where the pronoun was added only if extra emphasis was needed. In these languages, the order of verb and object when the pronoun is dropped is not necessarily the same as that of verb and object when S, V, O are all present.

These problems show that word order classifications are not entirely trustworthy. However, statistically, certain probabilities emerge. For example: an SVO language is likely to have auxiliaries preceding the verb, prepositions rather than postpositions, and genitives following the noun, whereas an SOV language is likely to have auxiliary verbs after the verb, postpositions rather than prepositions, and genitives preceding the noun. The English examples on the left would be likely to be represented in an SOV language by the order on the right:

| SVO | Bill eats potatoes. | SOV | Bill potatoes eats. |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| AUX V | Marigold can go. | V AUX | Marigold go can. |
| PREP | On Saturday. | POSTP | Saturday on. |
| N GEN | Queen of Sheba. | GEN N | Of Sheba queen. |

Because language is always changing, there are very few languages which are 'pure' types, in the sense of being a perfect example of the statistical probabilities. Most languages have some inconsistencies, and some **doublets** (double possibilities). English, for example, can say *Sheba's queen* as well as *queen of Sheba*.

However, a list of statistical probabilities is only a first stage in the working out of language types. The second, and more important stage, is to find out why these probabilities exist. This is still under discussion, and there may be several interacting explanations. One suggestion is that in languages there is a **principle of cross-**

category harmony. That is, different linguistic categories such as nouns, verbs and prepositions, all behave somewhat similarly to one another: the main word or head in a phrase is likely to be in a similar position throughout the different types of phrases. For example, if a verb normally occurs at the beginning of the verb phrase, as in English *eats peanuts*, then a preposition is likely to be at the front of its phrase, as in *on Saturday*, and an adjective at the front of its phrase, as in *red in the face*, and a noun at the front of its phrase, as in *father of the family*. Interestingly, the conclusion that languages behave in this way has also been arrived at independently by theoretical linguists trying to describe sentence patterns (X-bar syntax, Chapter 7).

Implicational probabilities can also, with a certain amount of caution, be used to reconstruct probable earlier states, as a supplement to other types of reconstruction in historical linguistics (Chapter 12). If we found traces of an old language which had verbs after objects and postpositions, then we would also be able to say that it was statistically likely to have genitives preceding nouns, for example.

At the moment, there is still an enormous amount more to be done in relation to typological characteristics for classifying languages, and the ensuing implicational relationships. Recently, Chomsky and his followers have started to take an interest in this type of work. Some of these ideas will be discussed in Chapter 16.

## QUESTIONS

1  What is contrastive linguistics?

2  Suggest three reasons why languages might show similarities.

3  How might one recognize genetically related languages?

4  What is the purpose of reconstructing a proto-language?

5  What are implicational universals?

6  Which basic word orders are the commonest among the world's languages?