Fiat Lingua

Universals: Recommended Reading

by Rick Morneau

April, 1992
Revised July 28, 1994

First, a little history. Somewhere around 1966, a well-know linguist named Joseph Greenberg published a few books on the subject of "language universals". He was well-known and highly regarded for his earlier work in classifying African languages. (His most recent work, classifying the native languages of the Americas, is also highly regarded, but much more controversial than his earlier work. The controversy rages on.) Although sporadic work had been done in universals before Greenberg, he not only brought it all together, but he also did a lot of original work himself.

Basically, work in linguistic universals tries to find patterns that exist across all natural languages. As it turns out, many universals are not truly universal, since exceptions to most patterns can often be found (these exceptions, however, often indicate that a language is undergoing a change from one pattern to another). Regardless, these patterns or tendencies can often reveal a lot about how languages change and, more importantly, how change can be limited into following along certain channels. The forms that human languages can take are actually quite limited, and the study of universals can show us what these limitations are.

A study of linguistic universals can also be helpful to conlangers. This is especially true if you are trying to develop a language that is quite different from the natural language(s) you are familiar with. A study of universals can help you design a language that ends up being speakable; i.e., one that is compatible with the grey stuff we've all got between our ears. If you "break the rules", so to speak, your language may end up being unlearnable in any real sense, and will end up being just a coding game rather than a real language.

Well, for those among you who are interested in learning more about linguistic universals, here are some introductory books that you might want to have a look at:

1. Language Universals and Linguistic Typology: Syntax and Morphology [2nd ed.] by Bernard Comrie, Chicago University Press, 1989, paper $14.95.

This is probably the best introduction to universals for the non-linguist. Unlike most linguists, Comrie writes clearly and doesn't try to impress the reader with paragraph-length sentences. (I recently joked with a colleague of mine who is a professional linguist. I told her that Greenberg

forgot the most important linguistic universal of all: Linguists can't write! In a sort of round-about way, she actually agreed with me! As it turns out, though, this is a tendency, rather than an absolute universal. Greenberg himself is quite a good writer. IMHO :-)

```
  2. Typology and Universals, by William Croft, Cambridge
     University Press, 1990, paper $17.95.
```

I recommend this book only if you have a fairly good background in linguistics. Croft takes some of the earlier work done by typologists (especially Greenberg, Comrie, Givon, Bybee and Hawkins) and expands upon it in very insightful ways. I suggest you read Comrie's book before you read this one. By the way, Croft is a former student of Joseph Greenberg.
The following three books go into detail about three specific aspects of language. The titles should be self-explanatory. All of them are quite readable.

```
  3. Tense, by Bernard Comrie, Cambridge University Press,
     1985, paper $14.95.

  4. Aspect, by Bernard Comrie, Cambridge University Press,
     1976, paper $16.95.

  5. Mood and Modality, by F. R. Palmer, Cambridge University
     Press, 1986, paper $17.95.
```

The following two volumes are actually a study of the syntax of natural language and the many forms it can take. However, the books are so heavily loaded with typological comparisons that they almost provide a complete course in typology. They are also quite readable, and I highly recommend them:

```
  6. Syntax: A Functional-Typological Introduction, by T.
     Givon, John Benjamins Publishing Company,
        Volume I, 1984, paper $24.95
        Volume II, 1990, paper $24.95
```

Finally, I mention the following three volumes with some reluctance:

```
  7. Language Typology and Syntactic Description, edited by
     Timothy Shopen, Cambridge University Press, 1985,
        Volume I: Clause Structure, paper $29.95
        Volume II: Complex Constructions, paper $27.95
        Volume III: Grammatical Categories and the Lexicon,
                    paper $29.95
```

I am reluctant to recommend the above because I found most of the papers disappointing. However, there are a few very good ones in the set. If you've got the bucks and the time to wade through a total of almost 1100 pages, then buy them.

All of the above books are also available in hardcover for the wealthy. Prices are in US dollars and may have changed by the time you read this. Addresses in the United States are:

```
Cambridge University Press
110 Midland Avenue
Port Chester, NY 10573

University of Chicago Press
11030 S. Langley Avenue
Chicago, IL 60628

John Benjamins Publishing Company
821 Bethlehem Pike
Philadelphia, PA 19118
```

If you do order directly from the publisher, don't forget to add a few bucks for postage and handling.

<div align="center">End of Essay</div>