

TITLE: A grammar's anatomy: Examining the relationship between grammatical descriptions and typology

CATEGORY: TPI poster

This poster will explore the relationship between linguistic typology and descriptive linguistics, bringing out some of the complications of treating languages as both unique individuals and members of a comparable group. By illustrating certain complexities of the typology–grammar relationship we intend to increase public awareness of the diversity of roles which modern descriptive grammars must play.

From a public perspective, the role of a written grammar and its relationship to other areas of language study are often quite narrowly conceived. Most non-linguists will primarily encounter grammar resources in the context of second language learning, or as reference manuals for formal style: consulting a grammar is often a matter of looking for a 'right answer'. In contrast, typologists may view grammars as a resource for investigation of what is possible or likely in languages, and for development of detailed yet flexible schema that can be relevant at specific or general levels.

The development of increasingly meaningful typologies is dependent upon ongoing descriptive work expanding our knowledge of the range of linguistic structures that exist. Some languages of the world have an extensive amount of linguistic literature that pertains to them, whereas some languages—typically those belonging to smaller speaker groups in regions of high linguistic diversity—have none. Description of little-known languages increases the robustness and diversity of typological samples and has implications for typologists' conclusions at both local and global levels. As such, decisions taken by descriptive linguists with regard to the structure and content of their grammars (which may be the only work available for the language in question) affects the usefulness of these descriptions to typologists, and the scope of subsequent typologies.

Competing pressures and tensions between the needs of typologists and the constraints on grammar writers (including the degree to which descriptive grammars should be informed by typological findings) are difficult to navigate and often left unspoken. For example, in glossing grammatical morphemes a descriptive linguist has to deal with sometimes conflicting demands concerning transparency, internal consistency, and agreement with established conventions, including those that are generally accepted, those that are theory-specific, and those that may be relevant only to the language family or area under study. The complexities involved in a particular glossing decision might not be immediately apparent, but can have implications for how a language is treated in subsequent comparative inquiries. We aim to draw attention to the underlying anatomy of a descriptive grammar and consider how this shapes linguistic typologies.