

Typology is about unity in diversity. Limitations of diversity which can claim linguistic significance – as opposed to those limitations which reflect the contingencies of human population histories – must have mental or social reality: they will reflect physiological or neuropsychological constraints (to do with storage and retrieval, processing and constructing, acquisition and attrition) or constraints on the transmission of mental grammars-and-lexicons through populations (within and across speech communities).

Now, when typological research is based on large language samples, there tend to be certain preferred structural focuses: typological generalisations are commonly being sought for major, frequently-recurring patterns of paradigmatic and syntagmatic contrasts readily inferrable from concrete surface forms. It is such patterns which can at a glance be gleaned from descriptive or reference grammars, the typical source of information for sample-based typology, while patterns only accessible to deeper, and perhaps more strongly theory-bound analysis of abstract representations have tended to remain off limits.

The resulting dilemma is that constraints identified through typological research, especially universals which constrain co-variation among variables (implications), are often hard to make sense of as constraints on mental grammars-and-lexicons or their social transmission, because the concrete variables investigated do not readily translate into constructs of mental grammars-and-lexicons or of processes of transmission. It is therefore worthwhile to seek to complement "descriptive", macroscopic typology through more "analytic", microscopic typology. This is what we propose to do here for a typological parameter concerning the interface of lexicon and syntax that has recently been suggested by Nichols, Peterson, & Barnes (2004), BASIC VALENCE ORIENTATION.

The claim here is that languages differ, not word by word, but in the valence orientation of the verbal vocabulary IN TOTO, with verbs tending to be either basically intransitive, with corresponding transitive verbs derived, or basically transitive, with corresponding intransitive verbs derived. This generalisation is based on a comparative study of 18 pairs of verbally expressed meanings ('die' – 'kill', 'come to boil' – 'bring to boil', etc.) across a sample of 80 languages. Among the means of deriving verbs, affixation or addition of non-morphological material (such as particles or middle/reflexive markers) is relatively easy to ascertain for lots of verbs for lots of languages. For suppletion, conversion, or phonological alternation, the direction of derivation is not seen at a glance from descriptive grammars and lexicons, but requires in-depth analysis. As a consequence, Nichols et al. consider suppletion inherently non-directional and classify languages as "indeterminate", rather than as "transitivising" vs. "intransitivising", when verb pairs are differentiated through phonological alternation or through overtly nothing.

While we agree that basic valence orientation is a promising typological parameter, we will argue that the classification of German and certain other Indo-European languages has been lead astray through the exclusive consideration of the evidence of middle markers added for certain intransitives. As will be shown through in-depth analysis of lexically circumscribed and yet productive morphonological patterns of vowel alternation, which are not apparent-at-a-glance but are supported by priming studies as well as EEG evidence, there continues to be an asymmetry between basic intransitive verbs (strong conjugation) and derived transitive verbs (weak conjugation), which has remained in force long after the loss of transitivising affixal morphology of Germanic and indeed Indo-European origin. Given abstract lexical representations of verbs, with stem vowels underspecified for certain contrasts, the phonological alternations in German can only be interpreted as showing a direction of derivation from strong/intransitive to weak/transitive.

From the rather heterogeneous classifications of the Indo-European languages in the sample of Nichols et al. 2004 it would seem that basic valence orientation is diachronically unstable, at least at a time depth of ca. 8000 years. Our argument for German being transitivising, however, suggests that the setting of this parameter in mental grammars-and-lexicons and its social transmission is very pertinacious, long surviving the loss of affixal morphology.

Microscopic and macroscopic typology: Basic valence orientation

crucial examples (German)

Verbs vacillating between consistently strong (intransitive) and consistently weak conjugation (transitive) (which is different from mixing strong and weak properties):

backen ‘bake’, intransitive and transitive in English too, ‘undergo the process of baking’ – ‘cause food to undergo the process of baking’, with no inflectional difference;

bleichen ‘fade’ (with prefix *ver-*) – ‘bleach’;

erschrecken ‘to be frightened’ – ‘to frighten’;

hängen ‘hang’, intransitive and transitive in English too, with analogous inflectional distinction:

hang, hung, hung – hang, hanged, hanged;

löschen ‘to go out’ (typically applied to fire, with prefixes *er-* or *ver-*) – ‘to put out, extinguish’;

quellen ‘swell’, intransitive and transitive in English too, with the resultative participle alternating between strong and weak too, *swollen – swelled*;

schleifen ‘drag’;

stecken ‘stick’;

wiegen ‘weigh’, the last three intransitive and transitive in English too, though without inflectional differences.

There is no overt difference between strong and weak in present stem (except 2/3SG), but elsewhere the vowels remain constant for weak verbs and alternate for strong verbs; e.g.

		STRONG	WEAK
PRES INDIC	SG2	<i>erschrick-st</i>	<i>erschreck-st</i>
	SG3	<i>erschrick-t</i>	<i>erschreck-t</i>
IMP	SG2	<i>erschrick-Ø</i>	<i>erschreck-e</i>
PAST INDIC	SG1/3	<i>erschrak-Ø</i>	<i>erschreck-t-e</i>
PRTCPL		<i>erschrock-en</i>	<i>erschreck-t</i>
		STRONG	WEAK
IMP	SG2	<i>häng-Ø</i>	<i>häng-e</i>
PAST INDIC	SG1/3	<i>hing-Ø</i>	<i>häng-t-e</i>
PRTCPL		<i>ge-hang-en</i>	<i>ge-häng-t</i>