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RARE TYPOLOGICAL FEATURES: SHOULD GRAMMARS BE PUNISHED FOR LICENSING THEM?

This paper explores the treatment of rare typological features in principles-and-parameters (P&P) syntax. It presents the three principal strategies for handling them, which are illustrated with case studies, followed by critical remarks. The three strategies are the following:

(1) Reductionist. The rare feature is derivable from the interaction of independently motivated universal grammar (UG) parameter settings.

(2) UG stipulation. The theory is structured so that the rare feature is predicted to be rare.

(3) Language-particular stipulation. Rare features are outside the domain of UG principles and parameters per se and are attributed to language-particular rules.

Note that (2) and (3) „punish“ grammars by requiring more complicated apparatus, either at the UG level or at the language-particular level.

In my view, (2) is a priori the least desirable of the three strategies, in that it complicates the theory of UG without at the same time providing new insight about grammar. (1) and (3) each have their plusses and minuses. (1) has the advantage of being most in accord with the spirit of P&P, but with the seeming defect of failing to account for the rarity of the feature. (3) is a move away from a pure P&P theory toward a construction-based approach. Yet the idea that grammars „pay“ for rare features by needing extra rules is intuitively appealing.

I argue that of the three strategies, the non-punishment option (1) should be appealed to whenever possible, precisely because of its reductionist nature. This strategy fails to explain why the feature is rare, but that is not a bad thing. I will explain why.