

Chapter 4

Linguistic typology

4.1 Introduction

Simply speaking, the study of universals is concerned with what human languages have in common, while the study of typology deals with ways in which languages differ from each other. This contrast, however, is not sharp. When languages differ from each other, the variation is not random, but subject to limitations. Linguistic typology is not only concerned with variation, but also with the limitations on the degree of variation found in the languages of the world. It is due to these limitations that languages may be meaningfully divided into various types.

For instance, typologists often divide languages into types according to so-called **basic word order**, often understood as the order of subject (S), object (O) and verb (V) in a typical declarative sentence. The vast majority of the languages of the world fall into one of three groups:

SOV (Japanese, Tamil, Turkish etc.)
 SVO (Fula, Chinese, English etc.)
 VSO (Arabic, Tongan, Welsh etc.)

Logically speaking, there should be nothing wrong with the three other possibilities: VOS, OVS and OSV. As mentioned above, however, they are exceedingly rare and typically occur in areas that have been relatively isolated. The three main groups have one thing in common, that the subject precedes the object. It is a small step, therefore, from basic word order typology to the formulation of the statistical universal we became acquainted with in the previous chapter:

Subjects tend strongly to precede objects.

The study of typology and the study of universals, therefore, go hand in hand.

In this chapter, we will have a look at morphological typology, word order typology, the typology of motion verbs, and the typological distinction between tone languages and stress languages. These are only a few examples of the large amount of phenomena that may be studied from a typological viewpoint.

First, however, we shall discuss a little further what typology is, and what it is not.

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Table of Contents An Introduction To Linguistic Typology

1. Understanding the eBook An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - The Rise of Digital Reading An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - An Introduction To Linguistic Typology User Reviews and Ratings
 - An Introduction To Linguistic Typology and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing An Introduction To Linguistic Typology Free and Paid eBooks
 - An Introduction To Linguistic Typology Public Domain eBooks
 - An Introduction To Linguistic Typology eBook Subscription Services

- An Introduction To Linguistic Typology Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating An Introduction To Linguistic Typology eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - An Introduction To Linguistic Typology Compatibility with Devices
 - An Introduction To Linguistic Typology Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Interactive Elements An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
- 8. Staying Engaged with An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Setting Reading Goals An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of An Introduction To Linguistic Typology
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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