

Descriptive and theoretical linguistics without linguistic analysis – causative and ditransitive case studies

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In this talk, I will argue that neither descriptive linguistics nor theoretical linguistics needs to provide “analyses” of language structure in terms of general grammatical frameworks, whether more formal frameworks like LFG or RRG, or less formal frameworks such as Dixon’s Basic Linguistic Theory.

For descriptive linguistics, the most appropriate approach is the Boasian recommendation to describe each language in its own terms, i.e. to create language-particular descriptive categories that need not match the categories of other languages. General frameworks always carry the danger of introducing a bias, often a Eurocentric bias.

For theoretical, explanatory linguistics based on empirical generalizations over properties of the world’s languages, I argue that one needs an entirely separate set of concepts (comparative concepts), which do not need to match the language-particular concepts very closely.

The validity of these general claims is illustrated primarily from two empirical domains, causative verb forms and ditransitive constructions. With respect to causative verb forms, I will show that the coding of the causal or the noncausal member of a pair (whether a causative pair such as Swahili *ganda* ‘freeze (intr.)’ vs. *gand-isha* ‘freeze (tr.)’), or an anticausative pair such as Japanese *waru* ‘break (tr.)’ vs. *war-eru* ‘break (intr.)’) is primarily determined by the frequency of use of the verbs, not by their derivational properties. Thus, their “analysis” is irrelevant for the explanatory account. For ditransitive constructions (like *She gave him money*, *She gave it to her brother*), a question of “analysis” that is often asked is which of the two objects is the direct object, or which of the objects is “higher”. Again, I will show that cross-linguistic generalizations about ditransitive constructions (as the basis for an explanatory account) need not consider these questions, and instead work with a separate set of comparative concepts.