

The importance of rara for a theory of linguistics

Michael Cysouw

MPI-EVA, Leipzig

In the typological study of the world-wide language diversity we regularly find structures that are widespread. Such common structures ask for an explanation, of which various kinds exist in current linguistic theory. However, we also normally find some languages that do not fit into any of the major types that are distinguished. I would even go as far to claim that there is probably something wrong with a typology without any rara. The existence of rara is a robust fact of the world-wide typological reality that has to be investigated in its own right. The first aspect to investigate is how robust a rarum is. If we find one language with a rare characteristic in a sample of 100 languages, this would theoretically extrapolate to about 70 examples among known languages in this world. Such an amount cannot be simply disregarded as 'exceptional'. The few cases in which this is investigated suggest that the existence of many rara can actually be extrapolated. More generally, these studies also show that the boundary between common and rare is a clear continuum. These two observations, first, taking rarity serious and, second, not distinguishing between common and rare on principled grounds, pose a challenge to any theory of linguistic structure. I will propose some ideas how we could deal with these challenges, but more importantly, I hope to entrench the importance of these issues in our thinking about linguistic structure - whatever each of us will do with them.